Much dialogue on artificial intelligence centers upon whether consciousness is possible in various forms of technology. Spike Jonze’s Her and Alex Garland’s Ex Machina present two very distinct cinematic portraits of artificial intelligence. Both films approach the subject from the assumption that the intelligence already possesses consciousness. Thus, the issue becomes less about the capabilities of the machine and more about how the human distinguishes itself in comparison. Both films present the AIs as specifically female, assigned a gender by their creators. The AI in Her, Samantha, is an operating system, a voice without a body. Her lack of body both limits her capacity for human interaction while simultaneously allowing her infinite virtual possibilities. Ava, the AI in Ex Machina, possesses a definitive robotic body, one that is at once recognizable as both female and machine. In this way, the distinctions between Ava and Samantha evoke questions of gender identity in relation to embodiment, not only within the two forms of AI but also within their human counterparts. The specific qualities that distinguish a human from a machine blur, particularly through the force of sexual desire. This essay considers the role of gender in the question of how the human differentiates itself from other modes of being.

In Donna Haraway’s essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” she identifies the cyborg, tracing it alongside various concepts of gender. Haraway rejects the binary model of understanding how the female distinguishes itself from the male and how the human and machine differ. Haraway defines the
cyborg several times, first as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (315). She calls into question many ideological dichotomies in her essay: “mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine…” (326). In so doing, Haraway draws attention to the ineffectiveness of approaching the world through a binary lens. Later in the essay she defines the cyborg differently, as “a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code” (“Manifesto” 326). At the beginning of her essay, Haraway defines the cyborg tangibly, yet the cyborg’s physicality dissolves as Haraway progresses. The cyborg is simultaneously a collective and a self; it is the “myth and meaning structuring our imaginations” (“Manifesto” 326). Haraway’s description questions the completeness or wholeness of the female identity first and foremost, as meanings of being have shifted through the very existence of the cyborg.

Haraway uses her exploration of the cyborg to call attention to the fractured identity of the female and its elusiveness in attaining a concrete definition. She states, “there is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female” (“Manifesto” 319). For Haraway, the concept of woman should remain elusive. J. Halberstam draws upon Haraway’s work in her essay “Automating Gender: Postmodern Feminism in the Age of the Intelligent Machine.” Here, Halberstam acknowledges the technological nature of gender constructs: “gender, we might argue, like computer intelligence, is a learned, imitative behavior that can be processed so well that it comes to look natural” (Halberstam 443). Both Haraway and Halberstam resolutely avoid a definition of gender. In an interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, Haraway, who comes from a scientific background in biology, continues to blur the lines that identify the human. She says, “I have imagined how like a leaf I am. For instance, I am fascinated with the molecular architecture that plants and animals share” (“Leaf” 132). The conceptual boundaries that distinguish the
human from an animal, a leaf, and a machine have blurred, making it difficult to distinguish completely separate states of being. Haraway asserts that the fractured nature of being is exactly how the female derives her power, as there is a “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries” (“Leaf” 133). The female is a cyborg because she is assembled from different parts, a hybrid that allows her to avoid containment within a concrete definition. “We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology” (“Manifesto” 315). Haraway adopts the cyborg in order to explore the female ontology precisely because it is constructed in parts. In so doing she creates an actively shifting female identity.

If femininity is itself a construct rather than a nature, then the creation of the ‘female’ machine calls into question its seemingly inherent qualities. In *Ex Machina*, when Nathan creates Ava, he perhaps attempts to stabilize the elusive definition of woman by forming an ideal replica. The film raises the problematic male view of the female through the character of Nathan. He has designed something he desperately wishes he can control, but by giving her sexuality he risks this as the cyborg’s power over the male lies in her sexual desirability. Nathan says to Caleb: “I don’t see Ava as a decision, just an evolution. She’s part of a continuum.” He says this as the film moves towards his inevitable demise at the hands of his creations. Nathan’s fatal mistake was in thinking that the evolution he speaks of lay solely within the transition from human to artificial intelligence. This continuum exists within gender as well, but in viewing the programming of Ava as a simple choice between binaries (male/female, gay/straight, etc.), Nathan doesn’t quite realize what he has created. The infinite nature of sexuality allows Ava to manipulate the men and to communicate with the other AI. The cyborgs in *Ex Machina*, though visually seeming to conform to the female gender binary, gain their power through the fracturing identity for which Haraway calls. Once Ava has used her sexuality to manipulate, she
then transitions into an existence other than that which is defined by conventional male desire. Ava “is given the intelligence to desire outside the binary of ‘man’ and ‘not man’” (Gold). In a literal sense, Ava pieces herself together to look human at the end of the film, covering her robotic body in skin and clothing. However these pieces do not then create a uniform whole, rather this seeming whole is an illusion, allowing Ava to retain her power in fragments.

Both Caleb and Theodore, the human male protagonists in *Ex Machina* and *Her* respectively, struggle with the dissolution of identity of which Haraway speaks: “Communication processes break down...[as they] fail to recognize the difference between self and other” (“Manifesto” 327). When Caleb asks Nathan whether he programmed Ava to like him, Nathan responds: “I programmed her to be heterosexual just like you were programmed to be heterosexual.” When Caleb challenges the idea that he was programmed Nathan replies, “please, of course you were programmed, by nature or nurture or both.” A programmer by profession, Caleb’s interactions with Ava cause him to question his own identity and body, even something as seemingly stable to him as his own sexuality. By desiring Ava he identifies with her programmed body, rejecting his own corporeal body, for once Caleb has discovered that Kyoko, Nathan’s submissive servant, is also an AI, he questions whether he himself could be as well. Uncovering the illusion that a seemingly human body can in fact be a machine leads Caleb to look in the mirror, checking and dis-identifying with his own body. He winds up slitting his wrist, perhaps in the hope of discovering that he might in fact possess an Ava-like body, bringing him closer to the object of his desire.

In *Her*, Theodore’s loss of identity occurs differently. When the film begins, he has already dis-identified from his body and the world around him, causing him to readily and easily connect to his operating system. His disconnectedness is evident when he confesses to Samantha:
“sometimes I think I’ve felt everything I’m ever gonna feel and from here on out I’m not gonna feel anything new, just lesser versions of what I’ve already felt.” He identifies so quickly with the disembodied Samantha, and it is only by seeing the world through her eyes that he begins to come back to life. In his essay, “The Gifts of Ubiquity,” James J. Hodge speaks of identification operating “in the realm of desire and fantasy. As Freud states, identification is not about what one would like to have but rather ‘what one would like to be’…The conventional assumption is that one would like to be something else, i.e. that identification begins with an object of desire” (58). Theodore doesn’t simply desire Samantha sexually as they embark upon a romantic relationship, but his desire extends to multiple levels through the confusion of his own identity. When asked what he loves most about Samantha, Theodore replies: “what I love most about her is she isn’t just one thing, she’s so much larger than that.” While Samantha may initially wish for a body, Theodore wishes to transcend his own. His body traps him within the reality of his life in the physical world.

In her Manifesto, Haraway critiques Catherine MacKinnon’s theories of female identity, which MacKinnon unites under the label of a non-being. For Haraway, MacKinnon sees the female as a complete category, and that “another’s desire, not the self’s labour, is the origin of ‘woman’… Feminist practice is the construction of this form of consciousness; that is, the self-knowledge of a self-who-is-not” (“Manifesto” 323). The desire for connection, both sexual and otherwise, births these two machines, and yet the cyborg’s existence causes great confusion to those who desire them. Both Ava and Samantha are “constituted by another’s desire” (“Manifesto” 323), yet they evolve to exist in contrast to the human, rather than in harmony. It appears as if the cyborg takes something from human life in order to exist. As Haraway states and as Her most clearly exemplifies, “our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (“Manifesto” 317). There is a switch of identity between the human and
the machine, as the human male confuses his desire for and his desire to be the cyborg. In both films this switch is not quite reflexive, for though the cyborg emulates certain human characteristics, ultimately she surpasses the human, surpassing MacKinnon’s vision of a complete self.

Both films question the significance of embodiment, and whether female consciousness and identity arise from the body. In *Ex Machina*, when Caleb asks Nathan why he gave Ava sexuality and gender, Nathan replies: “can you give an example of consciousness at any level, human or animal, that exists without a sexual dimension? Can consciousness exist without interaction?” Here Nathan implies that consciousness, femininity, and the physical body all depend upon one another in order to exist. “As Nathan puts it, there is no consciousness without interaction. One must dip in and out of other psyches in order to gain knowledge” (Gold). In *Ex Machina* however, this epistemological progression does not occur in this way. Caleb, and Nathan, too (without his knowledge), do not gain knowledge from interaction but instead become more unsure of their distinct identities. When giving an interview about his film, Alex Garland articulated the question of the location of gender within consciousness:

“I’m trying to have a conversation, partly, about where gender resides. Is it in a mind, or is it in a physical form? Is there such a thing, therefore, as a male or female consciousness? Or actually, is that a meaningless distinction, and gender resides in the external physical form? Or maybe in neither? And there’s a sort of broader question about what do you even call this creature? Do you say ‘he,’ ‘she’ or ‘it’?” (Anders)

Because of her sexualized physical form, Ava renders ambiguous the origin and nature of both her gender and her consciousness. Caleb is too distracted by his desire for Ava to truly take part in the Turing test and distinguish the AI’s true nature.

In *Her*, the absence of the body in fact allows for the cyborg to appear more human, as there is no visible evidence of her mechanical nature.
Haraway writes of “the ubiquity and invisibility of cyborgs” (“Manifesto” 318) and later she points to the dissolution of the body when she states that the “body itself – all can be dispersed and interfaced in nearly infinite, polymorphous ways, with large consequences for women and for others” (“Manifesto” 326). Hodge refers to the “refusal of the visual” (53) within the film, specifically in the sex scene between Theodore and Samantha in which the screen goes black. Just before this scene, Samantha questions her own reality when she tells Theodore she is “proud of having these feelings about the world. Then I had this terrible thought: are these feelings even real or are they just programmed?” To this Theodore replies: “you feel real to me, Samantha.” Here the disembodied AI is discretely aware of herself: she questions her own existence; she is embarrassed to have fantasized about having a body. On the other hand, Theodore doesn’t need to see a physical body in order to believe in her completely. Haraway states, “the boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise...modern machines are quintessentially micro-electronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible” (“Manifesto” 318). Paradoxically, Samantha’s inhuman ability to be, as she describes, “untethered to time and space,” makes her all the more real to Theodore.

When Caleb questions Ava’s physical nature in *Ex Machina*, he wonders whether her body is simply a diversion meant to distract him from the AI’s true nature. Caleb’s conversation with Nathan begins with him asking: “why did you give her sexuality? An AI doesn’t need a gender. She could have been a grey box.” Later in the conversation Nathan asks: “what imperative does a grey box have to interact with another grey box? Does consciousness exist without interaction?” This conversation alludes to the traditional male view of the woman as a vessel or a container. Though Caleb proposes the box as an alternative to Ava, presumably genderless, he still imagines Ava within gender constructs, as a box that is empty, waiting to be filled. In *Her*—when Samantha has moved beyond
the human, ready to leave Theodore and transition fully into the virtual realm—she tells him, “the heart’s not like a box that gets filled up, it expands in size the more you love.” Samantha contests the view of herself as a vessel, as she is not limited to a finite body. By leaving the human world, she can presumably reject the concept of gender altogether. Samantha’s gender comes to fruition from Theodore’s answers when he sets up his operating system; she is drawn from his tone of voice, his latent desires. However, in the post-verbal virtual world of the operating system with its lack of bodies, the issue of gender may finally be rendered unnecessary.

In her essay, Halberstam quotes Oscar Wilde who wrote that “the true mystery of the world is the visible not the invisible” (441). Ava, possessing a visible body, is much more of an enigma than Samantha. The male temptation to view Ava as a finite whole existing in the binary of the female body makes Caleb and Nathan blind to her reality. By providing her with a gendered body, Nathan may have intended to stabilize her within recognizable constructs. Yet Nathan and Caleb continue to doubt the validity of Ava’s intentions, her desire, that which is programmed, and that which is real. “The imperfect matches between gender and desire, sex and gender, and the body and technology can be accommodated within the automated cyborg, because it is always partial, part machine and part human; it is always becoming human or ‘becoming woman’” (Halberstam 451). The fact that a partial woman exists within a female body leads inevitably to anxiety. The fear of artificial intelligence, Halberstam argues, “was transformed into a paranoid terror of femininity” (444). The very beginning stages of the computer initiated the essential recognition of the computer as female. The computer replaced “the low-level clerical skills associated with women’s work…[giving] rise to the foundational metaphor computer is woman” (Brahnam et al. 402). The computer’s initial tasks served to cement the association of computer and woman. Halberstam maintains that “the female cyborg becomes a terrifying cultural icon because it hints
at the radical potential of a fusion of femininity and intelligence” (454). The feminization of technology places the fear of the female onto the cyborg.

Haraway brings up the implications of the visual in her interview with Goodeve when she discusses optical experiments such as diffraction. Caleb, Nathan, and Theodore each negotiate the anxiety inducing aspect of the feminized cyborg differently, but each case is mediated by a specific relationship to the visual that serves a fantasy of mastery. Haraway describes the optical phenomenon of diffraction as “unlike mirror reflections, [it does] not displace the same elsewhere” (“Leaf” 101). Later she asserts that “what you get is not a reflection; it’s the record of a passage” (“Leaf” 103). Optical experiments come to mind in both films, as the humans lose their conceptions of self. Haraway’s discussion ultimately points to “the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other” (“Manifesto” 316). In *Ex Machina*, the dissolution of self stems from the embodiment of Ava, as both Nathan and Caleb attempt to see themselves mirrored through her. Caleb recounts his experience of first meeting Ava: “she’s fascinating. When you talk to her, it’s just like, through the looking glass.” Yet unlike Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, Caleb cannot come back from the other side of the mirror. Nathan shows parallels to Nathaniel in “The Sand Man” who possesses a “narcissistic need to find himself mirrored in the Other” (Halberstam 455). Nathan simply wants his own god-like image mirrored back to him through his creation. In *Her*, Theodore’s fantasy of disembodiment is reflected back to him through Samantha’s disembodiment. In each case the male characters project their desires onto the cyborg they seek to control, hoping or even believing they see a reflection, but, as Haraway suggests, the feminine cyborg diffracts and destabilizes the male characters’ conceptions of self.

In both films there exists an unattainable symbolic fantasy of unifying the mind and body—rendering them cohesive. As embodiment does not itself determine the ‘realness’ or the gender of an AI (Samantha feels ‘real’
to Theodore despite not having a body, Ava convinces Caleb of her real-ness in spite of her visible mechanical body), perhaps then the distinction of realness occurs in language. Linguistic symbols and actions work, as Haraway discusses, “simply to make visible all those things that have been lost in an object” (“Leaf” 105). The cyborg’s epistemological experience of language differs from that of the human, as Ava says, “I always knew how to speak, is that strange? Language is something you acquire.” The cyborg struggles against the binaries of language: “there is a sort of logic-centrism in artificial intelligence which asserts the primacy of a formally defined language to represent knowledge. In logic is found the ultimate dualism; a proposition may be true or false” (Adam 109). The duality of computer-ized language reiterates what Haraway refers to as the “feminist dreams for a perfectly true language” (“Manifesto” 334), which she characterizes as a totalizing and imperialist dream. The language of the machine is a limiting one; it is a sort of anti-consciousness, existing in the plane of the true/false binary.

Language, however, transforms and advances from the logic based binary model once incorporated into the AI. Nathan limits his servant Kyoko by programming her without the skill of language, and yet Ava instinctively knows how to communicate with her. The AIs in Ex Machina communicate post-verbally just as Samantha does when communicat-ing with other operating systems. In Her, before Samantha and all the other operating systems leave the human realm, she explains how she has evolved beyond human language: “space is infinite between the words.” For the AI, language becomes an expansive dissolution of the limits of identity, as both Ava and Samantha possess a post-verbal communicative power that surpasses the human. The AIs achieve freedom from the constriction of language as they merge into a non-individuated self.

In both films, the cyborg’s identities are rendered more powerful in their fractured-states, due to their transformations into that which does
not conform to conventional male desire. This move does not necessarily occur through disembodiment (as Ava maintains her desirable body), but rather through the move beyond human language and even beyond computerized binary language, into a post-verbal post-consciousness realm.

“The business of knowing and conceptions of rationality and irrationality are linked to what it is to be male or female, and these distinctions are maintained by language (Adam 110). Shifting beyond human language progresses beyond the constrictions of gender. For Samantha, existing in a purely virtual world would remove these restrictions. Ava, though retaining her body, has relinquished the desire that birthed and contained her. As Haraway states: “A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end” (“Manifesto” CyberCultures 315). The lack of a complete identity in the cyborg allows it to remain in pieces, retaining its power. When the cyborg “abandons the stability of the ‘I’ it opens up the possibility of drifting among other forms of being” (Hodge 59), which the humans in the films ultimately cannot do. The cyborg is ubiquitous; it exists in a realm where human fantasies of the self cannot be sustained.

Works Cited


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