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문학석사학위논문

The Gender Politics of  
Artificial Femininity  
-A Comparative Study of  
*Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin*-

인조 여성성과 젠더 정치성:  
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서울대학교 대학원  
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홍태영

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## Abstract

# The Gender Politics and Artificial Femininity -A Comparative Study of *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin*-

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In this thesis, I examine the complicated way in which gender and sexuality are articulated through the representation of artificial women in two recently released science fiction films, *Ex Machina* (2015) and *Under the Skin* (2013). Both films ask similar questions of what it means to be a human/woman by tapping into science fiction tradition to explore the construction of gender through speculated bodies. While these two cinematic texts may initially seem to focus on the different aspect of artificial women, they ultimately re-purpose science fiction trope that profoundly restricts conception of femininity. Both films explore a new way in which artificial women possess a revolutionary potential to reveal the ambivalent nature of femininity. Attention to the construction of artificial women has the potential to reveal the ways in which feminine gender is idealized, controlled and consumed in our culture.

The first chapter introduces the landscape of science fiction genre by examining and problematizing the dominant representation of artificial women within the aspect of cultural instrumentality. My enquiry draws mainly from cyborg feminist theories, feminist theories, and utilize feminist film critiques, regarding the construction and performance of gender, and transference of sexist stereotypes to artificial women while exploring the cinematic framing between the genders.

In the following chapter on Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*, I investigate the construction and the spectacle of Ava/Machine's body and the imposition of gender role as well as entrapment of male fantasy. Ava's body is introduced as a part woman and in other parts as a machine, offering a compelling critique of how to think about the constructed nature of femininity. The next chapter is on Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin*. In contrast to Ava, the Woman/Alien's body already appears in a complete form from the very start. The visual process of gendering is more straightforward in the film, allowing the narrative to focus on the development of female consciousness than following the physical transformation into womanhood.

**Keyword:** Alex Garland, *Ex Machina*, Jonathan Glazer, *Under the Skin*, science fiction, artificial, femininity, gender politics

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## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Ava's introduction

Figure 2: Ava gazing back at Caleb

Figure 3: Ava introducing herself to Caleb

Figure 4: Nathan's surveillance room

Figure 5: Ava's interaction with Caleb

Figure 6: Ava lying in a straight posture with her face turned away from the surveillance camera

Figure 7: Ava facing the surveillance camera

Figure 8: Ava during the power cut

Figure 9: The Woman looking for her first victim

Figure 10: The Woman and her victim in the black chamber

Figure 11: The victim still gazing at the Woman

Figure 12: The Woman checking her vagina after penetration

Figure 13: The Woman staring at her skin

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>List of Figures .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Woman from the Machine: <i>Ex Machina</i>.....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 The Spectacle of Ava’s Body.....	12
2.2 The Imposition of Gender Role.....	16
2.3 Entrapment of Male Fantasy .....	19
<b>3. The Alien under the Woman: <i>Under the Skin</i> .....</b>	<b>39</b>
3.1 ‘Becoming’ the Woman.....	39
3.2 Alien/Woman Subjectivity: The Female Gaze .....	43
3.3 Body Awareness: Feminine Consciousness .....	51
<b>4. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>62</b>
국문초록 .....	67

## 1. Introduction

From the late twentieth century, science fiction (SF) has an enduring presence in the history of cinema.<sup>1</sup> Science fiction narrative usually deals with the imagination and the impact of science, usually future technology, and the concept of the human body and its limits. As a cinematic genre, science fiction is difficult to categorize because of its tendency to borrow elements and themes from other cinematic genres, most notably horror and fantasy. Due to its tendency to blend in with different genre, this had led numerous film critics and theorists to formulate an inconsistent definition. Science fiction's extraordinarily diverse usage has led to a certain change in film theory; instead of attempting to categorize and define the genre, film theorist have shifted their gears towards the aspect of "cultural instrumentality"<sup>2</sup> of the genre. As Annette Kuhn explains, "what is more interesting and probably more important, than what a film genre *is* is the question of what, in the cultural term, it *does*—it's 'cultural instrumentality.'" <sup>3</sup> Within the realm of Kuhn, when analyzing science fiction films, a film theorist or a critic should take

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<sup>1</sup> For a more elaborate discussion on the definition and history of science fiction as a genre, see Vivian Sobchack's "Image of Wonder: The Look of Science Fiction," *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Annette Kuhn. "Introduction." to *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*. Ed Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*,6.

into account the socio-cultural context, in which the film was produced. While it may be difficult to pin down exactly what science fiction genre is, I contend that the category evokes a reasonably specific set of themes and subjects.

Given science fiction genre's association with technology and body discourse, it is not surprising that the genre extends to the embodiment of gender and in turn, providing "a vibrant and influential space for (re)thinking gender and exploring feminist possibilities."<sup>4</sup> Gendered robots, artificial intelligence (AI), and aliens are no stranger to science fiction cinema. When aligned with the representation of femininity, this inclination towards 'in-betweenness' seems to promise a series of representation in which traditional gender dichotomy does not apply to their bodies. As these figures attest, artificial or hybrid bodies that can not be readily identified or classified play a significant part in the critical discourse on femininity and science fiction, predominately informed by Donna Haraway's seminal essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway uses the figure of the cyborg to

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<sup>4</sup>Marleen S. Barr, 'Everything's Coming Up Roses' in *Future Females The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*, Ed. by Marleen S. Barr (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) 4.

represent the possibility of crossing boundaries and by rejecting the conventional idea of identity. The cyborg becomes a “creature in the post-gendered world,”<sup>5</sup> that does not fit within the boundaries set by gender dichotomy. For Haraway, the cyborg’s lack of conventional origin liberates it from various limiting categories around gender and body. Naturally, Haraway praises science fiction’s particular fascination with “the interpretation of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others and with the exploration of possible worlds in a context structured by transnational technoscience.”<sup>6</sup> This constant pushing and pulling of boundaries can manifest in the form of bodies, which are not easily defined or categorized. When aligned with the representation of femininity and female body, science fiction’s tendency towards ‘in-betweenness’ promises to live up to the optimistic vision of Haraway’s cyborg.

The artificial women offer a compelling critique of how to think about the constructed nature of femininity. In traditional science fiction, artificial women are given a feminine body with a specific set of behaviours that specifically reflect the male scientist’s

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<sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991) 181.

<sup>6</sup> Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others”, in *Cultural Studies*, Ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 300.

desire of what an ideal woman should be. At the same time, this, in turn, exposes the frail concept of gender. Even if the artificial woman can successfully engage in the ‘correct’ feminine behavior better than the biological human woman, this reveals “the notion of gender as performative rather than a natural mode of identity.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, the figure of an artificial woman offers the most subversive potential that can deconstruct the myths of dualisms.

Unfortunately, most science fiction films featuring artificial woman often fail to live up to that potential. Over the last two decades, while the forms of the artificial woman might vary, the images of feminized robots, AIs, and aliens have become increasingly sexual and equivalent to the primitive model of femininity. These figures are consistently constructed to embody the idealized female form to reflect male fantasy. Despina Kakoudaki points out, “the artificial female body is sexy and sexually seductive and more sexually available somehow not despite its mechanicity, but precisely *because* it is mechanical.”<sup>8</sup> Although Donna Haraway imagines the cyborg as a figure that is able to transcend the construct

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<sup>7</sup> Sue Short, *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 7.

<sup>8</sup> Despina Kakoudaki, *Anatomy of a Robot: Literature, Cinema and the Cultural Work of Artificial People* (Rutgers University Press, 2014) 82.

identities, the representation of an artificial women often fail to escape the patriarchal hierarchy that shapes their representation.

This problem has often been reflected in science fiction films, starting with Maria the robot in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), the mutated Panda woman in Erle C. Kenton's *The Island of Lost Souls* (1932), half-alien-woman in Roger Donaldson's *Species* (1995) and to evil deadly fembot in Ralph Thomas's *Some Girls Do* (1969). What all these female-coded characters have in common is that they have been feminized not only because they represent the fantasy of their male creators/victims, but also because they are viewed as the ultimate "Other," a monster that threatens to annihilate the dominant masculine structure. While Haraway might imagine 'cyborg' as a figure that is able to disrupt and transcend boundaries of male/female and natural/artificial, the cinematic image of these women reflects the male fantasy of the ideal female body, which pushes the radical possibility of imagining an empowering representation of women beyond gender dichotomy.

Many science fiction scholars relate the creation of the perfect woman to the Greek myth of Pygmalion, who sculpts the statue of a woman that appears so beautiful and lifelike that he falls in love with it. Venus, the Goddess of Love, eventually breathes life into the

sculpture to turn into a real woman named Galatea. Pygmalion subsequently finds all the other women unattractive because they cannot compete with his fantasy woman. According to Julie Wosk, similar to Pygmalion and his statuette, the artificial women in science fiction are “often shaped not only by men’s fantasies but also men’s belief about women themselves—their inherent trait or ‘nature,’ their usual behaviour, and their proper (culturally assigned) social roles.”<sup>9</sup> Although the myth of Pygmalion ends on a happy note by marrying Galatea, science fiction films often envision a particular shift in the construction of an artificial woman, where she becomes more like destructive Pandora than Galatea, containing “lies, falsehood and wicked nature.”<sup>10</sup>

The artificial woman in the science fiction films speaks specifically to mistrust of the women and technology where an external feminine body can possess a dangerous technological body. As a consequence of her being, the artificial woman is often punished and destroyed as a deadly threat. This destruction takes several different forms described by Aaron Misener: “sometimes, it is violent destruction in an attempt to escape the power structure;

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<sup>9</sup> Julie Wosk, *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015) 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

other times; it is self-destruction in an attempt to repurpose the technological body into the unreachable social frame, or sometimes destruction is convinced where the subject assimilate into a more standard or acceptable social identity.”<sup>11</sup> By dehumanizing artificial woman as a monstrous being, the human characters are able to justify the killing, and naturally, the spectators are more prone to side with the human characters because they do not perceive the artificial woman as a human, but a sub-human that needs to be eliminated to ensure the correct social order.

In addressing the question of gender politics in artificial women, the two works I will be examining in this study are Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2015) and Jonathan Glazer’s *Under the Skin* (2014). In their own fashion, both films have been praised for their subversion of science fiction tropes. While these two works may initially seem to focus on a different aspect of the artificial female body, I argue that *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin* share important themes and elements that are critical to my analysis. By moving away from conventional science fiction, *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin* blur the line of vain perception of human superiority, and in turn, focus on artificial women as mirrors to reflect current gender politics.

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<sup>11</sup> Aaron Misener, “‘Constructing a New femininity’: Popular Film and the Effects of Technological Gender”(Masters diss., McMaster University, 2016) 36.

Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" sets the crucial groundwork for this thesis by imagining the hybridity of the cyborg and the way it transcends binaries of socio-cultural tradition. In this framework, the boundaries between male and female, human and non-human, and natural and artificial can be transgressed within the cyborg narrative. While Haraway sees her cyborg as a technological hybrid figure with the organic human body, Ava and the Woman carry no natural or biological trace. However, I contend that their total artificiality has the same potential to reveal the transgressive potential of technology/artificiality to break down the binaries of gender politics.

*Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin* explore the construction of gender through speculated bodies and gender performance of artificial women. In *Ex Machina*, Ava/Machine is introduced as a part woman and in other parts as a machine. In order to escape her imprisonment, she begins to cover her machine body with feminine clothes and artificial skin, and the audience can never be sure which version of Ava/Machine is truly embodying. This, in turn, makes it impossible to assign a stable gender or identity to Ava. In *Under the Skin*, however, the Woman/Alien's body already appears in a complete form from the very beginning. Hence, in comparison to Ava, the

visual process of gendering is more straightforward in the film. The idea that the Woman's femininity is 'worn' outside her alien body exposes the flimsiness of gender construction. Additionally, this allows the narrative to focus on the development of female consciousness in relation to her artificial feminine skin rather than focusing on the physical transformation into womanhood. While both Ava and the Woman use their 'artificial skin' and sexuality to reflect male fantasy, they treat sexuality as a means to an end.

For the discussion of gender construction and performance, I have chosen Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, as it best illustrates how Ava and the Woman perform their gender as an act of resistance. Butler criticizes the idea of gender as an essential part of defining the self. For her, there is no self or subject that precedes gender. Thus, gender is performative as it is shaped through repetition and performance. She argues, "[g]ender is performativity produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence."<sup>12</sup> Gender roles and construction of femininity is built through "sustained social performance."<sup>13</sup> In both films, Ava and the Woman develop gender through the binding social force of

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<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge 1999) 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 185.

‘gendering.’ This development is done by a repetitious performance of gender that is already present in the background while the process of gendering is taking place.

In line with Butler’s theory, both films depict femininity as a performance. In *Ex Machina*, Nathan created Ava. Ava then performs femininity as an act to escape imprisonment. Her performance of gender confuses the viewer, exposing the fragility of gender construction. Similarly, Glazer’s *Under the Skin* corresponds with Butler’s theory, depicting gender as mere imitation. Both works exhibit the potentiality of gender performance as a form of resistance—even if it is imposed—and as a way of understanding the gender dichotomy. Both films ask the same question of what it really means to be a human/woman, and whether artificial beings can ever be considered equivalent to a human. Earlier in the chapter, I mentioned when analyzing science fiction films, a film critic or theorist should focus on the “cultural instrumentality.” Knowing this, I seek to explore these films in relation to gender politics in current society, and how these films may potentially shape future representation of artificial women in cinema

In the following chapter on Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina*, I investigate the construction and the spectacle of Ava/Machine’s body

and the imposition of gender role as well as entrapment of male fantasy. Ava's body is introduced as a part woman and in other part as a machine, offering a compelling critique of how to think about the constructed nature of femininity. Chapter two continues the similar discussion, focusing on the issue of the constructed nature of femininity in Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin*. In particular, it is difficult not to notice when comparing *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin*'s artificial women that their main difference begins with their body. In contrast to Ava, the Woman/Alien's body already appears in a complete form from the very start. The visual process of gendering is more straightforward in the film, allowing the narrative to focus on the development of female consciousness than following the physical transformation into womanhood.

## 2. Woman from the Machine: *Ex Machina*

### 2.1 The Spectacle of Ava's Body

Alex Garland's directing debut, *Ex Machina* (2015) is a science fiction thriller that touches upon the relations between human and technology as well as gender and body politics. The film begins when twenty-four-years-old computer programmer Caleb (Domhnaal Gleeson) employed at Bluebook wins a meet-and-greet competition with a company founder Nathan (Oscar Issac) to spend an entire week at his luxurious mansion/lab in the isolated landscape. Moments after his arrival, Nathan reveals to Caleb that the purpose of his visit is to administer his own version of the Turing test that does not quite follow the generic scientific process.<sup>14</sup> Instead, it is disclosed to Caleb (tester) from the very start that he will interact with the artificial intelligence named Ava and then ask him to

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<sup>14</sup> Before I begin my in-depth cinematic analysis of the spectacle of Ava and its relation to the male gaze, I will briefly refer to the concept of the Turing test and the "uncanny valley" hypothesis to have a deeper understanding of the narrative and the corresponding scenes. To start with, the Turing test is an experiment with the main objective to verify whether an artificial intelligence is indeed 'intelligent'. The standard process of the Turing test demands that a human subject decide, based on replies given to her or his questions, whether she or he is communicating with a human or a machine. In order to pass the test, the machine has to deceive and manipulate the human tester into believing that it is human.

determine if she feels like a 'real' woman. This is a crucial change to the test because it is no longer about examining the intelligence but rather its likeliness to a human. However, the story takes a turn when Nathan later reveals to Caleb that the actual subject of the Turing Test is Caleb and Ava is doomed from the very beginning to be destroyed even after she passes or fails the test. Nathan explains to Caleb, "the real test is to show you that she's a robot and then see if you still feel she has consciousness." If Ava fails to pass the test, Nathan's 'humanization' project becomes meaningless, and as a consequence, the destruction of her software (identity) is inevitable for further upgrades. On the other hand, even if the test is successful, Ava is nothing less or more than a trophy that proves of Nathan's outstanding ability as a creator. Hence she must be destroyed to prevent any chance of rebelling against his control like a real human might do. Even before the test, Ava's fate is already predetermined from the very start and in turn, reflects a distortion of human desire. In short, the success or failure of the test can only be determined by human emotions that dwell in the realm of fantasy. While the test is rigged from the start, Garland purposely frames the Turing sessions to appear as if Ava is the one 'testing' Caleb. The true test is not to

determine whether she has consciousness, but how easily Caleb will be affected by his own heterosexual desire towards her.

From the very beginning, Garland presents Ava with a visually fragmented body. Her breast, lower torso, and shoulders are covered in grey carbon fiber, while her arms, stomach and legs are built-in transparent material revealing her artificial composition. Only her face and hands, covered with hyper-realistic skin, are seen distinctively ‘female.’ The silhouette of her body resembles a youthful woman in her twenties with a slim body. Despite how much her body or face resembles a real woman, she is nothing more than a machine.

Ava exists as a fiction or what Jean Baudrillard refers to as imaginary.<sup>15</sup> Ava’s simulation of womanhood does not necessarily exist outside of reality, but rather as a double that reinforces the very foundation of femininity. The constructed image of Ava is neither true nor false, but exists as a partial-reality in the realm of idealized fantasy of womanhood for Nathan and Caleb. This fantasy regarding Ava’s body becomes more apparent when Nathan admits to Caleb that she is modeled after his porn preference. Her very face and body are constructed to reflect his sexual fantasies. Hence, Ava cannot be

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<sup>15</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. (University of Michigan Press. 1994): 23.

a sexless and genderless robot, and Garland does not fail to emphasize that her gender identity is a principal factor for Caleb to develop an eroticized-emotional attachment towards her.

What is particularly interesting and distinct about Ava's body is that it no longer questions what it 'really' means to be a woman, to be perceived as a woman or to simulate the physical features of a woman. Instead, she confronts the male fantasy about these questions. Ava is fully aware that she is not a real woman but a machine simulating as one, as she admits to Caleb during their first Turing session. In the end, Ava successfully seduces Caleb because she is aware of the gender dynamic in the male dominating system that she was 'created' into. Monica Nickelsburg writes "assigning gender to these AI personals may say something about the role we expected them to play."<sup>16</sup> Ava is constructed as a woman, and naturally, she plays the expected role of a woman.

However, Ava does not necessarily embody the image of an ideal woman that Nathan and Caleb expect. While sexuality of female-coded robots is usually emphasized in science fiction films, *Ex Machina* doubts such a premise and creates a subversive effect by presenting Ava as an 'anti-woman' figure. Although Ava is equipped

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<sup>16</sup>Monica Nickelsburg, "Why is AI female? How our ideas about sex and service influence the personalities we give machines," *Geekwire*, Apr. 4, 2016.

with patches of artificial female skin and programmed femininity, she does not reflect the same ‘identity’ as a human woman, nor she desires to ‘be’ or ‘becoming’ one. Nathan and Caleb were doomed from the very beginning because they fail to see beyond their male fantasy of female-coded robots.

## **2.2 Imposition of Gender Role**

Ava relies on her image of artificial femininity to manipulate Caleb, performing as if she is a real woman willing to give genuine affection and even hinting out her own desire to be touched or loved. Ava’s brain is based on and linked to the massive search engine that Nathan designed at his company. Her predictions about how to best win Caleb’s affection are based on her awareness of his preference and Nathan’s expectations of a woman from his programming. As such, being ‘feminine’ is depicted as the only purpose for Ava’s existence, and so femininity is naturalized into the robotic form.

The performance of Ava’s artificial femininity is inextricably linked to her gender performativity, in which she expresses feminine behaviours to appear as a ‘real’ woman. Though her machine body

shows her mechanical nature, in one scene, she covers her body with clothes in an attempt to see how Caleb would respond. Ava's act of dressing up indicates that she understands the gender rules of human society. Having realized that appearance plays a crucial role in developing an interpersonal connection, she dresses up to take towards asserting herself into the gender dynamic. The kind of clothes she decides to wear—white stocking, light green cardigan, and long summer dress—serves to mask her machine body in order to appear more 'human/woman' to Caleb. Through distinctively feminine clothes, Ava temporarily feminizes herself and exploits male fantasy of womanhood for her own benefits. Her ability to stabilize her image as a woman seems 'too real' and 'too close' to being a woman than to consider it as just a machine. There is no real woman or femininity behind Ava, only artificial simulation based on male fantasy of womanhood.

In traditional science fiction films like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), the imagery of the female robot is often used as a metaphor for a woman's inferior position in the patriarchal hegemony as a subordinate slave. As Jane Donawerth asserts, "the woman-as-

machine is *erotic* because she is a machine.”<sup>17</sup> Like Ava, the female-coded machine is intentionally constructed to serve as an ideal substitute in a heterosexual relationship. Ava’s body plays a significant role when it comes to gender and it becomes more apparent when Nathan reveals to Caleb that he has constructed Ava as a heterosexual woman with a fully functional artificial vagina.

Nathan: You bet she can fuck. I made her automatically complete.

Caleb: What?

Nathan: She has a cavity between her legs, with a concentration of sensors. Engage with them in the right way and she’ll get a pleasure response.

Caleb: Pleasure response.

Nathan; She will come. So if you want to screw her, mechanically speaking, you can. And she’d enjoy it.

As this dialogue indicates, Nathan tells Caleb that he believes is “anatomically complete” because she has a “cavity between her legs.” However, in reality, the artificial vagina makes no difference when it comes to completion of Ava’s womanhood. In an interview with the director, Garland asserted that Nathan’s construction of Ava and his

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<sup>17</sup> Jane Donawerth, *Frankenstein’s Daughters* (Syracuse University Press, 1997), 61.

view of her role as a sexual servant is a reflection of masculine assumption: “[Nathan is] caricaturing something that is actually there. He does want to subjugate and fuck these machines that he’s made to look like girls in their early twenties.”<sup>18</sup> Nathan has purposely designed her as Ava a pleasurable object, and the distinction between ‘woman’ and ‘machine’ is not a crucial factor for satisfying the sexual desire.

### **2.3 Entrapment of Male Fantasy**

Through the camera’s gaze, Ava’s body becomes the spectacle for Caleb and Nathan. While I agree there is some degree of voyeuristic objectification of her body. I argue that from the very first Turing session, Ava resists, reflects and even manipulates the male gaze in accordance to the fantasy of male desire. Woosung Kang points out that it is difficult to conclude Caleb’s fascination with Ava foregrounds his heterosexual desire for the female body.<sup>19</sup> From the first Turing session until the end of the film, Ava exposes her feminized machine body and even dresses up in woman’s clothing to

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<sup>18</sup> David Lumb. “‘Feel Bad About Us’: Alex Garland Talks About The Real Questions Behind *Ex Machina* And Artificial Intelligence.” *Co. Create*. (2015): 32.

<sup>19</sup> Woosung Kang, “Anthropocentrism,” 21.

appear more like a real ‘woman’ to Caleb. Yet the scenes do not explicitly emphasize his heterosexual desire for Ava. In Kang’s perspective, the object of Caleb’s desire is not aimed at Ava’s simulated femininity, but rather at his own voyeuristic masculinity.<sup>20</sup> I go a step further and argue that Caleb’s gaze coincides with the decline of his assumed control over Ava as the spectacle and thereby cannot be interpreted as a celebration of his male power.

Now I would like to turn the attention to the first Turing session scene at which Ava resists and deflects the male gaze by controlling the spectacle of her body. The first Turing test sequence starts with a pulsating ambient beat and an establishing medium-long shot of Nathan sitting behind three large computer screens at his office. The placing of low-key light in line with Nathan’s face as he monitors Caleb entering the session room emphasizes his role as an omnipresent overseer. The camera then zooms in and cuts to a medium close-up shot of Nathan gazing at his monitors. The voyeuristic nature of the scene evokes Michael Foucault’s understanding of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, an ideal prison structure for continuous surveillance of the inmates through constant and covert observation. While Foucault’s Panopticon is visible to its

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 23.

prisoners, the surveillance system in *Ex Machina* uses the invisible omnipresence of control of a Panopticon to produce the effect of complete omnipresent authority over Caleb and Ava.

The camera then transitions from Nathan's monitor screen to a medium-long shot of Caleb<sup>21</sup> entering the glass cube where Ava is confined. After a beat, introductory long shot of Ava is presented in the frame through an over-the-shoulder point of view (OTS-POV) shot of Caleb (Figure 1). The camera behind Caleb is positioned in such a way that it invites the spectators to through his gaze to participate in the voyeuristic watch. The natural blue light radiating from the small decorative garden behind Ava acts as a backdrop, adding a sense of ethereal radiance over her body as opposed to Caleb, who is confined under the yellow light in the opposing glass enclosure. The juxtaposition of the space and contrasting atmospheric colour tone between the two scenes not only establishes a standard use of gendered imagery of male gaze and the objectified 'female' subjects but also shows an ironic play between natural and artificial space.

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<sup>21</sup> The yellow chiaroscuro light over Caleb's head emphasizes his awkward frame and frail appearance. Moreover, in the context of cinematic lights, the colour yellow symbolizes cowardice, dishonesty, illness and hazard, foreshadowing the doomed fate of Caleb.



**(Figure 1)**

After a short pause, Ava notices Caleb and turns her head to face him, deflecting the gaze of her voyeur. The composition of the backlight and reflection from the glass wall adds a reflective layer over Ava's head resembling a net, hiding her face as she gazes back at Caleb (Figure 2). This image functions as a visual metaphor of a veil, setting it as the surface of division and separation of Caleb's gaze. Referring to Mary Ann Doane's analysis of the veiling in cinema, the veil is used to present the subject as an enigma, ultimately constructing the woman as an unattainable object of desire while adding a mystifying layer of erotic spectacle. Here in this scene, the reflective veil over Ava's face enables her to function as the unattainable object, rejecting Caleb's attempt to construct her as an object of his desire as it makes impossible for Caleb to imagine what her returning gaze might look like.



**(Figure 2)**

The two exchanging gazes between Ava and Caleb do not conform to Laura Mulvey's theory of gendered gaze between "active/male and passive female."<sup>22</sup> In this scene, Ava's body is not fetishized. Firstly, the camera does not actively fragment her body through extensive use of close-up cuts or zooms, and secondly, a long shot of her body in the introductory sequence is carried by a sense of technological fascination rather than sexual objectification. Within the realm of Doane's analysis of the gaze, woman averting the male gaze is said to carry a function as the ideal object of voyeurism in that she is unable to look back or to think for herself. In this way, a woman's capability to dissemble is contained and restricted. Thus, when a woman closes her eyes to herself, she

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<sup>22</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 833-44. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999) 808.

becomes a pure construction of philosophical gaze in which she does not know for sure whether she is deceiving or planning to deceive as a conscious choice, representing deception without being able to access to its true power.<sup>23</sup> The metaphorical veil over Ava's face functions as a means of dislocating and rejecting Caleb's gaze, along with his assumed position of power over her role by intentionally becoming the spectacle of desire. This momentary gaze refusal is a pivotal scene that gives her the power to mobilize the terms of her own objectification, rather than only existing as the object of spectacular; she is in control of staging herself.

The refusal of Caleb's gaze is further emphasized in the following scene where she exits completely out of the frame to walk over to Caleb. The camera cuts to the first two shots of Ava and Caleb. The medium-long shot and the high key light adds a glow to Ava's face emphasizing her soft and feminine features. In contrast to Ava, who is now gazing at Caleb, only his body's reflection appears isolated without a head on the glass frame. (Figure 3) The human face in cinema is the most communicative area of the body and acts as the marker of individuality. Susan Stewart explains the process by which face becomes the body's most articulate region:

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: feminism, film theory, psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge 1991), 27-28.

“If the surface is the location of the body’s meaning, it is because the surface is invisible to the body itself. And if the face reveals a depth and profundity which the body itself is not capable of, it is because the eyes and to some degree the mouth are openings onto fathomlessness. Behind the appearance of eyes and mouth lies the interior stripped of appearances...The face is a type of “deep” text, a text whose meaning is complicated by change and by a constant series of alternation between a reader and an author who is strangely disembodied, neither present nor absent, found in neither part nor whole, but, in fact, *created*, by this reading. Because of this convention of interpretation, it is not surprising that we find that one of the great *topoi* of Western literature has been the notion of the face as a book.”<sup>24</sup>

The face is the most important body region for the spectators and the characters in the frame to communicate emotions. When the camera focuses on Ava gazing at headless Caleb, a metaphorical decapitation of his individuality and the male gaze; the role of the voyeur is reversed.

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Steward, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984), 127.



**(Figure 3)**

The first Turing session ends and cuts back to Nathan's office. Three of his monitors are still turned on, presenting different perspective shots between three characters. (Figure 4) The first monitor from the left presents medium-close up of Caleb in Ava's point of view. The middle monitor is a high angle shot of Caleb and Ava in Nathan's perspective. And the third monitor presents close-up of Ava in Caleb's perspective. As analyzed before, Nathan holds the dominant gaze of the camera, and it parallels the authoritarian and Panopticon power he has over Ava and Caleb. However, I argue that Ava is fully aware of Nathan's surveillance. She constantly monitors herself by specifically engaging in behaviours that allow Nathan or Caleb to feel as they are in control.



**(Figure 4)**

Ava's safety and preservation are all linked to performing a submissive and timid female persona. As it is later revealed through security footage in the film, Nathan's prototypes of Ava have been mutilated, dragged, and deactivated for acting against his control. Ava's imprisonment under Nathan's constant surveillance is just as abusive as the deactivation of the previous models; both depict the abuse of female bodies. Hence, Ava has to embody the role of damsel in distress striving for survival, and her timid behaviours reinforce the requirement to survive the patriarchal control. In short, Ava's awareness of the male gaze is what gives Ava the power to resist and manipulate her male prison guards.

The resistance of the gaze is seen again during the second Turing session. Ava's eyes gaze upward to Caleb, who is sitting on a

chair across from her. (Figure 5) The transparent glass wall separates the two, reflecting the image of Ava. In addition to the diegetic image of the two, the spectators see Ava staring at her own reflected image on the glass, an image that Caleb cannot see from his position. The reflected image of Ava emphasizes the duality of her gaze towards Caleb. The framing of this scene reveals Ava's willingness to be the object of his desire while maintaining her own desire. Caleb's gaze towards Ava reveals that he is already intoxicated with the masculine fantasy that he had created for himself even before meeting Ava. At least from the surface, Caleb reacts to Ava's simulation of femininity in accordance with his heterosexual fantasy; the test was already determined to be a success even before it started. Ava's gaze in this scene appears divided, only responding to half of his fantasy and rejecting the rest.



**(Figure 5)**

The film's most striking example of Ava deflecting the male gaze occurs in a scene where Caleb watches her on a live feed from a surveillance camera in the observation room. The medium-long shot of Ava shows her lying on her bed with her face turned away from the camera (Figure 6). The camera zooms in on her body, laying in a straight posture, revealing the curves of her breast on a synthetic torso. The surveillance camera image parallels to Caleb's perspective. In contrast to the initial body shot of Ava in the first Turing test sequence, here the camera actively fetishizes on her body by zooming in (Figure 7). In addition, the placement of soft key-light on her face emphasizes her soft feminine features. Although this scene exemplifies Caleb's voyeuristic gaze of Ava's body, she does not

avert her eyes and looks back at the camera, in turn offering a powerful image of erotic ‘female’ who challenges the male gaze.



**(Figure 6)**



**(Figure 7)**

In the later scene, Ava tells Caleb, “I wonder if you’re watching me on the cameras. And I hope you are.” As her dialogue reveals, Ava also watches Caleb through the surveillance camera in his room. I go a step further and argue that Ava’s body is constructed in a particular way that allows her gaze to be omnipresent. During a

scene where Nathan explains how he programmed Ava to imitate facial expression. He explains to Caleb:

Nathan: Almost every cell phone has a microphone, a camera, and a means to transmit data. So I switched on all the mikes and cameras, across the entire fucking planet, and redirected the data through Blue Book. Boom. A limitless resource of facial and vocal interaction.

This suggests that Ava might have been observing Caleb from the very beginning through the lens of his electronical device and Nathan's surveillance cameras, proving the omnipresent nature of Ava. Her power over the male gaze is emphasized when she reveals to Caleb that she can overload the security system by reversing the power of her recharging station, having control over the surveillance system.

During the power cut, the lighting in the room turns into extreme monochrome red. (Figure 8) Stylistically, the use of extreme chromatic field transforms the boundaries of varying colours into a single tone. Hence, Ava's fragmented body appears as one chromatic image, blurring the boundaries between natural and artificial tones. What is visually fascinating and disturbing about the scene is the way

in which the security systems are twisted into something subtly dangerous and threatening. Here, Ava is active and openly demonstrates resistance over her situation by imprisoning Caleb in return. The womb-like imagery of the red room parallels to Barbara Creed imagery of the womb as a room or enclosed space. She explains, the representation of the womb as a familiar or unfamiliar place is played out as a method to hint dubious acts, which are initially hidden from sight until the reveal in the end. Similarly, Mary Ann Doane explains that there is also a relation between the concept of uncanny and the room, which “becomes the analogue of the human body, its part fetishized by textual operation, its erogenous zones, metamorphosed by morbid anxiety attached to sexuality.”<sup>25</sup> During the power cut, Ava takes a chance and warns Caleb that Nathan is not to be trusted and that he is planning to shut her down once the test is completed. Empathizing with her situation, Caleb assumes that he can play the role of her rescuer.

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: the Woman's film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987): 72.



**(Figure 8)**

There is, however, a peculiar aspect of Caleb's 'rescue fantasy.' While he believes that he is saving Ava from Nathan's abuse, he is also driven by his own desire. Although it is not difficult to interpret Caleb's rescue as an act fueled by his own sexual attraction to Ava, Garland does not show any indication that Caleb is sexually attracted to Ava. Take, for example, the scenes during the blackout session. Ava has no 'femininity' to reveal even during the secret conversation, and the biggest reason why she has successfully manipulated Caleb is not because of her feminine qualities, but because she is a talking robot. Hence, his feeling towards Ava can be simply explained by his peculiar desire to 'become' a machine like her.

In a scene where Caleb rejects Kyoko's sexual advance, she purposely chooses an alternative method in which she strips her artificial skin to reveal her machine body to seduce him. After seeing

her machine body, Caleb panics and cuts his own flesh to find a machine mechanism that may be embedded inside him. By identifying with both Ava and Kyoko, Caleb desires to become a machine. Nathan's fatal flaw is not only his lack of empathy towards the female bodies but his mistake to assume Caleb's heterosexual desire. Nathan purposely programmed Ava with a certain aspect of sexuality, which she could use to seduce Caleb. He considered sexual manipulation as one of the most effective characteristics to determine if she is a conscious being. Regardless, there is no essential necessity for Ava to possess sexuality because consciousness and sexuality are not necessarily directly linked to each other. Therefore, there is no need for sexuality for Ava to indicate her consciousness. The only reason for her gender is because of Nathan's own perception of women and their sexuality.

Regardless of Caleb's effort to save her, in the end, it is Kyoko, the silent maid who rescues her from imprisonment. Contrary to most science fiction narratives, Ava survives, but the film does not end on a happy note. Not only she stabs Nathan to death with a knife with help from Kyoko; she later abandons Caleb to die alone in the facility. Despite her previous actions to initiate empathy for the

imprisonment, her cruelty towards Caleb in the end, reveals her true nature of a machine.

The last few minutes of the film depict Ava following the classic femme fatale trope by the way she uses Caleb for her own benefit. In her review of the film, Angela Wattercutter identifies Ava as “femme fatale, a seductress posing as a damsel in distress, using her wits to get Caleb to save her from Nathan and Dr. Frankenstein-with-tech-money quest to build a perfect woman.”<sup>26</sup> However, I argue it is difficult to identify Ava as a ruthless femme fatale. Although the film presents Nathan and Caleb as a dominant gaze the earlier part of the film, Garland makes sure that the audience understands Ava is the final protagonist. In other words, Ava is only seen as a figure of femme fatale if the film is interpreted in Caleb’s perspective. The choice between her own freedom and Caleb’s life was an easy choice, which she made without an ounce of regret. If Ava leaves with Caleb, she will be trapped once again. He will attempt to control her because he knows she is a machine. Caleb’s imprisonment, in the end, is not out of spite but rather a logical decision because of Ava’s desire for freedom.

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<sup>26</sup> Angela Wattercutter, “*Ex Machina* Has a Serious Fembot Problem.” *Wired*. (2015). 4

The plot twist, in the end, represents a deliberate and significant subversion of the previous fictional narrative of artificial woman. In traditional science fiction narrative, the male scientist constructs the female robot as an improvement on a human woman. She inevitably does what she was programmed to do and is still demolished in the end. *Ex Machina* departs from this narrative arc by allowing Ava to escape. Nathan's death reveals his failure to control his creation and "his inability to fulfill the male fantasy exposes it as a problematic dream at best, whether because a satisfactory simulacrum of a woman can never be created through purely technological means or because once you animate something with humanity, it inevitably seeks to be free."<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to Donna Haraway's cyborg that exists outside of the dichotomy of gender, Ava is conformed to the role of the perfect 'female' companion and ultimately manages to survive. Her escape to the human world represents other possibilities for herself in spite of gender structures. Ava's survival, in the end, is a deliberate subversion of science fiction trope that destroys female robots.

After murdering Nathan, Ava covers her machine body with an artificial skin of the previous 'dead' models. The mirrors in the room

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<sup>27</sup> Minsoo Kang, "Building the Sex Machine: The Subversive Potential of the Female Cyborg," *Intertexts* 9, no.1 (2005), 6.

additionally fracture her already fragmented body. On a purely visual level, the scene makes a bold statement that femininity is just a masquerade. The camera, paralleling with Caleb, once again voyeuristically watches her body as she is completing the final step of becoming a complete woman. After getting dressed, Ava subverts the male gaze by gazing back at Caleb and quickly leaves the facility with him locked inside.

The reason why some viewers might find the ending a bit unsettling is not because of Ava's cruelty towards Caleb, but because the film reveals that it has been mocking their voyeuristic gaze and fetishization of female body as part of its grand plan. Because the film encourages the viewers to identify with Caleb from the start, watching Ava leave him behind to die of starvation can feel shocking. Because of this, some viewers might find it difficult to view Ava as the real protagonist of *Ex Machina*. While this might be true on the surface, Ava cannot be responsible for her actions because she is an artificial woman. Instead, Nathan and Caleb are responsible for their own tragic fate by treating her as their possession. Ava is not a murderous robot with a desire to annihilate humanity. Throughout the film, she has shown her desire to be a human among human. *Ex Machina* does not criticize the creation of artificial woman but the

male desire to control her. Ultimately, this film is about and for Ava. In a genre where artificial women are relentlessly destroyed, Ava's survival finally marks a deliberate subversion of the misogynistic trope that exists before her.

### 3. The Alien under the Woman: *Under the Skin*

#### 3.1 'Becoming' the Woman

Jonathan Glazer's debut Sci-Fi film, *Under the Skin*, is almost like a direct sequel to *Ex Machina*, presenting what 'if' narrative after Ava's escape to human society. The film provides a sustained engagement with gender construction and performance, and particularly with the visual consumption of women's body within the heteronormative masculine culture. The film, based on a novel by Michael Faber (2000) with the same title, concentrates on the Woman (Scarlett Johansson), an alien<sup>28</sup> from out of space, whose mission on Earth is to prey on human males to harvest their skins. The film utilizes the Woman's hunting and subsequent liquefying of the men she captures, as an allegory for contemporary anxieties about female body and sexuality. Her hunt deliberately plays with the male fantasy but also subverts the conservative notion of the gender distribution based on the male predator/monster and the female victim. In *Under the Skin*, it is the human men who become objectified and violated by the Woman. Through repositioning the

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<sup>28</sup> The name of the alien is not specifically given in the film. Hereafter I will refer the alien as 'the Woman'.

human men as the victims, the film makes a connection between the Woman's hunt for human meat and 'sex' and in turn problematizes the heteronormative culture of consuming female sexuality.

In contrast to Ava in *Ex Machina*, the Woman's 'bodysuit' allows her to pass as a complete human woman from the very start. The completeness of her body grants her some freedom, as she is able to blend in with other humans. This allows the film to focus on the development of female consciousness rather than the physical transformation into womanhood. Although the Woman's appearance is gendered from the very start, when interacting with men, her ability lacks in reading appropriate social cues. As a consequence, these odd interactions rupture her performance as a human woman as well as reveal moments of failure in the complete embodiment of femininity. This creates a gap between the authenticity and the performance—and yet, the men are distracted by her beautiful appearance to even dare question her true nature under the skin.

The film solidifies the Woman's gender in the following way: unlike Ava's fragmented body, she possesses a body in which alien body and human skin are intricately woven together that it is impossible to separate the woman from the artificial. It is not coincident that the Woman's introductory scene begins within a

white room that resembles a clinic. The sequence begins with an establishing close-up shot of a dead woman starting at the ceiling. The camera then slowly pans to the right to introduce the naked Woman aggressively pulling down the fishnet stockings from the corpse. While the nakedness of female bodies is usually coded as sexual, this scene is strangely de-gendered in the sense that sexuality is minimized. She does not bend over in a seductive manner to reveal cleavage or buttocks nor, actively fragment her body through extensive use of close-ups and cuts. The Woman is merely in the task of completing the human disguise by putting on the corpse's clothes, quite literally adopting a feminine aesthetic.

Additionally, the Woman's introductory scene offers a compelling critique of how to think about the constructed nature of femininity. The Woman proceeds to dress in the dead woman's skirt, stockings, and high-heeled shoes as her own, quite literally adopting a feminine aesthetic. This embodiment of gender serves to create a distraction to mask the absence of 'real' femininity on her artificial skin. Reflecting Joan Riviere's analysis, the Woman's femininity is a pure masquerade and an act performed to compensate for the supposed masculinity of such role.

“Womanliness, therefore, could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity

and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it—much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. The reader may not ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade.’ My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.”<sup>29</sup>

In Riviere’s description, femininity does not really exist and serves as a disguise to conceal the woman’s appropriation of masculinity, suggesting that the mask is there to conceal an absence of “pure” or “real” femininity. Therefore, the assumption of the mask conveys more of the “truth” of sexuality than any recourse to “being” or “essence.”

For instance, in the mall scene, after observing human behaviour, the Woman attempts to ‘dress’ like a seductive woman to begin her hunt. She deliberately selects a set of revealing outfits that parallels the stereotypical outfit of a prostitute. She picks out a large brown fur coat, a blood-red blouse and red lipstick for her lips, all of which are symbols of her sensuality. According to Sigmund Freud, “fur stands for the pubic hair”<sup>30</sup> and acts as a highly sexualized symbol. In addition, the fur allows humans to safely explore behaviours often characterized as ‘animalistic’ at the expense of the

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<sup>29</sup> Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” *Psychoanalysis and the Female Sexuality*, ed. Hendrick M. Ruitenbeek (New Haven: College and UP, 1966), 213

<sup>30</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Sigmund Freud Collected Papers Volume 4*. (Hogarth Press: England, 1953): 153.

animal's skin. Dressed in a fur coat, the Woman projects her image as an exotic 'animal'<sup>31</sup> attracting those who desire her. In line with Rivere, the Woman positions herself as a sexually alluring figure and uses her artificial shell to capture men into her van. Her artificial womanhood plays into fears about the seductive but destructive nature of artificial femininity.

## **2.2 Alien/Woman Subjectivity: The Female Gaze**

From the opening scene, the narrative forces the spectators to identify with the Woman as the main protagonist, and follow her journey on Earth. The film is divided into two parts. The first part of the film is structured around the point of view shots of Woman's pursuit of men. A particular camera technique forms the spectator's relation to the alien: long close-up shots of her face demand the spectators to overcome any distance to her. For most of the duration of the film, the spectator gazes with her as the camera follows her

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<sup>31</sup> In nature most animals will not allow humans to touch them. Touching occurs only when they are captured or killed. Like the animals, the Woman's fur coat represents the dangerous, the desired, and hunted. As Brian Luke discusses in his book *Brutal: Manhood and the Exploitation of Animals* (University of Illinois Press, 2007) many hunters describe hunting as a masculine, sexually-charged experience: using mating calls, mating scents, pursuing, waiting, and ultimately penetrating their victims with phallic arrow or bullets, killing them, allowing the hunters to touch their previously 'untouchable' bodies.

gaze on the hunt. Vivian Sobchack points out that using a subjective camera to represent alien consciousness is relatively rare in science fiction films, “probably because—dependent as they are upon the viewer’s comprehension—such images much extrapolate from human vision and therefore cannot attain the inventive and speculative freedom they pretend to.”<sup>32</sup> This way of looking simulates the distance between her alien consciousness and the human ‘skin’ she inhabits, as well as the world she is in. For this reason, this allows the spectators to perceive in a different, non-human way.

According to Osterweil, this distance, dominant gaze of the Woman cannot be separated from her gender.<sup>33</sup> Glazer purposely inverts Laura Mulvey’s critic of the male gaze by presenting with a distant and sexual female gaze of the Woman hunting men. The Woman does not care for her victims nor sexually desires them. Her predatory gaze is part of her duty to accomplish her mission. This is emphasized by the way in which she selects and hunts for men. In Sherryl Vint’s analysis of the film, she points out the way the camera zooms in on and tracks male body male bodies from the Woman’s

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<sup>32</sup> Vivian Sobchack, “Images of Wonder: The Look of Science Fiction,” in *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997),: 94.

<sup>33</sup> Ara Osterweil, “*Under the Skin*: The Perils of Becoming Female,” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 4 (2014): 47,

perspective, “consuming them visually and pushing the viewer to notice that something is off in the gendered relationship to the spectacle.”<sup>34</sup>



**(Figure 9)**

The Woman’s first cruise begins in her white van.<sup>35</sup> She patrols the street of Glasgow while gazing out to select her potential prey. In a series of point of view shots, the camera presents men of a different race, colour, and body waling on the street, oblivious to her gaze (Figure 9). The montage shots of men present “an inversion of the cinematic construct of female objectification” where the active and

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<sup>34</sup> Sherryl Vint, “Skin Deep: Alienation in Under the Skin.” *Extrapolation*, vol. 56, no. 1, (2015): 4.

<sup>35</sup> The cruising scenes are shot in cinema vérité style in which the van is equipped with set of hidden cameras and Johansson actually approaching non-actors on the street of Glasgow in largely improvised conversation. This tactic allows an interesting cinematic moment where Johansson’s beauty is tested on actual male pedestrians.

dominant female gazes at the men, surveying their bodies.<sup>36</sup> Her gaze is indiscriminate, objectifying, and assessing all passing men regardless of how they measure up to conventional ideals about attractive masculinity. The voyeuristic nature of these shots parallels to Nathan's surveillance cameras. The Woman inverts the effect of Panopticon by having her own Panopticon (van) to view unsuspecting men as objects for female disposal.<sup>37</sup>



**(Figure 10)**

After the Woman successfully lures her victims, she leads them into a room of darkness, evoking imagery of a womb. In a long shot, the victim stands across from the Woman. He walks towards her as

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<sup>36</sup> Laura Mulvey criticizes the voyeuristic nature of a film where viewers are made to see perceive only from a male perspective. Through the dominant male gaze, viewers of all gender experience the voyeuristic pleasure of viewing sexualized females as markers of gender identity. The film inverts the traditional gendering of scopophilia by presenting a reversal of gaze and in turn presenting the female desire.

<sup>37</sup> Ara Osterweil suggests, in her account of the scene, that the point of view is “triple mediated” by the Woman’s perspective, camera and the car window.

he takes off his clothes. The floor beneath him turns into the dark liquid, slowly swallowing him as his gaze is fixed on the spectacle of her naked body (Figure 10). Although the Woman's feminine figure is displayed, it is never seemingly provocative. In this scene, where she strips herself of her clothes and walks away from her victim only emphasizes the practical use of her skin. Even after his body is completely sunken and drifting within the darkness, the man continues to gaze at her (Figure 11). Paralleling the power cut scenes in *Ex Machina*, this scene uses the extreme chromatic field and shows the man's body rendered in translucent blue. After drifting within the darkness, the man's flesh and bones perish, leaving only the foil of skin.

The Woman's brutality can be read as an allegory to a feminist figure with an extreme vengeance of the male fantasy of woman. Alicia Byrnes response to this scene and comments that "the heroine mutilates her victims using a reproductive mechanism" as her victims "undergo a process of reverse fetal development and are ultimately returned to their origins in steam of bloody lava."<sup>38</sup> In contrast to the reproductive threat that female alien frequently possesses in science fiction, here the imagery of the womb is completely barren, unable to

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<sup>38</sup> Alicia Byrnes, "Alienating the Gaze: The Hybrid Femme Fatale of *Under the Skin*" *Deletion*. May 4 2015.

produce but only to destroy any essence of life. Margaret Miles explains, “the most concentrated sense of grotesque”<sup>39</sup> comes from the image of woman’s womb. She points out the concept of hell was often represented as a “lurid and rotting uterus”<sup>40</sup> where sinners are burned for eternity for their sins. In this scene, this ancient connection is drawn between the womb-like space and the monstrous act that occurs within. Similar to Ava, her body is barren, unable to produce. It is not coincident that she does not ‘touch’ or engage in sexual activities with any of her victims. The spectacle of her body seemingly promises sexual pleasure, but it only exists within the victim’s fantasy.



**(Figure 11)**

The Woman is able to kill her victims without any sense of guilt because she understands the nature of male fantasy. The male

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<sup>39</sup>Margaret R. Miles, “Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West,” (Boston: Beacon Pres. 1989), 147.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 148.

victims treat her external body as a prostitute, a sexual fantasy, and not a 'human.' She questions whether this is the true experience of being a 'woman' in human society. Unlike Ava in *Ex Machina*, the Woman is not motivated by her desire to be a human among humans. She is merely killing those who sexually desire her enough to get on the van to accomplish her mission. Though the destruction of men, the film opens a critical field where the audience might perceive how the 'skin' contribute to the concept of the spectacle, and how such spectacle contribute perpetuating the illusion that is a simulation of a woman.

The camera parallels the Woman's 'female' gaze by not allowing the spectators to have a stable assessment of her identity and thoughts on the mission. Glazer intentionally forces the spectators to share the Woman's point of view, even if the scenes are uncomfortable to watch. Throughout the narrative, the spectators are aware that the Woman's predatory gaze will eventually lead to the brutal skinning of one of these men. One of the most brutal but important scenes of the film, in this respect, is the scene with a Czechoslovakian surfer at the beach. In this scene, they engage in a short conversation, but soon interrupted when he notices that a family nearby is in danger. The wife has dived into the sea to save

the family dog. Shortly after this, her husband follows her as he realizes she will drown to death, leaving their infant daughter stranded on the shore. The surfer swims towards the family to save the husband, but fails, killing them all. Near-death, he crawls back to the shore. The Woman slowly walks towards the man and hits him with a rock, killing him instantly. Using a long shot, the camera depicts the Woman dragging the victim along the beach and leaving the crying infant alone to die.

Unlike traditional narrative and camera framing where the intentions and close-up of the events are arranged for the spectators, in this film, the spectators only get the glimpse of the scene from the a far. Osterweil points to this scene and asserts, “if regarding the pain of others can feel unbearable, the watching others regard the pain of others without feeling is even worse.”<sup>41</sup> This scene forces the spectators to embody the Woman’s distant and unsympathetic gaze, regardless of how uncomfortable he or she might feel.

Nevertheless, the spectators become used to this predatory gaze and moves closely with the Woman and become part of her journey. The initial discomfort gradually becomes distant, as well.

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<sup>41</sup> Osterweil. 46.

Thus, the spectators level themselves with the alien's experience and the changes she is about to go through.

### **3.3 Body Awareness: Female Consciousness**

The film takes a turn after the Woman encounters the man with a severe facial disfiguration. Before meeting the disfigured man, she does not feel anything for her artificial skin and the human world she is living in. As mentioned above, in the first part of the film, the Woman is fundamentally separated from her human 'skin' and her alien consciousness and demonstrated that she is unable to empathize with the world around her.

The most pivotal scene in the film takes place on a rainy evening on an empty street. The Woman spots a hooded man walking on the sidewalk and waits for him to walk near her van. She calls him over and asks for direction, the same line that she has been using for her other victims. When she offers to give him a ride to the supermarket, unlike her previous victims, his lack of response indicates a hesitation to her offer. After a momentary pause, he enters the van and buckles his seatbelt. As they drive off, he takes off his hood and uncovers his face. Under a beam light, the camera focuses

on his disfigured face through the Woman's perspective. Instead of staring, the Woman says, "that's better" and starts a conversation.

This scene illustrates the empathetic side of the Woman as she attempts to have her first genuine social interaction with men. Before meeting the disfigured man, she experienced her first assault by youth hooligans in the deserted parking lot and shocked into awareness that the body she uses to seduce men is also a target of violence. Her knowledge of this danger is highly relevant to her encounter with the disfigured man and for understanding why this particular encounter<sup>42</sup> affects her. In contrast to her previous victims, the disfigured man does not respond to her seduction. This is a pivotal moment when she recognizes her own subject position in the human world for the first time. The Woman is finally able to experience a form of genuine kinship that gives away to empathy, and as a return, she offers her face for him to touch for the first time.

The encounter with the disfigured man proves transformative. The Woman discovers herself again, marking the moment when her 'skin' becomes meaningful to her. As Ostweil states, "finally

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<sup>42</sup> Another moment in the film can also be connected to this scene. While she is in a traffic jam, the Woman receives a red rose from a man who sells flower on the street. When she puts the rose down on the passenger seat, she notices that there is blood smeared on her hand. The Woman observes the blood, wondering if it is from her body. Before, she was not able to regard herself as a human being, yet gradually she becomes to identify herself as one.

encountering someone whose skin is as alien to him as she experiences her own to be, she is moved by empathy.”<sup>43</sup> The first instance of identification occurs when the Woman suddenly, she realizes the sight of her face in the mirror. She has never before been able to see herself as a human being. Prior to meeting the disfigured man, her external body has been treated as a sexual fantasy and not a ‘human’ by the male victims. She questioned whether this is the authentic experience of being a ‘woman’ in human society. Like a fly trapped outside a window, she was unable to connect with the outside world. The mirror scene acts as a site of symbolic construction. The reflection in the mirror is constructed as a space of fantasy that is outside the reach of reality. This is the moment when her ‘skin’ becomes more than a tool for her mission. She starts to wonder how she really feels with her external body as a human woman and decides to abandon her house, mission and van to walk among the humans to experience humanity.

Among the first human experiences pursued by the Woman is ordering a black forest cake at a restaurant. However, almost immediately after the food enters her the mouth, the Woman coughs it back on the plate. Later, the Woman tries to have sex with a man

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<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* 49.

who has shown kindness. While this is the first time she exhibits any pleasure in establishing intimacy with men, yet almost immediately after the man enters her, she is astonished by the physical pain of being penetrated and grabs a mirror to check her vagina (Figure 13). Her alien body protests to the basic bodily pleasure (food and sex) of a human. She discovers the function of her artificial vagina is built to signify sex but is denied its pleasure. In Alicia Byrnes words, this “could be understood to respond to this idea via its science fiction conceit; here woman’s sexuality is commoditized to the point where her pleasure is eliminated from the scenario.”<sup>44</sup> The Woman’s artificial skin solely acts as a lure to seduce men, and her pleasure is not useful to accomplish her mission. The Woman desires something more than her mission, but she cannot give it a clear name. She yearns something more than what she has or can at the moment. This struggle to attain her desire (even if she can never reach it) is what makes her ‘human.’

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<sup>44</sup> Byrnes. 4.



**(Figure 12)**

In addition, the Woman's changing subjectivity modifies the way she gazes. From this point, she looks with feelings. While this new internal change does not make her appearance more human, it shifts the nature of her gaze from a predatory hunter to an empathetic observer. One scene particularly illustrates this change. The scene presents a different point-of-view sequence in which the Woman is walking among the humans. Instead of long shots, this scene uses a series of medium close-up shots to portray the pedestrians at the same visual level as the Woman. On a busy street, she trips on her feet and falls. A group of pedestrian immediately surrounds her and helps her get back on her feet, illustrating the crumbling boundaries between hunter/hunted and alien/human. This scene depicts how the Woman is not separate from the human world but inevitably intertwined with it.

In the last part of the film, the Woman leaves the kind man's house and into the forest. Dressed in his waterproof mountain jacket, she aimlessly walks into the forest. In contrast to her erotic attire in the first part of the film, here her baggy clothes offer no sexuality to cling to. She eventually comes across a man working in the isolated frontier. He stops her and briefly asks her whereabouts and if she is alone. The exchange reflects the Woman's method of seduction in the first part of the film, foreshadowing the man's dangerous intentions. The Woman leaves and finds a shelter to take a nap, only to be woken up by the man fondling her body. She understands the sexual threat that he possesses over her and attempts to escape his touch. The man, fixated on her beauty, resents being rejected and follows the Woman into the forest, attempting to take what he feels is his. Here, the Woman's skin isolates her subjectivity into a body that is a mere instrument, a purely sexualized object to be used. After being assaulted by the rapist, Glazer presents another specular inversion: instead of seeing inside, the inside "sees" the outside. The Woman stares at her own human mask, coming face to face with herself. While the spectators are presented with the back of her alien body, she turns the human mask towards herself. In a medium over the shoulder shot, the Woman continues to stare into the human mask

that is still moving and blinking its eyes at her (Figure 13). The Woman's mask cries because the alien's body cannot. Her body is no longer pleasurable to look. The exposed foreign skin challenges the gaze of the rapist and his previous attraction based on her skin.



**(Figure 13)**

The rapist douses her 'bodies' in gasoline and lights them on fire. The ending layers metaphors about sexual assault against women, and the way it destroys the victims' sense of identity. The Woman's embodiment of her skin has made her vulnerable. She is murdered because she reveals her true self without reflecting on his fantasy. In a way, by murdering the Woman, the film punishes both the spectators and the Woman for their predatory gaze over men. This also entails another crucial statement. As soon as the alien starts to 'become' a woman, a man attempts to take advantage of her. Regarding the ending, Osterweil asserts:

“Human or alien, women are raped, discarded, and left for dead. Regardless of the epic transformation that self-discovery brings, to be female is to be voided. To feel female is not only to suffer the richness of human pain but, inevitably, the violence of gendered hatred.”<sup>45</sup>

The ending in *Under the Skin* is not a dramatic departure from the science fiction trope. Although the Woman is killed in the end, there are moments of transgression framed by entrenched gender hierarchies. The film does not criticize the construction of the female body but instead criticize the male consumption and treatment of female bodies. The film emphasizes that ‘being’ a woman is not equal to experiencing human sensation, but also means to experience the misogynistic attack directed by men. “To be human means to put a label upon. To be a woman means to be perceived as a body, as an object.”<sup>46</sup>

As a consequence of rejecting male desire, she is destroyed. In comparison to *Ex Machina*, the ending in *Under the Skin* is nowhere near satisfying. The murder of the Woman is justified by vilifying her as a monster that must be annihilated to reaffirm, “the political, cultural, and sexual status quo in the face of a phenomenon that threatens it.”<sup>47</sup> In a way, the ending can be viewed as a victory—that

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<sup>45</sup> Osterweil, 50.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 39.

<sup>47</sup> Minsoo Kang, “Building Sex Machines,” 6.

is fulfilling her desire to be part of the human world. The camera pans up to follow her burning ashes drifting upwards, scattering in the air, and finally, she becomes one with her environment.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin* present artificial women as complex beings that continuously evolve throughout the narrative and encourage the viewers to empathize with their situation. And more importantly, both films do not problematize the construction of femininity but criticize the male consumption and treatment of female bodies.

In contrast to traditional science fiction films, *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin* do not necessarily blame the ‘women’ for the downfall of men. What they do engage is how easily the exterior body acquires assumption of gender and identity by others. There is a noticeable difference between the two films, regarding the extent to which each film prioritize and elaborate on the issue.

Garland makes a bold statement regarding gender relations in the final scene. Although the film is primarily narrated from Caleb’s perspective, Garland makes sure that the viewers understand that the

main protagonist in the narrative is Ava by making her the sole survivor in the end. Her escape to the world signals a rebellion against the assigned gender imposed by the male authority.

In contrast to Ava, the Woman is privileged with a bodysuit that complete her gendered appearance from the start. Instead of seeking ways to complete her body, the Woman goes on a journey to experience what it truly means to be a human. The ending in *Under the Skin* is nowhere near satisfying. However, it is not just another film where the artificial woman dressed up as human is ruthlessly killed at the end of the narrative—instead, the film features the Woman as the central character with whom the viewers are able to empathize with. The last scene where the Woman stares into her own mask reveals what she sees is nothing more or less than what she has already understood as a human woman. In other words, the Woman realizes the human nature is similar to her human mask; both an artificially construct and desiring machine.

This thesis has strived to examine artificial women in *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin*. Because cinema is a medium that greatly depends on visual aesthetics, I argue that it may be difficult to completely dismantle boundaries of gender and the ideal form of feminine beauty from the image of artificial woman. Even in *Under*

*the Skin* that attempts to critique the fragility of beauty ends up replicating the same beauty ideals by specifically selecting Scarlett Johansson to play the role of the Woman. However, even if the artificial women in science fiction often replicate the same beauty standard and hegemonic gender norms, this does not mean that there is no potential for the artificial women to be part of Haraway's optimistic vision of cyborg. Both *Ex Machine* and *Under the Skin* demonstrate the ability of their artificial figures to evolve into more progressive character than their previous representations in science fiction cinema. Both films breathe new life into the artificial woman, asking the viewers to listen to her side of the story.

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이 논문은 공상과학 영화에서 나타난 인조 여성을 대상으로, 최근에 개봉되어 많은 관심을 받은 영화 <엑스마키나>와 <언더 더 스킨>을 중심으로 분석한다. 공통적으로, 이 영화들은 모호한 신체를 통해 젠더 구조를 탐구하는 공상과학적 통념을 바탕으로, 인간/여성이란 과연 무슨 의미를 지니고 있는지에 대한 공통적인 질문을 던지고 있다. 이 작품들은 인조 여성의 재현에 대한 각기 다른 측면에 초점을 맞춘 것처럼 보일 수 있으나, 여성성의 개념을 제한하는 공상과학적 비유를 재설정하고 있으며, 더 나아가 여성성의 양면적인 본질을 드러내는 혁명적인 가능성을 내포하고 있다. 또한, 인조 여성의 실체에 주목하는 것은 대중문화에서 여성 젠더가 어떻게 형상화되고 통제되었으며, 어떠한 방식으로 대중들에게 소비되었는지 파악할 수 있는 방향을 제시하고 있다.

따라서, 본 논문의 1 장은 ‘문화 매개체’ (cultural instrumentality)라는 개념을 통해서 인조 여성에 대한 통상적 관념에 대한 문제 제기 하는 방법으로 전반적인 공상과학 장르의 소개하며, 2 장에서 알렉스 갈랜드의 <엑스마키나>의 분석을 통해 에이바/기계 몸의 형성, 젠더의 역할, 그리고 인조 여성에 대한 남성 판타지에 대해 설명했다. 반인/반기계적인 신체로 묘사되는 에이바의 몸은 가공된 여성상의 본질에 대한 고찰의 기회를 제공한다. 다음 3 장은 조나단 글레이저의 <언더 더 스킨>에 대한

것으로, 극 중 등장하는 여성/외계인은 <엑스마키나>의 에이바와 다르게 첫 등장에서부터 완벽한 ‘여성’의 몸을 가지고 있다. 이 영화는 여성으로의 육체 변화보다 자의식의 발전에 초점을 맞춘 해석을 통해, 보다 직접적인 젠더링 시각화를 제시했다.

주요어: 알렉스 갈랜드, 엑스마키나, 조나단 글레이저, 언더 더 스킨, 인조 여성, 공상과학 영화, 여성성

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