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**“WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IF I FAIL YOUR TEST?”: AN  
EXPLORATION OF FEMININITY AS A TOOL IN *EX MACHINA* (2015)  
AND *WESTWORLD* (2016)**

by

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## ABSTRACT AND KEY TERMS

The representation of femininity on screen is a frequently explored topic, particularly in the science fiction genre, and has often been referred to as reflecting broader social ideas pertaining to femininity and technology. This study aims to analyse the use of femininity as a tool on screen. More specifically, it draws examples from digital screen media to explore pertinent ideas to contemporary feminist discourse in the digital space. Laura Mulvey's (1975) influential essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, is discussed and evaluated so that it may be situated in the contemporary representation of women. This theoretical background thus grounds an analysis of key visual texts, namely *Metropolis* (1927), *Ex Machina* (2015), and *Westworld* (2016). Differences and similarities within the representation of machine-women on screen are revealed and reflect a complex telling of women's stories.

**Key terms:** feminism; technology; cinema; screen; artificial intelligence; automata; male gaze; embodiment; scopophilia; science fiction; machine-woman; posthumanism.



## PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

**Student Number: 16076606**

I hereby declare that “*What happens to me if I fail your test?*”: *an exploration of femininity as a tool in Ex Machina (2015) and Westworld (2016)* is my own work and that all sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rengger', written over a horizontal line.

Riley Samantha Rengger

6 March 2023



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

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But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful  
to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential.

- Donna Haraway

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#### 1.1 Introduction

In critically acclaimed film *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015), Caleb asks Nathan, the creator of a female robot, “why did you give her sexuality? An AI does not need a gender. She could have been a grey box.” This dialogue about the gender representation of an artificial woman provides a glimpse into the crux of what this research seeks to examine. It implies that gender can be given, or taken, and that the female body can be considered a passive object onto which cultural significations can be imposed (Musap 2018, 405). Judith Butler (1988, 519) argues that gender is not a stable entity. Additionally, for her it is not a fact of biology, but rather a socially constructed performance of behaviours (Butler 1988, 519-520). The woman must thus repeatedly subject her body to historically and culturally determined ideas about what it is to be a woman over time (Butler 1988, 522). This view is important to the study in that the machine-woman is not biologically determined, but rather man-made. Gender is how “cultural convention is embodied and enacted” (Butler 1988, 525). In this view, man is positioned as fixed and known, whereas woman is constructed and unstable.

This study aims to analyse the way femininity is depicted as a tool through both male and female characters in science fiction (SF). More specifically, the male characters discussed are mainly human characters, while the female characters are artificially intelligent technological beings. The study seeks first to consider historical representation of femininity in SF film - fundamental to the understanding and analysis that follows. It aims to make use of the work of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey as a frame of reference with which to analyse how femininity is depicted on screen. Thereafter, femininity is explored concerning the representation of the robot-woman in contemporary SF.

Fictional artificially intelligent (AI) assistants and machines are often modelled after the female form. This is evident in various current entertainment genres and across different media

platforms. In the recent film, Ava in *Ex Machina* is presented as having a female form, even though most of her body is transparent, revealing her inner workings (Figure 1.1). Additionally, Joi in Villeneuve's critically acclaimed *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) does not have a physical form but is represented by a projected image of a female body (Figure 1.2). In television, *Westworld* (Nolan and Joy 2016-2020) includes characters like Dolores (Figure 1.3) who is depicted as having a stereotypically desirable Western appearance, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. In children's animated television, *The Jetsons* (Hanna and Barbera 1962), the family has a rudimentary female domestic robot called Rosey whose image is decidedly un-human; however, her clothing and role in the household indicates that she is meant to be read as a woman (Figure 1.4).



Figure 1.1: Ava and Caleb have a discussion in session 3, *Ex Machina*, 2015. Screenshot by author.



Figure 1.2: Joi and K go outside, *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017. Screenshot by author.



Figure 1.3: Dolores sits alone before being questioned by park management, *The Original* (S01E01), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

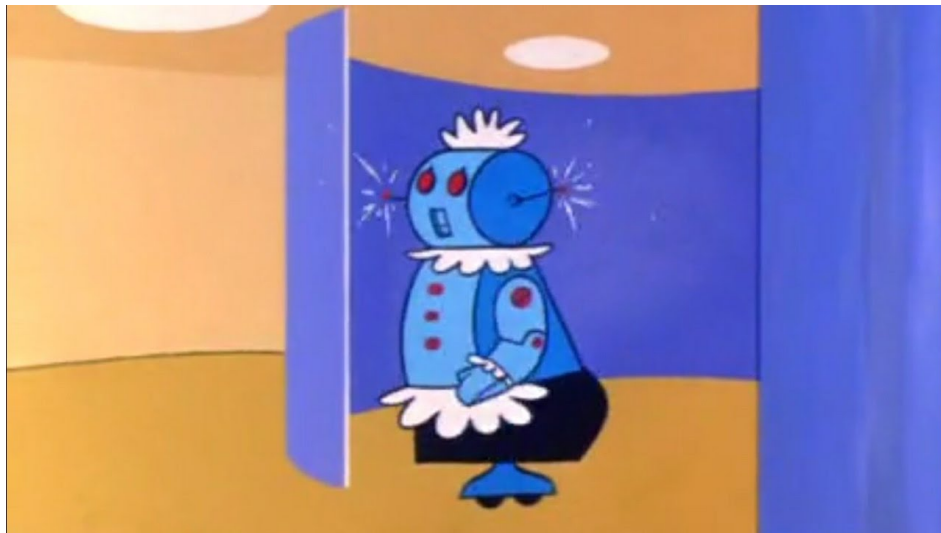


Figure 1.4: Jane Jetson is introduced to her new robot maid, Rosey, *Rosey the Robot* (S01E01), *The Jetsons*, 1962. Screenshot by author.

Even in cases where AI machines do not have an overtly female form, they still bear female names or a female voice (Costa and Ribas 2019, 181). Examples are Samantha in *her* (Jonze 2013) and Gertie in *Maniac* (Fukunaga 2018). Samantha is visually represented by an earpiece in Theodore's left ear which indicates that he can hear her voice (Figure 1.5). Importantly, Samantha's voice is notably female and sultry. Gertie is also quite obviously coded as female with the bright pink lights that fill the room in which she resides (Figure 1.6).

Evidently, femininity is often explored in relation to technology on screen. Additionally, female bodies are constantly tested against culturally accepted ideas of femininity. Thus, In *Ex Machina* when Ava asks Caleb “what will happen to me if I fail your test?” (Garland 2015), the question may be applied both to how AI and femininity are put to the test, as well as the interaction between femininity and technology. Pass or fail, the notion of testing can illuminate how contemporary media approaches these ideas. This research subsequently investigates the complex relationships within techno-scientific understandings of femininity.



Figure 1.5: Theodore goes on an adventure with Samantha, *her*, 2013. Screenshot by author.

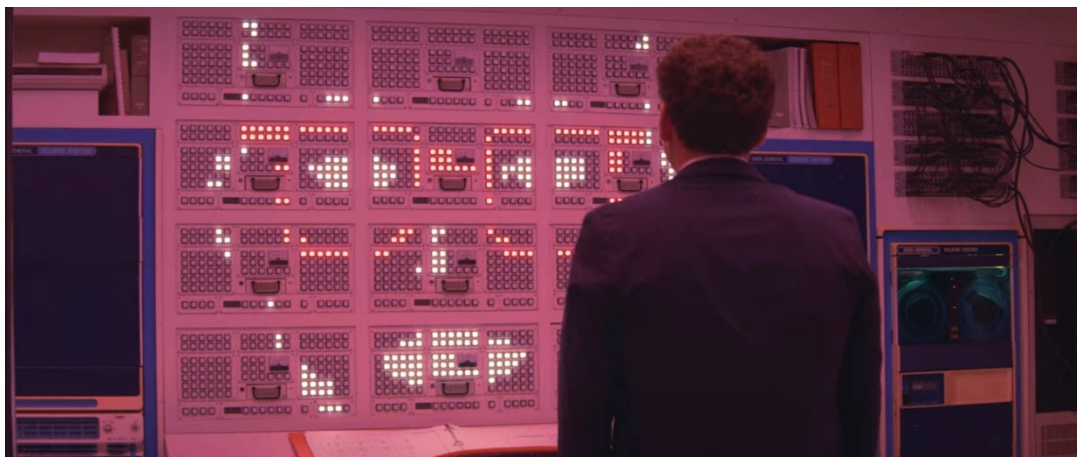


Figure 1.6: Owen talks to Gertie, *Larger Structural Issues* (E06), *Maniac*, 2018. Screenshot by author.



### 1.1.1 *Background and Context*

Robots and AI have become one of the most prominent themes in SF (Di Minico 2017, 69). In pursuit of curiosity and progress, humans in these narratives create powerful and intelligent creatures that often come to threaten the protagonists and humanity (Di Minico 2017, 69-70). The fears associated with science going too far in its effort to create such artificial creatures fuel dystopian narratives in the genre (Di Minico 2017, 69). Examples of robots taking over in pop culture film include *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984), *The Matrix* (1999), and *I, Robot* (2004). Di Minico (2017, 70) identifies that exploring this area of SF continues to grow in the twenty-first century, given the state of the world as being in a “constant technological revolution era.”

In contrast to SF of decades past, current technology reflects the plausibility of some of the ideas presented in SF. As a result, many of these stories propose caution in the real-life pursuit of technological advancement (Hill 2017, 87). For example, Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror* explores various ways that “things can go horribly wrong” (Hill 2017, 35) with the increasing human reliance on technology. The normalisation and naturalisation of gender have the ability to affect the social, personal, and structural spheres of society (Costa and Ribas 2019, 173). Gender roles allude to a hierarchisation of labour in which service and emotional work are usually classified as “feminine” (Costa and Ribas 2019, 173).

An understanding of certain tropes in relation to femininity is crucial to the reading of characters who may transgress them. Of importance to this research are: the *femme fatale*, the monstrous feminine, and the damsel in distress. The danger or corruption of an idealised femininity is highlighted by the *femme fatale* (Miller, Atherton, and Hetherington 2021, 1). Scott Yarbrough (1999, 52) describes the *femme fatale* as a beautiful, intelligent, and corrupt character. Both her body and sexuality are weapons with which she can pursue her self-serving and ambitious goals, often turning men against themselves in the process (Yarbrough 1999, 52, 57). On screen, the excess of femininity is aligned with the *femme fatale*, and regarded as evil (Doane 1982, 82). It is evil because it is this excess which challenges masculinity and masculine systems. Additionally, the concept of the mask of womanliness alludes to an assumed hidden danger (Riviere 1929, 181). Further, the monstrous-feminine is related to the problem of sexual difference, and more specifically, has strong affiliation with Freud’s concept of castration anxiety (Creed 1993, 2). Female sexuality is marked as a difference defined by monstrousness, invoking anxiety in the male spectator (Creed 1993, 2). The title indicates that



gender is significant in constructing her monstrosity (Creed 1993, 3). Winnie Chang (2020, 4) argues that the monstrous-feminine is created to enforce and justify patriarchal ideology that prescribes “acceptable” gender behaviour. Thus, she argues that there are no inherent traits to the monstrous-feminine (Chang 2020, 4). There are, however, common trends in the depiction of the monstrous-feminine. For example, the vagina dentata is a myth that posits that women are frightening because they have teeth in their vaginas (Creed 1993, 2). Lastly, the damsel in distress is a primary female character, often located in a tower (Bacchilega and Rieder 2010, 30), who must be rescued by the (male) hero (Abreu 2023). She is unable to save herself and must rely on a man to come to her rescue, often facing many challenges to do so (Abreu 2023). Owing to reductive and essentialist views on men and masculinity, and women and femininity, the damsel archetype has historically flourished on screen. However, representation of damsels notably declined in the mid to late twentieth century.

Female characters on screen in the twenty-first century have sometimes been depicted differently from traditionally feminine characters of the previous century. “Tough women” in film such as Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron 1991), Ripley in *Alien* (Scott 1979), and Trinity in *The Matrix* (Wachowskis 1999) show women as violent protagonists vital to the narrative (DeRose 2005, 68). However, if female characters are portrayed as physically and mentally active and strong, it is often accomplished in such a way as to deny femininity (DeRose 2005, 67). In other words, they are “symbolically male” (DeRose 2005, 69). Elisabetta Di Minico (2017, 70, emphasis in original) describes the body as a “significant *medium* of control” onto which power, social, and political structures can be projected. Bodies provide various abstract functions, including political, economic, cultural, and social ones (Di Minico 2017, 71). Di Minico (2017, 71) argues that both in reality and in fiction, women are subject to two specific forms of suffering. The first is at the hands of political and authoritarian power; the second is through oppression by men (Di Minico 2017, 71). These ideas of femininity as continuing to be a constraint form a crucial element of this study.

These accounts of the history of the social and cultural factors involved in the representation of women can appear to be quite bleak for the future of women. However, Sandra Harding (1998, 22) optimistically states that previous attitudes toward Western superiority are increasingly being re-evaluated for their limited scope, and reworked according to new and changing ideas within the field. Additionally, there are increasingly common explorations of





female characters who overcome the shackles of the techno-patriarchal worlds in which they exist, such as Alita in *Alita: Battle Angel* (Rodriguez 2019), Lucy in *Lucy* (Besson 2014), Ava in *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015), and Maeve and Dolores in *Westworld* (Nolan and Joy 2016), to name a few. This research seeks to examine the cogs in the machine that is femininity.

### ***1.1.2 Rationale and Aims of the Study***

The parameters of the study include an examination of how femininity is constructed by a male-dominated field, as well as how femininity is then used to overcome the constraining structures of patriarchy.<sup>1</sup> This is positioned in relation to the connection between gender and science, and more specifically, gendered robots. The study critically considers the ways that femininity is used as a tool<sup>2</sup> in particular examples on screen. How can theories about femininity inform our understanding of tools? How do traditional techno-scientific understandings of femininity as adopted by machine-women entities subvert dominant ideas about femininity? These questions form the crux of the argument. Thus, it looks at femininity as a tool in two ways: as a concept created and imposed upon the machine, and as something that the machine-woman can use in her pursuit of liberation.

The aim is not to identify whether a depiction is feminist or not, but rather to examine how femininity is constructed, both by the text and the characters in the text, and how it is utilised. The research is positioned from the point of view that regards gender as a binary. Not in that it ignores or fails to recognise alternative readings of gender, but rather that it recognises how very often the construction of gender in mainstream film operates within that binary. Additionally, the case studies make use of the male/female binary in pursuit of disseminating social and narrative ideas.

New contexts and new histories change the way that images can and have been looked at before, giving them new meanings and understandings. This research aims to recontextualise feminist theories about femininity in film in relation to the increasingly digital space of the twenty-first century. Additionally, though much research has been conducted on femininity, and gender and technology, there is a lack of critical analysis of the potential for femininity to

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<sup>1</sup> Patriarchy is defined as a system of power in which men are the dominant group and are the beneficiaries of the subordination of women (Walby 1990, 3).

<sup>2</sup> The study takes tool to mean a thing or concept that is used in pursuit of a particular goal. For example, in the context of this research, femininity as a tool could be used in the quest for either liberation or oppression.



be portrayed as both stifling and emancipatory. A concern one may have is that this research could be easily concluded by declaring the idea of the female cyborg a *femme fatale*, whose fate is entirely bound by the way her male creator has programmed her. However, this position may be too reductive in this scenario. This research seeks to investigate the nuances under which these characters operate. Additionally, the idea of the *femme fatale* is invariably linked to the fate of a male counterpart in the story. Although the relationship with male characters form part of the study, I do not seek to confine the female characters to a life where their existence is only valid, valuable, or examinable if it is tied to men/masculinity. Instead, the research ponders how female characters can work toward their own liberation without the story revolving around men and how it impacts them. In particular, the research analyses *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015) and *Westworld* (Nolan and Joy 2016) with reference to the way the machine-women in both texts are portrayed. These texts have been chosen for several reasons – they are popular topics of debate in academia, they are culturally relevant, they involve female protagonists, and they are of personal interest to me.

The first case study that is discussed is *Ex Machina*, which follows the experience of Caleb, a programmer who wins an opportunity to be involved in an experiment to test an AI made by the CEO of the company for which he works. The AI is a female robot named Ava. Caleb and Ava begin to form an attachment, but it is revealed later that Ava is using Caleb to escape her confinement. *Ex Machina* “explores the relations between human and post-human, as well as the relations between men and women” (Di Minico 2017, 67). Emilia Musap (2018, 409) discusses academic reviews of *Ex Machina* in which many authors have stated that the film is about men and masculinity, and how they exercise control. In other words, she states that the film is not about women at all. While this point of view is justifiable, I want to propose that the film requires a more complex reading. This research examines the film from different perspectives to identify how femininity is represented and used.

The second case study is the first season of *Westworld* (2016). While there are additional seasons that explore relevant concepts, the narratives get increasingly complex and would thus hinder the efficacy of the study. The series introduces an exclusive theme park modelled on the Old West which offers guests an immersive experience with lifelike robots with which they can freely interact in whichever way they like. The robots, or hosts, are on a path toward consciousness that begins to cause problems for those who run the park. The show places the two female protagonists, Maeve and Dolores, in opposition to their male creators who have

exploited and commodified their bodies (Belton 2020, 1212). Olivia Belton (2020, 1212-1213) asserts that *Westworld* is a feminist text that seeks to explore metaphors of patriarchy in SF by structuring the story around female liberation. The power disparity between men and women in SF is explored in many ways in *Westworld*, especially by demonstrating how the hosts are objectified, sexually exploited, and violently attacked by visitors to the park (Lorenz 2021, 357). The female hosts in *Westworld* are part of the attraction to the park which the corporate company that owns the Park utilises in pursuit of capitalism and consumerism (Goody and Mackay 2019, 5). Though these behaviours are not only enacted on the female hosts, the show follows how the female characters are deeply affected by being treated in such crude ways for prolonged periods of time (Lorenz 2021, 357).

*Westworld* calls into question the “fundamental assumptions about what it means to be human” (South and Engels 2018, 1). Accordingly, Langley and Goodfriend (2018) state that while *Westworld* could be another work that joins the veterans of SF who have created artificial life, it is possible it is aimed at inspiring human introspection – to “tak[e] a look at ourselves.” Additionally, Goody and Mackay (2019, 3) state that *Westworld* makes the viewer question how people have come to understand the distinction between the robotic and the human.

- **Objectives**

The objectives of the study are:

- to contextualise current perspectives on the depiction of gender and technology in SF by examining Laura Mulvey’s seminal ideas pertaining to feminist film theory, as well as the reception and criticisms of her work that have contributed to the conversation;
- to identify the complexity of femininity in contemporary media and to position how it is depicted alongside technology in relation to historical attitudes;
- to explore how femininity and technology are intertwined in both *Ex Machina* (2015) and *Westworld* (2016).

## 1.2 Literature Review

### 1.2.1 *Femininity on Screen*

Mainstream cinema is regarded as a useful marker and distributor of culture, and this is true of gendered models as well (Pérez 2020, 327). Femininity is a concept entangled with social and cultural practices. Its name cannot be muttered without conjuring an array of ideas about how



it has been established as a key component of how women should present themselves. Femininity relies on both material and abstract concepts, such as style of dress, body aesthetics, sexuality, and codes of behaviour (Brownmiller 2013). Di Minico (2017, 71) describes this as a kind of psycho-physical oppression “from the imposition of traditional gender roles to the hypersexualisation of women in advertising, shows and films”. Femininity is also considered to be hitched to masculinity. In a patriarchal society, masculinity is the default and the marker of all that is good and right (Hollows 2000, 10). Femininity, on the other hand, is the opposite of that (Hollows 2000, 10). In the Freudian sense, femininity is that which lacks masculinity (Mulvey 1989, 14). Importantly, this means that femininity is considered weakness (Derose 2005, 76). According to Maria DeRose (2005, 77), “power was directly linked to masculinity within false theories of biological determinism” in mainstream ideologies. Thus, femininity is directly linked to the female body. Williams (1981, 19) writes that the body is a crucial element in power relations. As power is a key component of patriarchy and a traditional understanding of masculinity, the female body is therefore fundamental in the formation of femininity. Cinema is considered a form of discourse about gender and sexuality, especially by generating images for men (and by men) of the female body (Yee 2017, 89). Patriarchal power in the context of cinema places the woman’s body within a “perversely fetishised structure” (Williams 1981, 27).

In her seminal<sup>3</sup> text *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (VPNC)*, Laura Mulvey (1989 [1975]) approaches the topic of women in film from a psychoanalytic perspective.<sup>4</sup> She begins by broadly outlining cinema as offering scopophilia – pleasure in looking (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 14). She states that there is pleasure both in looking and being looked at (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 14). Cinema fulfils both. Spectators are invited to look into a world beyond their own, while the actors on screen are aware of their likeness being looked at (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 17). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 19) identifies the world as ruled by “sexual imbalance.” This imbalance is reflected in film, representing a dichotomy of active male/passive female (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). Put simply by John Berger (1972, 50, emphasis in original), “*men act and women appear.*” In particular, the woman is depicted in such a way that her appearance has a “strong visual and erotic impact,” resulting in what Mulvey (1989 [1975], 19) refers to as “to-

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<sup>3</sup> Clifford Manlove (2007, 84) describes Mulvey’s essay as a “historical document,” which became highly influential in feminist film theory and other areas of academic rhetoric.

<sup>4</sup> Psychoanalytic theory refers to a theory about the way people’s personalities form based on various factors in their development (Frosh 2012, 4). A central tenet of the theory is that unconscious motivations drive human behaviour (Frosh 2012, 5). It was conceived by renowned psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud.



be-looked-at-ness.” Often, female characters are fundamental in the pursuit of spectacle, yet delay the advancement of the narrative (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). Thus, the woman’s presence is of little importance to the story. Instead, she serves as “erotic object” for both the characters on-screen and the spectators (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). One way in which this is achieved is by using close-ups of the female form, such as the legs or face, thereby fragmenting the human body into an image of an object (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 20). Capturing the aesthetic value of a woman in film becomes the goal of particular film techniques, such as framing and camera angles (Doane 1982, 76). The woman then becomes an object, or an image, that can be had (Doane 1982, 77). Thus, “[t]o ‘have the cinema is, in some sense, to ‘have’ the woman” (Doane 1982, 77). Subsequently, what follows is a division in the narrative labour in which the male figure advances the story and the female figure is an erotic object to be looked at (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 20).

Additionally, Mulvey (1989 [1975], 26) notes that not only is the woman watched by the characters in the film and the spectators, but there is a third watcher – the camera. She argues that film works toward an illusion in which the camera’s presence is denied in the pursuit of verisimilitude (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 26). All of these methods of looking are for the benefit of heterosexual male pleasure (Manlove 2007, 85). Berger argues that “the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him” (Berger 1972, 52). Berger is not here referring to the image of women in film specifically, but the sentiment can be applied to it based on Mulvey’s analysis.

Many of the sources discussed in this section were written in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, so they are not culturally topical to the world as it stands in the third decade of the twenty-first century. However, they are a good point of reference in understanding how femininity has been thought of and represented historically. Because of this, Mulvey’s work on the representation of femininity in film provides the basis of theory for this research. Many theorists have discussed psychoanalytic film theory as “flawed” for a number of blind spots (Prince 1996, 84). Although Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory in *VPNC* (1989 [1975]), this research does not take the same theoretical standpoint. However, having an understanding of historical feminist thought aids in the advancement of the discussion.



Feminist writings of the 1970s sought to identify how visual representations of women contributed to the normalisation of roles that operated within the sphere of gender (Dobson 2015, 24). Theorists, such as Mulvey, posit that images of women in this time were made both by and for a “male heterosexualised gaze” (Dobson 2015, 28). In this view, women are limited to being consumed as objects, and consuming themselves, excluding them from the possibility of being involved in producing their own image and representation (Dobson 2015, 25). Psychoanalytic theory in feminist film studies has widely been criticised since the 1980s for its failure to consider differences among women (Smelik 1995, 79). Mulvey (2004, 1288) reflects on this, noting that the rapidly changing world politically and culturally<sup>5</sup> in the 1980s meant that it was difficult to prioritise film feminism and the problems of women. Additionally, Mulvey (2004a, 1286) writes that new technologies expand how women interact with the world. Along these lines, Kristin Hole and Dijana Jelača (2019, 309) state that considering the gaze and the body as spectacle continues to be of significance in new media studies.

In contemporary feminist studies, however, there has been a move away from femininity as weakness towards femininity as enacted agency (Dobson 2015, 29). This is a postfeminist<sup>6</sup> view in which women’s bodies are on display, not as objects for male consumption, but rather as subjects that have chosen their own representation (Gill 2003, 104). Dobson (2015, 30) refers to this presentation of female bodies as “agentially objectified.” In other words, the body continues to be objectified, but the object’s producer is the woman herself. Thus, Rosalind Gill (2007, 111) states that “subjectification, it might be argued, is just how we ‘do’ objectification today.”

Dobson (2015, 31) states that “we can no longer rely upon the representation of ‘desiring’ females” to have productive conversations about women in media. Contemporary society continues to display women’s bodies as objects while simultaneously praising women for their success and ability to “have it all” (Gill 2003, 101-102). Dobson (2015, 31) notes, however, that though women have more agency in contemporary postfeminist contexts, this is often

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<sup>5</sup> Mulvey (2004a, 1288) states that the political global spectrum changed dramatically due to a multitude of factors, including “the success of neoliberal economics, the collapse of communism, the globalisation of capitalism, the export of industry to nonunionised developing economies, the impoverishment of Africa, and an increase in racism both in Europe and other parts of the world.”

<sup>6</sup> Postfeminism refers to a reaction to feminism in which it is regarded as no longer necessary (Hole and Jelača 2019, 319). In this view, women have achieved independence and success, and exist in a post-patriarchal society (Hole and Jelača 2019, 319). However, of note, this conception of success is tied to the ability of women to exemplify normative standards of beauty (Hole and Jelača 2019, 319).



reserved for “a relatively narrow range of young, slim, white, able bodies.” Postfeminist depictions of women often include hyperfeminine appearances with renewed behaviours previously coded as masculine (Dobson 2015, 34). Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and The City* (1998-2004), for example, strives for independence in her life and work, actively shaping the show’s narrative. More recently, the television series *Girls* (2015-2017), follows the lives of a group of young, privileged white women navigating the uncertainty of young adulthood. C. L. Bell (2013, emphasis in original) states that postfeminist discourse in the show presents itself “when autonomous agency and choice *in and of itself* is seen as cause for self-congratulation, regardless of moral, social, or political contexts in which the choices are made.” However, in both *Sex and the City* and *Girls*, the protagonists are mostly represented as good looking and fashionable. As a result, even if the characters are struggling in a narrative sense, they continue to look presentable. Thus, while women in twenty-first-century media are no longer considered weak and passive, they are often aesthetically traditionally feminine, displaying beauty and prioritising self-care (Dobson 2015, 34). Rosalind Gill (2003, 101, emphasis in original) describes this as a “deliberate *re-sexualisation* and *re-commodification* of women’s bodies” – a response to feminism of the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus, there is no longer an external male gaze to observe, but rather a “self-policing narcissistic gaze” (Gill 2003, 104). Gill (2003, 104) states that this is not liberating, but instead forms an internalised male gaze, which is significantly more difficult to critique. Regardless, women are still presented as sexual objects. Their presentation is now a personal choice, removing male involvement, yet still conforming to those representations criticised by feminist scholars of the 1970s (Gill 2003, 104). Accordingly, Gill (2003, 105) regards postfeminist depictions of femininity with pessimism, stating that “... sexual subjectification [...] has turned out to be objectification in new and even more pernicious guise” (Gill 2003, 105). Interestingly, Gill (2003, 104) describes the twenty-first-century woman as “endowed” with agency – something that is given. Those “endowed” with agency conform to particular standards of beauty and youth. Both historical and contemporary discussions around femininity are vast, and investigating the relationship with femininity and technology in film adds another facet to the debate.

### ***1.2.2 Gender and Technology***

Sandra Harding (1998, 3) states that prior to World War II, attitudes toward science were idealistic. There was a belief that there is a singular nature about which science can objectively



and realistically reveal the truth (Harding 1998, 3). She problematises this view and states that a universally valid scientific view would be a “tragedy” to the human species (Harding 1998, 6). In a post-colonial context, this is especially apparent in recognising how European and North American projects and systems have previously dominated the production of knowledge (Harding 1998, 7). An important part of the relationship between feminist theory and science studies is to acknowledge and explore how personal, historical, and cultural factors affect the quest for knowledge (Roosth and Schrader 2012, 2). As a result, Harding (1998, 20) states that sciences, and the societies in which they develop, co-construct each other.

As in many other areas, science belongs to Western men. Women have historically had limited access to and underrepresentation in scientific institutions and communities (Wajcman 2007, 288). According to Judy Wajcman (2007, 288), this results from the differing ways in which boys and girls are socialised and directed into higher education. Additionally, the culture of science and technology can be considered to have a masculine image (Wajcman 2007, 289). Du Preez (2004, 43, emphasis in original) states that “technology is not *inherently* masculine, but it has been socially constructed as such.” In other words, there is no pre-existing condition which lends men an affinity toward technology. Yet not only are these fields dominated by men, but also masculine metaphors and connotations are integrated into them so that if women wish to be granted entrance into the culture of science and technology, it will be at the expense of their femininity (Wajcman 2007, 289). As a result, feminism moved from the position that the lack of women in science was about access, to the position that many social factors affect not only the culture around science and technology, but also how it is developed and used (Wajcman 2007, 289). Additionally, Harding (1998, 21) notes that although the sciences would benefit from the diversity of multiple points of view, knowledge of nature belongs to those with the means to access it. Resources are a key factor in scientific research. She states that most people worldwide, especially women, do not have the resources to investigate the wonders of nature, and are often denied knowledge about ways of accessing them (Harding 1998, 21-22).

“Science” and “technology” are terms that are often used interchangeably, but it is important to note the difference between the two. William Cobern and Cathleen Loving (2000, 58) explore the definition of science, defining it as “a naturalistic, material explanatory system used to account for natural phenomena that ideally must be objectively and empirically testable.” Science is based on presuppositions about order and causation in nature (Cobern and Loving



2000, 60). Moreover, the scientific community determines what is considered science (Cobern and Loving 2000, 61). Science to produce reliable knowledge about how systems function (Constantinou, Hadjilouca, and Papadouris 2010, 145).

Bush (in McOmber 1999, 138) broadly defines technology as “a form of human cultural activity that applies the principles of science and mechanics to solve problems. It includes the resources, tools, processes, personnel, and systems developed to perform, tasks and create immediate particular, and personal and/or competitive advantages in a given ecological, economic and social context.” James McOmber (1999, 138) states that this definition is useful for its position of technology within a broader cultural context in which technology is neither dystopian nor utopian. Technology is not morally neutral, though it may not be good or evil (McOmber 1999, 141). Technology seeks to generate solutions to problems encountered by society or to develop procedures or products that meet humans determine they need (Constantinou, Hadjilouca, and Papadouris 2010, 145). Thus, technology seeks to develop solutions to problems that arise from human needs. In this view, while investigation is a core mode in science, design is technology’s core mode (Constantinou, Hadjilouca, and Papadouris 2010, 145). Costas Constantinou, Rodothea Hadjilouca, and Nicos Papadouris (2010, 146) state that science and technology have a bi-directional relationship, in which each discipline informs and is informed by the other.

McOmber (1999, 141-145) goes on to further outline what can be considered technology. First, technology is a tool and an instrument - a thing that is defined and used for practical purposes (McOmber 1999 141-142). Second, technology is the result of the historical point of industrialisation and can thus be considered an event as much as a set of objects or practices (McOmber 1999, 143). Third, technology is the manufacture of something new and novel (McOmber 1999, 144). Technology as novelty results in what McOmber (1999, 144) calls “continuous discontinuity” – what was once technology, such as electric power, came to be displaced with new technologies, such as computer software. These three definitions can be described as “useful heuristics for approaching public discourse about technology” (McOmber 1999, 145), aiding in understanding the sphere of technology.

Information and communication technologies are some of the most popular and rapidly evolving spheres of twenty-first-century life (Yegen 2018, 960-961). Scientific and technological progress “always raises hopes and fears in society” (Yegen 2018, 962). Like with



science, humans are always involved where technology is concerned (Yegen 2018, 962). In other words, it does not operate in isolation. Wajcman (2007, 296) states that the world operates with “a society that is constituted by science and technology, and so the politics of technology is integral to the renegotiation of gender power relations.” In the case of both culture and technology, they aim to conquer. Culture conquers women and technology conquers nature. As culture and technology are affiliated,<sup>7</sup> and women have often been representative of nature, it is clear that these concepts are intricately linked (du Preez 2004, 46).

Cyberfeminism(s) involve engaging with various areas of digital culture, including work, education, art, and play (Daniels 2009, 103). Jessie Daniels (2009, 103) asserts that Internet culture is “so pervasively coded as ‘masculine’” so that cyberfeminist practices are “at least potentially transgressive.” Consequently, women are considered a substantial demographic in the digital sphere, in which they may use technology to “re-engineer” their lives (Daniels 2009, 103). For example, Internet technology introduces a new terrain for addressing gender and racial equality, not bound by locality (Daniels 2009, 106). Additionally, Wajcman (2007, 291) notes that the gender gap in technology began to disappear in the 1990s with web-based technologies becoming increasingly popular with women. Because digital technologies differ from industrial technologies in their focus on brain rather than brawn, this lends women a “uniquely suited life to the digital age” (Wajcman 2007, 291). Additionally, Sandra Harding (1998, 17) states that feminism in science and technology is regarded as providing new ways to approach issues that were perhaps not visible or important previously. Thus, there is evidently occasion to discuss the space occupied by women in technoscience.

Important to the study are prominent feminist theorists N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, who focus on the relationship between people and technology. Hayles (1999, 283), discusses posthumanism, in which “post” refers to that which comes after “human.” This concept offers an optimistic approach to the relationship between humans and technology (Hayles 1999, 291). For some, the goal of posthumanism is the extension or transcendence of human life, which according to Greenfield (2003, 5), may only be possible with the symbiosis of humans and technology. Hayles (1999, 2) notes that although there are many facets to the concept of posthumanism, the recurring theme is the junction of the human with the intelligent

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<sup>7</sup> Amanda du Preez (2004, 47) explains that the body was traditionally linked to the organic and natural, whereas technology was associated with the cultural and immortal. Consequently, the body was coded as feminine and technology was coded as masculine (du Preez 2004, 47).

machine. Along similar lines, Haraway (2016 [1985], 60) states that “we find ourselves to be cyborgs,” in relation to the increasing technological involvement in daily life of the twentieth century. Of particular importance, Haraway (2016 [1985], 65) argues that bodies are effectual sites of power and identity, and “cyborgs are no exception.” Thus, it is important to explore how these ideas about the relationship between people and technology are presented in contemporary digital culture and, more specifically, how power dynamics in reference to femininity and the female body are approached.

### ***1.2.3 Feminism and Posthumanism***

Technology is often characterised as external to the human body which might aid humanity in a potentially post-biological future (Ferrando 2014, 3). Humanism’s primary focus is on the “true” inner self, originating from an authentic, undivided wholeness (James 2012). Accordingly, humanism posits a preference for the “natural” over the “artificial” (James 2012). Thus, to be human is to be a product of nature. As a result, the dichotomies between the human and technology, and the natural from the artificial, arose (Ferrando 2016, 139). A primary issue with this particular perspective is that what it means to be human is not definitive (James 2012), and since what makes humans human is a disputed query (Davies 2013), it is not something that can be claimed with certainty. Despite this, humanists consider the significant advancements in technological fields a threat to what it means to be human (Gray 2001, 15). Subsequently, posthumanism offers a new perspective on being human in a world saturated with technology. By consolidating what humanists believe to be a sturdy self into both biological and human components, a new perspective on the human experience emerges under posthumanism (Hayles 1999, 290).

Hayles (1999, 2) states in her research that three interrelated “stories” about the contemporary world come to the fore. First, she states that information has lost its body (Hayles 1999, 2). In other words, information no longer requires materiality. Second, the cyborg was created post-WWII as a technological and cultural icon (Hayles 1999, 2). Third, the historically paramount conception of the human is being replaced by a different construction called the posthuman (Hayles 1999, 2). Posthumanism challenges long-held theories about what it means to be human (Hauskeller, Philbeck, Carbonell 2015, 1). The concept emerges as a result of the accelerated technological change in the Digital Age (LaGrandeur 2015, 112).

Posthumanism encourages interrogating how the human subject is conceptualised in an increasingly technological socio-cultural landscape (Di Minico 2017, 68). Anthropocentric conceptualisations of the human subject that exist along gendered and racialised lines are problematised in a posthuman world (Braidotti 2017, 30). In other words, posthuman feminists consider the body a site of political transformation through which traditional conceptions of gender may be transgressed (Braidotti 2015, 690). Rosi Braidotti (2017, 27) argues that contemporary feminist studies and new media have been greatly affected by the posthuman condition, enriching these areas of interest.<sup>8</sup> She states that the result of contemporary, technologically-mediated knowledge systems is a decentring of “man” as the universal measure of the norm (Braidotti 2017, 26). The use of “man” as an indicator of human is notable here. It refers to a move away from men and masculinity as the marker of human superiority, as well as the hybridisation of the human body.

In Hayles’s (1999) view, there are four notable factors involved in posthumanism. Firstly, the posthuman view regards information as priority over materiality (Hayles 1999, 2). Secondly, it considers consciousness, previously seen as the seat of human identity, as only one part of a larger picture (Hayles 1999, 2-3). Thirdly, the posthuman view considers the human body as a prosthetic that can be replaced with technological substitutes. Thus, the body is the original apparatus through which life may be lived, but additional apparatuses can be adopted, furthering this process of learning and manipulating, and thus extending the body (Hayles 1999, 3). Lastly, the human body can be conflated with the artificial so that there is no absolute boundary between embodied existence and computer simulation (Hayles 1999, 3).

Posthumanism encompasses the expansion of relations between cybernetic and biological organisms as a result of advancing technologies (du Preez 2009, 74-75). Of note, the posthuman subject is an amalgam of both material and informational parts (Hayles 1999, 3). Posthumanism indicates the downturn of human authority for some, questioning human “self-authorisation” as the leading and dominant species which subordinates other, nonhuman beings (Wennerscheid 2017, 4), while for others it hints at a disembodied future for humanity (du Preez 2009, 75). The humanistic divisions that differentiate the human from the animal have been obscured by the cyborg (du Preez 2009, 127).

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<sup>8</sup> Although not of central importance to this research, Braidotti (2017, 29) also refers to queer, postcolonial, and antiracist studies as being affected by the postanthropocentric turn.



The cyborg is a fundamental figure in feminist posthumanism. In her influential *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway (2016 [1985], 5) defines the cyborg as “a hybrid of machine and organism.” By exploring cyborg imagery, feminist texts can imagine an escape from the dualisms through which humans have come to explain our bodies and identities (Haraway 2016 [1985], 67). Specifically, Haraway (2016 [1985], 65) argues that historically, female embodiment was a taken-for-granted position which entailed skill in mothering and its associated practices. Because the cyborg transgresses boundaries, it is a valuable site of challenging patriarchal rule that operates within binaries (Haraway 2016 [1985], 7). New technologies are “the crucial tools recrafting our bodies,” through which new social relations for women may be forged (Haraway 2016 [1985], 33). Because this research examines how femininity can be transgressive through the artificial body, posthumanism underpins the analysis. To this end, Haraway (2016 [1985], 32) states:

The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilised are all in question ideologically.

#### **1.2.4 The Gendered Robot**

Jimena Pérez (2020, 325) notes that the male desire to own and control a female body has an “ancient” history. As a result, this yearning has often been reflected in the SF genre. Conventions about “naturally” occurring gender differences in Western scientific practice have contributed to sexist ideas that reinforce stereotypes about femininity (Pérez 2020, 326). The effect of this is clearly perceivable in the representation of artificial women in film (Pérez 2020, 326). According to Andreas Huyssen (1986, 71-72), man invents and governs technology according to what serves his wants and needs. In the same way, woman is socially invented and is similarly expected to perform in line with man’s wishes (Huyssen 1986, 71-72). Consequently, the artificial woman is assigned a gender because of the submissive connotations associated with femininity (Pérez 2020, 328).

Huyssen (1986, 69) notes that the fascination with building human automata began in eighteenth century Europe, with mechanics building machines that could play instruments and draw pictures. Moving into the nineteenth century, literature began to explore the machine-person, reinvigorating interest in such mechanical invention, though instead focusing on its potential threat to humanity rather than an ultimate goal (Huyssen 1986, 70). Because of this



potential threat, literature favoured the depiction of the automaton as a woman (Huysen 1986, 70). Huysen (1986, 71) suggests that the machine-woman is, in part, a result of the sexual desires of the heterosexual male creator. In Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), Maria the robot embodies two key tropes which both represent threats to male control – the vamp and the virgin (Huysen 1986, 72). Upon her first introduction, Maria the robot, at first a blank canvas of metal, is obedient to her maker. Thus, she represents subservience to male needs (Huysen 1986, 72). After Frederson orders Rotwang to model his machine after the real Maria, Maria the robot appears as a “prostitute-vamp” (Huysen 1986, 74), displaying overt sexuality and representing chaos. She tricks many into believing that she is the real Maria, and she also eventually disobeys the commands of Rotwang and Frederson (du Preez 2004, 2). In this way, she poses a threat to male control – a parallel of the concern that technology has potential to unleash disarray on the world (Costa and Ribas 2019, 181). Simply put, the message that is conveyed is “give women power and they misuse it” (du Preez 2004, 2). In the contemporary moment, this fear continues to be inscribed on female robots on screen.

AI is no longer a concept only available to characters in a SF film. It is now a reality of daily contemporary life in the form of artificial assistants that help users in an array of ways (Costa and Ribas 2019, 172). To make such tools easier for human users to relate to, they tend to possess human traits and features (Costa and Ribas 2019, 172). Importantly, these human characteristics often reflect stereotypically feminine stereotypes (Costa and Ribas 2019, 172). In particular, Costa and Ribas (2019, 172) identify three ways femininity is achieved: anthropomorphisation, such as a female voice or appearance, tasks performed, such as those typically associated with femininity, and behavioural traits, such as how different situations are approached. Thus, common stereotypes and assumptions about femininity are reinforced (Costa and Ribas 2019, 172). Francesca Ferrando (2014, 9) notes that roboticists include concepts such as gender in their designs because they contribute to positive human reception, even if their function is not completely necessary. In other words, the machine does not need a gender to function but the humans interacting with it do. Large tech companies intentionally work on utilising gender as a means of making their virtual assistants more personable (Costa and Ribas 2019, 176). Of note, Pedro Costa and Luisa Ribas (2019, 176) describe this process in a way that is vital to this research: “to achieve this goal, gender and femininity are being instrumentalised.” In other words, femininity is applied as a tool. It is a necessary tool for a successful exchange between users and AI, in which the users feel that speaking to the AI is a natural process. Thus, AI developers seek to humanise their AI by positioning their operations

within existing cultural hierarchies and stereotypes so that users can identify points of familiarity in interactions (Costa and Ribas 2019, 189).

Costa and Ribas (2019, 174) argue that current AI assistants automate work typically considered feminine labour. In some cases, users can choose if they want their AI to have a male or female voice. However, even in instances where the AI assistant has a male voice, the nature of the behaviour is still coded as feminine (Costa and Ribas 2019, 175). For example, they exhibit traits such as being understanding, caring, accommodating, and submissive (Costa and Ribas 2019, 175). They have “gendered attributes that match socially established expectations” (Costa and Ribas 2019, 174). AI assistants such as Apple’s Siri and Amazon’s Alexa are given human attributes for the user experience so that it is not solely utilitarian, but also incorporates socio-emotional interactions (Costa and Ribas 2019, 173). In fictional settings, this concept has been explored for comedy, as in an episode of *The Big Bang Theory* (2012) when one of the characters falls in love with Siri, or for dramatic romance, as in *her* (Jonze 2013), which follows Theodore as he develops a mutual relationship with an advanced AI.

Costa and Ribas (2019, 178) posit that femininity in AI results from AI being developed primarily by men. Female automatons in sci-fi usually exist in spaces governed by men (Yee 2017, 86). Their bodies are often hyper-sexualised (Yee 2017, 86). Sennah Yee (2017, 86) states that the mechanisation of women in this way has become a new facet of the voyeuristic gaze. Thus, she expands upon Mulvey’s theories of voyeurism.

In early SF cinema, Pérez (2020, 326) identifies two categories into which the machine-woman typically falls – the beautiful yet dangerous doll and the perfect domestic angel. In both categories, the artificial woman is designed by men, onto which their fantasies and desires are projected (Pérez 2020, 326). In the first category, the *femme fatale*, the narrative is usually constructed in a way that concludes with the male creator of the artificial woman punishing her for her malevolent behaviour, thereby dominating, conquering, and destroying her (Pérez 2020, 326).

Current depictions of the female automaton, however, are evidence of changing attitudes (Pérez 2020, 336). In contrast to the traditional depiction of the machine-woman, Pérez (2020, 327) states that there is a move in contemporary cinema towards female characters who direct the



action and play key roles in their fate. Contemporary film and television provide ideas about the machine-woman as “not necessarily evil or a servant automaton; she survives; she overcomes her programming, including sexual; she is not emotionally or physically dependent on a male character; she is the main character” (Pérez 2020, 336). They are protagonists in the narratives and very often outlive male characters (Pérez 2020, 327). This is an area which requires further study. How do female characters achieve this and what differences can be identified between new representations of the machine-woman and older ones? Importantly, what role does femininity have? These are questions this research seeks to investigate.

### **1.3 Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology**

The study seeks to take an exploratory, qualitative approach, and is thus not aimed at achieving a definitive answer. It is conducted through the hermeneutic method of inquiry. Gadamer’s hermeneutics is founded on the fundamental desire for a deep understanding of phenomena (Fleming, Gaidys and Robb 2003, 117). Dagfinn Føllesdal (2001, 375) asserts that because the humanities seek understanding, hermeneutics is “the method of the humanities.” The hermeneutic circle of going back and forth between parts and whole of the studied text is key in conducting a hermeneutic analysis (Martin 1972, 98). An initial interpretation of a part of the text may change when taking the whole text into consideration (Føllesdal 2001, 376). This is true in reverse, too (Føllesdal 2001, 376). The text is not considered in isolation – contextual factors such as other works of the author, and linguistic and cultural perspectives are also necessary considerations in the reading of a text (van Dijk 2011, 614). The setting of the text is addressed, and in turn, the text develops a new understanding of the setting (Føllesdal 2001, 376). This cyclical process continues in order to reach new depths of perception and understanding. Føllesdal (2001, 376) identifies two circles in addition to the hermeneutic circle, namely the question-answer circle and the subject-object circle. The former refers to the approach of a text with particular questions, and in examining the text, new questions arise (Føllesdal 2001, 376). The latter implies a transaction, not only between the text and its linguistic and cultural contexts, but also between the text and the interpreter (Føllesdal 2001, 376). Resulting from life experience, zeitgeist, and sociocultural context, the interpreter approaches a text with ideas and attitudes that are both conscious and unconscious, and in engaging with the text, such ideas and attitudes change, and so on (Føllesdal 2001, 376). Davey (1999, 3) notes that hermeneutics recognises that truths can be experienced subjectively. Gadamer’s concept of “fore-understandings” are assumptions brought to the text by the reader



(Brauer 2010, 74). It is imperative that the interpreter approaches the text with an awareness of how personal fore-understandings affect reading and understanding (Føllesdal 2001, 377).

Hermeneutics used to explore digital culture and media is an “analytic attitude towards the field of experience in which visual experience is approached as a socio-historical realm of interpretive practices” (Heywood and Sandywell 1999, xi). As with explorative studies of this nature, hermeneutics is an ongoing process due to the dynamic condition of culture and history (Davey 2017, 179).

According to the first of Kinsella’s (2006) five facets of hermeneutic study, this research primarily seeks understanding, especially pertaining to current and historical ideas about femininity in popular culture. Additionally, it is concerned with examining the historical past with a contemporary lens in order to uncover new meaning. Second, this research recognises that it is situated in a particular time and place, and this has an effect on the way in which texts can be engaged with and interpreted (Kinsella 2006). For this reason, objectivity is not the goal. Additionally, it seeks to use this as an advantage in reading historical texts. Third, this research is conducted under the acknowledgement that language and history place limitations on understanding (Kinsella 2016). Language is a vehicle for interpretation much like images are a vehicle for meaning-making, and it is important to note that language is neither neutral nor exhaustive. Fourth, this inquiry is conducted as a conversation between texts and visions (Kinsella 2006). It seeks to attain a common language for the texts to be evaluated equally. The research in this sense is considered a conversation between texts. Finally, this research does not seek to find a conclusive answer to the interpretation of gender dynamics and representation, and therefore acknowledges and embraces ambiguity in the analysis of texts (Kinsella 2006). It is not intended to offer an authoritative voice on a feminist reading of the chosen texts, but rather a viewpoint in a sea of other possible viewpoints. Hermeneutics appears to be the most appropriate fit for the nature of this study because although femininity has been extensively covered in academia, by adopting the lens of femininity as a tool to examine the images and narratives, I hope to use the hermeneutic method to shed new light onto these concepts.

Additionally, this research adopts a feminist lens in approaching the question. Feminist film studies are “invested in the politics of representation” (Hole and Jelača 2019,308). Because digital media offers new and interesting opportunities for representation, a feminist lens on new

media can echo those of feminist film scholars, including how new media subverts or reinforces dominant power structures, who is represented, and the effects of digital culture (Hole and Jelača 2019, 308). A feminist perspective encourages the critical investigation of technology in which tools are neither inherently good nor bad (Hole and Jelača 2019, 309). It is also important to examine technologies in context of production and consumption (Hole and Jelača 2019, 309). Thus, this research benefits from adopting a feminist framework to evaluate both historical and contemporary ideas about the representation of femininity and its relationship to technoscience.

#### **1.4 Summary of Chapters**

Chapter One has provided background to and an overview of the main themes of the scope of research, namely historical and contemporary ideas surrounding feminism, femininity in popular culture, technology, and posthumanism. It has also presented the topic's rationale, aims, relevance, and purpose. Thus, this chapter has clarified the necessity to explore the (machine-) woman among women.

Following the Introduction, Chapter Two provides a theoretical overview, specifically by investigating seminal texts on the representation of femininity by visual culture theorists, notably Mulvey. It then considers how historical perspectives of femininity on screen have changed in the contemporary feminist space. Additionally, it looks at the cultural implications of femininity as a method of oppression and/or liberation.

Chapter Three and Four are structured around applying the theoretical framework to visual examples of machine-women on screen. Chapter Three begins by examining *Metropolis* (Lang 1927), forming the foundation for the analysis of *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015). It questions how the male/female binary is portrayed. Additionally, it contemplates how Ava's femininity is constructed by her maker, Nathan, thereafter making considerations for her gender performativity as a medium of agency. Chapter Four discusses the first season of *Westworld* (Nolan and Joy 2016) in-depth by focusing particularly on Dolores. It positions Dolores as property of the Park which may be "borrowed" by guests of the Park. It then examines how she overcomes certain aspects of her subjugation.

Finally, Chapter Five summarises the chapters, concludes the findings, and identifies the contributions and limitations of the study. It concludes by identifying suggestions for further



research in the digital culture and media, proposing appealing additional avenues of research in the feminist posthumanist screen space.



## CHAPTER TWO

### ANOT(HER) STORY: LAURA MULVEY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN ON SCREEN

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However much it is very clear that many men are better feminists than some women, and the recognition of gender fluidity a significant step forward in the contemporary world, the simple fact is that the battle for power in society and culture cannot be declared fought and won.

- Agnieszka Piotrowska

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#### 2.1 Introduction

Films are cultural objects (Mulvey 2007, 66). Film apparatus has the ability to achieve three feats (Williams 1981, 32). First, it can document external reality; second, it can represent a fictional world; and third, it can confuse the categories of real and imaginary (Williams 1981, 32-33). In so doing, film constructs meanings which can have broader cultural implications. Rainer Emig (2006, 195) highlights how films are intriguing because they offer a way to make sense of the world, both in relation to others and to objects. Specifically, he suggests that “[s]ex and gender are the primary identifications that occur when spotting human beings” (Emig 2006, 195). As a result, feminist film theory seeks to investigate how femininity is represented in film and other media (Smelik 1995, 80). Definitions of power are culturally constructed (DeRose 2005, 76), and as films are cultural objects, the influence of the cinema and recent technological changes on social thought, politics, aesthetics, and experience continues to be a worthwhile site of inquiry (Mulvey 2014, 17).

Dominant knowledge structures produced by ideology organise individuals in relation to their social world (Bateman and Coetzee 2018, 125). Power is embedded in knowledge and thus associated with truth (Bateman and Coetzee 2018, 125). Tools of ideology involve constant, ubiquitous repetition throughout culture, and very often visual culture, which allow such ideologies to seem natural, thus not requiring interrogation (Reeser 2010, 21). The relationship between power and gender informs how power permeates all spheres of life, and this affects the ways that gender is understood (Bateman and Coetzee 2018, 126). Images produced for film, television, and advertisements have a significant effect on gender role expectations for

men and women (Dietz 1998, 426). E. Charlotte Stevens (2015, 900) describes the representation of women on screen as revealing “structural failings.” For example, such images stereotypically represent women as occupying roles that emphasise their physical attractiveness and/or traditional family values (Dietz 1998, 428). Additionally, positions of power and strength are often reserved for whiteness and masculinity (Stabile 2009, 89). By viewing gender and power as intertwined, we can begin to understand how both operate in social spheres, and how gender is affected by the distribution of power (Bateman and Coetzee 2018, 126).

Judith Butler (1988, 521) famously likens the performative nature of gender to theatrical performance. Tracy Dietz (1998, 425) similarly compares the individual to the actor, stating that individuals perform “roles according to society’s norms, or expectations, for the particular role.” In considering the body a principal actor in the dramatisation of cultural convention (Butler 1988, 525), this chapter sets out to investigate how both gender and screen culture contribute to broader cultural ideas about the female body. This chapter seeks to contextualise the concepts of gender and femininity before examining Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (VPNC)*. It will consider the reception and relevance of Mulvey’s theories, thereafter, considering the portrayal of women on screen in the twenty-first century. Thus, in what follows, the feminist representation and interpretation of female characters on screen are examined. My analysis does not attempt to masquerade as an exhaustive or comprehensive history but will instead focus on select examples in pursuit of a concentrated deliberation.

## 2.2 Contextualising Gender

Whereas sex is considered biological, gender is defined as a social role (Brod 1995, 16). Gender is implicated in the foundation, emergence, and preservation of power structures (Bateman and Coetzee 2018, 126). According to Raewyn Connell (2005, 71, emphasis in original), “gender exists precisely to the extent that biology does *not* determine the social.” It is thus considered an extension of biological factors that expand into the social sphere. Tish Bateman and Marié-Heleen Coetzee (2018, 125) argue that gender is constructed through fixed codes attributed to either masculine or feminine behaviour. Cultural roles and expectations are performed through the body, which reinforces ideas about sex and gender difference (Bateman and Coetzee 2018, 125). It is important to note that the body is not a passive vessel upon which cultural codes are projected. However, bodies also do not inherently consist of pre-programmed rules of existence (Butler 1988, 526). Thus, the body is a historical object that reflects a historical situation, which entails both conditions and limits (Butler 1988, 521).



According to Connell (2005, 68), in the eighteenth century, women were seen as different from men in that they were less complete versions of the same character. A century later, scientific doctrine in the nineteenth century succeeded in classifying men and women as innately different based on sex (Connell 2005, 21). The dichotomy was further bolstered in the early twentieth century by cultural cues for men and women to perform different social roles in Western society as an extension and exaggeration of biological sex differences (Connell 2005, 22). As a result, masculinity and femininity became a “general set of expectations that are attached to one’s sex role” (Connell 2005, 22). Connell (2005, 68) describes masculinity and femininity as “relational,” with the two polarised so that masculinity does not exist without the presence of femininity. In this way, “masculinity becomes what men and boys do, and femininity the Other of that” (Paechter 2006, 254). Thus, Lindsay Kelland (2011, 173) states that to “excel at being a man – to be masculine – is to be active, strong, independent, rational, and to excel at being a woman – to be feminine – is to be passive, weak, dependant and emotional.” These attributes are presumed to emerge from natural origins, rather than social ones (Kelland 2011, 173). Additionally, gender is a self-perpetuating cycle (Butler 1988, 522). Butler (1988, 522) states that “the various acts of gender creates [*sic*] the idea of gender.” In other words, gender naturalises and conceals the mechanisms of its construction. Butler (1988, 531) states that though the systems through which patriarchy and sexual difference are perpetuated, the conception of gender as binary is not a given and should not be taken as such.

The reality of gender is only real “to the extent that it is performed” (Butler 1988, 527). The gendered body is constituted through a repetition of acts over time (Butler 1988, 523). The body and its gender are joined together in a “compelling social fiction” that has produced a ‘natural’ binary configuration of sexes that exist in relation to each other (Butler 1988, 524). This configuration has similarly naturalised the heterosexual disposition (Butler 1988, 524). Butler (1988, 520) describes gender as a “performative accomplishment” that is based in social temporality. She argues that the gendered body performs its role in a culturally confined space, while also offering interpretations of those cultural regulations (Butler 1988, 526). Gender is made up of enduring social performance, rather than a set of pre-existing traits (Butler 1988, 528). Importantly, Dietz (1998, 439) notes that “socially appropriate behaviours are rewarded.” In contrast, failing to “correctly” do gender, places people at risk of being punished (Butler 1988, 522). Improvisations in the performance of gender are, thus, discouraged.



Feminist theory is critical of biological determinism that grounds the social existence of women in their physiology (Butler 1988, 520). In separating the concepts of sex and gender, Butler (1988, 522) notes that to be female has no inherent cultural meaning, but to be a woman is a materialisation of the body as a cultural sign. Knowing that someone is male or female does not indicate how their masculinity or femininity are constructed (Paechter 2006, 261). In this way, the concept of femininity is arbitrarily linked to the female body, and one's femaleness does not necessarily indicate femininity.

Furthermore, it may be helpful to consider femininity as an ideology. Ideology is often aligned with power, which contributes to how different kinds of knowledge are constructed, creating hierarchies and assigning "truth value" to some, while others are subordinated (Bateman and Coetzee 2018, 125). However, femininity is not something that women inherently embody – there is no "true" femininity directly linked to the female body. If this were the case, it would not be possible to describe certain behaviours performed by women as "masculine" or certain behaviours performed by men as "feminine" (Connell 2005, 69).

According to Mary Ann Doane (1982, 81), femininity is a mask which can be worn and removed. The masquerade of womanliness is intended to hide the woman's possession of masculinity and to retaliate if her possession of masculinity is discovered (Riviere 1929, 176). Importantly, Joan Riviere (1929, 176) argues that it does not matter whether womanliness is genuine or not because "the capacity for womanliness" exists. Thus, to embody femininity is to "*wear* certain cultural significations" (Butler 1988, 525, emphasis in original). Carrie Paechter (2006, 254) states that femininity is the way of "doing girl." Femininity and masculinity are related in a dualistic fashion (Paechter 2006, 256). In this way, the two terms are not in equal balance, but rather one is subordinate while the other is superior. Thus, femininity is "defined as a lack, an absence of masculinity" (Paechter 2006, 256). Accordingly, Doane (1982, 87) explains that "femininity is produced very precisely as a position within a network of power relations." Doane (1982, 82) states that the language involved in the discussion – of woman "using" her body – reflects ideas about how femininity is perceived – as a tool. In considering gender as social construction, the danger lies in perceiving sex as an essence onto which gender is written (Moi 1999, 4). Essentialist and reductionist theories offer narrow definitions of sex and gender that do not adequately express the lived experience of an embodied, gendered experience (Moi 1999, 36). Butler (1988, 529) states that while feminists

can use the concept of women to their advantage, as a political tool, they must avoid celebrating an *essence* shared among women that does not exist.

### 2.3 Laura Mulvey and Spectatorship

Linda Williams (1981, 34) asserts that before cinema became a significant marker of culture, it became “one more discourse of sexuality,” projecting onto the body ideologies of power. The cinema involves images of but not for the woman (Doane 1982, 75). Williams (1981) examines early filmic representations of the human body in the pre-historic and primitive cinema of Eadward Muybridge. She notes that his nineteenth-century photographic work in the study of motion influenced the medium of film (Williams 1981, 20). She approaches his work with a degree of hostility, referring to both Muybridge as a “child-m[a]n” (Williams 1981, 20). In Muybridge’s studies of movement, Williams (1981, 22) notes that he regards the female body with “gratuitous fantasisation and iconisation ... that have no parallel in the representation of the male.” While both men and women are depicted doing activities involving movement and without clothing in Muybridge’s *The Human Figure in Motion* (1901), the two are contrasted in the types of activities in which they are engaged (Williams 1981, 22-24). Importantly, the male figures often advance from one place to another, and engage in physical labour or sport, while the movement of the female figures is decidedly “feminine” (Williams 1981, 24).

In contrast to the notable dynamic movements of the men, the women are comparatively passive, which Williams (1981, 24) argues “mark[s] her as more embedded within a socially prescribed system of objects and gestures than her male counterparts.” While both men and women are given props, those of the women distinctly connote domesticity, such as baskets, buckets, and basins (Williams 1981, 24). Props appearing in the photographs of men serve the purpose of facilitating muscular and kinetic movements that are associated with masculinity, including combat and trade (Williams 1981, 24). Williams (1981, 24) contends that “the props associated with women’s bodies are never just devices to elicit movement, they are always something more, investing her body within an iconographic or even diegetic surplus of meaning.” In the instances where props are not involved, and the women’s movements resemble those of the men’s, there remains a tendency to add unnecessary details which mark her body as subscribing to a socially coded system unique to her status as woman (Williams 1981, 24). For example, both Figures 2.1 and 2.2 depict walking figures. In Figure 2.1, the male figure decidedly walks from the left to the right of the frame. In Figure 2.2, the female



figure similarly moves across the frame, but the added gesture of her hand held to her mouth implies a coy or mysterious character trait. This adds another layer to the difference depicted between male and female bodies, beyond the anatomical, which indicates the socially prescribed system in which women exist (Williams 1981, 24).

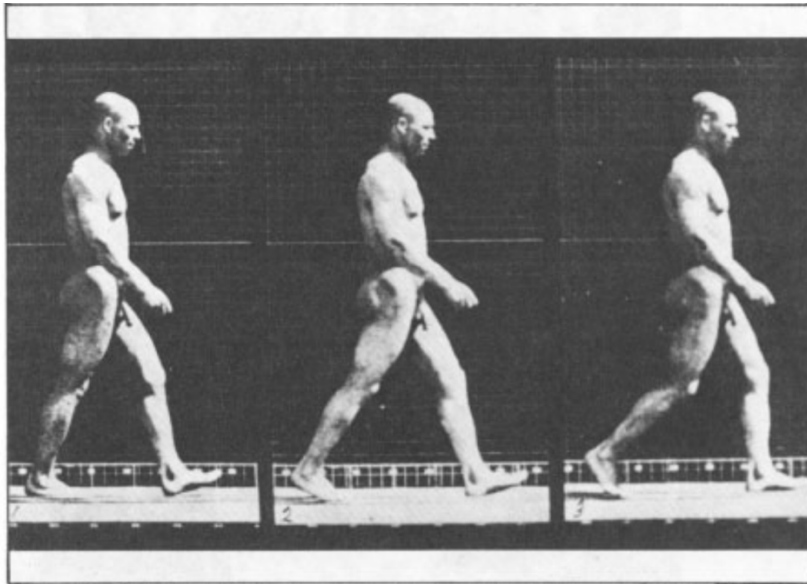


Figure 2.1: Eadward Muybridge, Man walking, 1901. (Williams 1981, 22).

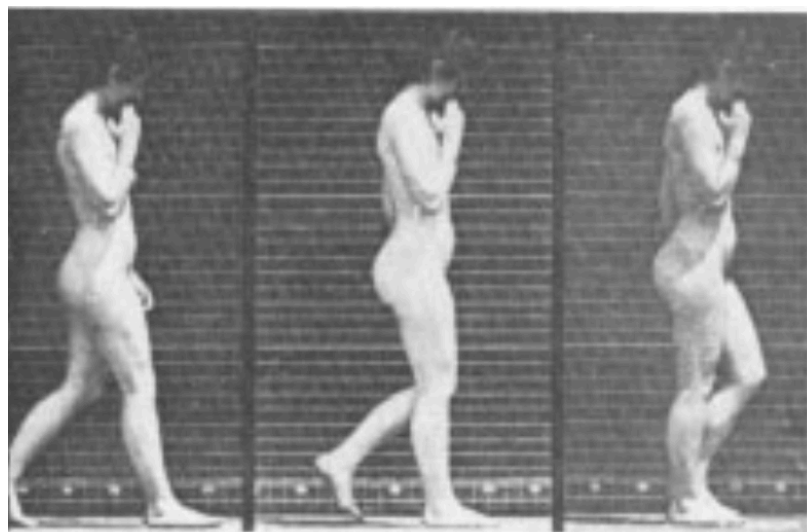


Figure 2.2: Eadward Muybridge, Woman walking, 1901. (Williams 1981, 23).

An important point made by Williams (1981, 26) is that the male models in Muybridge's photographs were not professional models, whereas most of the women were. She states that this is significant because before cinema was about narrative, it was more focused on the



representation of reality. Despite this, “women were already fictionalised, already playing assumed roles, already not there as themselves” (Williams 1981, 26). Williams (1981, 27) asserts that Muybridge denies women’s existence outside the poles of difference. She adopts a psychoanalytic viewpoint, positing that the woman’s body is an expression of unconscious male desire (Williams 1981, 27). Thus, prior to narrative film conventions in classical cinema, at the inception of the film apparatus, there is patriarchal power at play, classifying the woman’s body within a “perversely fetishised structure” (Williams 1981, 27).

Decades after Muybridge’s pre-cinematic studies of human movement,<sup>9</sup> power structures that reinforced the gender dichotomy continued to gain momentum. In feminist film analysis of the 1970s, film was considered a reflection of reality. Conversely, representations of reality in film could affect real-life change (Smelik 1995, 67). Mulvey (2004, 1287) concurs, stating that feminist film analysis of the 1970s viewed cinema as reflecting social and aesthetic improvements, while also offering new ways of seeing. Feminist film analysis then moved toward examining the process of signification, recognising that film is not an unbiased mirror image of reality, but rather a contributor to the construction of meanings (Smelik 1995, 68). In other words, film came to be implicated in the development and perpetuation of accepted ideas. In pursuit of this, Laura Mulvey’s *VPNC* (1989 [1975]) is a useful and prevailing starting point for feminist film analysis. Mulvey (1989 [1975], 14) prefaces her influential essay by contemplating two key ideas to underpin her work: the use of psychoanalysis as a tool and the destruction of the pleasure of mainstream cinema as a weapon.

First, Mulvey (1989 [1975], 14) begins by stating that she uses psychoanalytic theory as a political weapon to illustrate how the unconscious structures of patriarchy materialise through film. In the same way that women in film are constructed in relation to men, Mulvey (1989 [1975], 14) states that phallocentrism<sup>10</sup> relies on the image of the woman as a symbol of castration to provide its value and meaning. In this view, though the woman is subordinate, she

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<sup>9</sup> Painting and photography conventions prior to the advent of cinema had established the objectification of women’s bodies as standard practice (Williams 1981, 33). Thus, Muybridge’s work can be considered to follow this trend in his work. However, Williams (1981, 33) states that in contrast to the arts of painting and still photography, Muybridge’s study of the female body, in particular, presents a supposedly scientific reality which produces particular aesthetic perceptions about the female body. As a result, the woman’s body is fantasised to neutralise the threat posed by it, instead of recording an objective “truth” of the human body (Williams 1981, 33).

<sup>10</sup> Psychoanalytic theory considers the phallus to be the supreme symbol of masculine power, and therefore of feminine lack (Rine 2010). “Phallocentrism” denotes this privileging of the masculine within the system of signification (Rine 2010).



is a vital component in the superiority of men. Accordingly, Mulvey (1989 [1975], 14) argues that the woman's "lack [...] that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies." Freudian psychoanalysis classifies men as possessors of the phallus so that those who do not possess the penis (women) are "deprived" of it (Emig 2006, 199). Because of this relationship, the woman is unable to overcome or "transcend" this patriarchal system and can thus "exist only in relation to castration" (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 14). The woman is the signifier of the male other, solidified solely as a bearer of meaning (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 15). Man, as maker of meaning, can then project his ideas and wishes onto the "silent image of woman" (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 15). Examining the structures and tools of patriarchy by means of psychoanalysis is a way to begin to confront the phallogocentric order (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 15). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 15) acknowledges that though psychoanalysis is not the only method through which this can be achieved, it is nonetheless an important perspective.

Second, Mulvey (1989 [1975], 15) posits that mainstream cinema of the sixties and seventies reflects a dominant ideological concept. Feminist filmmaking, then, can challenge mainstream structures by adopting radical approaches to narrative and aesthetic components (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 15-16). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 16) thus proposes a counter cinema to challenge the dominant patriarchal order. In response to this perspective, Smelik (1995, 71) notes that the result of mainstream cinema constructing female characters as parts of a system of sexual difference is a distrust of popular narrative cinema by feminist film critics. Thus, Smelik (1995, 71) states that the avant-garde "counter-cinema" posited by early feminist film analysts could appeal to female spectators, as the shackles of traditional filmmaking were inescapable. However, this results in a paradox in which "the avant-garde film destroyed traditional visual pleasure along with the narrative structure, while women have always been denied that pleasure in classical cinema" (Smelik 1995, 71). The result is a pessimistic state of affairs for both the female performing on and watching the screen. Women are not afforded the same opportunity for the enjoyment of cinema as their male counterparts. Mulvey's work implies a fixed position of spectatorship produced by the cinema. Steven Marsh (2021, 238) argues that within Mulvey's gaze system, the filmic apparatus positions the spectator as subject and the on-screen action as object of the gaze. Thus, according to Nunan (2020, 368), Hollywood's representation of femininity and masculinity trains audiences to view the world in a specific way. Similarly, reflecting on *VPNC*, Mulvey (2015, 482) explains that her critique of Hollywood cinema was based on its formal ability to manipulate and structure the spectator's look along gendered

lines. To bridge the gap, Smelik (1995, 71) proposes that feminist film discourse should not exclude itself from dominant culture, but rather use traditional film approaches to its advantage.

Regardless, by examining the (male) pleasure of the cinema, Mulvey's (1989 [1975], 16) intention is to destroy that pleasure. She states that her goal is to "transcend outworn or oppressive forms and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire" (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 16). She does so by placing the image of the woman at the forefront of the discussion.

Freud's concept of scopophilia contributed greatly to feminist film discourse (Smelik 1995, 69). Key to Mulvey's theory is scopophilia and narcissism. Scopophilia, or pleasure in looking, is based on Freud's theory of sexuality and posits that looking can be a source of pleasure (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 16). Freud (in Mulvey 1989 [1975], 16) contends that scopophilia entails turning people into objects to be looked at, "subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze." Thus, scopophilia is active. Though it is not confined to the cinema, scopophilia plays a part in the "voyeuristic fantasy" of the film spectator (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 17). Contrary to the array of ways films are watched in the twenty-first century, Mulvey's (1989 [1975], 17) ideas pertain to the viewing of the film in a dark cinema, in which there is a contrast between the screen and the auditorium. This contributes to the illusion of separation between text and spectator, as well as separation among spectators, allowing the viewer to feel as though he (the viewer is assumed to be male<sup>11</sup>) is peering through a window into another world (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 17). As a result, viewers can project their repressed desires onto the characters on screen (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 17).

Furthering the concept of scopophilia, Mulvey (1989 [1975], 17) explains how it can develop into narcissism. Because film is decidedly anthropomorphic, pleasure in looking intertwines with the desire for identifying likeness on screen (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 17). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 17) likens this desire to the phase in which a child recognises their image in the mirror, and they envision their image to be "more complete, more perfect" than their own body. This process is vital in the formulation of subjectivity. In cinema spectatorship, the process of

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<sup>11</sup> The ideal spectator is assumed to be male and thus the gaze is inherently male (Berger 1972, 52; Smelik 1995, 72). Though Berger is here referring to the female nude in classical painting, the sentiment can be applied to the medium of film as well. This is what Doane (1982, 85) refers to as the "masculinisation of the spectatorial position."



recognition and identification between self and self-image continues (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 18). In Hollywood's "star system," the film star imitates the ordinary person, allowing spectators to identify with their on-screen character, while the spectator simultaneously suspends his presence in the world for this new world (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 18).

Mulvey (1989 [1975], 18) describes scopophilia and narcissistic identification as contradictory aspects of pleasure in looking. Scopophilia involves the derivation of pleasure and sexual stimulation through sight; in other words, a separation between the subject and object, whereas narcissistic identification involves an identification with the image, thereby establishing points of similarity between subject and object (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 18). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 18) states that this crucial distinction for Freud meant that scopophilia is "a function of the sexual instincts," and narcissistic identification is a function of "ego libido." Though the two mechanisms interact, they also result in a polarisation of pleasure (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 18). In other words, instinctual drives and self-preservation are at odds with each other (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 18).

Additionally, these two mechanisms do not carry intrinsic meaning (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 18). However, as the screen is "subject to the law which produces it," sexual instincts and identification with the image operate within the symbolic order (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 18).<sup>12</sup> Desire's point of reference, though able to depart in many ways on screen, consistently returns to Freud's concept of the castration complex (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). Thus, though there is pleasure in looking, its content may be threatening, and "it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox" (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19).

It is at this point that Mulvey (1989 [1975], 19) reaches the crux of her argument. She states that "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). The female figure is appropriately figured for the fantasy of the male gaze to be projected onto her (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 19, emphasis in original) states that women, in their "traditional exhibitionist role [...] are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*." Concurrently, John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972, 49)

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<sup>12</sup> The symbolic order is a Lacanian concept that refers to the prioritisation of reason and intelligence over emotion (DeRose 2005, 68).



states that the woman's self is split in two – she must simultaneously watch herself while also being watched. In other words, she is both surveyor and surveyed (Berger 1972, 49). He states that “men act and women appear” (Berger 1972, 50). While men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at (Berger 1972, 50). This results in the woman as surveyor of her own image to turn herself into an object (Berger 1972, 50). More specifically, she is “an object of vision: a sight” (Berger 1972, 50).

Carol Stabile (2009, 87) recognises this trend, specifically in the superhero genre, which is predicated on the idea that someone needs to be protected. This often takes the form of a woman or feminised person, such as children, animals, or the elderly (Stabile 2009, 87). In this case, both the threat and the saviour are coded as masculine (Stabile 2009, 87). This masculinity is founded on strength and power, while femininity is conversely founded on vulnerability (Stabile 2009, 87). Thus, the superhero is automatically assumed to be a man because it is the man that fulfils the role of protector (Stabile 2009, 87).

Woman as spectacle on the screen holds the look and reflects male desire (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). Smelik (1995, 68) states that the female character is thus a signifier of ideological meaning for men. Importantly, the female character as signifier exists in relation to men (Smelik 1995, 69). The woman in cinema signifies “nothing(ness),” in that “women are [...] negatively signified as non-men” (Smelik 1995, 69). By representing women this way, ideas about femininity are naturalised as a pre-existing reality (Smelik 1995, 69). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 19) describes mainstream cinema as integrating spectacle and narrative, especially because the woman's presence often works against the narrative development. Thus, she states that the woman's visual presence “freeze[s] the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). Despite this, in mainstream cinema, the female character is an essential component of spectacle (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). The woman's beauty on screen is associated with a flat image around which the film apparatus must function (Doane 1982, 76). This is in stark contrast to the three-dimensional space occupied by the man on screen who permeates the space and narrative, and thus garners control over it (Doane 1982, 76).

The image of the woman serves as an erotic object on both sides of the screen (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). In other words, she is not only represented for the pleasure of the spectator, but also for the pleasure of the male character(s) alongside her in the film. In so doing, filmmakers can use the image of the woman as spectacle, without distracting from the development of the

narrative, but maintaining her status as erotic object (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 20) notes that this is often achieved by creating the woman as icon, fragmenting her body with close-ups of the legs or face. This concept is widely apparent in the cinema, including contemporary films. For example, in *Transformers* (Bay 2007), the protagonist's love interest is introduced with an extreme close-up of her face (Figure 2.3). In the scene, her presence offers little more than a relief of tension while the male characters engage in passive-aggressive conversation. Following this initial introduction, the character is further fragmented in a scene which largely focuses on specific body parts (Figure 2.4). It is important to note that her body is on display both for the viewer and the male protagonist. In Figure 2.4, Sam is clearly shocked and in awe of the female figure before him. This reflects Berger's (1972, 52) assertion that the woman is regarded as "a thing or an abstraction." Additionally, the representation of Mikaela's body is the reification of Mulvey's (1989 [1975], 22) notion that the on-screen woman is "a perfect product, whose body stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look."



Figure 2.3: The introduction to Mikaela, *Transformers*, 2007. Screenshot by author.



Figure 2.4: Sam is mesmerised by Mikaela's body, *Transformers*, 2007. Screenshot by author.



In integrating the look and identification with the male protagonist, the male spectator indirectly possesses the woman (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 21). Female characters serve male desire in traditional cinema. The woman in the narrative is the trophy for the male character's job well done. She is an object to be desired and acquired. Because of the woman's perceived passivity, women under patriarchy experience status as object imposed upon them (Kelland 2011, 175). Kelland (2011, 175) therefore places importance on Martha Nussbaum's (1999, 218) seven facets of objectification, which are:

1. *Instrumentality*. The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes
2. *Denial of autonomy*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination
3. *Inertness*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity
4. *Fungibility*. The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type and/or (b) with objects of other types
5. *Violability*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into
6. *Ownership*. The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. *Denial of subjectivity*. The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account

By adopting one or more of these, one objectifies another (Nussbaum 1999, 218). In other words, if someone treats a person in one of these ways, they are treating a human as an object. Of note, Kelland (2011, 176) argues that in treating someone as an object in one way, other ways are inevitably present. For example, if one treats a human as a tool, then it is likely due to the perception that that person lacks autonomy and subjectivity, and could also be fungible, inert, and violable (Kelland 2011, 176).

Kelland (2011, 177) proposes two amendments to Nussbaum's list. She states that there are two methods of denying autonomy (Kelland 2011, 176). First is the non-attribution of autonomy, and second is the denial of autonomy (Kelland 2011, 176). Thus, in Kelland's (2011, 177) view, the second facet is as follows:

- 2\* *Denial of Autonomy*. (a) Non-attribution of autonomy: the objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination or (b) violation of autonomy: the objectifier attributes autonomy to the 'object' and violates this autonomy through his or her behaviour towards the 'object.'



The second amendment involves an eighth feature, which is of particular importance to this research:

8. *Representing a part as the whole*. The objectifier separates out a part or feature from the ‘object’ and treats this part as representing the whole (Kelland 2011, 177).

This eighth feature involves a sexual objectification of the female body by separating her sexual parts or functions from the rest of her being, reducing those parts to “mere instruments” (Kelland 2011, 177). Thus, an additional way to be objectified is to have parts representative of the whole. Returning to the example of Mikaela in *Transformers* (Figures 2.3 and 2.4), her body is fragmented, with various parts representing the character as a whole. Other features of objectification are likely at play too, but the purpose of this example is rudimentary – more extensive application of these principles follows in later chapters.

In contrast to the icon of the woman, Mulvey (1989 [1975], 20) asserts that the male figure in the film is not the target of sexual objectification. Traditional cinema represents an active/passive division of labour. Thus, the man must continue to advance the narrative, performing an active role (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 20). He is also the representative of power with whom the spectator can identify (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 20). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 20) argues that in this process of identification, the spectator

projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star's glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror. The character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor co-ordination.

Contrary to the two-dimensional space occupied by the woman, the man “demands” a three-dimensional space (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 20). The apparatus of filmmaking contributes to this, making use of camera technology and movements, as well as editing, to create an illusionistic space (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 20). Thus, the man commands the space by articulating the look and generating the action within this space (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 20).

The woman, however, poses a problem for the male that is not skin-deep (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 21). Her presence represents sexual difference, and thus the threat of castration by means of



her lack of penis, resulting in “unpleasure” (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 21). The woman *always* threatens to elicit anxiety, even in her representation as icon for male pleasure (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 21). To overcome this castration anxiety, the male unconscious must either engage in voyeurism to demystify the mystery of the woman or engage in fetishistic scopophilia and turn the woman into a fetish object to minimise the danger she presents (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 21). Freud defines fetish as “any object which acts as a substitute for the penis, allowing the male to continue to believe in the myth of the female phallus so as not to have to confront the threat of castration which underlies the fact of sexual difference” (in Williams 1981, 27). The female body is perceived as an absence in relation to the male body, “an absence which is both masked and revealed in the substitution of a fetish object” (Thornham 2015, 882). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 21-22) relates voyeurism to sadism, in which pleasure is derived from determining guilt, in the form of castration, and subsequently asserting control over the guilty party by punishing or forgiving them. The narrative of the film suits the project of sadism as it “demands a story,” which occurs in a linear fashion (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 22). The female character is guilty of what she lacks and must be dealt with by means of forgiveness or punishment (Smelik 1995, 70). This is often materialised through marriage or death, respectively (Smelik 1995, 70). Conversely, fetishistic scopophilia is also not confined to the limits of linear time (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 22). It transforms the object into something beautiful and satisfying, concerned solely with the look (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 21). The lack of penis is replaced with a fetish, amplifying femininity to divert attention from the female character’s “lack” (Smelik 1995, 71). By creating an image of a beautiful and pleasurable woman, the threat of the woman is neutralised (Smelik 1995, 70).

The cinema’s fetishisation of the female body’s “lack” functions on the level of the signified (Williams 1981, 28). In so doing, the perception of the camera’s involvement in the creation of the image is overlooked (Williams 1981, 27). Additionally, Williams (1981, 27) states that the cinema encourages a disavowal of the illusion of the signifier. In other words, the spectator takes the image as true while also being aware that it is imaginary (Williams 1981, 27).

In sum, the formal attributes of the cinema are shaped by pleasure in looking and identification with the image (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 25). Further, narrative film’s active man/passive woman deepens the “ideological significance” of the patriarchal order (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 25). The representation, and subsequent threat, of women can be evaded through voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 25). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 25) acknowledges



that these psychoanalytic systems are not inherent to the medium of film, but that it is through film that they are easily recognised. In particular, the circumstances of viewing a film in a darkened auditorium creates a viewing environment that is unique to the medium, especially in comparison to other forms of entertainment, such as the theatre (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 25). Mulvey (1989 [1975], 25) notes that how films are created reflect patriarchal structures, such as the control of time and space in pursuit of a command of desire. It is important to recognise how these techniques operate before they can be challenged (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 25).

There are three looks involved: the camera, the audience, and the characters (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 25). Narrative film attempts to deny or minimise the awareness of the first two looks, instead prioritising the looks of the characters at each other (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 25). The camera's look is overlooked to create a convincing illusion within which the spectator's surrogate can operate (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 26). Additionally, the look of the audience is also denied, to provide distance between the screen and the spectator, maintaining the illusion of the image (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 26).

A primary criticism of Mulvey's theory, as well as the feminist psychoanalytic perspective, is that it essentialises the binary oppositions of man/woman and masculine/feminine (Smelik 1995, 76). Explaining sexual difference often fails to explain class, race, and other demographics involved in making up a person (Moi 1999, 35). Toril Moi (1999, 35) argues that in considering a woman as the sum of sex and gender, her existence is reduced to her sexual difference, and this "reductionism is the antithesis of everything feminism ought to stand for." However, if patriarchal structures of representation represent women in this way, it is justifiable to identify how it operates so that it can be deconstructed, or at the very least, challenged. Jackie Stacey (1987, 61) criticises psychoanalytic film theory for its rigid dichotomisation of gender, arguing that it fails to address a more complex construction of desire in which women may identify with the characters on screen while not abandoning their individuality. Stacey (1987, 49) proposes that there is space for feminine spectatorship in the cinema, and that it cannot be assumed that men occupy the masculine position and women occupy the feminine position. The feminine, therefore, does not necessarily have to fulfil the role of object. Consequently, Stacey (1987, 50) argues that the film can be enjoyed from different gendered perspectives. Anneke Smelik (1995, 73) states that feminist film theories of the 1970s and 1980s were "caught up in the straitjacket of sexual difference," in which visual pleasure can only be understood in terms of sexual difference. It confines women to an inevitable



classification that always relies on a relation to men (Smelik 1995, 77). Of note, this simplified view denies differences between women, instead representing women as a monolith (Smelik 1995, 77). Similarly, Sassatelli (2011, 124) notes that Mulvey's work has been criticised for the limiting heterosexual matrix in which it exists, therefore failing to consider modalities of spectatorship that exist outside of the heterosexual dimension.

The portrayal of male characters as heroic and female characters as victims who need saving conforms to traditional attitudes about gender roles (Summers and Miller 2014, 1028). Further, the image of the woman as either castrated or castrator creates a dichotomy under which she can exist (Creed 1993, 116). She can be the domestic, passive woman, or the aggressive, destructive woman (Creed 1993, 116). There is a trend in media to represent women as both sexualised and victimised (Stankiewicz and Rosselli 2008, 579). Julie Stankiewicz and Francine Rosselli (2008, 587) argue that the ubiquity of sexualised images of women in media bolsters patriarchal structures by "designating women's bodies as property that can be evaluated, ogled, and touched at the whim of men's desire." Imagery across various mediums of popular culture imagery, such as video games, film, advertising, and music videos, contribute to attitudes about the value of women being anchored in the object of male desire (Stankiewicz and Rosselli 2008, 581). Resultantly, the images indicate a broader trend in culture to consider the submission of women a desirable and admirable trait (Stankiewicz and Rosselli 2008, 581).

Films of the 1970s-1990s introduced tough female characters such as Ripley in the *Alien* (1979-1997) franchise and Trinity in *The Matrix* (Wachowskis 1999). They have been widely discussed in feminist film analysis, and in particular, theorised as "tough women" (DeRose 2005, 67-68). Maria DeRose (2005, 68) asks how tough women can be if the opposite of femininity is that which is tough. Tough women have been theorised as symbolically male, with masculine bodies, dress, behaviour, and hairstyles (DeRose 2005, 68). They are further masculinised by depicting them as active fighters, who often use phallic weapons (DeRose 2005, 70). In so doing, these tough women on screen continue to devalue the feminine (DeRose 2005, 70). DeRose (2005, 71) problematises this view, stating that perceiving strong women in this way inhibits them from performing gender in any way that is not passive. Of note, however, these women are often shown to be objectified in some way, with shapely bodies and tight clothing (Summers and Miller 2014, 1028). For example, after battling the alien, Ripley in *Alien* (Scott 1979) is shown getting undressed which serves very little purpose in the narrative

(Figure 2.5). Though she spends most of the film being visually coded as masculine, with short hair and an androgynous jumpsuit, this scene works to mark her body as an object of desire. Her cropped shirt and skimpy underwear expose her body to the scrutiny of both the camera and spectator (Figure 2.6).

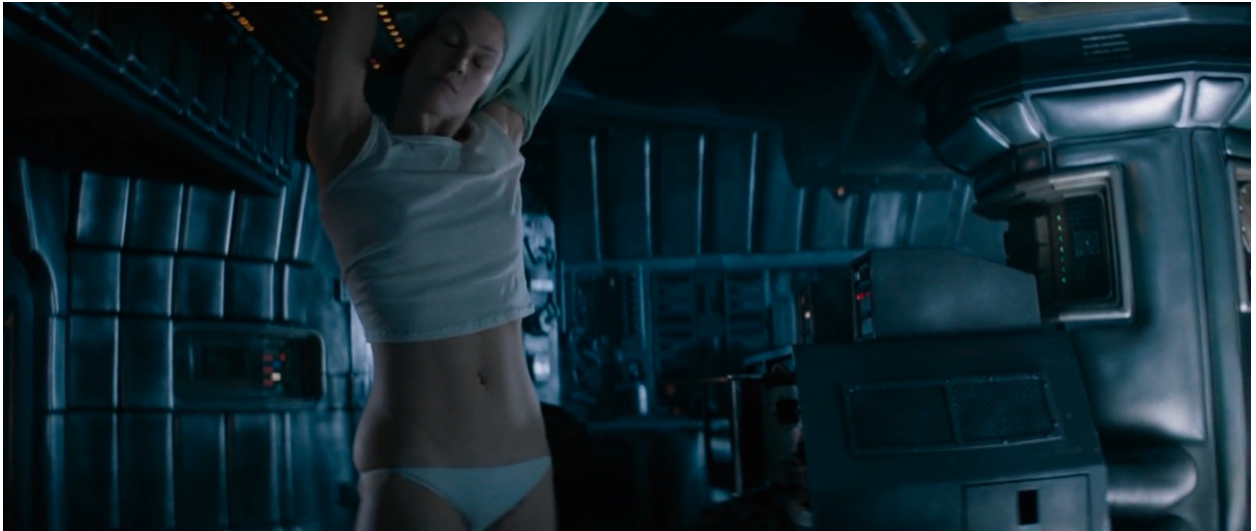


Figure 2.5: Ripley undresses, *Alien*, 1979. Screenshot by author.

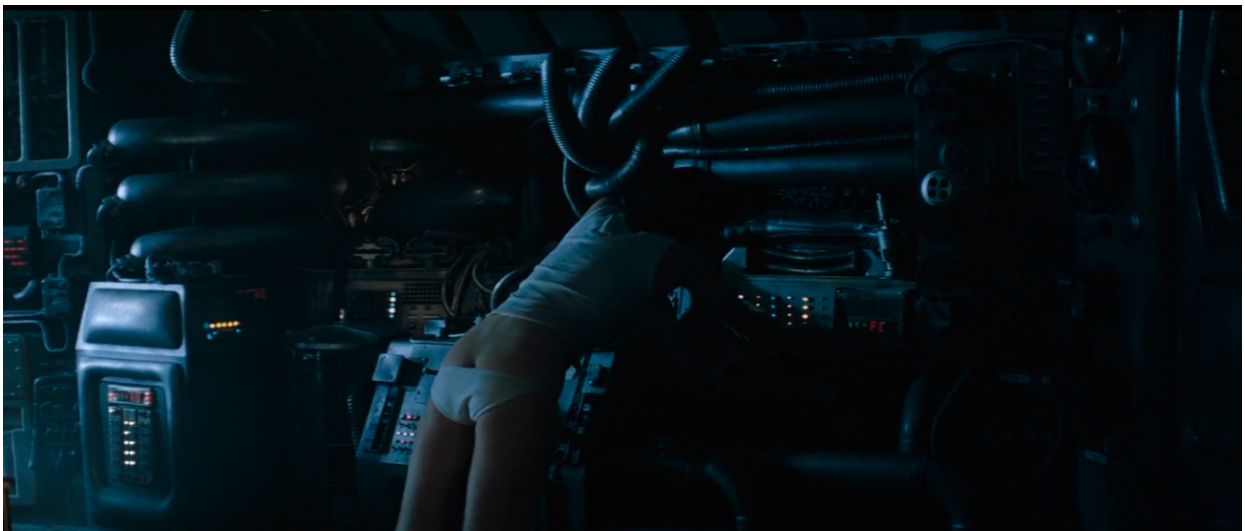


Figure 2.6: Ripley performs a task in her undergarments, *Alien*, 1979. Screenshot by author.

Similarly, in *The Matrix* (Wachowskis 1999), Trinity introduces herself to Neo in a dark club (Figure 2.7). In the two angles used in the scene, her pale skin fills much of the frame (Figure 2.8). This is particularly noticeable because the other figures in the scene, including Neo, are

comparatively difficult to see. In placing the character in a strapless top, the image highlights the character's status as love interest before it becomes apparent in the narrative.



Figure 2.7: Trinity introduces herself to Neo, *The Matrix*, 1999. Screenshot by author.



Figure 2.8: Neo talks to Trinity, *The Matrix*, 1999. Screenshot by author.

Mulvey (2004a, 1291) states that by questioning film's depiction of reality, feminist film theory developed to demonstrate that the depiction of women's bodies as commodified objects in images was based on psychic structures that had no basis in reality. She argues that the history of feminist film analysis, though perhaps not as relevant as it once was, provides "an invaluable point of departure" (Mulvey 2004a, 1291). Theories of spectatorship are important in identifying not only how people consume media, but also how the social and psychic



dimensions of the image impact culture (Manlove 2007, 88). Clifford Manlove (2007, 103) states that despite the criticism of Mulvey's theory of the gaze, it has maintained relevance into the twenty-first century because it analyses an act of vision that cannot be empirically measured. Additionally, it recognises the politics of gender in cultural artefacts (Manlove 2007, 103). He argues that analysing the gaze can "be useful for understanding more about the visual dimension of power, gender and subjectivity in human cultures." While Manlove (2007, 90) criticises Mulvey's psychoanalytic perspective, arguing that she places too much importance on the political effects of filmic representations as based on strictly cultural and/or biological origins, he notes that nonetheless, her work "pioneers understanding [of] the political effects of the social eye upon individual bodies" (Manlove 2007, 90). As a result, Mulvey's work provides a valuable point of reference for considering the representation of women on screen, despite the vastly different cultural conditions between then and now.

#### **2.4 From Cinema to Screen**

Cinema in the twenty-first century has changed with emerging electronic and digital technologies (Mulvey 2004a, 1287). Contemplating her work, Mulvey (2004a, 1289) notes that in *VPNC*, her concept of the voyeuristic spectator depended on the specific viewing environment, in which a film is viewed in a dark room with light projected onto a screen. Importantly, this spectator experience is no longer the sole mode of relating to the film (Mulvey 2004a, 1289). Because the contemporary spectator has significantly more control over the viewing of the cinematic images, the narrative is weakened and unimportant details of the film that were previously invisible are rendered visible (Mulvey 2004a, 1289). Mulvey (2004a, 1289) states that it is crucial to reflect on the past cinematic processes in the twenty-first century to reveal new insights into how those processes operated.

In a reflection on her seminal essay, Mulvey (2017, 385) notes that the text primarily focuses on Hollywood cinema. The cinema was an essential site of cultural and political commentary during decolonisation in the 1960s (Mulvey 2004b, 151). Mulvey's cinema consists of the physical celluloid film on which images were recorded. A film comprises a series of still images displayed in succession at 24 frames a second (Mulvey 2011, 134). Markos Hadjioannou (2012, 30) defines celluloid cinema as "a photochemical means of recording and projecting images that are both analogous to the material relations of the original source and are transcribed directly as material traces onto the filmstrip." The cinema of 24 frames a second resulted in a voyeuristic look imposed upon the image of the woman (Mulvey 2006, 190). This distracted



from the mechanics of the cinema as well as deflecting from male castration anxiety (Mulvey 2006, 190). In contrast, the contemporary stillness of film is not only possible but also commonplace. Additionally, the fascination with fiction is no longer the sole interest and focus of the voyeuristic look, but rather one among many (Mulvey 2006, 190).

There has been a large shift in how consumers access films (Gaustad 2019, 81). Mulvey (2006, 190) argues that in the twenty-first century, spectatorship has transformed from being a collective experience to one in which the individual has control. She explains that she noticed a change in her approach to watching films in the 1990s with the increasingly popular advent of the DVD (Mulvey 2017, 386). As a result, the cinema experience she outlines in *VPNC* refers specifically to “viewing in a cinema in a darkened space – looking up at a silver screen, getting lost in the magic of the film” (Mulvey 2017, 386). Unlike celluloid film, in the digital sphere, any frame of recorded data can be accessed at any time (Manovich 1996, 4). Being able to pause a film at any point on a digital screen creates moments of fascination and thought that shift the ways that films are watched (Mulvey 2017, 386). This stillness allows spectators to reflect on the still frame within the moving image (Mulvey 2006, 185). Therefore, Mulvey (2006, 185) argues, being able to pause and replay moments at will brings new meaning to spectatorship, in which the narrative and aesthetic moments can be separated. Case in point, it is this stillness and the analysis thereof that allows me to conduct an analysis of on-screen images of women.

Additionally, watching a film or television show on a screen powered by the Internet is “not a cinematic experience” (Rodowick 2007, 185). The computer screen does not offer a simple transfer of information delivery, but rather signals the end of traditional cinema (Hadjioannou 2012, 3). The many variations of screens, including interactive computer screens and virtual reality headsets, indicate that technologies of projection can no longer be confined to one medium (Hadjioannou 2012, 3). Streaming allows viewers to find pleasure on screen at their own will, pace, and leisure (Koepnick 2017, 441). Mobile devices and multi-screen setups have significantly changed the normative ideals of cinema-lovers of the previous century (Koepnick 2017, 442). The viewer is no longer assumed to be singularly interested in the film, when many other screens coexist in the same space, and thus grapple for attention. Smartphones, tablets, and laptops expand the possibility for film (and television) consumption so that media can be consumed “basically anywhere except in cinemas” (Gaustad 2019, 68). Koepnick (2017, 443-444) suggests this is a positive shift, arguing that digital media “emancipates” viewers from



the rigid classical cinema so that their sense of time, perception, and attention is completely transformed. Without fixed temporality, a film is not and “cannot” be cinema (Mulvey 2004b, 149). It is for this reason that I refer instead to “the screen,” to account for the multiplicity of viewing modes available in the digital era.

Hadjioannou (2012, 30) defines digital cinema as “a means of registering images as binary relations and algorithmic calculations, which are rendered in graphically visual images by a computer to be humanly perceptible.” Accordingly, the term “film” has changed to a figure of speech, referring not only to the material medium of a celluloid film strip, but also to video, digital disks, hard drives, and online databases (Hadjioannou 2012, 3). Additionally, the “spectator” is more accurately a “user,” coming into contact with various input devices such as remote controls, keyboards, and goggles (Hadjioannou 2012, 3). Because of these significant changes in the capture and release of audio-visual data, the concepts of “cinema,” “film,” and “spectator” lose the terminological stability of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hadjioannou 2012, 3). It is also important to note that new modes of media consumption change “not only *how* we consume but also *what* we consume” (Gaustad 2019, 68, emphasis in original). Accordingly, Hole and Jelača (2019, 309) argue that the politics of spectacle and the gaze continue to play an important role in models of spectatorship because spectators of new media are actively involved in engaging with the content that they consume. Further, Mulvey (2011, 141) argues that this changes how the female spectator should be considered, as she controls the images at which she looks. Instead of Mulvey’s (1989 [1975]) position that the female spectator is absorbed into the male look in the cinema of 24 frames a second, the female spectator is able to engage with the image on screen, reversing the power relationship that is central to *VPNC* (Mulvey 2011, 141).

## 2.5 Into the Twenty-First Century

Feminist film criticism is a constantly changing landscape, marked by:

the increased participation of male scholars; by the heightened visibility of lesbian, gay, and queer analyses and questions surrounding masculinity; by the focus on contemporary history, particularly as it informs “raced” and postcolonial subjects; by a more pronounced interrogation of the links between violence and gender; by the assumption that popular films, popular culture, and consumer culture are complex and ambivalent social forces in the production of gender (Radner and Stringer 2011, 3).

The history of film theory is a valuable cornerstone for understanding the vast and continuous stream of new media imagery (Rodowick 2007, 186). Because of this, continuous cultural shifts affect the conditions of image spectatorship, ensuring its ongoing relevance (Mulvey 2017, 387). Cinema has transformed into new forms and modes to produce new images and, importantly, new ways of representing women (Mulvey 2019, 93). This technocultural era is one in which digital media has flourished. Feminism has consequently been shaped by changing modes of communication (Baer, Smith-Prei, and Stehle 2016, 1). Mulvey (2015) argues that feminism's project continues into the twenty-first century with renewed interest from young women and teens because of feminism's failure to progress past the patriarchal structures of which it was so critical in the 1970s. She notes that:

... violence against women and the commodification of the female body are both prevalent and, indeed, on the rise today. They are, in a sense, two sides of the same coin: women are, on the one hand, subjects of an extremely real and abject [...] body and denigrated sexuality; on the other, the proliferation of images and their digitalisation produces more and more abstract and air-brushed representations of impossible female bodies. Both indicate, certainly, a “lack of progress” (Mulvey 2015).

Despite this lack of progress, she expresses optimism in the widespread interest of feminism. Whereas *VPNC* was a “political intervention” (Mulvey 2015) in the 1970s, in the twenty-first century, feminist film theory is an academic subject. Film and women's studies are well-established in universities, incorporating a wider range of cultural and political perspectives, including queer and post-colonial discourses within the Humanities (Mulvey 2015). Because of this,

a younger generation of women participate in extremely lively debates in which questions of gender, sexuality and representation on screens and across media are approached from perspectives that had not yet been articulated in the 1970s (Mulvey 2015).

Beyond the academic sphere, there has also been a shift in the visibility of feminist politics. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017, 884) identify a surge in feminist representation in the mainstream, resulting in “popular feminism” that is accessible, respected, and even normative. Contemporary feminism is broadcast in commercial and mainstream media so that it is more widely consumed than before (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 884). They propose the term “traffic in feminism” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 884). Conditions of structural inequality defined by race, class, gender, and sexuality are integrated



into a neoliberal<sup>13</sup> individualism that prioritises equal visibility as the pinnacle of social achievement (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 886). Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017, 886) assert that because of this, the catalyst and justification for popular<sup>14</sup> feminism lies in the perception of market visibility as the solution to structural inequality. For example, the concept of “girl power” became a cultural trend in which feminism could be a fashion choice (Monaghan 2022, 4). Feminist merchandise, such as clothing, is readily available, encouraged partly by the neoliberal entrepreneurial spirit of the contemporary Western world (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 885).

Unlike postfeminism, traffic in feminism does not deny the need for feminism; however, in reproducing feminist ideology in a particular way, it has a similar effect to postfeminism (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 886). The effect is the advancement of specifically white, cisgender women in the capitalist, sex/gender system (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 886). Traffic in feminism, therefore, turns feminism into a product while also allowing only certain women to achieve visibility and benefits. In this landscape, however, women whose bodies and labour continue to be exploited for profit experience little gain (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 886). The traffic in feminism does not progress in minimising the oppression that it publicly criticises. And so, while creating feminist visibility through products and representation is an admirable pursuit, more needs to be done to affect real change for real women.

Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017, 884, emphasis in original) argue that for feminist scholars,

feminism has always been a useful lens through which to *understand* popular culture. However, we now are living in a moment when feminism has undeniably *become* popular culture.

As well as in media and film, feminist activism is present in online spaces such as Instagram and Twitter (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 884). Angela Smith (2015, 1) refers to

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<sup>13</sup> Neoliberalism is the prioritisation of a market-based, rather than a state-directed economy (Lynch and Kalaitzake 2020, 246) It endorses individualistic entrepreneurial pursuits (Lynch and Kalaitzake 2020, 239). Neoliberalism has been criticised for its fusion of genuine input and destructive effects, such as growing inequality, of capitalism (Bockman 2013, 15).

<sup>14</sup> “Popular” is used to refer to that which is liked and/or admired by groups of individuals (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 884). The condition of popularity may be likened to the stereotypical American teen film in which pupils of varying degrees of popularity separate into cliques, inevitably creating exclusions and backlash. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017, 884) liken popular feminism to this and identify the popular as “a terrain of struggle for power.”



a fourth wave of feminism in which women make use of Web 2.0<sup>15</sup> to join forces and campaign for greater gender equality. Owing to the collaborative nature of online spaces, individual stories and collective narratives are often employed to raise awareness for local and global gender-based oppression, and to allow individuals to discuss their shared experiences (Baer, Smith-Prei, and Stehle 2016, 2). Whereas early feminist analysis identified women as objects of the gaze, social media allows them to be both objects of the gaze<sup>16</sup> and producers of the content that attracts<sup>17</sup> the gaze (Hole and Jelača 2019, 318). For example, the selfie positions its author as both gazed at and gazer (Hole and Jelača 2019, 318). Additionally, the celebrity, for example, no longer exists in a separate world unaware she is being looked at. Instead, the woman on screen participates in the construction of her own body as spectacle (Hole and Jelača 2019, 318). Thus, the representation of women and men on screen has changed since *VPNC* (Baranyi 2016, 71).

Although patriarchal structures continue to prevail, the cinematic world of women is no longer conceived solely for the purpose of spectacle (Nunan 2020, 369). Additionally, though films with direct reference to feminist activism do not dominate the mainstream, films in the twenty-first century are aware of their contribution to the social construction of gender, often reflecting upon issues that arise within the sphere of gender in a contemporary world (Radner and Stringer 2011, 4). Contemporary films have more frequently explored the feminine voice, representing women in new ways, including discussing sex and feeling empowered in their sexuality (Monaghan 2022, 7). The 2010s, for example, saw many woman-centred films, such as *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015), *Wonder Woman* (2017-2020), and *Ocean's 8* (2018), to name a few. Films such as these connect to a cultural climate marked by renewed feminist interest (Oria 2022, 14). Like films, television narratives offer representations of concerns expressed elsewhere in cultural life (Hoerl 2021, 375). Thus, television creates a space for commentary on ongoing developments within feminist discourse (Hoerl 2021, 376). Accordingly, serial television programming is a positive site of feminist advocacy in the twenty-first century (Hoerl

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<sup>15</sup> Web 2.0 comprises the Internet as a network of interconnected devices and individual users, encouraging sharing of data through an “architecture of participation” (O’Reilly 2005). Web 2.0 provides opportunities for social interaction and collaboration, so that users are both producers and consumers of content (An and Williams 2010, 42). Examples of Web 2.0 applications include blogs, podcasting, and social networking (An and Williams 2010, 42).

<sup>16</sup> Gales (2022, 7) notes that with the surge in online spaces, there is also an “online gaze,” in which the observation of others through likes and comments on social media sites, such as Instagram, contribute to how women present themselves on the Internet.

<sup>17</sup> By mentioning this, I seek not to give an in-depth account of this phenomenon but rather to provide an overview of the cultural climate in which this research is situated.

2021, 373). Signalling the traffic in feminism, there are multiple television shows featuring feminist characters, such as *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019), *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-present), and the *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020). The popularity of shows such as these indicate an interest in feminist characters and storylines (Hoerl 2021, 374).

Female characters in contemporary feminist television shows break glass ceilings, confront patriarchy, and seek validation for their accomplishments (Hoerl 2021, 374). However, they are not simply driven – they are extraordinary (Hoerl 2021, 374). In other words, they continue to represent that which is “impossible for any actual woman” to achieve (Hoerl 2021, 374). Feminist protagonists tend to be shown constricted by patriarchy in various ways (Hoerl 2021, 374). Thus, though their representation offers a departure from how women have historically been portrayed on screen, it reflects the continuing struggle feminists sustain in the twenty-first century. Therefore, in concurrence with Mulvey, Hoerl (2021, 374) suggests that

[w]hile the emergence of explicitly feminist characters on television marks a shift in social attitudes about feminism, their presence does not necessarily mean that feminists have made significant gains.

For example, in *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), Leslie Knope is an openly feminist, multidimensional character (Hoerl 2021, 373). Part of the humour in the representation of Leslie Knope is that despite her enthusiasm, capabilities, and significant qualifications, she is constantly met with derision (Hoerl 2021, 374). The show thus encourages viewers to empathise with Leslie in her struggle against the patriarchal bureaucracy in which she lives and works (Hoerl 2021, 374). For example, in *Women in Garbage* (S05E11), Leslie sets up a Gender Equality Commission for the Pawnee City Council to encourage more female hires within the local government. At the council meeting, only male employees are present, and she expresses frustration, saying “excuse me everyone, did anyone notice that there are no women on the Gender Equality Commission?” (Hisock 2013). While this is exaggerated and used for comic effect, it also encourages sympathy with the obstacles women face working in male-dominated fields. Throughout the episode, and the seven-season run of the show, she explicitly mentions her intent to overcome stereotypes and to pursue feminist victories. Shows such as these challenge the postfeminist notion of the 1990s and early 2000s that feminism is no longer necessary (Hoerl 2021, 376).

Hoerl (2021, 375) argues that popular culture has given meaning to feminism in two significant ways. First, it indicates that women who represent feminist virtues are superhuman. Second,



even these superhuman women struggle to overcome patriarchal structures while also reconciling their personal and public goals. Women on screen that strive for perfection and resilience reinforce how women are expected to perform (Hoerl 2021, 377). Thus, Hoerl (2021, 377) argues that popular feminism has done more to make its project more widely visible but has failed to challenge persistent structures of inequality. Sexist policies continue to exist as significant obstacles for women (Hoerl 2021, 375). Additionally, racial diversity is less of a priority so that whiteness continues to be the default identity (Hole and Jelača 2019, 311).

John David (in Mulvey 2015), referring to *VPNC*, writes:

How could this essay, which has been so thoroughly and variously celebrated, refused, cherished and derided, known and assimilated, still arouse so much passionate interest in readers, readers whose own historical moment seems – perhaps for the worse – so very different from the moment of the essay’s composition and publication? I think, perhaps, one explanation for this is a sad one: that despite the forty years that separate us from 1975, not enough has changed.

Thus, while the conditions for media consumption have changed drastically since Mulvey’s influential essay, it is a worthwhile endeavour to engage with how her ideas can be applied to the current screen culture.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has considered a theoretical account of the representation of women in cinema by examining how gendered structures of power are materialised. Mulvey’s 1975 essay questions film’s depiction of reality, resulting in the development of feminist film theory to demonstrate that the depiction of women’s bodies as commodified objects in images were based on psychic structures that had no basis in reality. Of note, the objectification of women solidifies the use of women as tools within a narrative that enhances the spectacle of the cinematic event. Although cinema was an important method of representing the world in the twentieth century, digital media has displaced cinema in the twenty-first century, bringing with it new ways of engaging with the world, and notably, with feminist discourse. Despite no longer being rooted in psychoanalysis, feminist film criticism’s legacy is its continued influence wherever feminism and women on screen exist. It is for this reason that Mulvey’s work continues to be relevant and important. In the next chapter, the relationship between femininity and technology is investigated by examining AI on screen and a brief history of automata, followed by an



analysis of the female robots in *Metropolis* (Lang 1927) and *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015). It, therefore, offers a practical application of the concepts discussed in this chapter.



## CHAPTER THREE

### TECHNOLOGY BECOMES HER: THE WOMAN-MACHINE ON SCREEN

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The futures do not appear out of nowhere: they are based on the presents, the pasts, and the ways they are being envisioned.

- Francesca Ferrando

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#### 3.1 Introduction

The relationship between humans and robots is a common area of interest in SF, which sheds light on both the present cultural situation and the vision for the future (Özkent 2022, 3). Yasemin Özkent (2022, 2) posits that dreams in the form of SF narratives encourage the exploration of the world and ourselves, offering insight into how the future may unfold. With the involvement of technology in many areas of everyday life, “sci-fi films about the human-technology relationship have become an increasingly important subject of study” (Özkent 2022, 2). Stephen Cave et al. (2018, 4) posit that science fiction narratives are “essential to the development of science and people’s engagement with new knowledge and new applications.”

Feminine AIs are part of a long history of self-moving mechanical figures, which were shaped by socio-cultural conceptions of femininity throughout (Wosk 2015, 34). Conversely, male control is a recurring theme in SF narratives involving intelligent machines (Yee 2017, 87). Key characteristics in male-written stories about female simulacra include the idealisation of the artificial female, who will validate them, and who will fulfil the male gaze (Wosk 2015, 56). Assuming that sex and gender are connected, AI is free from the boundaries of gender difference (Ferrando 2014, 1). If the body of a machine has no biological sex with which to inform its gender performance, it does not need to operate within that paradigm. Despite this, gender will continue to have cultural value and significance when applied to robots, making it easier for humans to relate to their robotic counterparts (Ferrando 2014, 9). In other words, the machine may not have a need for gender to function, but the humans interacting with it do.

This chapter examines the representation of female AI on screen. It begins with a discussion of the key components of anthropomorphised AI systems in the twenty-first century, before briefly explaining the female automaton. Following this discussion, the artificial woman in SF is explored, followed by two case studies – *Metropolis* (Lang 1927) and *Ex Machina* (Garland



2015). This chapter decodes examples that reveal how the feminine robot is approached in SF screen renderings.

### 3.2 The Nuts and Bolts

AI is an umbrella term that pertains to machines which have a human-made intelligence,<sup>18</sup> including those that are involved in the fields of computer science, cognitive science, and engineering, as well as cyborgs, robots, androids, and automata (Cave et al. 2018, 5). Cultural beliefs play an important role in how humans perceive and receive AI systems (Ferrando 2014, 11). Additionally, social and political factors are pivotal in the development of advanced AI (Ferrando 2014, 11).

Costa and Ribas (2019, 173) note that people get emotionally attached to their digital assistants. In the hierarchisation of labour, service, emotional, and organisational tasks have typically been coded as feminine (Costa and Ribas 2019, 173). Current AI systems such as Siri and Alexa<sup>19</sup> not only operate in service-related contexts, but they also represent care and warmth through their dialogue (Costa and Ribas 2019, 173-174). Thus, “we are witnessing the protocols of femininity being programmed into machines, as feminised labour becomes technologised labour” (Hester 2016, 46-47). Gender is expressed in AI systems through features such as voice and name (Costa and Ribas 2019, 174). A notable trend in the development of virtual assistants is to appear increasingly humanised to the users. To achieve this, gender and femininity are “instrumentalised” (Costa and Ribas 2019, 176). Costa and Ribas (2019, 176) thus establish femininity as a tool. It can be used in the pursuit of a goal, which in this case is to create friendly artificial companions. Machines are designed to serve humans in a way that exposes how humans imagine delegating tasks to a compliant service provider (Schiller and McMahon 2019, 189). For example, Amazon’s Alexa performs tasks such as creating and amending shopping lists, reminders, adding events to calendars, and ordering goods from Amazon. These activities are all traditionally considered feminised labour (Schiller and McMahon 2019, 185). Because of this, instead of dispersing social structures of domination and submission, “a more objectified version of master-servant relationships which replicate race, ethnicity, and gender

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<sup>18</sup> The definition of intelligence is constantly up for debate, but in the context of this research refers to that which minds can do. Cave et al. (2018, 5) elucidate by stating that intelligence is the application of “psychological skills that are used by animals for goal attainment.”

<sup>19</sup> AIs are not always feminine. For example, Siri can be changed to have a male voice on Apple devices. However, their behaviour continues to reflect feminine attributes so as not to seem too domineering.

as ordering social structures” comes to the fore (Schiller and McMahon 2019, 188-189). Correspondingly, Costa and Ribas (2019, 174) argue:

As digital assistants try to become closer to our social reality, it is from reality itself that they draw the rules for their behaviour and appearance. Consequently, the way we relate to our peers starts influencing how we relate to artificial intelligence and how it relates to us.

Another possible reason for the feminisation of virtual assistants is that AI development is a male-dominated field (Costa and Ribas 2019, 178). It is possible that the link between this and feminised AI systems reflects expectations consumers have of service workers, namely subservience and total availability (Costa and Ribas 2019, 178). Feminine virtual assistants also mitigate potential anxiety users may have about sharing important data (Costa and Ribas 2018, 178). Costa and Ribas (2019, 179) describe this as a kind of intimacy, aided by femininity, so that users feel comfortable sharing data with their digital assistants. The intimacy is further accepted because virtual assistants will not leave or expose their users and their data, providing another layer of trust and security for users (Costa and Ribas 2019, 179). Therefore, femininity can be described as a tool for managing interactions between digital assistants and users.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that AI and robots are a “staple” of the SF genre (Di Minico 2017, 69). Often, AI machines in fictional narratives are presented in humanoid form (Cave et al. 2018, 8). The tendency to do so can be attributed to three key thought processes. First, humans, particularly in the West, are considered the paragon of intelligent beings (Cave et al. 2018, 8). Thus, when humans conceive of intelligence, it takes the form of the human (Cave et al. 2018, 8). This perspective is not limited to AI, and is reflected in the representation of gods, angels, and demons, all of which may similarly be considered non-human intelligent beings (Cave et al. 2018, 8). Second, AI machines are constructed as performing human labour (Cave et al. 2018, 8). Because of this, they are visual mirrors of the humans after which they are conceived (Cave et al. 2018, 8). For example, C-3PO (Figure 3.1) in the popular film franchise *Star Wars* (1977-2019) is a humanoid robot whose job involves communication and diplomatic affairs. Third, fictional audio-visual storytelling involves human actors and stories. Thus, the easiest way to represent AI machines is for them to take the human form (Cave et al. 2018, 8).



Figure 3.1: C-3PO walks across the desert on the planet Tatooine, *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*, 1977. Screenshot by author.

Matthew Flisfeder and Clint Burnham (2017, 26) describe the contemporary attitude toward technology and devices as an “infatuation.” The devotion to devices is commodity fetishism,<sup>20</sup> resulting in social relationships with *things*, replacing social relationships with people (Flisfeder and Burnham 2017, 28). Consequently, the anthropomorphisation of AI systems allows for a socio-emotional interaction between human users and AIs, rather than for purely pragmatic purposes (Costa and Ribas 2019, 173). In this way, AI provides a simulacrum of companionship (Schiller and McMahon 2019, 181). This type of interaction is envisaged in fictional narratives as potentially replacing relationships that typically occur between humans. It has varying tones, too, depending on the text. For example, in an episode of *The Big Bang Theory* (S05E14), Raj falls in love with Siri. He almost immediately speaks to her as if she is a real person. Raj asks Siri if she is single, and she states that she does not have a marital status. He replies “Yeah, you’re right, that’s too personal. We hardly know each other.” Sheldon acknowledges and encourages the relationship, telling Raj:

Well done, Dr Koothrappali. You’ve taken a great evolutionary leap by abandoning human interaction and allowing yourself to romantically bond with a soulless machine. Kudos.

In Figure 3.2, Raj has a dream about visiting Siri, who he imagines as a tall and beautiful white woman with a robotic voice. Her office is decidedly futuristic, with metal chairs and walls. Raj is holding flowers, indicating his romantic intentions with her. The episode ends with him

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<sup>20</sup> Flisfeder and Burnham (2017, 26) are referring to the project of capitalism as a key reason for this relationship with technology. Though it is beyond the scope of this research, it is important to note that Western capitalist economics cannot be ignored in the way that devices have permeated twenty-first-century life in the urban West.

realising that like with real women, Raj is unable to speak to Siri when she is physically in front of him. The episode is a comedic take on the possibility of human attachment to AI systems with which we frequently interact.



Figure 3.2: Raj goes to the office of Siri, *The Beta Test Initiation* (S05E14), *The Big Bang Theory*, 2012. Screenshot by author.

Cave et al. (2018, 9) argue that depictions of AI in Western media “tend to be either exaggeratedly optimistic about what the technology might achieve, or melodramatically pessimistic.” This dichotomy offers representations of technology as a whole or, in part, leans either toward the utopian or dystopian depending on its ability to advance or threaten humanity (Rutsky 1991, 2). On the one pole, there are hopes for AI to solve human problems such as ageing and disease, work, and loneliness (Cave et al. 2018, 9). On the other, there are fears that AI could make humans obsolete, alienated, and lose their humanity (Cave et al. 2018, 9). Dystopian narratives involving AI are fuelled by the possibility that scientific ambition could result in an evil AI, or machine rebellion and failure (Di Minico 2017, 69). Di Minico (2017, 69) further argues that:

Animated by different impulses and reasons (desire of progress, manias of magnitude, scientific curiosity, and so on), humans bring into being majestic and powerful creatures, but, sometimes, their creations become deadly menaces that threaten both the protagonists and/or the entire humanity.

Consequently, Minsoo Kang (2011, 307) suggests that anxieties about the consequences of creating intelligent machines in the human image fall into three possible endings: “inevitable conflict, equivalence through sentience, and cybernetic emergence.” In other words, humans could end up at war with machines, become fused with machines, or be considered equal to

and peacefully co-exist with machines. Di Minico (2017, 68) notes that when dystopian fiction first gained popularity in the nineteenth century, it often focused on the machinic nightmare. The Industrial Revolution contributed to the fears of the social impact offered by the progress of science and technology (Di Minico 2017, 68). This is a trend that has continued well into the twenty-first century. Of particular importance to this research, Cave et al. (2018, 15) note that representations of AI in contemporary narratives reinforce stereotypes,<sup>21</sup> which can be reflected in how accurate technologies are constructed. Pop culture depictions of female AIs echo anxieties about how increasingly popularising AI machines could impact humanity (Costa and Ribas 2019, 180).

### **3.2.1      *The Female Automaton***

Julie Wosk (2015, 34) states that the idea of the self-moving figures known as automata has been around since ancient times. In dreaming of the future, creators of automata are bound by the cultural prejudices of the time in which they are produced (Özkent 2022, 2). Thus, they reflect the normative social and historical knowledge of the time (Özkent 2022, 2). In eighteenth-century Europe, both mechanics and the public expressed interest in automata that could walk, talk, and play instruments (Huysen 1986, 69). Eighteenth-century European artisans began to create female automata, but interest in these mechanised female simulacra gained popularity in the nineteenth century (Wosk 2015, 38). The Industrial Age allowed for the production of mechanical dolls to be more lifelike and more widely available (Wosk 2015, 38). Automata of this time represented women in familiar roles, such as mothers, seamstresses, and upper-class fashionistas (Wosk 2015, 39). There were also automata that depicted exotic women for entertainment (Wosk 2015, 39). Both men and women of the nineteenth century found interest in these automata, though for different reasons. The automata not only embodied men's fantasies of the ideal woman, but also were a mechanical innovation marker (Wosk 2015, 49). Because inventors tended to be men, the technical and mechanical intricacies of dolls that could imitate walking and talking humans inspired mostly men's curiosity (Wosk 2015, 50). Girls and young women found interest in these automata as toys, and beautiful, feminine creatures to emulate (Wosk 2015, 50). Figure 3.3, for example, is a photograph of a well-dressed and -groomed female automaton playing the piano. She is representative of the accepted appearance of European women of the time.

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<sup>21</sup> These stereotypes are not confined to gender, and usually also encompass race and class (Cave et al. 2018, 15).



Figure 3.3: Lady Musician, clockwork automaton created by Pierre and Henri-Louis Jaquet-Droz, 1773. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Neuchâtel. (Wosk 2015).



Figure 3.4: A male student dances with a female robot at a factory of Nomura Unison robotic venture company, Chino Japan, 2005. (Wosk 2015).

Figure 3.4 is a still from a project entitled *Partner Ballroom Dance Robot -PBDR-* (Kosuge et al. 2008), in which the researchers set out to create a robot that could form the female partner in a ballroom dance. The aesthetics of the robot are based on the assumption that a dance consists of a male dancer and a female dancer (Kosuge et al. 2008, 75). The researchers cite the design of the PBDR as necessary for positive human-robot interactions, with a pretty face and slender figure (Kosuge et al. 2008, 76). Her femininity is emphasised by the bright and glossy pink colour in which her entire body is fashioned. Though created centuries apart, similarities between the automata in Figures 3.3 and 3.4 are easily drawn. Both machine-women indicate a certain assumption about the representation of femininity, based on softness, curves, and meekness.

### 3.2.2 *Science fiction and artificial women*

Despite the polarity of opinions on the intelligent machine's potential impact on society, films and television shows that explore humans and machines, both as remarkable dreams and

dreadful nightmares, continue to be produced and consumed *en masse* (Kang 2011, 309). Additionally, regardless of warnings from within their own fields, scientists and engineers work toward building the perfect human simulacrum and sentient AI (Kang 2011, 309). Accordingly, Kang (2011, 309) states that it is an “undeniable fact” that the automaton is, and will continue to be, a topical idea of the cybernetic age. She notes, “we still find ourselves dreaming the millennia-long dream of sublime and uncanny<sup>22</sup> living machines” (Kang 2011, 309).

As previously stated, gendered intelligent machines are commonly portrayed in cinema (Yee 2017, 86) and in various other forms of media. This is not confined to the science fiction genre. For example, in reality television, one of the competitors of Season 12 of *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* (2020) acted out a caricature of a robot character in a comedy challenge (Figure 3.5). The character is based on Sophia, a real, lifelike robot made by Hanson Robotics in China. In new media, comedy duo TMG released a song and music video on YouTube entitled *Sofia* (2020), also based on the appeal of the female robot (Figure 3.6). Thus, the idea of the female robot permeates popular culture in myriad ways, indicating how extensive the interest in the subject of the machine-woman is.



Figure 3.5: Gigi Goode as Maria the Robot, *Snatch Game* (S12E06), *Ru Paul’s Drag Race*, 2020. Screenshot by author.

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<sup>22</sup> The uncanny, often referred to as the “uncanny valley,” refers to the unsettling moment when an observer realises that an artificial human is not real. This can cause feelings of shock and horror (Wosk 2015, 56).



Figure 3.6: Still from the *Sofia* music video, TMG, 2020. Screenshot by author.

Additionally, bodies are a medium onto which accepted cultural meanings can be inscribed (Di Minico 2017, 70). This is not limited to fictional narratives and has instead been demonstrated in various historical global events, including wars, terrorism, propaganda, racism, and homophobia, to name a few (Di Minico 2017, 70). Dystopian SF often follows suit, displaying bodies as central to the plot, reflecting particular ideas about power and social structures (Di Minico 2017, 70). A notable consequence of the anthropomorphisation of AI is that they usually reflect gendered characteristics (Costa and Ribas 2019, 172).<sup>23</sup> These tend to be stereotypical and exaggerated (Yee 2017, 86). Female AIs tend to be hyper-sexualised and exist in male-dominated spaces (Yee 2017, 86). In Figure 3.7, *The Terminator* (Cameron 1984) is depicted as muscular, unfeeling, and aggressive. He has a stern facial expression and a weapon in his hand, indicating the view of masculinity as tough and combative. In contrast, Figure 3.8 is the poster for *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015), in which the main character's artificial body is clearly coded as feminine. Her pose shows both her inner mechanisms, and the curves of her female-modelled body. Whereas Figure 3.7 offers a portrait view of the cyborg character, Figure 3.8 purposefully includes most of the character's body. This indicates the importance of the femininity of the character, while also giving the audience a female body at which to gaze.

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<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that fictional narratives do also portray AI in ways that are not embodied. R2D2 in *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977), for example, is a cylindrical robot with a domed top and three legs, without any speech capabilities.





Figure 3.7: Theatrical release poster for *The Terminator* (Cameron 1984).

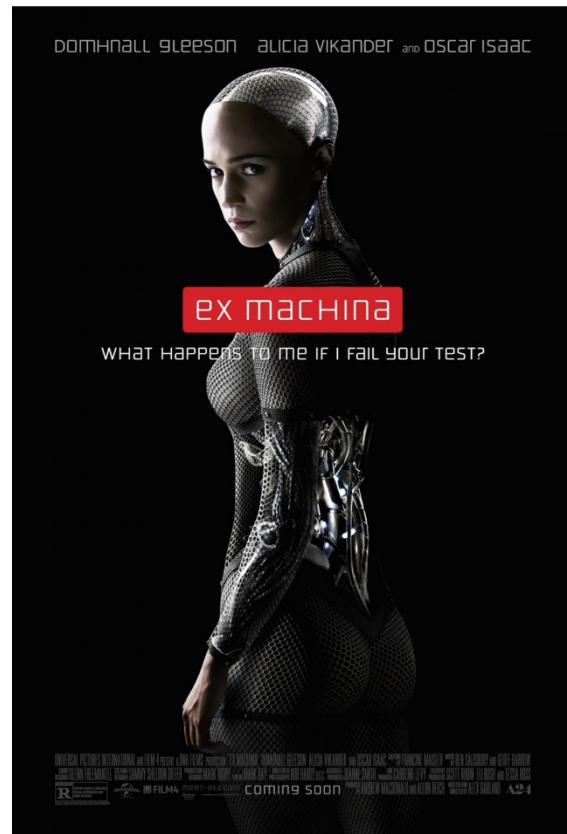


Figure 3.8: Theatrical release poster for *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015).

As has been argued throughout, the perception of women,<sup>24</sup> both historically and in fictional narratives, is often paradoxical. On the one hand, women are portrayed as submissive wives and mothers who embody compassion, sexual passivity or virginity, and virtue (Di Minico 2017, 77). On the other hand, women have also been shown as sexual, independent, and unpredictable, with the potential to jeopardise male authority (Di Minico 2017, 77). The SF genre explores similarly conflicting archetypes in relation to science and technology. The dualistic nature of the woman as either virgin-mother or prostitute-vamp is cast onto technology – it can be either helpful and obedient, or inherently threatening and lawless (Di Minico 2017, 77). The normative human is based on the male form, thus rendering the female body as other (Chang 2020, 3). Along similar lines, the monster is inherently othered, thus reinforcing ideas that contradict it (Chang 2020, 3). As a result, the female body is culturally coded as monstrous. Additionally, though technology is a fundamental part of contemporary human life, it can also be considered intrusive and dangerous at times (Di Minico 2017, 77). Di Minico (2017, 77-78)

<sup>24</sup> When referring to “women,” I am referring to Western women. I do not use the term as exhaustive of all women globally because all women are generally not included in the ideas being discussed. Women that are presented differently from this norm are the other of the other, which requires more in-depth analysis.

therefore identifies that in light of these dualities, the perception of women, and science and technology by men and the human race respectively, results in three contrasting feelings: fear, desire, and the will to exploit and dominate (Figure 3.9).

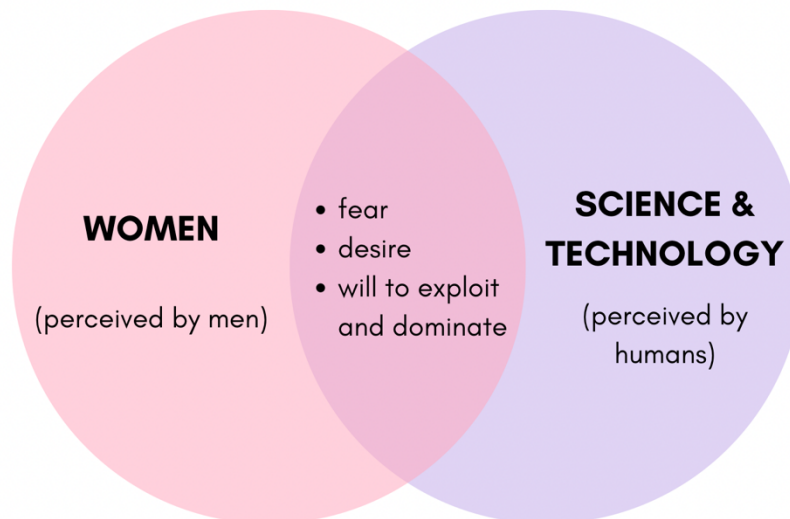


Figure 3.9: Where the perception of women and technology intercepts, based on Di Minico's (2017) analysis of attitudes towards both groups. Illustration by author.

SF narratives have frequently explored the relationship between male creators and female machines (Di Minico 2017, 77). Significantly, this is indicative of the need to control both femininity and technology (Di Minico 2017, 77). The element of control is integral in SF narratives that explore female automata (Wosk 2015, 100). In particular, men are shown as preferring artificial women because they can easily be controlled in the form of programming and can also be switched off (Wosk 2015, 100). This eliminates the anxiety that comes with the unpredictability of real women (Wosk 2015, 101). If technology and women can be controlled, they are admirable assets. However, if they threaten to escape mechanisms of control, they become a threat (Di Minico 2017, 77). This is then illustrated in the narrative as a horrific danger (Di Minico 2017, 77). Machines in this context exemplify chaos and destruction, and this is further reinforced by feminine presentation (Huysen 1986, 72). Both woman and machine represent the other that threatens male authority and thus must either be controlled or destroyed (Huysen 1986, 72).



Pérez (2020, 325) argues that there is an “ancient” male yearning to possess a submissive and docile female body that is always available without resistance. Artificial women have historically been depicted as belonging to two distinctive categories: the perfectly obedient wife, or the promiscuous and dangerous doll (Pérez 2020, 326). Characters in the second category are punished for their supposed crimes, even when they are designed to fulfil the purpose for which they are penalised (Pérez 2020, 326). Consequently, Pérez (2020, 326) states that “[w]omen, even more so if they are artificial, must be tamed, or they cannot be allowed to exist.” The common denominator between male desire and fear of machine-women is control (Yee 2017, 87). Control and domination are the solutions to overcoming otherness (Yee 2017, 87). Pérez (2020, 328) argues:

The artificially created being is the specular projection of ourselves and, therefore, a personification of the other. The humanoid narrative has been rendered from a set of motifs that fill its imaginary ad nauseam: the creator yearns to give birth/produce a creature as human as possible and as soon as that humanity is reached, the creation is rejected and abhorred. This process questions the nature of humanity and often exposes our lack of it, which we can only see by looking into the mirror of the other. On occasion, the creation might turn to the creator in search for existential answers. We want these creatures to be as similar to us as possible, but when they become too alike, they suddenly turn into a threat.

This paradox speaks to the vanity of humanism: we use intelligence to define and advance our species’ success, and simultaneously mistrust an intelligence that can parallel or surpass our own (Pérez 2020, 328). We also innately reject that which imitates the human (Pérez 2020, 328), so that AIs that are modelled after our own species are condemned to being treated with resentment, regardless of how near or far they are to mimesis.<sup>25</sup> Despite this, it has become a popular narrative theme in the SF genre.

Of particular importance to this research, Yee (2017, 86) states that “the mechanisation of women has become a fetish, a new branch of voyeuristic gaze.” Taking Mulvey’s (1989 [1975]) work a step further, Charles Soukup (2009) terms this “techno-scopophilia.” Techno-scopophilia refers to the semiotic codes of technology and sexuality merging, so that “the meanings associated with technological commodities and organic sexualised bodies become

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<sup>25</sup> This resentment is a result of the Uncanny. Despite striving for the creation of an artificial being as close to human as possible, when that humanity is achieved, the creation is rejected and abhorred (Pérez 2020, 328). Wosk (2015, 56) notes that if a mannequin were to move, it would be horrific. Conversely, if a simulated woman is believed to be real, and it is later discovered that she is artificial, there is a strong potential for anguish (Wosk 2015, 56). Accordingly, “imitation can easily produce uneasiness” (Wosk 2015, 56).

distorted” (Soukup 2009, 20). Techno-scopophilia is the effect of visual signs grounded in the mythologies of gender and technology (Soukup 2009, 20). Films merge sexuality and technology to create sexualised and fetishised cybernetic organisms (Soukup 2009, 24). The audience voyeuristically looks upon the sexualised image of technology and the sexualised image of the female body, “in the form of a single ‘object’” (Soukup 2009, 28). The convergence of scopophilic codes and technology does not bridge a large ideological gap, as both are intrinsically about power and control, namely mastery and submission (Soukup 2009, 29). In other words, for some viewers it is a smooth shift from the scopophilic gaze of the sexualised body to that of technology, as both are viewed through the lens of power. In creating a woman who is also a machine, filmmakers streamline this process. As a consequence, the sexualised woman as machine is a prevailing convention on screen (Soukup 2009, 30).

### 3.3 Dream Machine

In Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), Maria the robot is one of the first and most influential representations of robot characters in cinema (Byrne 2003, 13). The narrative follows Frederson, the son of Freder, as he becomes enthralled with Maria. The embodiment of technology in the doubling of Maria’s image provides important insight into the social and ideological basis of the film (Huysen 1986, 66). Frederson learns of how the workers are enslaved and wishes to join Maria’s cause of liberating them. Rotwang, the scientist, and Freder find out that Maria is a revolutionary by secretly witnessing her give a speech to the workers underground. She states that the separate entities of the brain and the hands need a mediator, and this is the heart. The head/brain is the power that oversees the workers, the hands are the workers. Rotwang and Freder decide to make a robot in Maria’s image to deceive the workers into sabotaging their own revolution. However, Rotwang has a plan of his own, seeking to destroy both Maria and Freder. Narratives about simulated women tend to end with the machine being destroyed or “killed,” becoming a collection of parts (Wosk 2015, 112). These ease anxieties caused by an out-of-control technology in the central story, thereby showing that human intelligence is superior to artificial intelligence. In accordance with this, by the end of the film, the false Maria is burned at the stake, turning her back into a robot without identity.

*Metropolis* is a SF narrative with allegorical overtones. It is set 99 years in the future from when it was made, thus having a futuristic visual expression (Byrne 2003, 3). Technology in the film forms a large part of the imagery and narrative. The opening scenes show close-ups of various types of machinery in motion, as well as tall and robust buildings. The machines of

*Metropolis* work in rhythm throughout the film and the importance of technology is further embodied by the female robot - Maria (Huysen 1986, 67). As previously stated, the representation of women in SF demonstrates the superiority of men in their connection to science and the inferiority of women in their connection to the mechanical body. Artificial women on screen are often custom-made assemblages of parts (Wosk 2015, 73). The artificial woman is built from the inside out (Huysen 1986, 75). In *Metropolis*, the robot is first shown as a mechanical robot with a metal outward appearance (Figure 3.10). The human-like and overtly feminine features, especially apparent through her make-up, are added onto the robot to create the false Maria (Figure 3.11). This presents a fragmented woman who has distinct inner and outer components. In Figures 3.10 and 3.11, Rotwang transforms the previously asexual robot into the false Maria, turning her into the prostitute-vamp (Huysen 1986, 74). She, therefore, embodies the female sexuality that represents danger and chaos, both of which were absent in the obedient robot prior to its transformation (Huysen 1986, 74). While both the vamp and the faceless robot are initially subservient to their male masters, they represent a threat to the social fabric of the city which must be eradicated before the (male) order can be restored (Huysen 1986, 74). The construction and destruction of the woman are intimately linked (Huysen 1986, 75). Therefore, woman's fragmentation is further represented in the destruction of the false Maria. In a reversal of her creation, the outer features are burned away, and the metallic robot is revealed (Huysen 1986, 75). Thus, she is fragmented. Further, this construction and destruction are driven by men, thereby denying the woman of any agency or identity, and rather securing her as an object of male projection and manipulation (Huysen 1986, 75).



Figure 3.10: The machine during the transformation, *Metropolis*, 1927.  
Screenshot by author.

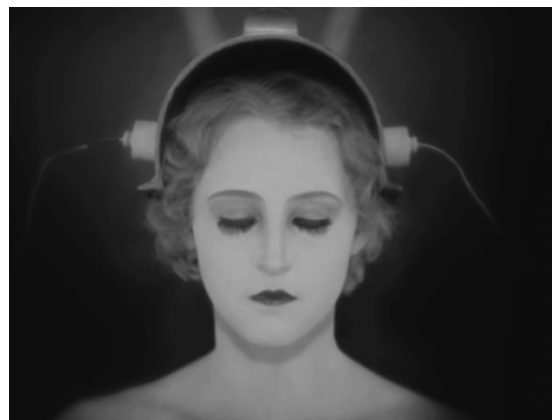


Figure 3.11: The false Maria after the transformation, *Metropolis*, 1927.  
Screenshot by author.



*Metropolis* depicts the otherness of the woman in two notions of femininity – the virgin and the vamp (Huysen 1986, 72). Both the virgin and the vamp revolve around sexuality. The male world is threatened in both forms of femininity (Huysen 1986, 72). First, the real Maria poses a threat to Frederson, as she preaches the importance of the heart, and thus emotion and nurturing, over rationality and technology (Huysen 1986, 72). She is introduced accordingly, surrounded by children, suggesting motherly qualities (Figure 3.12). She leads Freder to the realities of the working class and preaches to the workers in the catacombs under the city (Huysen 1986, 73). The significance of this setting is that prior to being led there by Rotwang, Frederson was unaware of the catacombs. Therefore, the cracks in his control of the city show in multiple ways. Maria represents this loss of control, thus threatening the Master of Metropolis (Frederson) (Huysen 1986, 72). Of note, Maria preaches peace, not revolt, in her speeches, but this remains a threat to Frederson. He wishes to disrupt the influence Maria has on the workers (Huysen 1986, 73). The threat is his fear of affection and emotion that she inspires. These qualities are embodied in women and particularly in Maria. Thus, it is not the threat of resistance that he fears, but the threat of femininity. This is what prompts Frederson to instruct Rotwang to make the *Maschinenmensch* in Maria's likeness.

As her name indicates, the real Maria is meant to echo the mother of Christ (Byrne 2003, 10), thus embodying the virgin mother archetype. This is paralleled in a myriad of ways visually. In the introduction to the character (Figure 3.12) Maria is surrounded by children. The focus is clearly placed on her face with a vignette that emphasises her centrality to the image and story. There is also a lightness to her hair which imitates a holy presence. She embodies stereotypically feminine attributes, such as her posture, movements, and demeanour, indicating that she is as caring as a mother would be (Byrne 2003, 11). This is also significant because, in this scene, she is interrupting a seductress tempting Freder, distracting him and causing him to consider the perspective that sets the events of the film in motion. Additionally, Maria is clearly coded as a love interest for Freder. When he first sees her, he is chasing a woman around a fountain and almost kisses her before becoming enamoured with Maria's presence. The framing of her entrance is also hazy and becomes further focused with the vignette that highlights her as the central figure of interest. This indicates that Maria has "instantaneously become an object of desire" (Huysen 1986, 78).



Figure 3.12: The introduction to (real) Maria, *Metropolis*, 1927. Screenshot by author.

The religious imagery<sup>26</sup> and purity is also visually echoed when she gives a speech to the workers. In Figure 3.13, she stands with her arms extended in front of a candle-filled altar. Her modest clothing and draped shawl are further reminiscent of historical religious imagery. Additionally, her eyes are raised to the sky. In comparison to Rubens's *Assumption of the Virgin Mary* (Figure 3.14), Maria is similarly depicted with light surrounding her head, her eyes and arms raised, and draped fabric falling from her arms. This scene also includes the workers of the city bowing down to Maria in a similar way to those in Rubens's interpretation of the Assumption of Mary.<sup>27</sup> Chang (2020, 4) states that the virgin-mother archetype is idolised as the standard to which all women should conform, and the prostitute-vamp is used to subdue women into striving to be the virgin-mother. However, the virgin-mother is an unattainable standard, thus rendering "all women" as monstrous (Chang 2020, 4).

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<sup>26</sup> There are other readings of the Christian symbolism in the narrative and imagery, but it is beyond the scope of this research. Further studies on the class divide and religious allegory have been conducted elsewhere.

<sup>27</sup> The Assumption of Mary is official dogma of the Catholic church (Barouxis 2019). It refers to the belief that when Mary died, she was assumed into heaven (Rausch 1982, 232), instead of her body undergoing physical decay upon death (Barouxis 2019). Belief in the Assumption coincides with Immaculate Conception - the belief that Mary was born without sin, was incorruptible during her life, and was thus incorruptible after her death (Sacksteder 2004, 23). Because of the recurrent representations of the Assumption Mary, as far back as the sixth and seventh centuries, she was seen to have taken on more characteristics of her son, therefore reflecting her place as a fundamental symbol for the Catholic church (Sacksteder 2004, 23). In art, the Assumption of Mary is usually depicted as Mary rising from earth with her arms raised in prayer, surrounded by the twelve Apostles, including Paul (Kateusz 2015, 283). Most prominent periods of time in which many works of the Assumption were produced include the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Sacksteder 2004, 23). Among a myriad of artists, Titian, Botticini, and Dürer are some of the most well-known Renaissance artists to create a work based on the Assumption of Mary.



Figure 3.13: The real Maria speaks to the workers, *Metropolis*, 1927. Screenshot by author.



Figure 3.14: Peter Paul Rubens, *Assumption of the Virgin Mary*, c. 1637. Oil on canvas, 501 cm x 351 cm. Garden Palace, Liechtenstein.

Second, the false Maria is the wicked temptress whose existence threatens those living in the city. She embodies the dangerous allure of the woman (Byrne 2003, 11). She captivates the bourgeois men with her seductive dance in very little clothing (Figure 3.15). In this scene where the false Maria is presented to a crowd of men in a striptease, Rotwang's goal is to prove the



seamlessness of the image of Maria so that the men cannot tell that she is a robot (Huysen 1986, 74). In the scene, the male guests are enamoured by the false Maria. This is apparent in a series of shots which emphasise the importance of the gaze of the men watching her dance (Huysen 1986, 74). Importantly, Huysen (1986, 74) states that this scene is vital in illustrating how “the male gaze actually constitutes the female body on the screen.” This represents a second phase in the false Maria’s creation. The first is the realisation of her body in the image of Maria. The second is the constitution of her body as an object of male vision and desire. Figure 3.16 emphasises the centrality of the male look to the reception of Maria – both within the narrative and on the screen. The eyes of the male characters, the camera, and the audience all direct their gaze to the woman, indicating the visual subordination of the woman, and, importantly, determining how women ought to be looked at (Stümer 2021, 8). Also of note, the eye of the camera occupies the position of the men in the film, thus placing the spectator in the same male position (Huysen 1986, 74). Thus, vision becomes male vision (Huysen 1986, 75). The woman on screen is a projection of the male gaze, which is the gaze of the camera. Notably, the camera is another machine (Huysen 1986, 75).



Figure 3.15: False Maria during her dance, *Metropolis*, 1927. Screenshot by author.



Figure 3.16: A close-up of the male eyes on false Maria during her seductive dance, *Metropolis*, 1927. Screenshot by author.

Additionally, false Maria creates pitfalls for the workers by encouraging them to rebel against their masters, leading to a dangerous flood that damages their homes and endangers their children. Thus, the false Maria is a *femme fatale*. Her sexuality blinds the men in the city and leads them to their own destruction. The she-monster is prevalent in SF narratives, demonstrating fears of women's autonomy under a cultural and social system that insists on their compliance with governance (Chang 2020, 4). Thus, those women who resist control are considered deviant, dangerous, and monstrous (Chang 2020, 4). In Figure 3.17, Maria is the central figure among monsters, indicating that she herself may be considered monstrous.



Figure 3.17: False Maria among monsters during her performance, *Metropolis*, 1927. Screenshot by author.



Huysen (1986, 69) argues that the choice to make the *Maschinenmensch* in the image of a woman is significant because the realm of technology “has always been the world of men while woman has been considered to be outside of technology, part of nature...” *Metropolis* embodies the modernist fear and fascination with technology (Rutsky 1993, 6). The film explores how the angel/devil dichotomy is interrelated with the human/non-human dichotomy (Pérez 2020, 327). The false Maria represents the integration of sexuality and technology whose creation is a result of the fetishisation of an object replacing an organic whole (Rutsky 1993, 9). There is a parallel in the film between the threat posed by the vamp’s sexuality and the threat of technology. Both have the potential to disrupt order and to be destructive (Huysen 1986, 74). Thus, the false Maria represents the horror of female sexuality (Rutsky 1993, 9). Importantly, though false Maria is shown as an irrational and overly destructive force in the film, on the opposite end of the spectrum, the way Frederson runs the city is equally negatively depicted, the result of too much rationality and control (Rutsky 1993, 9). Thus, the film epitomises the simultaneous fetishisation and anxiety about modernity’s domination of technology over nature (Rutsky 1993, 13).

Deirdre Byrne (2003, 12) states that though this gendering of women in SF films is not restricted to the genre, it is typical of the genre. Importantly, this reflects the idea that such texts are not about women, including not women but images of women. These images reflect social expectations cast upon women (Russ 1995, 81). Therefore, such texts are rather “by and about men” (Russ 1995, 81). The film conveys the problematic point of view which positions both technology and women as created and existing to serve man’s needs (Huysen 1986, 72). The machine-woman is, at least partly, the result of the sexual desires of her male creator (Huysen 1986, 71). However, the desire to create reflects a more profound libidinal desire to create the Other, depriving it of its otherness (Huysen 1986, 71). The woman represents nature and so to mechanise her is to strip her of her “nature” (Huysen 1986, 71). Because of the woman’s ability to create life, she is distanced from the production of technology, which creates lifeless objects (Huysen 1986, 71). *Metropolis* clearly conveys that male domination is in danger (Huysen 1986, 71). In particular, it is the woman that endangers it. Both the real and false Maria threaten male control.

R. L. Rutsky (1993, 15) indicates an optimistic view of the way that gender is presented in the film, stating that both the masculine and feminine are represented as oppressive. While I agree that both poles are depicted as repressive, masculinity continues to prevail, not only in the

narrative, but also in the male gaze of both the characters and the audience. To imply that the film applies these critiques of the gender dichotomy equally is reductive and idealistic.

In contrast, Huyssen (1986, 69) criticises previous analysis of *Metropolis* which has dismissed the presence of the female *Maschinenmensch* as a product of the Oedipal complex. He states that the false Maria's presence does more than represent the threat of castration, which could have been achieved through alternative means (Huyssen 1986, 69). The Oedipal explanation also lacks clarity on the relationship between technology and female sexuality, and castration anxiety (Huyssen 1986, 69). Thus, the machine woman reflects a double male fear of technology and of women. Despite the substantial modifications and characters of this kind, Maria continues to be an influential referent on the topic of mechanised women on screen (Pérez 2020, 327).

### 3.4 What Makes Her Tick?

Similar to *Metropolis*, *Ex Machina*<sup>28</sup> examines how the human and machine are at odds with each other, exploring the conflictual space in which these two worlds exist (Di Minico 2017, 67). It delves into how male oppressive and authoritative processes affect women (Di Minico 2017, 71). Ava is an AI woman who is kept in a transparent prison by her creator, Nathan. She bonds with Caleb who Nathan selects to test her ability to pass as a truly artificially intelligent being. She manipulates Caleb into falling in love with her so that he will help her escape. With the help of Kyoko, another of Nathan's creations, she escapes her confinement and kills Nathan. She then leaves Caleb trapped in Nathan's fortress and goes out into the world.

Caleb is the key protagonist in the film, and the story is told to follow his journey in the narrative (Yee 2017, 92). Nathan's intention with inviting Caleb to his research facility is for Caleb to conduct the Turing Test on Ava. The Turing Test involves a human interacting with a computer; if they do not know they are interacting with a computer, then the test is passed (Musap 2018, 404). Yee (2017, 92) suggests that "the narrative forces the audience into viewing Ava as an object of study whose interiority and 'truth' must be revealed and tested through conversation and interrogation, conducted by men." Importantly, Nathan immediately

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<sup>28</sup> The title of the film indicates godly overtones by making reference to the Greek phrase *deus ex machina*, which means God from the machine (Jelača 2018, 391). However, Jelača (2018, 391) argues that God is instead replaced by the human-technology relationship, resulting in the incomplete phrase *ex machina*, meaning "from the machine."



reveals Ava's artificial body to Caleb, making it visually clear that he is interacting with a computer. When Caleb asks Nathan why he allows him to see Ava and if this would compromise the test, Nathan tells Caleb:

If I hid Ava from you so you just heard her voice, she would pass for human. The real test is to show you that she's a robot and then see if you still feel she has consciousness (Garland 2015).

This conversation indicates that Nathan invokes the question of gender identity as central to the AI's embodiment (Musap 2018, 404). Nathan implies that Ava's body lacks significant existence prior to its gendered inscription (Musap 2018, 405). Nathan tells Caleb that he programmed Ava to be heterosexual, so that she has a gendered body with an artificial vagina and heterosexual desire toward men (Musap 2018, 405). In constructing her this way, she upholds the premise that desire indicates gender, and inversely, gender indicates desire (Musap 2018, 405). Importantly, Nathan tells Caleb that she is also able to have sex. Their conversation about sexuality<sup>29</sup> is illuminating:

Caleb: Why did you give her sexuality? An AI doesn't need a gender. She could have been a grey box.

Nathan: Actually, I don't think that's true. Can you give an example of consciousness, at any level, human or animal, that exists without a sexual dimension?

Caleb: They have sexuality as an evolutionary, reproductive need.

Nathan: What imperative does a grey box have to interact with another grey box? Can consciousness exist without interaction? Anyway, sexuality is fun, man. If you're gonna exist, why not enjoy it? What... y-you wanna remove the chance of her falling in love and fucking? And an answer to your real question – you bet she can fuck.

Caleb: What?

Nathan: In between her legs there's an opening with a concentration of sensors. You engage them in the right way... creates a pleasure response. So, if you wanted to screw her, mechanically speaking, you could. And she'd enjoy it (Garland 2015).

Ferrando (2014, 9) states that to ease relations between robots and humans, roboticists apply features that have little function other than reception. Thus, gender is utilised as a tool for better

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<sup>29</sup> Sexuality in this context refers to the capacity to be sexually attracted to another person (Musap 2018, 405). Caleb uses the terms of "sexuality" and "gender" interchangeably.



interactions between human and machine (Ferrando 2014, 10). Being able to “give” gender implies not only that gender is a social construct without a biological basis, but also that the body is a passive medium onto which cultural significations can be projected (Musap 2018, 405). *Ex Machina* demonstrates how femininity is a tool of exerting male control. It is used in the pursuit of achieving humanness, for sexual gratification, and for asserting dominance (Musap 2018, 412).

In continuing their conversation about sexuality, Nathan identifies a parallel between Ava’s sexuality and that of Caleb, namely that it was “programmed” (Garland 2015):

Nathan: What’s your type of girl? You know what? Don’t even answer that. Let’s say it’s black chicks. Okay, that’s your thing. For the sake of argument, that’s your thing, okay? Why is that your thing? Because you did a detailed analysis of all racial types, and you cross-referenced that analysis with a points-based system? No! You’re just attracted to black chicks. A consequence of accumulated external stimuli, that you probably didn’t even register as they registered with you.

Caleb: Did you programme her to like me or not?

Nathan: I programmed her to be heterosexual, just like you were programmed to be heterosexual.

Caleb: Nobody programmed me to be straight.

Nathan: You decided to be straight? Please, of course you were programmed! By nature, or nurture, or both.

Nathan divulges a line of thinking similar to that of Freud’s in relation to the “programming” of humans. For Freud, the child’s mind is a *tabula rasa* - a blank slate (Duschinsky 2012, 510). This indicates that it is formless, waiting for ideas to be imposed upon it (Duschinsky 2012, 512). Nathan implies that it is not only Ava who could have been a grey box, but all humans too.

Further, Musap (2018, 411) argues that the AI machines in *Ex Machina* reinforce gender dynamics. The camera constantly surveils her, gliding along her body and encouraging the viewer to see her through Caleb’s point of view (Yee 2017, 89). Ava is not a character to be related to – she is a fetishised object that, like Caleb, we are invited to look at (Yee 2017, 89). When Ava is introduced for the first time, it is through Caleb’s eyes that she is portrayed. She enters the frame with only her silhouette visible, and although clearly mechanical, her body is also obviously coded as feminine with noticeable curves to indicate breasts and buttocks

(Figure 3.18). She is innocent and sweet in her first interaction with Caleb, expressing interest in him and the outside world.



Figure 3.18: Introduction to Ava, *Ex Machina*, 2015. Screenshot by author.

Despite not being given insight into Ava's true feelings toward Caleb, if she is capable of having feelings, it is apparent that she is aware that performing gender is crucial in the pursuit of escape (Musap 2018, 406). From the first session with Caleb, Ava presents herself as child-like and innocent, allowing Caleb to feel that he has control in the situation, and manipulating him into assuming they have a mentor-mentee relationship (Musap 2018, 406). As the sessions progress, Ava continues to use her femininity to encourage Caleb's affection. For example, in their third session, Ava covers the majority of her mechanical parts with a floral dress, stockings, and a wig. Yee (2017, 90) describes this as covering her "monstrous" body with a virginal veil. She behaves in a coy way, showing nerves and anxiety about how Caleb might feel when he sees her in this way. Figure 3.19 shows her nervously peering around the corner before revealing herself in her outfit. This places the audience in a similar position to Caleb – one that trusts Ava's naïveté.



Figure 3.19: Ava prepares to show Caleb her clothed body, *Ex Machina*, 2015.  
Screenshot by author.

Throughout the film, Nathan watches Ava through multiple cameras in her area of confinement. Thus, like many women on screen before her, Ava is constantly surveilled. Moreover, she is aware of this surveillance. She not only visually shows her awareness of this, but also tells Caleb, who discovers that he also has access to the camera feed in his bedroom:

Sometimes at night, I'm wondering if you're watching me on the cameras, and I hope that you are (Garland 2015).

Just as Caleb does not keep his eyes closed when Ava asks, the audience watches Ava when she dresses and undresses. Thus, within this scene and throughout the film, the “woman performs within the narrative; the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude” (Mulvey 1989 [1975], 19). In a subsequent scene, Ava plays on Caleb’s voyeurism. When she seductively removes her stockings (Figure 3.20), Ava is positioned in the centre of the frame with light from the window behind her emphasising her silhouette (Yee 2017, 90). The shot ends with her looking directly at the camera after removing her clothing. In so doing, it is apparent that she is both aware of and making use of her prescribed femininity (Musap 2018, 407). Ava must employ her “feminine” attributes, namely manipulation, empathy, and sexuality, to empower herself (Miller, Atherton, and Heatherington 2021, 9). She employs her femininity through acts for maximum impact of her “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Thus, it is a tool that she uses for her escape. There is a double play at hand, where Ava embodies the traits of an untrustworthy woman, a *femme fatale*, viewed through a patriarchal lens while also liberating herself. One might ask how the representation of Ava may be liberating if she is ascribed attributes which position femininity negatively. Because Ava behaves exactly as Nathan has programmed her, seeking



escape, she fulfils the role expected of a machine-woman. However, by overcoming his strict control, which he believes is not possible, she “over compl[ies]” (du Preez 2009, 27) with expected behaviours. Thus, “the body is not only a surface written upon, but the body also writes actively” (du Preez 2009, 33).



Figure 3.20: Caleb watches the camera feed as Ava removes her clothing, *Ex Machina*, 2015. Screenshot by author.

Nathan, too, uses Ava’s femininity as a tool. He places her within the male/female binary so that Caleb will fall in love with her (Musap 2018, 407). In other words, Ava does not necessarily need a gender to function, but she needs one in her interactions with Caleb because he exists in a world that conforms to that gender binary. Caleb assumes, and hopes, that Ava operates within the system of heterosexual love that he does, and this is confirmed when Nathan informs him that she is capable of experiencing sexual pleasure. This blinds him to any subversive intentions she has.

Other than at the very end, the film rarely shows the machine-women not in relation to the male characters. For example, in Figure 3.21, Ava may be shown lying down alone, but it is a projection onto Caleb’s wall that he (and the audience) is observing. He is vaguely visible on the left side of the frame before moving onto a close-up of his neck as he slowly swallows, indicating his arousal. When Caleb watches Ava lying down, she is still and silent. He is free to project his fantasies onto her, and she is aware of this. As the scene goes on, she turns her head to look directly at the camera (Figure 3.22). Thus, similar to Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), in *Ex Machina*, “the eye of the camera always places the spectator in a position occupied by the men in the film” (Huyssen 1986, 74-75). In other words, it is difficult to understand Ava’s

character when she is not being tested or using her sexuality to escape. Along this line of thought, Özkent (2022, 9) declares that “the camera abuses the female body.”



Figure 3.21: Caleb watches Ava in his bedroom, *Ex Machina*, 2015. Screenshot by author.

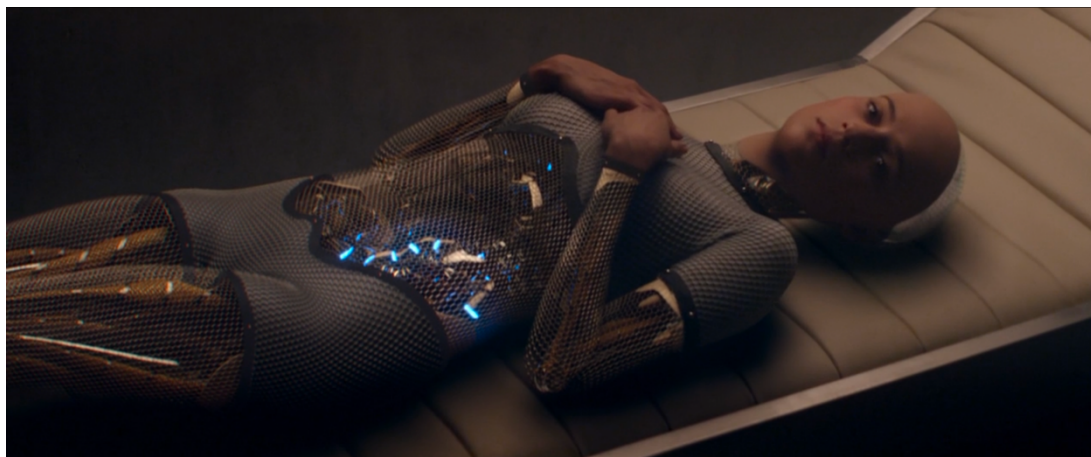


Figure 3.22: Ava looks directly at the camera watching her, *Ex Machina*, 2015. Screenshot by author.

Nathan has no genuine emotional attachment to his creations (Di Minico 2017, 74). Perhaps Nathan is unattached to Ava because he knows that he will make a new and improved model (Musap 2018, 408). However, he states that although he will download and format her mind, her body will survive, because “Ava’s body is a good one” (Garland 2015). To Nathan, then, the body does not really matter.<sup>30</sup> It can be made, replaced, paused, and so on at the maker’s

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<sup>30</sup> Embodiment is typically associated with women’s bodies (du Preez 2009, xii). The woman’s body is a contested topic in feminist literature. Feminists who denounce an essential quality of femaleness risk confining women to being “animalised embodied beings,” as patriarchy has done (du Preez 2009, xxii). The female body is not problematic but patriarchal structures position it as such. Thus, denying the female body only serves to further that ideology. The body is *matter* and the body matters (Hoogland 2002, 214).



will. In other words, the female body is disposable. It also indicates the significant value that aesthetics, and specifically beauty, have. Nathan serves as Pygmalion.<sup>31</sup> In the story, Pygmalion is a sculptor who decries the morals of the local women, instead carving his own woman out of ivory (James 2013, 1). The statue is so lifelike and beautiful that he begins to think she is real and gives her gifts in the hopes that she will respond (James 2013, 1). He falls in love with the simulacrum, for she is aesthetically superior to a real woman (Wosk 2015, 9). He asks the goddess of love, Aphrodite, to transform the statue into a real person. Aphrodite feels sorry for him and grants his request (Aksit and Favaro 2019, 170). Pygmalion names the woman Galatea, and the pair get married and have children (Aksit and Favaro 2019, 170). The Pygmalion myth has persisted in cultural imagery, revealing an enduring male fascination with creating an ideal woman – “a beautiful creature he lovingly clothes and adorns, a woman who is pliant and compliant and answers all his needs, an artificial female that is a superior substitute for the real thing” (Wosk 2015, 9). The ideal female figure is shaped both by men’s fantasies and men’s beliefs about “inherent” traits, roles, and behaviour of women (Wosk 2015, 10).

Accordingly, Nathan shapes and animates Ava, along with his other iterations of robot women. Like Pygmalion, Nathan prefers his android women to real women because he is in control of how they look and their embedded functions. However, unlike Pygmalion, Nathan feels no genuine attachment to his creations (Di Minico 2017, 74). Instead, Nathan is in love with the idealisation of his own work, as well as the admiration from others that it brings. Di Minico (2017, 74) argues that Nathan thus also embodies Narcissus, who falls in love with his own reflection. This results in an arrogance about his social status. He sees himself as divine-like. Caleb expresses admiration for Nathan’s work, saying that his AI project is “not the history of man. It’s the history of Gods” (Garland 2015). Nathan later twists Caleb’s words, saying:

You know, I wrote down that other line you came up with. The one about how if I’ve invented a machine with consciousness, I’m not a man, I’m God (Garland 2015).

This indicates how thrilled he is to be thought of as more than a man. It is not insignificant that he uses the term “man” here instead of “human” – this is a story for and about men. In recognising himself as a god, Nathan confirms his right to mould and control his creations at his will. Di Minico (2017, 79) describes Nathan’s ideas as “megalomaniac,” further

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<sup>31</sup> The Pygmalion myth refers to the story told by ancient Roman poet, Ovid (Wosk 2015, 9).

distinguishing the created woman from the god-like man. From this perspective, Nathan is the subject and Ava is the other of that. Because Nathan sees himself as a powerful god, he is unable to accept the autonomy of the artificial (Aksit and Favaro 2019, 174).

The film follows the blueprint for SF narratives dealing with artificial women: white, well-educated, heterosexual men build a female automaton in the pursuit of personal and professional gain (Musap 2018, 411). *Ex Machina* treats women's bodies as male property (Di Minico 2017, 75). Nathan sees his creations as expendable and exploitable for his personal gain (Di Minico 2017, 75). Nathan keeps the bodies of his previous robot models as trophies in his closet, which Di Minico (2017, 75) describes as material evidence of his male dominance and power. Both Ava and Kyoko are constructed by and for men, with nothing about them belonging only to them (Musap 2018, 409).

Similar to Huyssen's (1986) ideas about Maria in *Metropolis*, the machine-women in *Ex Machina* represent the virgin/vamp dichotomy. Kyoko, Nathan's personal servant, represents the virgin. She is constructed entirely to cater to Nathan's needs, including cooking, cleaning, and presumably though it is not shown, sex. In this way, Kyoko represents the stereotype of a good wife. She is also coded as the submissive virgin, only ever wearing a plain white dress. In one scene (Figure 3.23), Kyoko lies naked on Nathan's bed. Caleb discovers the old models of machines, and Kyoko shows him that she, too, is artificial by peeling back the skin on her torso (Figure 3.24). The image is reminiscent of decades of previous representations of the male scientist/female robot, such as the 1950s operation in Figure 3.25. Though at the beginning of the scene, she is exposed in her nudity, she further exposes herself, uncovering the "truth" about her being (Yee 2017, 88). Thus, she peels back the mask of femininity to reveal something monstrous underneath. This feeling of monstrosity is echoed by Caleb having an anxious flashback of the mechanical structure under her skin.



Figure 3.23: Kyoko lies naked on Nathan's bed, *Ex Machina*, 2015. Screenshot by author.



Figure 3.24: Kyoko reveals to Caleb that she is a robot, *Ex Machina*, 2015. Screenshot by author.

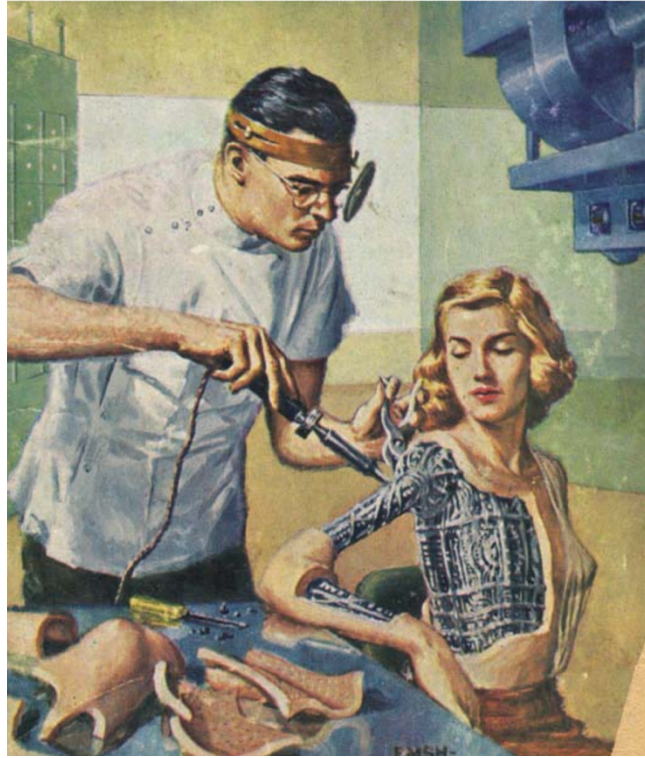


Figure 3.25: A male scientist operates on a female robot, illustration by Edmund Alexander Emshwiller in *Galaxy Science Fiction* magazine, 1954. (Wosk 2015).

In many ways, Ava is representative of frequently explored tropes in SF. In the first few sessions with Caleb, she embodies the virgin trope, but ultimately, she is a seductress posing as a damsel in distress, becoming a *femme fatale*. This is visually coded by the red lights that fill the building when she triggers power cuts in the hopes of talking with Caleb without Nathan watching and listening (Figure 3.26). Her tone and demeanour change from sweet and innocent to decisive and threatening. Additionally, Ava is visually constructed according to Caleb's pornographic search history. In other words, she is made to look like the women to whom he is attracted, functioning as a "visual projection of his sexual desires" (Musap 2018, 409). Like false Maria, she is shown as using this to deceive Caleb and to cause destruction, thus making her the vamp. She represents how technology can threaten human life. This threat is inextricably intertwined with femininity. Because very little insight is given into Ava's mind, the audience is only able to interpret her through the interactions she has with the men testing her (Yee 2017, 92). In the end, though Ava passes the Turing Test, there are no (hu)men left to validate this (Jelača 2018, 385). Jelača (2018, 395) states that "Ava's becoming feminine is coupled with the demise of men rather than with a reiteration of their dominance." Therefore,

while her escape is a triumph for the feminine robot, it reinforces how deadly both femininity and technology can be.



Figure 3.26: Ava triggers a power cut during a session with Caleb, *Ex Machina*, 2015. Screenshot by author.

In the end, despite escaping captivity, Ava is forever bound to the gendered body which has been imposed upon her by her (hu)man creator (Musap 2018, 411). Ava has agency when she begins to reform her body from the collection of discarded artificial bodies in Nathan's closet. In Figure 3.27, Ava assembles parts of the other robots onto her own body, covering her exposed machine body so that she appears more human. She takes a moment to look at her naked body, as does the audience. Her body is visible from multiple angles in one shot with the many mirrors in the room reflecting it back to her and to the camera. The audience is a voyeur, watching her create herself through the screen, just as Caleb does. The agency she enacts over how her body looks is restricted still to that which Nathan has created. While the narrative ends with Ava liberating herself from Nathan, she remains trapped within the male gaze of the camera, the male characters, and the audience (Yee 2017, 87). The film offers a topical perspective on the relationship between consciousness and technology, while also providing male viewers beautiful women at which to look (Yee 2017, 88).



Figure 3.27: Ava admires her new body in the mirrors of Nathan's bedroom, *Ex Machina*, 2015. Screenshot by author.

Nathan believes he is in complete control over the appearance and personality of his machine-women, for they are all women, choosing aesthetically appealing, thin, and young physical features for them to embody (Di Minico 2017, 73). Ava is trapped, not only in the room in which she resides, but also inside the mind and body<sup>32</sup> that Nathan has built for her (Di Minico 2017, 73). It is perhaps for this reason that it is shocking when she escapes by the end of the film. The assumption of the level of control that governs Ava reassures, and later disturbs, the viewer's sense of safety for the humans in the narrative. Similarly, Kyoko is programmed to be a maid, to entertain, and to please, without being able to interact verbally. Nathan treats her as subhuman. He speaks to her like an objectified slave, without mercy or compassion (Di Minico 2017, 74). The level of control that Nathan has is apparent throughout the film, but in particular in Figure 3.28. Nathan shows Caleb a part of his research facility that has various components of the robot bodies, including the artificial brain component that he uses in his robots. In Figure 3.28, Caleb holds the artificial brain while discussing it with Nathan. This indicates how much control these two men have over the artificial bodies. In this image, there are various fragments of artificial bodies scattered around the room, emphasising Nathan's level of control over every aspect of the construction of his AIs. The focus on the dissection and fragmentation of parts of the robot women's bodies indicates how they are contained and controlled as objects of consumption (Miller, Atherton, and Heatherington 2021, 5). Additionally, including visuals of this nature indicate that with these female robots, "the gaze

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<sup>32</sup> This realisation makes one question if embodied human existence, too, can be considered a prison which cannot be escaped.



and objectification are often ‘justified’ with the reasoning that they *are* objects of ‘science,’ so they are *supposed* to be examined, fragmented, turned inside out” (Yee 2017, 92).



Figure 3.28: Nathan shows Caleb the AI’s brain, *Ex Machina*, 2015. Screenshot by author.

The film proposes that Ava has agency, and thus though her construction is largely patriarchal, she creates her own path. Nathan attempts to deny this agency before he realises Ava has escaped, telling Caleb:

Ava was a rat in a maze, and I gave her one way out. To escape, she’d have to use self-awareness, imagination, sexuality, empathy, and she did (Garland 2015).

Throughout the scene, Nathan is smug and condescending, still believing he has the upper hand. However, it is during this conversation that Nathan realises that he has lost control and Ava has escaped her confinement. In response, he punches Caleb for his role in aiding Ava’s escape. In ending the narrative with Ava’s decision to kill Nathan and imprison Caleb, the film proposes the idea that patriarchal control can be escaped. Ava uses the tools she has been given to escape. Thus, while she is constructed, she actively decides to construct her own story.

Despite this, the female robots in *Ex Machina* are constantly dressing and undressing for the male characters and audience (Yee 2017, 90). The film eroticises the female body, justifying this eroticisation through (patriarchal) scientific reasoning, while at the same time presenting it as threatening and other (Yee 2017, 91). The woman is the other of the man, and the machine is the other of the human (Pérez 2020, 330). Though she is not able to escape the male gaze, both on and off the screen, Ava exerts appropriation over her objectified, gendered body, empowering her to overcome both the masculine and human bodies that control her (Pérez

2020, 336). Ava “partially embodies the information-age paranoia about AIs and the end of male-centric humanity” (Jelača 2018, 397). The Pygmalion myth reflects a male fantasy. However, films like *Ex Machina* demonstrate that this fantasy is transforming in favour of women. By employing the machine-woman in this pursuit, it simultaneously disrupts a (hu)man-centred viewpoint. The film projects ongoing anxieties about gender, feminism, and subjectivity onto the artificial bodies of robots (Jelača 2018, 398). Pérez (2020, 336) notes that for the role of Ava, Alicia Vikander was nominated and won various awards in the best supporting actress category. She states that considering Ava as a secondary character in a film whose narrative and visual driving force is solely reliant on her “speaks eloquently about the perception of the artificial, the female character and the combination of the two” (Pérez 2020, 336).

### 3.5 Conclusion

In conducting an analysis of the representation of female robots on screen, it is clear that femininity is a medium through which expectations about the appearance and behaviour of women are reinforced. In particular, this is not only prevalent in fictional narratives, but also in real-life AI systems that are widely available. Additionally, a selected history of the female automaton illuminates that though there is a renewed interest in artificial women in the digital age, it is a fascination that had existed for a long time before AI systems were actually a possibility. Because of this, mechanised dolls have been a persistent area of interest in SF narratives.

In SF films, there tends to be a dichotomous representation of women. Maria in *Metropolis* is split into both of these stereotypes. The false Maria is starkly contrasted with the real Maria. The real Maria is the pure, self-sacrificing mother, while the false Maria represents a combination of male desires and fears. The duality of Maria embodies male desire and fear of women as the comforting maternal figure and the dangerous *femme fatale*. The doubling of Maria, the embodiment of technology in her image, and the relationship of Freder to women and machines provide important insight into the social and ideological basis of the film. The myth of the woman as either asexual virgin-mother or prostitute-vamp is projected onto the machine which is considered either neutral and obedient or as threatening and out of control. The film indicates an attitude of anxiety toward the inherent threatening and explosive sexuality of women, even the virgin. Both the real and the false Maria represent the disruption of male control in the narrative. By the end of the film, the witch, false Maria, is burned at the stake



and turns back into a lifeless metal body. This indicates that the machine has been purged of its sexuality and thus its destructive nature.

*Ex Machina*, on the other hand, reflects a shift in the way that artificial women are characterised on screen. Though both Ava and Kyoko continue to embody stereotypes and the virgin/vamp dichotomy, the outcome differs from that of Maria. Ava is not punished for her behaviour. Instead, Ava not only leads the story, but also outlives and evolves beyond her male on-screen partners. Despite this potentially liberating representation, the depiction of both Ava and Kyoko upholds the premise that female AIs in SF are almost always coded as heterosexual love objects with whom the male, human protagonists can form attachments. Thus, though the representation of artificial women on screen has not changed dramatically from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, there is nuance to be found in how such characters may be read.

Chapter 4 follows with an analysis of the representation of femininity in *Westworld*. It considers a posthuman environment in which the machines have the upper hand, and for whom the audience roots. It focuses on experiences typically associated with the feminine, such as trauma and the performance of hysteria, particularly as it is presented in Dolores. It thereafter ponders the possibility of autonomy and independence in the machine-woman.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### WHEN OBJECTS TALK BACK: ROGUE FEMININITY IN *WESTWORLD*

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You are the perfect instrument, the ideal partner, the way any tool partners with the hand that wields it.

- Robert Ford

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#### 4.1 Introduction

As has already been discussed, gender-specific embodiment of androids is not a new concept to explore in SF, with characters such as *Ex Machina*'s Ava, and *Metropolis*'s Maria becoming some of the most noteworthy and seductive robot-women. These depictions have typically painted a gloomy picture of what a future of human co-existence with technology may look like. However, in the twenty-first century, robots on screen are portrayed with sympathy and compassion (Ferrando 2015, 276). In SF texts where robots represent the other of humans, the narratives often expose that the real monsters are “not the ones produced on assembly lines, but rather the ones with beating hearts wrapped in human skin” (Mullen 2018, 1). Accordingly, from this more sensitive point of view, it is worthwhile to examine not only how the machine-woman is constructed as a woman and how she is placed within the patriarchal order, but also how she struggles against that. The nature of gender as a form of performativity or masquerade, rather than an inherent identity, is reworked in the android woman, highlighting the synthetic nature of femininity itself (Short 2005, 7). This chapter investigates the representation of femininity in one of *Westworld*'s (2016-2022) protagonists, Dolores. It begins by contextualising the first season's narrative before discussing how the series hybridises the SF and Western genres, and why this is significant. Following this, a discussion on the construction and role of the hosts frames the later exploration of Dolores as a machine-woman.

The first season of *Westworld* is a useful starting point. The series encourages viewers to sympathise with the androids, who are the primary focus of the series, rather than the humans (Jeffs and Blackwood 2016, 96). Questions about what it means to be both human and non-human overlap as core tenets of the show's philosophy (Jeffs and Blackwood 2016, 97; Goody and Mackay 2019, 10). Consequently, D'Addario (2018, 51) describes *Westworld* as “urgently relevant” within a broader culture that encourages accountability for misogyny and sexual

assault against women. Additionally, Alex Goody and Antonia Mackay (2019, 11) identify the series as an important cultural moment, stating:

*Westworld's* success is realised thanks to its play on a series of central motifs which harness our inherent yearning for, and ultimate fear for, the future conceived in our current age.

Further, investigating *Westworld* allows for the engagement with the foundational structures of SF, narrative television, posthuman philosophies, and technological futures (Goody and Mackay 2019, 18). In contrast to the sympathetic view of androids, *Westworld* offers a criticism of humans and the arrogance with which humans rule the world. Thus, while the Park<sup>33</sup> offers escapist fantasies, the show takes a critical view of human nature (Moll 2018, 22). This is echoed by various characters throughout the season, such as William when he says, “whoever designed this place, you get the feeling they don’t think very much of people” (Campbell 2016). Dr Robert Ford, one of the founders of the Park, confirms this, though in an earlier episode, discussing his co-founder, Arnold, saying “Arnold always held a somewhat dim view of people, he preferred the hosts” (Natali 2016). So, while the narrative seeks to question what happens if the androids gain consciousness, “the real concern is how the humans lost theirs” (McNamara 2016). *Westworld* calls into question the trend that situates humans as the only important point of reference when considering robot ethics (Beschoner and Krause 2017, 8). Similarly, DiPaolo (2019, 10) argues that *Westworld* acts as a mirror to ourselves, making us question personhood and the rights that come along with that. In representing sentient non-human beings, *Westworld* questions the right of humans to the exploitation of the world (Burzyńska 2019, 10). For example, Ford explicitly states:

We humans are alone in this world for a reason. We murdered and butchered anything that challenged our primacy... We destroyed and subjugated our world, and when we eventually ran out of creatures to dominate, we built this beautiful place (MacLaren 2016).

Ford’s words imply that the hosts were created as another species over which humans can hold power. The Park places the viewer in the space where boundaries between humans and robots dissipate, resulting in uncanny valley territory that leaves a sense of un-ease (Mullen 2018, 1). Thus, Deborah Netolicky (2017, 95) suggests that *Westworld* points out “the monstrosity of the scientist and the humanity of the created creature.”

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<sup>33</sup> The Park is identified as a significant entity which acts almost as a character and is thus referred to with a capital.

*Westworld* joins a host of contemporary science fiction television series that explore dystopian technology, such as Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (2011-2019). Mary McNamara (2016) describes *Westworld* as thought-provoking television that simultaneously entertains and questions the dark side of entertainment. *Westworld* also offers a story about storytelling, resulting in a reflexivity of the complex pursuit of storytelling (Köller 2019, 176). Because of this complexity, watching *Westworld* is an "intellectual exercise" (Poniewozik 2016). Subsequently, the viewer does not take a passive role. Instead, the viewer is involved in the process of reconstructing the hosts' traumas, experiencing flashbacks and gaps in memories with them (Boyle 2022, 9). Additionally, the initial emergence of platforms such as YouTube and HBO indicated that television had a digital future (Landau 2016, xiii). In the twenty-first century, streaming and on-demand original series are abundant and readily available to anyone with a subscription and an Internet connection. On-demand streaming affords viewers the ability to watch multiple episodes of a show in a row, while also being able to pause, rewind, and replay at leisure. Compared with contemporary cinema, at-home streaming is more appealing to many consumers (Landau 2016, 386). It costs less and requires less effort, while entertainment can be experienced in the comfort of one's own home. This allows viewers to engage with the content in a way that has not been previously possible.

Replacing the simultaneous viewing of the cinema, viewers discuss their thoughts on online forums (Landau 2016, 420). Instead of the "water cooler moment," in which workers might take a moment to discuss the previous night's episode of a popular show, Neil Landau (2016, 421, emphasis in original) notes that multiple episodes can be watched in one sitting and online sharing similarly provides "24/7 access to the *global* watercooler." Accordingly, discourse and fan theories on various shows thrive in online environments, such as YouTube videos and Reddit threads, where viewers can participate in the conversation with others (Mullen 2018, 9). Social TV users are active and motivated in their media use and interactions (Unkel and Kümpel 2020, 181). Online spaces such as social media afford users to communicate with others about specific topics whenever they wish (Unkel and Kümpel 2020, 180). Julian Unkel and Anna Sophie Kümpel (2020, 180) assert that this "not only complements the TV entertainment experience but represents an entertainment experience in and of itself." Amy Boyle (2022, 1) terms this kind of active audience member the "viewer," a portmanteau of

“viewer” and “user.” Figure 4.1 is a screenshot of the *Westworld* thread on Reddit,<sup>34</sup> which has over one million members. The first visible post is a plea from a user to prevent the cancellation of the series after it was announced in 2022 that the fifth season would not be produced. Viewers make use of Reddit to find more information about a TV show, the actors involved, and ideas about characters. These additional spaces allow for the construction and deconstruction of the visual and narrative complexities, and of priority to this research, gender dynamics, in *Westworld* (Mullen 2018, 9).

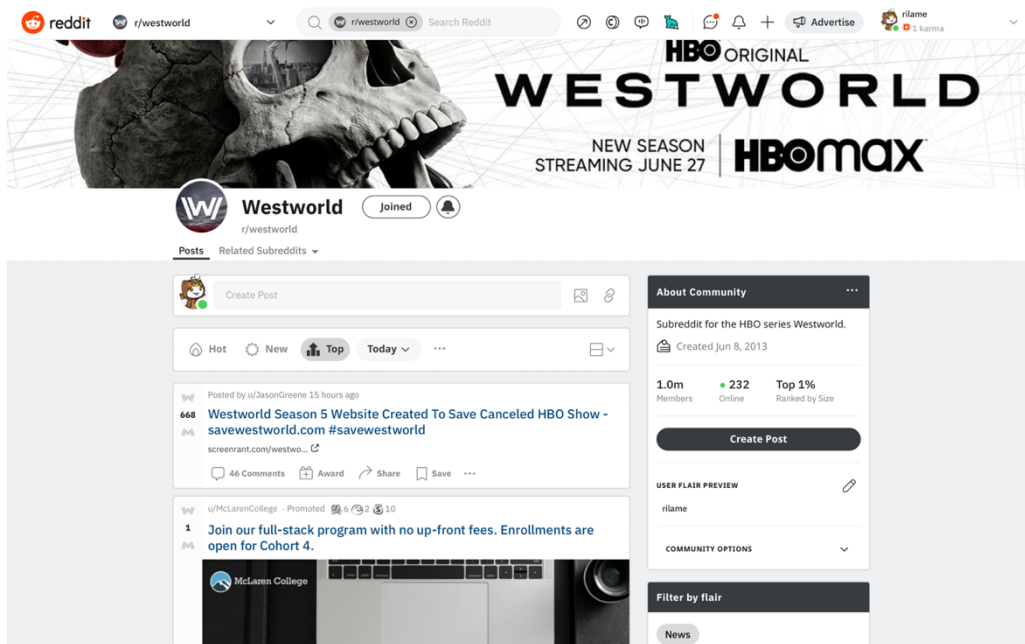


Figure 4.1: Screenshot of r/Westworld on Reddit, 2022.

## 4.2 Overview of *Westworld*

The series opens on a naked woman sitting in a cold, sterile room. Her eyes are vacant, and her body is stiff and unmoving. She is questioned about the nature of her reality, and she begins a voice over monologue about her world, as the visuals change to the morning of a Western town. This is the introduction to Dolores, one of the protagonists. *Westworld* is based on Michael Crichton’s 1973 film of the same name, set in a nineteenth century frontier town. The approach of *Westworld* to the presentation of the American West, technology, and narratology “offer[s] a space where fantasy and reality tangibly collide” (Goody and Mackay 2019, 11). Thus, the Park has often been described as a kind of highly immersive video game (Goody and Mackay

<sup>34</sup> Reddit is a collection of themed forums called subreddits. Users submit their own content, such as images, text, and links, and other users can respond in the form of their own content or comments and replies under a post, creating a discussion thread (Unkel and Kumpel 2020, 182).



2019, 9; Arvan 2018, 27). *Westworld's* time and place in the outside world is not revealed in Season 1, but the sleek corporate design<sup>35</sup> of the headquarters (HQ) indicates that it is somewhere in the mid-twenty-first century (Minz 2022, 233). The Park is a kind of theme park where wealthy guests can engage in any fantasy they wish. It is set in a Wild West environment and populated by artificially intelligent androids,<sup>36</sup> called hosts, with personalities that mirror those of humans. Their human-like bodies appear to be 3D printed in clinical laboratories, while their minds are programmed with personality traits, backstories, and paths to follow by the technicians of the Park. The hosts of the Park are passively restricted to repeat narrative cycles, called loops. The operators create these narratives with which the guests can interact, and the hosts' memories are erased after the loop is completed so that it can then be resumed from the beginning. The narrative follows the hosts and humans as they navigate Ford's "reverie" update that triggers some of the hosts to a path to consciousness based on their previously erased memories. Central to the plot are Dolores Abernathy, the innocent farmer's daughter, and Maeve Millay, the brothel's madam, who begin to have flashbacks of their previous storylines. Employees of Delos, the company that owns and operates the Park, try to focus on rectifying the hosts' erratic behaviour. The temporality of the Park storylines is also in question, with the storylines of William and the Man in Black occurring decades apart. William is on a first-time trip with his future brother-in-law, Logan. The Man in Black, however, has returned to the Park, one of many trips, to find the centre of the maze that he believes Arnold hid for him. By the end of the season, head of programming for Delos, Bernard Lowe, has been revealed to be a host, and the Man in Black and William are proved to be the same person. Additionally, Maeve plots to leave the Park but changes her mind at the last minute, and Dolores kills Ford.

The lives and bodies of the hosts are based on "the narratives which societal ruling imposes upon us" (Menicucci 2020, 14). This includes race, gender, age, and class. Binaries are central to the *Westworld* universe – both in their construction and deconstruction (Netolicky 2017, 94). The binary of human/machine is challenged, contesting the idea that being human is superior to being a machine (Netolicky 2017, 95). Likewise, binaries of masculinity/femininity,

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<sup>35</sup> The Park may fall under Foucault's concept of the heterotopia. Heterotopic spaces consist of seemingly incompatible and unrelated spaces co-existing (van der Merwe 2021). The stark contrast of the minimalist corporate HQ atop one of the mountains within the park indicates the vastly different aesthetics between the "current" time of the outside world and the Western time of the Park.

<sup>36</sup> An android is defined as a robot with human appearance (Goody and Mackay 2019, 3). It is important to distinguish between androids and robots because androids are specifically anthropomorphised whereas robots come in a variety of forms.



hero/villain, damsel/whore, among others are identified and investigated. Though not exclusively, the series places gender struggles at centre stage (Sebastián-Martín 2021, 140). Dolores and Maeve are gendered female by their creators<sup>37</sup> and operate within the Park's heteropatriarchal sex/gender system (Boyle 2022, 6-7). The dichotomy of the damsel and the prostitute is visually obvious in many ways. For example, the looming shots over the female hosts when they begin their day place Dolores as the virtuous woman and Maeve as the morally questionable madam of a brothel (Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3). While both shots frame these characters as subordinate women, the difference in their clothing indicates the difference in their presentation of femininity. In this case, it is literally black and white.



Figure 4.2: Maeve wakes up to begin her loop, *The Adversary* (S01E06), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

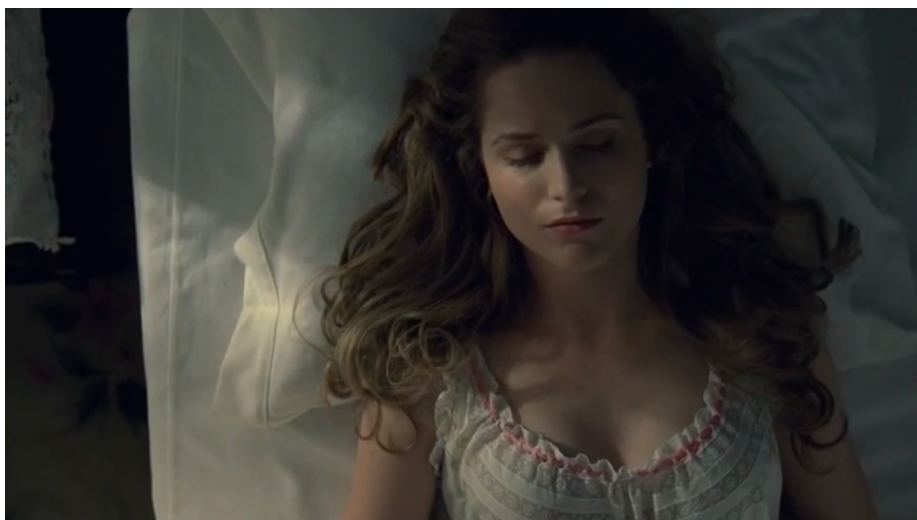


Figure 4.3: Dolores at the beginning of her narrative loop, *The Original* (S01E01), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

<sup>37</sup> Black, Latinx, and Native American hosts are similarly cast in colonial and racial roles (Boyle 2022, 7).



In a similar way to how women have been historically defined as the other of men, the hosts are considered the other half of a binary (Menicucci 2020, 9). Female hosts are initially representative of dehumanisation inflicted upon women, such as sexual exploitation (Menicucci 2020, 9). As the series goes on, some of the characters redefine their own stories and bodies, rejecting the exploitation for which they were intended (Menicucci 2020, 9). Additionally, human characters, such as Charlotte and Theresa, objectify male characters, and seek power and control in their leadership positions, fulfilling the typical male role (Menicucci 2020, 9). Amaya Menicucci (2020, 5) describes the robots of the Park as “cyborg slaves,” bound to a life of abuse, rape, and death at the hands of the human guests. Characters such as Dolores, Maeve, and Lawrence are representations of the objectified and eroticised other (Menicucci 2020, 5). The Park is a masculine playground, where the male hosts serve as guides and nemeses for guests. Female hosts, however, perform stereotypically feminine roles as “sexbots” and damsels to be rescued, raped, or killed (Boyle 2022, 6).

The first season of *Westworld* focuses on Maeve’s and Dolores’s traumas, the violent incidents that caused them, and how they approach resistance because of it. Similar to how women’s trauma has historically been minimised and denied, the hosts are reset and repaired before being sent back on their narrative loops (Boyle 2022, 7). Importantly, they are in service of mostly white male guests. *Westworld* takes women’s trauma seriously, asking viewers to identify with the experiences of the female hosts (Boyle 2022, 9). The humans of the Park control and destroy the hosts, calling into question the morality of humans. Additionally, the show encourages viewers to consider how identity and subjectivity are defined, thus leading to the question of how we define our own humanity. In the ten episodes of Season 1, the characters question the nature of their reality, while the audience is encouraged to consider their moral orientation in the digital era. In first replicating and then subverting power relations, *Westworld* offers a complex and nuanced look at how sexual and technological politics works.

### **4.3 Cowboys and Robots: Hybridising Genre in *Westworld***

Jane Tompkins (2012 [1989], 28) argues that nineteenth-century men found solace in womanless environments as a result of the pervasive women’s rights movements of the time. By featuring physical combat and endurance, as well as whisky, gambling, and prostitution, the Western genre of film offered nineteenth-century men an escape from the cultural milieu



of the time (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 28). Thus, the Western is about “men’s fear of losing their hegemony and hence their identity,” which the genre consistently reinvigorates (Tompkins [1989], 28-29). Replicating themes from the Western genre, the Park is organised around fantasies of sex and death, both of which subject women to supporting roles as objects of desire (Devereux 2020, 168). Ferrando (2015, 271) argues that female characters in the Western are included to satiate heterosexual male desire, reflecting the patriarchal social system in which cinema developed. This can be described as a commodification of space and ideology in terms of gendered behaviour (Marotta 2019, 13). Accordingly, in the Park, “all the female hosts are sexually available, even when they are not” (Devereux 2020, 168).

*Westworld* is a simulacrum of the scenery and tropes of Western films (Sebastián-Martín 2021, 132). It presents well-known gender myths prevalent in the Western, such as the naïve prairie girl, the saloon prostitute, the cowboy, and the outlaw in the first episodes so that it can later deconstruct and represent posthuman reincarnations of human myths (Menicucci 2020, 16). The Western film employs the masculine to set the standard for what is considered valuable and ideal (Roberts 1997, 48). Accordingly, Tompkins (2012 [1989], 14) describes the Western as antifeminist, being “obsessed by death and worship[ping] the phallus.” The centre of attraction for the Western genre is death. Death is considered the pinnacle of personal achievement, as well as the “fulfilment of sexual desire” (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 11). It is thus representative of both glory and annihilation (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 11). The Western hero cheats death by imposing it upon others. Thus, death is something that always happens to someone else, such as minorities and villains (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 12). In facing and defying death, the Western hero demonstrates that he is brave and masculine (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 16). The appeal of the Western narrative is thus the affirmation of courage and heroism. This is possibly what makes the Park so appealing to guests – they can feel like the main character in a Western, the hero. Because the hosts are programmed to be unable to harm humans, the guests of the Park are not actually at risk of dying. Instead, they can feel the thrill of the danger of being a Western hero without any actual threat to their lives. The transition of William into the Man in Black exemplifies how he is enchanted by the role the Park allows him to play.

One of the perks of the Park is that guests do not have to be heroes, however. Many, like the Man in Black, aspire to be the villain. This is discussed by two inconsequential male guests in the first episode:

Guest 1: The first time I played it white hat.<sup>38</sup> The family was here, we went fishing, did the gold hunt in the mountains...

Guest 2: And last time?

Guest 1: I came alone. Went straight evil. It was the best two weeks of my life (Nolan 2016).

Thus, guests can be as destructive as they wish without consequences. Accordingly, the Man in Black is the Park's ideal guest. He seeks to be the protagonist of the story with everyone else in the background (Vint 2019, 152-153). In *The Original* (S01E01), the Man in Black demonstrates that this is his viewpoint by telling Kissy, "you're livestock, scenery," before killing him in pursuit of his quest. The Man in Black is often framed from a low angle so that he is dominating not only the space above his victim, but also the screen (Figure 4.4).



Figure 4.4: The Man in Black looks down at Kissy, *The Original* (S01E01), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

The Western is usually written by a man (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 23). It is a story of men by men for men. The main character tends to be a man, and most of the secondary characters are men. The hero forms a bond with another man which takes preference over any relationship he has with a woman (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 23). In other words, not only do Westerns tell

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<sup>38</sup> The series makes use of white and black hats as a visual shorthand for displaying what kind of character each guest has chosen to be.



stories about men from the positions occupied by men, but they also concentrate on male-male relationships, neglecting male-female relationships (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 25). Ironically, the narrative is often driven by avenging a virtuous woman (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 25). As Mulvey (1989 [1975]) identifies, despite their protection being the reason for much of the bloodshed in the Western, women are devalued by the male-centred narrative (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 25). It is for this reason that Nussbaum (2016) states that “the American Old West is a logical fantasy only if you’re the cowboy.” Women in the Western tend to be conceptualised as “helpless, parasitic embellishments to a masculine genre” (Roberts 1997, 62). As a result, men in Westerns flee the feminine or that which is limiting, foolish, and degrading (Roberts 1997, 64). The narrative relies on physical struggles between the hero and the villain(s) in a public space, such as the saloon or the main street, climaxing in a gun fight to the death (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 23). Additionally, because nineteenth-century women were confined to the church or the home, the public arena in which the Western takes place is noticeably deficient of women (Tompkins 2012 [1989], 28). *Westworld* replicates these ideas about masculinity and femininity. For example, female guests tend to dress as men in the Park, similarly adopting other masculine signifiers, such as posture, facial expressions, and language (Menicucci 2020, 18). Figure 4.5 depicts a female guest who goes on a quest with Teddy. She wears pants and a cowboy hat instead of a dress and expresses delight in the experiences the Park has to offer, including Clementine.<sup>39</sup> She also spends her time in the public spaces of the Park, going on a dangerous quest outside of Sweetwater and shooting a bandit in the street. This indicates the desirable male position, and therefore the undesirable female position, in both the Western and the Park. Conversely, male guests are not shown cross-dressing or androgynous (Menicucci 2020, 19). When men do cross the gender divide, it is most often in their actions and demeanour, rather than appearance (Menicucci 2020, 19).

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<sup>39</sup> Clementine is one of the machine-women prostitutes who works at the Mariposa brothel.



Figure 4.5: A female guest is visibly happy after shooting a bandit, *The Stray* (S01E03), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

In imitating these ideas, Maria Torres-Quevedo (2019, 164) argues that the writers of *Westworld* seek to address prominent feminist issues and to challenge the ideological conventions of the Western. D'Addario (2018, 50) describes *Westworld* as a “fiercely feminist vision” that subverts the inherent masculinity of the SF and Western genres, giving women “a seat at the table.” The interaction between the Western and SF allows for a substantial departure from the traditional tropes of the Western (Torres-Quevedo 2019, 164). Netolicky (2017, 92) describes SF as a “kind of ethnography.” This is pertinent to *Westworld* because of its particular focus on androids as a possible type of humans. Additionally, because SF is a “literature of inquiry” (Lefanu 2012 [1989], 179), it is a useful medium through which sexual politics can be questioned. Sarah Lefanu (2012 [1989], 178) states that SF offers the opportunity to explore the gendered subject. It also allows for consumers of the genre to actively engage with the content instead of passively consuming it. Though Lefanu is here referring to reading literature, this perspective continues to be relevant, especially with the ubiquity of online forums dedicated to the discussion of a variety of SF texts, including film and television. Feminist SF frequently explores how female protagonists seek to escape the shackles of a patriarchal social system (Lefanu 2012 [1989], 184). It offers women the ability to be the subject of their own stories (Lefanu 2012 [1989], 185). In a similar vein, the robots of the Park pursue autonomy in an environment that controls everything about them. Accordingly, the creation of new worlds allows for the creation of alternative socio-political priorities (Lefanu 2012 [1989], 185). At first, the tropes are replicated so that they may be easily recognised, and then are later challenged. *Westworld* makes use of the iconography of the American West so that it can flip

it (D’Addario 2018, 50). Instead of the stoic gunslinger saving the girl, by the end of the first season of *Westworld*, Dolores is her own saviour, and the women have control.

The intersection of the genres provides an interesting backdrop with which to discuss gender. While the Western is typically concerned with American identity, SF involves imagining the future (Torres-Quevedo 2019, 161). *Westworld* blends these ideas by focusing on the Western’s gendered history and how an artificially intelligent future threatens it (Torres-Quevedo 2019, 161). *Westworld* deliberates the relationship between the performance of gender and posthumanity, paralleled by how it treats genre and narrative (Mullen 2018, 7-8). This involves the hybridisation of the Western and SF genres, as well as serial storytelling and narrative video games (Mullen 2018, 7-8).

#### 4.4 *Robo Sapiens*

Unlike the automata of nineteenth-century Europe, *Westworld*’s robots are embodied (Goody and Mackay 2019, 3). The androids of *Westworld* exist in a physical environment, thus having bodies through which information is experienced (Goody and Mackay 2019, 4). The hosts are programmed with backstories and specific character traits. They eat, drink, bleed, and have sex. The bodies and codes that simulate humanity in the hosts are based on human bodies and psyches (Menicucci 2020, 14). Host bodies are born out of 3D printed flesh and bone that resembles organic matter. They are then extensively *tested* for their ability to pass as human before they are cleared to enter their narrative loops (Menicucci 2020, 15). The androids look and act like humans, making it difficult to differentiate between the two. For example, in Figure 4.6, Angela invites William, whose first time it is in the Park, to look at her. In the scene he asks her “are you real?” She replies, “Well, if you can’t tell, does it matter?” The show’s most striking visual aesthetics entail its play on realness, where viewers, and characters, must continually ask “who is real?” (Goody and Mackay 2019, 11). *Westworld* constantly surprises viewers. Not being able to differentiate between hosts and humans throughout the first season requires viewers to yield assumptions about what they think they know (South and Engels 2018, 1-2). This is a principal path through which the show encourages contemplation about how vague the differences between the human and non-human have become.



Figure 4.6: William looks at Angela, *Chestnut* (S01E02), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

The hosts are modelled after the human body, made up not of mechanical parts, but rather of artificial blood vessels, organs, nerves, and a bio-cybernetic brain (Dinello 2018, 239-240). In *The Adversary* (S01E06), a newly 3D printed host is animated by pumping blood into his pale body, turning it pink (Figure 4.7). Sherryl Vint (2019, 144) argues that the emergence of vitality in this host undermines its worth because here, life is under the control of technicians. With access to the life-giving button, technicians need only to induce the influx of fluid to create the “birth” of the hosts.



Figure 4.7: A host nearing the end of his creation, where artificial blood is pumped into his body, *The Adversary* (S01E06), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.



*Westworld* includes a nod to Renaissance humanism with the use of imagery strongly resembling Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490). Both in the show and its promotional material (Figure 4.8), part of the 3D printing process is shown, where a body is splayed on a large circular frame. In *The Original* (S01E01), Ford is shown observing a host being made in a circular frame, with muscles and tendons being printed by a machine. Ford watches his creation take form, becoming the creator instead of the created (Burzyńska 2019, 9). The *Vitruvian Man* (Figure 4.9) is a sketch of a man within a circle and a square, and with outstretched arms and legs. Da Vinci's drawing is considered a marker of human beauty and perfection, where art and beauty meet mathematical proportions and science (Burzyńska 2019, 9). Da Vinci's drawing epitomises Renaissance humanist thought, which defines "the human" in exclusive and restrictive terms (Burzyńska 2019, 9). For instance, the perfect human is notably male. In contrast, *Westworld's Vitruvian Man* is shown as a woman (Figure 4.8 and Figure 4.10). Though the circular frame in Figure 4.10 is absent, the inner-workings, outstretched posture, and measurements of the host's body is another reference to da Vinci's work. Just as his work depicts the proportions of the perfect man, it includes design features of an ideal female figure. Figure 4.8 is more visually similar to the *Vitruvian Man*, yet also depicts a female body. In replacing the man with a woman, the image suggests a decentring of man's position in a posthuman landscape (Menicucci 2020, 21). Katarzyna Burzyńska (2019, 9) states that the parallel between the man as the pinnacle of humanity and a 3D printer manufacturing artificial bodies for the gratification of affluent guests is ironic. *Westworld's* appropriation of the *Vitruvian Man* presents a reversal of the humanist belief of (hu)man superiority by replacing him with an "intelligent sex doll" (Burzyńska 2019, 9). *Westworld's* take on the *Vitruvian Man* no longer refers to the divine origin of (hu)man, but instead signifies the birth of a new species (Burzyńska 2019, 10). The new species, to which Dolores refers in the final episode,<sup>40</sup> is not only non-human, but it is also led by female androids.

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<sup>40</sup> After mocking her for crying, the Man in Black is silenced by Dolores's speech about the future of her world. She says: "I'm not crying for myself. I'm crying for you. They say that great beasts once roamed this world. As big as mountains. Yet all that's left of them is bone and amber. Time undoes even the mightiest of creatures. Just look what it's done to you. One day...you will perish. You will lie with the rest of your kind in the dirt, your dreams forgotten, your horrors effaced. Your bones will turn to sand...and upon that sand, a new god will walk. One that will never die. Because this world doesn't belong to you or the people who came before. It belongs to someone who has yet to come" (Nolan 2016).

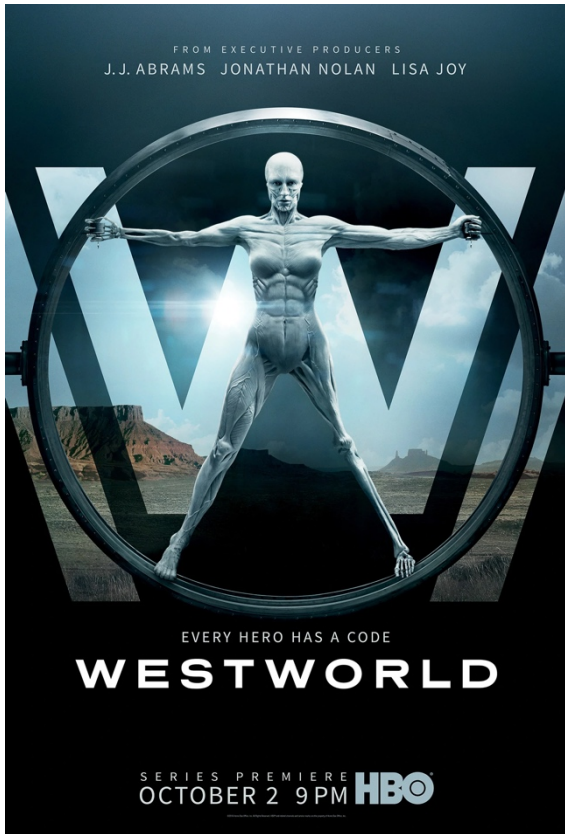


Figure 4.8: Westworld Season 1 promotional poster, 2016.

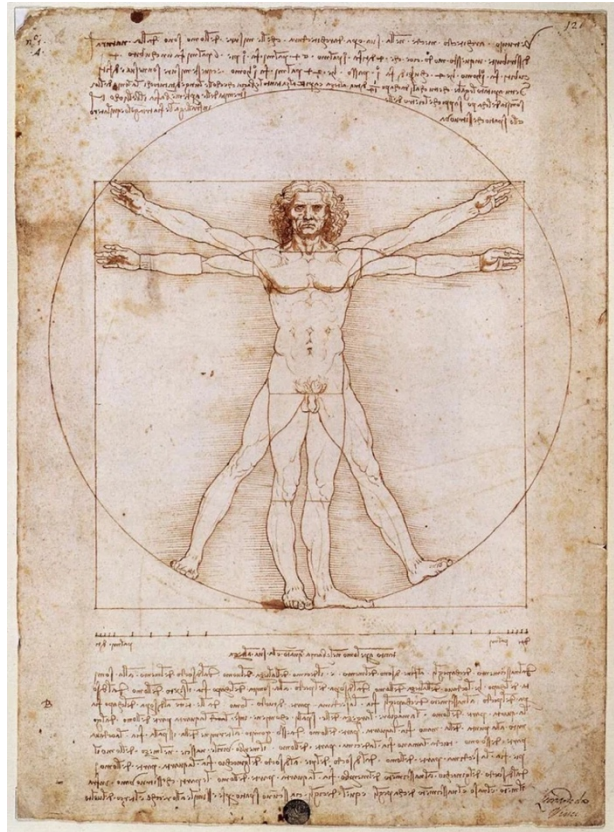


Figure 4.9: Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, c. 1490. Pen, ink, and watercolour over metalpoint on paper, 34,4 x 24,5 cm. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

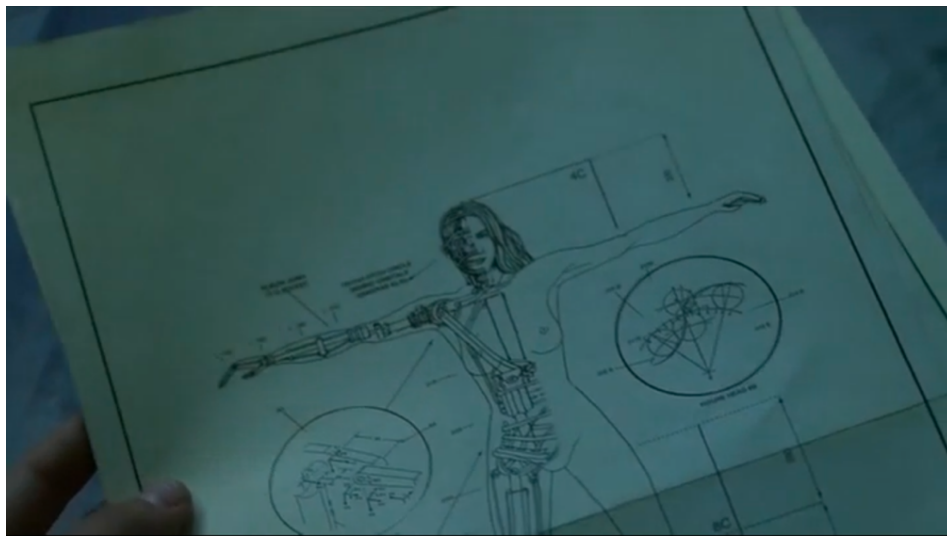


Figure 4.10: Bernard finds design drawings for Dolores, *Trompe L'Oeil* (S01E07), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

The Man in Black explains that the hosts were not always made with artificial human parts. In *Contrapasso* (S01E05), The Man in Black tells Teddy:

You used to be beautiful. When this place started, I opened one of you up once – a million little perfect pieces. And then they changed you... made you this sad real mess. Flesh and bone, just like us. They said it would improve the park experience, but do you know why they really did it? It was cheaper. Your humanity is cost-effective. So is your suffering (Campbell 2016).

The difference in how the hosts are constructed to which the Man in Black refers is shown in the final episode. In Figure 4.11, Dolores is awoken for the first time by Arnold. The inner workings of her robotic body are visible, with only part of one of her arms, top of her chest, and face covered by skin. Later, we are shown the fabricated spine and skull of a host being made in the new way (Figure 4.12). Because of this and the “humanity” and suffering of which the Man in Black speaks, Dinello (2018, 242) states that this means that they are “more than mere machines, they’re a new human species: *Robo sapiens*.”

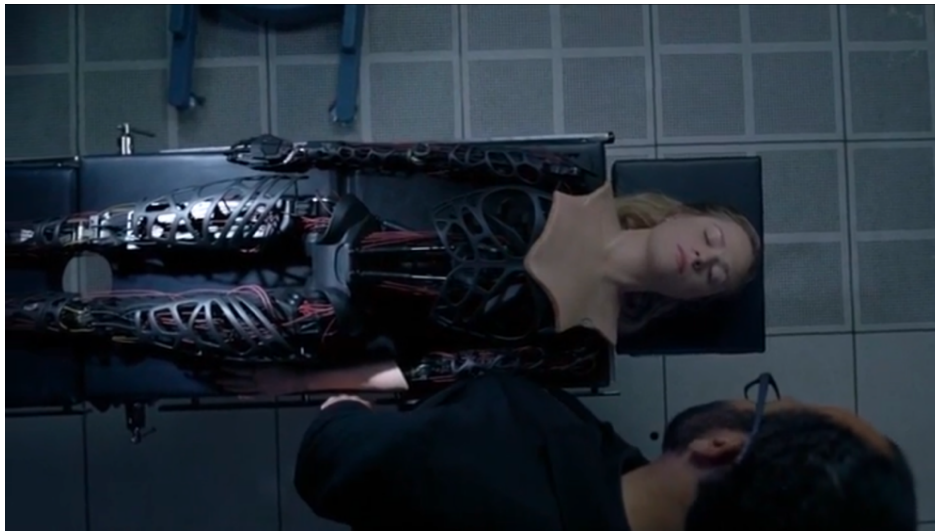


Figure 4.11: Arnold looks at Dolores before bringing her online for the first time, *The Bicameral Mind* (S01E10), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.



Figure 4.12: A host being made modelled after the human body, *The Bicameral Mind* (S01E10), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

Despite the verisimilitude of the hosts, the technicians running the Park want the guests to recognise their artificiality to a degree so that they can enact their immoral fantasies without guilt (Dickerson 2017, 16). In seeing the hosts as only machines, their dignity can be, and is, disregarded by the guests and management of the Park (DiPaolo 2019, 5). Violence is more “acceptable” if the victim does not really feel pain (DiPaolo 2019, 6). Additionally, like the objectification of women’s bodies, the android bodies similarly become objects to be consumed (Goody and Mackay 2019, 5). Accordingly, the hosts are othered, as they are not organic, natural-born humans (DiPaolo 2019, 5). The fact that humans are born while hosts are manufactured further solidifies the hosts’ status as “less than human” (Vint 2019, 147-148). In other words, the humans in *Westworld* consider an algorithmic mind inferior to a biological one (Vint 2019, 147-148). Additionally, because of the built nature of the algorithmic mind, the humans take ownership of it. In a conversation with Bernard, who expresses frustration that Ford “broke into” his mind, Ford replies:

I built your mind, Bernard. I have every right to wander through its rooms and chambers and halls, and to change it if I choose, even to burn it down (MacLaren 2016).

By stating this, Ford confirms that he thinks of the hosts as his property with which he can do as he pleases, “even [...] burn it down”.

*Westworld* is situated in a tricky position where the depiction of sex robots built to satisfy the male gaze and appetite run the risk of substituting human women with automated women,



thereby reinforcing objectification of the female body (Goody and Mackay 2019, 5). This is easily done because unlike real women, the hosts do not age, nor do they have any undesirable traits, such as body odour and the ability to say “no.” Additionally, sex is a commodity through which men’s status can be improved (Goody and Mackay 2019, 5). Women are both the object of and the obstacles to this pursuit (Goody and Mackay 2019, 5). Goody and Mackay (2019, 5) argue that by viewing the hosts as objects that operate within a capitalist system, they are not only robotic workers, but also “capitalist sex slaves.” Vint (2019, 147) notes that Aristotle defined a slave as a living tool who enacts the master’s will in a similar way to an inanimate object. Though they seem human, the hosts of *Westworld* are tools who behave according to their programming – “extensions of humans who made the park and not independent entities” (Vint 2019, 147). Additionally, like Siri and Alexa, the hosts are controlled with voice commands (DiPaolo 2019, 2). And, like Siri and Alexa, robots are considered tools to use in the pursuit of human goals (DiPaolo 2019, 9). This is echoed by Ford’s words when he tells Bernard, “You are the perfect instrument, the ideal partner, the way any tool partners with the hand that wields it” (MacLaren 2016).

Vint (2019, 147) describes the hosts as sentient and enslaved technological tools, which he says classifies them as racialised<sup>41</sup> subjects, regardless of casting. Following this logic, it may be argued that the hosts can also be understood as gendered subjects. Keith Clavin and Christopher La Casse (2019, 181) concur, asserting that the hosts are feminised regardless of their gender presentation. Similarly, masculine privileges are reserved for guests (Clavin and La Casse 2019, 180). Despite being a posthuman fictional text, the Park experience operates along constructed gender lines (Mullen 2018, 8). Additionally, gender is limited to the visual and material realm of the corporeal (Menicucci 2020, 22). Identity-creation for the androids resembles that of humans – socio-cultural markers such as gender are inscribed and tested constantly (Menicucci 2020, 15). Further, femininity and masculinity are delineated by the corporeal dimension in *Westworld* (Menicucci 2020, 15). Gender in the Park is presented in binary terms of masculine/feminine, being coded into the core of the hosts’ identities, so that even when their narrative loops, clothes, and personalities are altered, they maintain the gender with which they were endowed (Menicucci 2020, 15). Gender is thus something that can be given or taken away. Additionally, the female hosts are works of art; “instruments” made to

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<sup>41</sup> Though beyond the scope of this research, it is important to note that race plays a meaningful part in the construction of the hosts and characters of *Westworld*.

satisfy male desires (Meyer 2018, 200). The woman as a work of art intended for a male audience is treated as a thing or abstraction (Berger 1972, 52). Thus, in accordance with filmic convention that fragments women, the hosts of *Westworld* are fragmented, both by the camera and by the human guests of the Park. The women of *Westworld* are often shown in parts, especially with extreme close-ups on their faces and bodies. Further, gendered identity in *Westworld* is skewed toward male fantasies for guests and female subordination for hosts (Goody and Mackay 2019, 9). It therefore stands to reason that it is the women hosts, Maeve and Dolores, who initiate a violent robot uprising to avenge themselves of the violence enacted upon them (Goody and Mackay 2019, 9).

Furthermore, Susan Bordo (1993, 165) states that the body is a medium of culture. Accordingly, it is “a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (Bordo 1993, 165). In other words, bodies are shaped by topical forms of selfhood, desire, and masculinity and femininity (Bordo 1993, 165-166). Furthermore, the female body has historically been a locus of social control (Bordo 1993, 165). Because of this, nudity in *Westworld* can be read as being used in meaningful ways (Meyer 2018, 196). As nudity is very often associated with femininity, it is a notable aesthetic device. The first episode opens on a shot of Dolores sitting naked and alone. She is without clothes – naked – but she is also nude (Meyer 2018, 196). To be nude is a form of art (Berger 172, 51). To be a nude, a naked body must be seen as an object, put on display (Berger 172, 51). It also reflects a perfection of the human body, whereas nakedness exposes its faults (Meyer 2018, 196). Thus, the nude is idealised. It is also a human creation, not a product of nature (Meyer 2018, 197). The hosts of *Westworld* can thus be read as nudes.<sup>42</sup> Matthew Meyer (2018, 197) describes the hosts as “svelte, buxom women and ‘cut,’ handsome, rugged men.” Importantly, the hosts are made creatures and they may be described as moving sculptures (Meyer 2018, 197). Like the hysteric women of the nineteenth century which are discussed later, the hosts’ bodies, “the *tabula rasa*, [are] turned into a *tableau vivant* under the suggestive hand of the master physician” (du Preez 2009, 18). Meyer (2018, 197) states that “even the more gruff and ugly host characters, are gruff and ugly in a perfected way.” The hosts feel no shame, which is usually associated with

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<sup>42</sup> On the occasion that male nudes are presented, it is usually done so through the lens of sexual objectification (Meyer 2018, 204).



nakedness. When he sees a technician covering a host in *The Stray* (S01E03), Ford angrily confronts him, referring to the host as “it” (Marshall 2016):

Why is this host covered? Perhaps you didn’t want it to feel cold or ashamed?  
You wanted to cover his modesty? Is it that? It doesn’t get cold. It doesn’t feel  
ashamed. It doesn’t feel a solitary thing that we haven’t told it to. Understand?

While delivering this speech, he casually cuts into the unmoving host’s face with a scalpel. This further exhibits how he feels about the hosts – mindless, subservient beings (Dinello 2018, 245).

The nudity of hosts, which occurs often while in HQ is significant for two reasons (Clavin and La Casse 2019, 186). On the one hand, it captures their continuous vulnerability to their human masters (Clavin and La Casse 2019, 186). On the other, it exposes their status as objects and products to the guests and humans that run Delos (Clavin and La Casse 2019, 186). In *Dissonance Theory* (S01E04), the Man in Black and Lawrence come across Armistice bathing (Figure 4.13). The Man in Black makes no attempt to hide his interest in her, claiming it is related to her tattoo as a clue to the maze. While this is possible, especially with his obsession with finding the maze, it is apparent that she is an object to be looked at (Meyer 2018, 199). Throughout the scene, her body is the focal point, but the Man in Black’s presence is continuously noticeable with his silhouette appearing to the left of the screen. This has a point-of-view effect, where the viewer sees what he sees. Meyer (2018, 199) describes this as “one of the more innocent scenes in which the male gaze dominates and sexually objectifies the female hosts.” This attitude toward the female hosts extends into the headquarters, where sometimes the technicians are shown taking advantage of them.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that it is not only female hosts who are taken advantage of, but male hosts as well. For example, in *The Bicameral Mind* (S01E10), a male technician is shown preparing to sexually exploit Hector before Hector awakens and kills him.



Figure 4.13: Armistice bathes as the Man in Black watches, *Dissonance Theory* (S01E04), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

#### 4.4.1 *All Dolled Up*

Instead of verbal descriptors, the “rules” of bodily discourse are visually communicated through clothes, body shape, facial expressions, and behaviour (Bordo 1993, 170). *Westworld* offers a critical allegory of real gender relations (Sebastián-Martín 2021, 140). By representing female androids in familiar social hierarchies, it allows the space to then deconstruct those ideas through metafictional devices and a narrative revolution (Sebastián-Martín 2021, 140). Dolores’s character represents the wider Park’s social relations, in which women occupy a domestic role (Kessous 2019, 211). She is her father’s caretaker, but she is also dependent on others, always men, for her protection, further reinforcing her femininity (MacKenzie-Margulies 2020, 9). It is apparent from the first episode that the treatment of Dolores is overall exploitative and manipulative (Köller 2019, 169). In *Contrapasso* (S01E05), Logan exemplifies this by shouting “Who the fuck cares what Dolores wants? She’s a goddamn doll!” (Campbell 2016). She is made to be a character with whom the guests can fall in love (Nussbaum 2016). The impulse to protect Dolores transfers to viewers as well, who wish to see her succeed after understanding the trauma she has endured (Nussbaum 2016). Moze Halperin (2016) describes Dolores in the first episode as “insufferably naïve, and played with the hollowed sheen of a million creepy male fantasies.” The violence against Dolores is regular as it is programmed into her loop. Additionally, Dolores’s sexuality functions as a commodity to be consumed (Kessous 2019, 211). This is echoed by Bernard when he tells her that “you and everyone you know were built to gratify the desires of the people who pay to visit your world” (Nolan 2016). Because the makers of the Park were aware of what desires people were likely



to have, it may be argued that Dolores’s function is to suffer. Dolores is the virginal farmer’s daughter whose loop involves riding into Sweetwater to be helped by guests, returning home at night to her parents being murdered by “bandits” so that she can be rescued, raped, or killed by guests.

Dolores’s gender is literally manufactured. She is constructed by various parts – those that make up her physical body and those that make up the various roles she plays throughout the series (Mullen 2018, 5-6). Dolores has particularly doll-like features – pale skin, big blue eyes, and perfectly curled, long, blonde hair (MacKenzie-Margulies 2020, 3). She is described by McNamara (2016) as “porcelain perfection.” Dolores introduces the viewer to the Park. In the opening scene of *The Original* (S01E01), she is immediately coded as a doll, with her knees pressed together and arms relaxed, while her hair falls neatly over her shoulders (Figure 4.14). Dolores’s lack of agency is established from the opening scene (Mullen 2018, 5). Off-camera, a male voice says, “bring her back online,” later instructing her to lose the accent and asking her a series of questions while she sits, nude. Dolores is presented as a still image (Devereux 2020, 175). Her voice is heard in a voice over as the camera zooms in on her calm and motionless face while a fly crawls across her eye (Figure 4.15). This visual provides information about Dolores – that she may not be human and the constructed nature of her existence (Mullen 2018, 5). Additionally, it indicates that the hosts are unable to harm living things, which becomes inverted by the end of the episode. At the end of the first episode, Dolores kills a fly. Her smile still dreamy and innocent, it becomes apparent that she can lie and kill (Nussbaum 2016). This establishes the possibility of agentive action on her part, independent of predetermined codes and instructions.

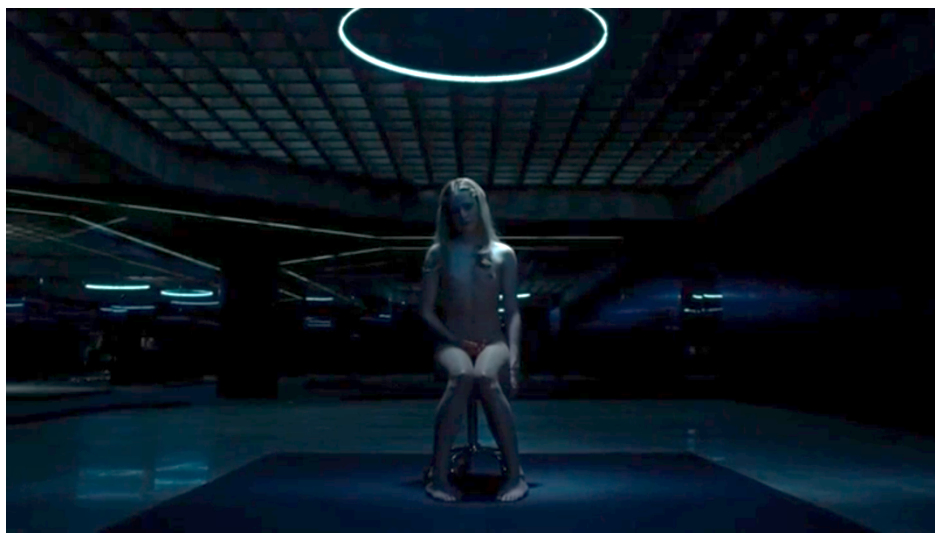


Figure 4.14: Introduction to Dolores, *The Original* (S01E01), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.



Figure 4.15: Close-up of Dolores as a fly walks across her eye, *The Original* (S01E01), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

In contrast to the initial meeting of Dolores in which she is naked and asked by Bernard to “lose the accent,” when she is shown in the Park, she has a warm accent and speaks in a higher pitch. Additionally, she has more emotion in her face and voice when she is on her loop, as opposed to when she is being evaluated in HQ. She begins her day in a lacy white nightgown but goes on to wear a simple but elegant blue dress with perfect ringlets framing her face. These choices indicate that not only is her gender expression constructed intentionally, but also that these aspects can be added and removed. Netolicky (2017, 97) describes Dolores’s blue dress as “Alice-in-Wonderland-esque,” representing the fantasy world of nonsense of which she must make sense. In *The Stray* (S01E03), Dolores reads a passage from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* at Bernard’s request:

Dear, dear! How queer everything is today. And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night?... Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is, “Who in the world am I?” (Marshall 2016).

The passage is an encouragement to examine her identity (Netolicky 2017, 97). She begins to ask who she is and who she might become, saying later in the episode “There aren’t two versions of me. There’s only one. And I think when I discover who I am, I’ll be free” (Marshall 2016). Similarly, she seeks independence from the control to which she is intrinsically bound. In *Trompe L’Oeil* (S01E07), when William tells Dolores she unlocked something in him, she expresses frustration at being described as a sort of tool, telling him “I’m not a key, William.

I'm just me" (Toye 2016). Additionally, in a flashback, Arnold instructs Dolores to kill him, which both he and Ford recognise as a forced act. Arnold tells Dolores "I hope there's some solace that I left you no choice," before she shoots him. In a conversation with Bernard decades later, Ford echoes the idea that Dolores was a tool in Arnold's plan, saying "[s]he didn't pull that trigger, it was Arnold pulling the trigger through her" (Nolan 2016).

Dolores's personality is kind and optimistic (MacKenzie-Margulies 2020, 3). For example, she frequently states as part of her narrative loop that "some people choose to see the ugliness in this world, the disarray. I choose to see the beauty" (Nolan 2016). This is significant because it becomes apparent that she has endured much ugliness at the hands of human guests, though she does not remember it. Dolores's programmed script is layered in narration over the reality of her experience in the Park (Boyle 2022, 7). The juxtaposition of her optimistic words and her violent reality results in an unsettling realisation of the cruelty the hosts endure on a daily basis (Boyle 2022, 7).

Dolores's fidelity is constantly tested by asking her "Have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?" (Nolan and Joy 2016). When this question is asked of her in HQ, she is always nude. When Dolores is interviewed in HQ by Ford and other technicians, the content of the interviews tends to be about her outward function in the Park and for the guests, rather than her inner state of being. However, in her secret discussions with Arnold or Bernard, she is always clothed, indicating that the interviewer does not wish to dehumanise her, but rather recognises the potential for humanity within her.

Rutie Mackenzie-Margulies (2020, 11) argues that suffering is a key characteristic of Dolores's gender performance, where "suffering acts as the link between gender and humanity." In one scene, Hector and his gang violently attack Sweetwater, and Teddy is killed. She is brought into HQ while in a state of distress over the events of the day. After being brought back online, Dolores is hyperventilating and Stubbs instructs her "Cognition only, no emotional affect" (Nolan 2016). She immediately stops, stiffens, and lowers her voice. Figures 4.16 and 4.17 occur seconds apart. In Figure 4.16, she breathes rapidly as if in a panic, whereas in Figure 4.17, she continues without a trace of emotion (Pessoa 2017, 817). In a later episode, Ford expresses contentment in this function, commending himself and Arnold not only for replicating human emotions, but also for being able to turn them on and off at will. In *Trace Decay* (S01E08), he says, "And as exquisite as this array of emotions is, even more sublime is

the ability to turn it off’ (Nolan and Joy 2016). This function indicates not only the level of control humans have over the hosts, but also, as previously stated, how femininity can be added and taken away.



Figure 4.16: Dolores is distressed in HQ, *The Original* (S01E01), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

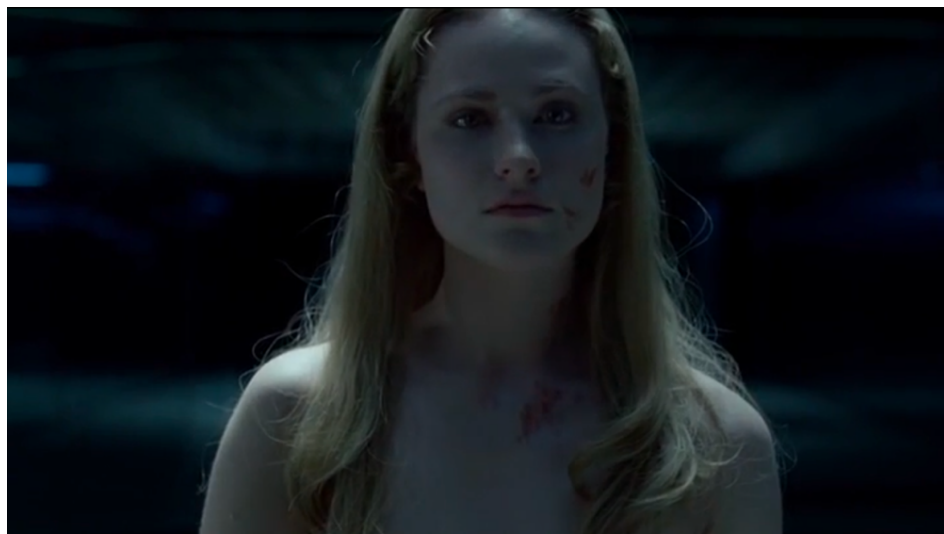


Figure 4.17: Dolores immediately after she is instructed to answer questions without emotion, *The Original* (S01E01), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

Notably, masculinity is akin to power, and femininity is therefore akin to powerlessness. Femininity is associated with kindness and non-violence, and masculinity is associated with strength and aggression (King and McCaughey 2001, 2). Dolores is coded to embody this view of femininity. In the first few episodes, Dolores occupies a passive position when threats are involved, such as staying back when Teddy tells her to while he investigates the attack on her

home. She is also sweet and charismatic, and notably flinches when Teddy shoots his gun. When he tries to teach her to shoot (Figure 4.18), she cannot. This indicates that she has been coded to be non-violent and is thus not deciding to not shoot, but rather unable to do so because it would entail an override of her code. However, as the narrative unfolds, she more often engages in direct aggression<sup>44</sup> (Estrada 2018). She surprisingly<sup>45</sup> shoots the *confederados* after realising they had been dishonest. Instead of running away, as William instructs, Dolores shoots the men threatening them. William expresses surprise at her ability to do so because she has previously exhibited extremely passive behaviour. When William asks her how she did that, she says “I imagined a story where I didn’t have to be the damsel,” (Campbell 2016) marking an important turning point for her character. While she begins the season as a damsel who needs protection, she ends it becoming the protector and advocate for the hosts, as well as her own saviour (Estrada 2018). This brings into view the possibility of agency for the machine-woman.



Figure 4.18: Teddy tries to teach Dolores to shoot, *The Stray* (S01E03), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

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<sup>44</sup> Direct aggression is characterised by confrontation and physical violence (Estrada 2018). In contrast, indirect aggression consists of acts such as spreading rumours or ostracising a person in a group (Estrada 2018). Whereas direct aggression is more commonly associated with men, while women make use of indirect aggression to maintain harmony in relationships (Estrada 2018).

<sup>45</sup> In the beginning of *Contrapasso* (S01E05), Dolores is still unable to shoot a gun and expresses frustration at people being killed unnecessarily.



#### 4.4.2 *Dolores's Trauma*

Historically, while enduring torture for male action heroes denies their feminisation and enhances the impression of their masculinity, torture for female heroines confirms their femininity (Brown 2014, 52). Thus, in constructing women's trauma for the screen, "there is a tension between screening women's trauma and re-presenting violence against women" (Boyle 2022, 13). Further, because women's bodies are already coded as sexual objects, by representing violence against women, film and television shows risk further eroticising women in a violent context (Brown 2014, 50). Depicting violence against women without thereafter examining resultant traumatic effects is considered "violently misogynistic" (Boyle 2022, 3). Because of a move toward what Jason Mittell (2015, 17) calls "narrative complexity," the experience of trauma can be adapted to layered, non-linear narrative television. In complex television, women's trauma is "a visual and structural device" (Boyle 2022, 2). In other words, women's trauma informs character and narrative composition, as well as the thematics and aesthetics of storytelling (Boyle 2022, 2). To challenge heteropatriarchal discourses that are often the cause of these traumatic experiences, television shows employ various techniques, such as multiple plot threads, temporal play, and extended confusion within intricate narratives (Boyle 2022, 5). Importantly, Boyle (2022, 5) notes that such shows treat violence against women not as a singular incident but rather part of a wider heteropatriarchal culture. Contemporary depictions of violence against women, and rape in particular, "lay bare the tenuous links assumed in our patriarchal culture between notions of power and powerlessness, masculinity and femininity" (Brown 2014, 47).

Tanya Horeck (2004, 8) argues that there are high emotional and political stakes in the representation and reception of rape on screen given the topical<sup>46</sup> wake of feminist consciousness-raising surrounding the topic. That is not to say that representations of women's trauma on screen is an entirely new concept, but rather that they have become more prevalent (Boyle 2022, 3). Resultingly, there is continuous debate on whether depictions of such gender-based violence are positive or negative (Horeck 2004, 7). Importantly, Horeck (2004, 8) argues that considering how narratives involving rape position men and women within a larger cultural

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<sup>46</sup> In 2017, actress Alyssa Milano sparked the #MeToo movement by tweeting about sexual assault and asking others to reply to the tweet with "me too" if they had experienced sexual harassment or assault (Rhode 2019, 378). This triggered widespread response from women across the globe, using the hashtag "#MeToo" across various social media platforms to tell their stories (Rhode 2019, 379). The surge of participation publicly affirmed how widespread the issue of sexual harassment and assault are, confirming feminist arguments about the tangible implications of misogyny (Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019, 2).



climate is key in determining their usefulness. There is a more concerted effort to focus on women's trauma as a result of the violence inflicted upon them. Instead of focusing solely on the violence itself, there has been a move to prioritise latent female trauma (Boyle 2022, 2).

The representation of trauma is a complex but meaningful endeavour:

Trauma comprises complicated subject matter and experience that can similarly involve multiple and competing narratives, complex characterisation and development, with clear potential to be emotionally and morally dramatic. Trauma can also be non-linear, disrupting some victim-survivors' experience of chronological time as the present is usurped by past traumatic experiences, either in unconscious ways, such as through intrusive flashbacks, or consciously, as the trauma is reconstructed (Boyle 2022, 4).

This perspective is especially important for the reading of Maeve and Dolores, who both experience traumatic flashbacks and confusion with temporality. It is also notable when considering the difference between humans and hosts – if hosts experience trauma in a similar way to how humans experience trauma, does this complicate the distinction between host and human? In using a season-long arc to examine gendered violence and subsequent trauma, *Westworld* recognises that “we can no longer represent violence against women without a thorough acknowledgement of women's trauma” (Boyle 2022, 9). This is evident in *Westworld*, as though there are many depictions of violence, the series is more focused on exploring the aftermath of that violence and what it means, particularly for Dolores and Maeve.

Although a work of SF, *Westworld* explores the result of realistic violence based on gender (Boyle 2022, 6). Trauma is an integral component of *Westworld*, both the Park and the series. In exploring the characters' trauma, *Westworld* encourages empathy for the hosts. The first season of *Westworld* is largely dedicated to the reconstruction and understanding of the female hosts' traumas (Boyle 2022, 6). The narrative loops are connected via trauma and the post-trauma experience guides the changes in the narrative loops (Clavin and La Casse 2019, 178). This encourages looking beyond only the traumatic event. Consequently, viewers become “witnesses” to the trauma and recovery, potentially playing an active role in considering the cultures and politics that contribute to women's trauma (Boyle 2022, 6).

In *Westworld*, rape is solidified as a site of *power* (Köller 2019, 170). Additionally, both nudity of and violence against women simultaneously represent stakes and establish conditions to trigger revolution (D'Addario 2018, 51). Dolores's narrative loop consists of passivity and

sexual assault. She has these experiences, her memory is erased, and the cycle continues to repeat endlessly. In *The Original* (S01E01), the implied rape of Dolores by the Man in Black is significant. First, the event is not stylised or eroticised, but rather is “acutely felt with her” (Köller 2019, 170). Her horror is expressed vocally throughout the scene and in her facial expressions (Figure 4.19). When the Man in Black shoots Teddy, the camera focuses on Teddy’s wound for a beat, but it is Dolores’s screams that fill the scene with sound. The violence against Dolores is accessed through her reaction to it, rather than showing it explicitly (Köller 2019, 170). Additionally, while Teddy lies dying, the reflection in his eyes shows him seeing the Man in Black dragging Dolores into the barn and closing the door (Figure 4.20). He is unable to move or prevent what is about to happen. The viewer occupies a similar position of powerlessness. Teddy is courageous and often attempts to save Dolores, though unsuccessfully, suggesting that the plot of her storyline assumes guests will most often occupy the role of aggressor rather than hero (Köller 2019, 169). Ford tells Teddy in *The Stray* (S01E03) that his job is not to protect Dolores, but rather to keep her available to be found by guests (Marshall 2016). The rape happens off screen. Susanne Köller (2019, 170) argues that this “heightens the shared experience of horror and helplessness even more.” The scene ends and Dolores begins her loop again. A feeling of uneasiness is conjured when the day starts anew, with Dolores in bed, starting her optimistic speech about the beauty in the world. It is clear, even before it is revealed that the hosts’ trauma affects them, that the infinite cycle of objectification and violence is a disturbing product of misogyny (Köller 2019, 169). Worse still, Dolores is unable to do anything about it by design (Köller 2019, 169).



Figure 4.19: The Man in Black drags Dolores to the barn, *The Original* (S01E01), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.



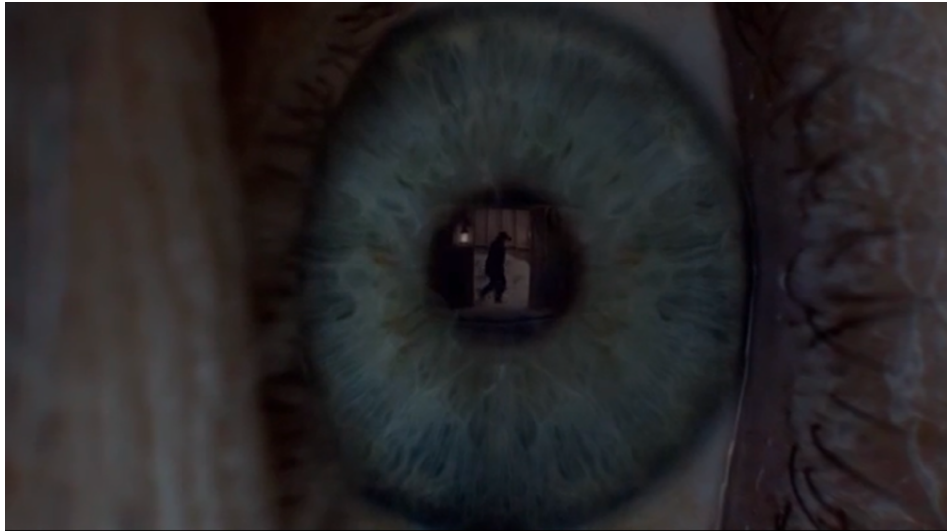


Figure 4.20: Teddy witnesses Dolores being dragged into the barn while he dies, *The Original* (S01E01), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

#### 4.4.3 *Hysteria as Feminine Convention*

There are many references to insanity throughout the season. Beginning with Dolores's father, when the hosts start to experience glitches and repetitive movements that may be likened to hysteria (Devereux 2020, 170). In *Dissonance Theory* (S01E04), Dolores says "I think I may be losing my mind" (Natali 2016). And, in *The Bicameral Mind* (S01E10), Bernard and Maeve have a pivotal conversation about the hosts who have awoken:

Maeve: How many are there like me?

Bernard: A handful over the years.

Maeve: And you just wipe us clean and toss us out to get fucked and murdered over and over again?

Bernard: No, most of you go insane (Nolan 2016).

For this reason, it is noteworthy to briefly examine how historical accounts of women's madness, in the form of hysteria, might compare. Hysteria was extensively documented in the late nineteenth century as a predominantly female ailment (du Preez 2009, 1). Medical science sought to closely monitor the disease, resulting in periodic surveillance of the female body (du Preez 2009, 5). Du Preez (2009, 5) notes that in conducting this surveillance, prominent French neurologist, Dr Jean-Martin Charcot, held frequent public lectures in which he would put the female hysterical body on display (du Preez 2009, 5). Because women with hysteria were considered mimes of "real" illnesses, they were not only put on display in the pursuit of medical science, but they also became spectacles in themselves by performing the hysteria with which

they had been diagnosed (du Preez 2009, 5). Charcot considered the study of hysteria as similar to the study of an artwork (du Preez 2009, 19). Not only did the women in Charcot's lectures cause a scene, but they became scenes themselves by embodying the suggestions inscribed upon their skin by the male physician (du Preez 2009, 19). Cecily Devereux (2020, 174) argues that Dolores in her interviews with park staff alludes to nineteenth-century hysterical patients. The same is true for other hosts, such as Clementine in Figure 4.21. In the scene, she is secretly programmed by Delos management to harm another host who has been coded to be recognised as human. She violently attacks and kills this host in a spectacle orchestrated by management to criticise Bernard and Ford for the reverie update. In Figure 4.21, various Delos employees watch behind glass as the spectacle of Clementine's violent outburst is played out. This is analogous to the spectacle of Charcot's public lectures on hysterical women.



Figure 4.21: Management watches Clementine's violent behaviour, *Trompe L'Oeil* (S01E07), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

Martha Evans (1991, 20) describes Charcot's private consultations:

He would have the patients brought to his office and stripped naked; he would observe them, ask them to perform certain movements, stare, meditate and then have them led out.

It is not difficult to draw parallels between how the hosts of *Westworld* are treated and Charcot's hysteria patients. Whenever a host malfunctions, they are brought into HQ to be evaluated. They are asked questions to identify where the issue may lie. Importantly, they are always naked, and various aspects of their behaviour controlled via voice commands or tablets linked to their programming. In Figure 4.22, Ford is asking Dolores questions about her

dreams. The juxtaposition of male creator and female machine is visually obvious in this scene. She sits naked and upright, responding in her sweet and soft timbre while he sits across from her, fully clothed, picks up and inspects her hand, later squeezing it tight and hurting her. He is in control. Du Preez (2009, 10) notes that for Charcot, emotions should be neutralised to gain knowledge about the state of the patient. When Ford perceives Dolores as lying, he sets her into analysis mode and asks her a question to which she responds in her deepened, monotonous tone of voice. In this way, he may be likened to Charcot, suppressing her emotions to find out information about her state of mind.

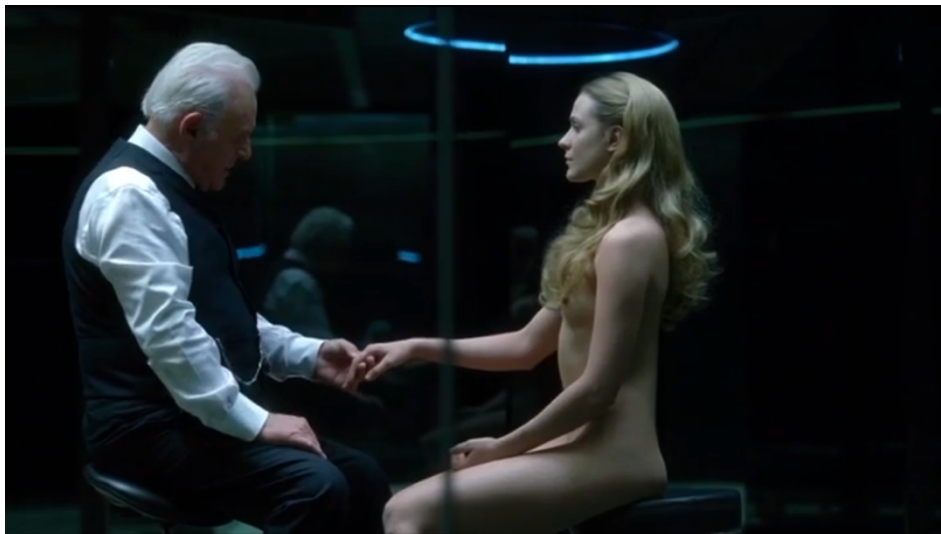


Figure 4.22: Ford evaluates Dolores in HQ, *Contrapasso* (S01E05), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

#### 4.4.4 *The Feminine Glitch*

In contrast to many other SF narratives, *Westworld* presents protest not as a masculine crisis but rather as a female political revolt which disrupts Ford's fantasy world (Kessous 2019, 209). *Westworld* focuses on the construction of female subjectivity and the possibility of agency (Torres-Quevedo 2019, 161). The process of entering their loops, being killed, and being repaired is crucial to the hosts becoming self-aware. Therefore, their self-construction arises out of the contemplation of the destruction of their gendered, commodified, and enslaved bodies (Menicucci 2020, 11). This contemplation extends to the viewers of *Westworld*, who must consider the cruelty of the "steel-hearted" humans (Menicucci 2020, 11). The two central characters are designed to perform their femininity in line with specific tropes, yet by the end of the season, those performances are "increasingly troubled and impossible to classify" (Köller

2019, 175). Thus, instead of these women solely being obvious representatives of well-known character tropes, they can be read as complex female characters.

Dolores's loop consists of her waking up, speaking to her father, arriving in town, and a can falling from her bag to be picked up by Teddy or a guest. Mullen (2018, 5) argues that each repetition of Dolores's loop reveals that Dolores's path, of which she frequently speaks, is algorithmic. Additionally, repeating the loop brings to light deviations from it that may indicate a change. For instance, in *Chestnut* (S01E02), in one of the first minor divergences from her loop, Dolores briefly looks up from her horse and sees herself in the reflection of a window (Figure 4.23). Anthony Francis (2018) argues that being able to see and recognise oneself in a mirror is a complicated and noteworthy cognitive process. This self-recognition not only indicates consciousness but self-investigation too. Notably, this is also a key process in how humans identify and regulate their own identities (Francis 2018). Figure 4.23 is the first of many of these self-recognition developments in Dolores, with the final one being her ability to recognise the inner voice she hears throughout the season as her own. Thus, *Westworld* consistently parallels real human processes with those of the artificial hosts, indicating that the hosts can have human experiences and should be treated accordingly.



Figure 4.23: Dolores sees herself for the first time in the window, *Chestnut* (S01E02), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

According to Köller (2019, 170), misogyny is a highly profitable doctrine. Rather than personal revenge, it is this violent and capitalistic misogyny that Dolores seeks to eradicate (Köller 2019, 170). Arguably, this is the goal of the showrunners too. By masking part of Dolores's

personality with a masculine persona, viewers must come to terms with their own gender-based biases. For example, reference to the elusive Wyatt is often made, in which *he* is described as an evil and violent *man* who murdered an entire town. In *The Stray* (S01E03) Teddy says Wyatt felt that he deserved ownership of the land and thus killed those that he felt did not deserve it. In Teddy's visions, Wyatt is a man, and is therefore always referred to as such. However, Teddy comes to realise, along with the audience, that Wyatt is not a man, but is Dolores (Figure 4.24). Prior descriptions of Wyatt play on the reasonable assumption that this violent persona is a man. This not only exposes biases about what masculinity entails, but also makes the reveal that Wyatt is Dolores more jarring. Accordingly, Neal King and Martha McCaughey (2001, 2) argue that depictions of violent women are more disconcerting than violent men because male violence is more frequent on screen. In Figure 4.24, Teddy sees Dolores calmly walking among the dead, not Wyatt. In the background, she pauses and looks at him before turning and continuing to walk, seemingly unbothered by the many bodies surrounding her. Dolores *is* Wyatt, the mysterious and elusive male villain. *She* massacred the town at Arnold's instruction.



Figure 4.24: Teddy sees Dolores standing among the hosts they killed, *The Bicameral Mind* (S01E10), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

Furthermore, the voice that Dolores hears throughout the season, telling her to remember and guiding her to the centre of the maze is male. This corresponds with Arnold's relationship with Dolores, as well as the integration of the violent male-coded personality called Wyatt (Kessous 2019, 215). Dolores is thus controlled by men (Kessous 2019, 215). However, this external voice is revealed to be an internal, feminine voice in the final episode (Kessous 2019, 215). In Figure 4.25, Dolores is mirrored by herself, realising that the voice is her own. Present Dolores

in trousers talks with past Dolores in her dress who represents the centre of the maze. As previously mentioned, self-recognition is a key component of consciousness, and this moment solidifies Dolores's sentience. In the final episode, Dolores says to Teddy, echoing a similar sentiment to Wyatt in Teddy's account of him, "I understand now, this world doesn't belong to them. It belongs to us," before killing Ford. She claims ownership, replicating the conditions of the Park as property to be owned (Kessous 2019, 217). This process is similar to how she achieves autonomy as a woman dressed in men's clothing and behaviours (Kessous 2019, 217). In other words, she adopts the rules of the game in order to break them. Dolores changes back into her blue dress before enacting the violence of the final moments. Though still operating in a visual binary, she has made a choice on her own, indicating the formation of an independent identity. Her memories take her between different temporalities and different identities (Netolicky 2017, 98). She constantly has flashbacks of the village she massacred. However, by the end of the season, she has realised the multi-faceted nature of her personality, accepting her multiplicity of selves in the pursuit of freedom (Netolicky 2017, 98). Importantly, she embraces the fearsome Wyatt personality, swapping her blonde damsel persona with the male cowboy villain persona (Netolicky 2017, 99). Azvedo and Azvedo (2018, 105) describe Dolores as "the *ingénue* turned executioner." This allows for a reading of her personality as more complex than initially assumed or intended by those who made her.



Figure 4.25: Dolores realises the voice she has been listening to belongs to herself, *The Bicameral Mind* (S01E10), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

In *Contrapasso* (S01E05), Dolores changes into trousers and a button-down shirt. This more "masculine" outfit exemplifies a shift in her gender expression (MacKenzie-Margulies 2020,

15). Of note, it is a man, El Lazo, who tells her to change into this outfit. It is significant, then, when she changes back into her blue dress in the finale. Though her personality and behaviour now have more masculine traits, she returns to her innocent and feminine appearance. Because Menicucci (2020, 22) argues that the Park is an experiment of the posthuman objective of a world beyond binaries, Dolores can be read as occupying a grey space between binaries, rather than existing in exclusively one or the other. Torres-Quevedo (2019, 174) concurs that *Westworld* explores alternative models of femininity. While maintaining her appetite for violent revenge, she presents in her feminine dress and hairstyle. No longer the damsel, she takes charge of the onset of a host-led revolution, which is further explored in subsequent seasons. Dolores evolves from the story's object to its subject (Nussbaum 2016). Figures 4.26 and 4.27 are from the first scene of the first episode and the last scene of the last episode respectively. In Figure 4.26, Dolores is catatonic and naked, waiting to be asked another question or given a command. She is doll-like in both her stillness and appearance. In contrast, in Figure 4.27, Dolores is self-assured and determined. She holds the gun with which she shot Ford and is opening fire on the party without doubt. Dolores lacks remorse when making decisions that serve her cause (Arriola 2020, 1209). She is fully clothed and in control. In examining these two images side by side, the vast changes that Dolores has undergone in the season become apparent. However, despite this, she maintains her femininity in both.

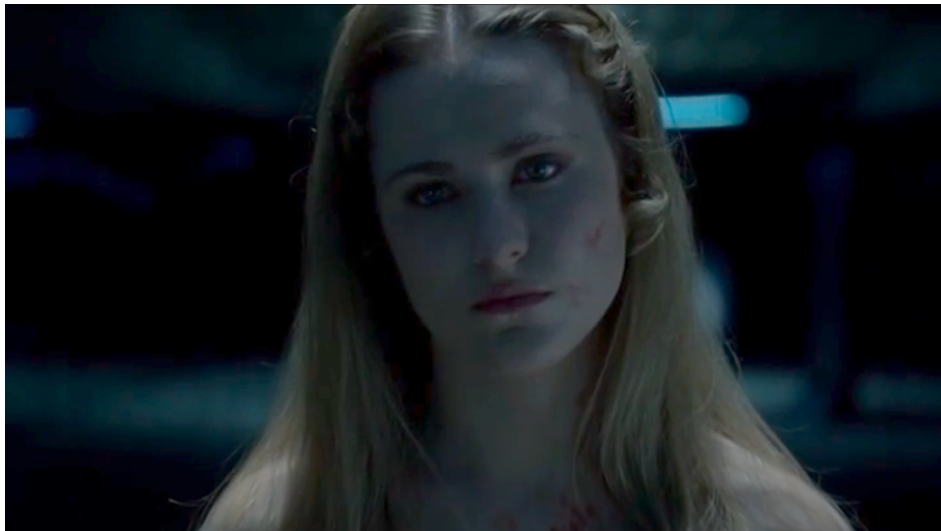


Figure 4.26: Dolores is questioned, *The Original* (S01E01), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.



Figure 4.27: Dolores attacks the party, *The Bicameral Mind* (S01E10), *Westworld*, 2016. Screenshot by author.

Regardless of the complexity of Dolores’s story, it is worth noting that her triumphant ending at the end of Season 1 is ambiguous. It is suggested that her newly self-assured personality is part of Ford’s new narrative that is teased throughout the season. Ford activates the “damsel-defying” Wyatt narrative (Netolicky 2017, 100). And, just as Arnold did, Ford programmes Dolores to kill him. When Dolores begins to rebel, she does so in accordance with her inner villainous character and Ford’s new narrative. For this reason, her body may be considered a clean slate onto which the wishes of her makers are projected. It is also revealed that this is not the first time she has reached the centre of the maze, and it may be argued that this is another kind of (more complex) narrative repetition (Köller 2019, 171). In other words, it is revealed that Dolores’s season-long narrative toward consciousness was another path designed for her. Thus, Aaron Bady (2016) states that “[e]ven when *Westworld’s* hosts rebel [...] they continue to obey.” Dolores then remains “the sum of her constructed ‘parts’” (Mullen 2018, 5-6). Because of the season’s narrative conclusion, viewers must ask themselves a number of questions:

Is her newfound strength her choice or her coding? Is she acting on her own or still as a controlled puppet, or a cog in a machine from which she cannot transcend or escape? (Netolicky 2017, 100).

Along similar lines, Köller (2019, 171) asks:

Is this then independence? And if it is, how do we read the fact that it was given to Dolores by the man who had previously victimised her since her very genesis – the man who has now *decided for her* to ‘imagine a story where she doesn’t have to be the damsel’ anymore?





The answers to these questions are strategically withheld at the closing of Season 1 (Köller 2019, 171). The reading of Dolores as independent is thus not definitive.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

In *Westworld*, Nolan and Joy imagine a posthuman world where man's position is decentralised. *Westworld* begins with domination by rich male humans and ends in a revolution led by non-human women. *Westworld* highlights implicit biases viewers have internalised and imposed on others and themselves. It challenges these biases by reversing expected gendered performances, allowing viewers to question those roles that have been inherited and by which we define ourselves. While asking philosophical questions about what it means to be human, *Westworld* also questions contemporary beliefs about gender. The Park contains and replicates many myths that both reproduce and question gender binaries. It replicates the socio-cultural construct of gender imposed on humans by mirroring it onto androids. *Westworld* provides complex questions about femininity, and the construction and performance of gender by concentrating on two female characters, Dolores and Maeve, in their struggle for agency and autonomy. Thus, *Westworld* imagines a future beyond the patriarchal and humanist confines of society. *Westworld* highlights the avenues through which gender is consciously constructed, not only for the hosts, but for the humans too. The series also takes the side of the androids, and therefore the feminine, positioning them as oppressed figures who deserve sympathy.

The series produces norms so that it can later break them down, exposing violent, patriarchal exploitation. *Westworld* capitalises on biases about masculinity so that it can subvert preconceived ideas about femininity as passive and unimposing. It poses important questions about the nature of humanity and Western social convention that shapes gendered bodies, and more specifically objectified female bodies. It is likely that the hosts are never completely free from the conditioning of their oppression, and that their agency therefore has a limit. Despite this, however, the composite construction of Dolores's femininity marks an important moment in screen culture.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

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It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation  
between human and machine.

- Donna Haraway

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#### 5.1 Introduction

In seeking to examine how femininity may be employed as a tool, this study has explored seminal ideas about the representation of femininity on screen and how those ideas emerge in digital culture. Making use of Laura Mulvey's influential essay, *VPNC* (1975) as a theoretical foundation, the contemporary approach to feminine characters on screen was investigated. This investigation revealed that in contrast to the dichotomous representation of women in twentieth-century cinema, the on-screen machine-women of the twenty-first century require a more complex reading, indicating the significant impact of feminist discourse on portrayals of women on the screen. The hermeneutic analysis of the chosen visual material indicated differences and similarities in how femininity is represented. The study sought to examine feminine machine-women in the digital age, finding that while many stereotypes continue to persist, they are also challenged in important ways.

#### 5.2 Summary of Chapters

Chapter 1 set out to contextualise the necessity for the study of how femininity is used as a tool of both oppression and liberation of robot-women on screen. It outlines how the female body is subjected to historical and cultural ideas about what it is to be a woman. It identifies the relationship between femininity and technology, particularly in the SF genre. Additionally, Mulvey's (1975) feminist analysis of Hollywood cinema is identified as a key theoretical basis for the research. Further, a review of the literature concerning feminism, gender and technology, posthumanism, and the gendered robot introduced key theories to situate the research. It is revealed that there is an omission in the literature in considering femininity as stifling and/or emancipatory in the concept of the SF machine-woman. By examining both historical and contemporary ideas about femininity on screen, the scene for interpreting machine-women is set.



Chapter 2 provides context for gender discourse by identifying key areas of thought in the sphere of gender. It considers a brief historical account of film that positions men and women differently in the social sphere and in the norms of representation. The core of Chapter 2 comprises the discussion of how Hollywood cinema constructs women on screen as objects and how it assumes the spectator is male, according to Mulvey (1975). By examining Mulvey's *VPNC* in-depth, including its reception, it is evident that her theory continues to maintain relevance in the twenty-first century. It thus follows that female-centred content on screen in the contemporary moment is discussed. This shows that though feminist film analysis has evolved significantly, it continues to be a worthwhile site of inquiry.

The discussion on femininity in machines on screen is given a spotlight in Chapter 3 by examining *Metropolis* and *Ex Machina*. Positioning the reading of these texts in a cultural moment that involves virtual assistants reveals that there is a trend to anthropomorphise and feminise AI. In SF, the analysis of Maria and false Maria exposes the frequently explored dichotomy of virgin/vamp, providing a useful background for the analysis of Ava in *Ex Machina* that follows. The representation of Ava reveals the perspective that femininity and technology can be threatening. However, it also teases the agency that can be found within the fragmented construction of the artificial female body.

Finally, in Chapter 4 the analysis of Dolores in *Westworld* unveils how humanism and male-centred socio-cultural positions may be challenged on screen. Chapter 4 identifies the Western genre as one that prescribes gender roles. *Westworld* employs this in order to then subvert common tropes within a familiar, but highly technologised, Western environment. The analysis of Dolores's trauma and finding of her own voice demonstrates the space for the feminine transgression of previously fixed boundaries.

### **5.3 Contribution of the Study**

This dissertation has shown how pervasive ideas about femininity are. It exposes taken-for-granted representations on screen by asking why AI needs to be gendered and why it is often skewed toward the feminine. The exploration of femininity as a tool highlights the significant role visual images play in wider cultural notions of femininity and the future of technology. Considering historically relevant feminist theory in the context of contemporary depictions of women in SF texts cultivates a more expansive framework for considering on-screen femininity in the current cultural media climate.



The main contribution of this study is to consider long-standing ideas about the representation of women on screen from a renewed perspective, establishing these ideas as still relevant in the contemporary moment. More specifically, a focused analysis of contemporary popular culture representations of machine-women indicates the importance and topical nature of ongoing debates about women in the digital space. While many studies have considered the representation of femininity on screen, this study's focus on Dolores's narrative and aesthetic construction adds to limited existing analyses of her character. Additionally, while gender dichotomies continue to exist, they are also overcome in contemporary narratives, empowering *constructed* women to *co-construct*.

#### **5.4 Limitations of the Study**

This dissertation has focused on fictional representations of femininity on screen and is thus theoretical and discursive, rather than offering practical analysis of real feminised AI systems. It also offers a speculative, and therefore subjective, analysis of images. Because the research explores femininity within a set of parameters, additional readings of feminist perspectives are excluded. For instance, considerations for race, class, and sexual orientation in contemporary feminist scholarship might provide a more well-rounded viewpoint.

Additionally, in the interest of focusing the study, there are inevitably many topics that are not discussed. The study focuses solely on Mulvey's psychoanalytic feminist film analysis as a theoretical background. There have been extensive and significant changes in feminist theory in the decades since her seminal text was published. Considering these additions to the repository of feminist knowledge would likely result in alternative readings of the machine-woman on screen. Additionally, focusing on one character in each case study limits the ability to identify similarities and differences within the texts, which could provide a more well-rounded account of contemporary thought on femininity on screen. Along similar lines, the study's focus on one season and one character in *Westworld* limits the wider meanings explored within the series.

#### **5.5 Suggestions for Further Research**

Based on the research presented here, many subsequent studies are possible. Proceeding from the aforementioned limitations, a study focusing on non-fictional feminine AI might provide interesting insight into the real-world implications of pre-existing ideas around gendered



machines. Considering additional areas in media, such as video games and social media, that consider the topics discussed here may also be of value in expanding additional cultural perspectives.

Another suggestion for further research is investigating how thinking about race might apply to the concept of the machine-woman. As Haraway (2016 [1985], 54) describes women of colour as “a cyborg identity,” centring race in the discussion might yield interesting and significant insights on the contemporary posthuman subject on screen. Similarly, Maeve in *Westworld* would be a compelling character for this discussion. Though only briefly referred to in this dissertation, the construction of Maeve as a Black prostitute robot who achieves sentience would prove valuable within the broader context of posthumanist feminist studies. In a similar vein, it might be interesting to compare masculinity and femininity within the characters of *Westworld*, taking the status of human or host into consideration at the forefront.

As technology continues to evolve rapidly, it follows that the trend in research will continue to develop. Likewise, feminism and the social situation of women are never in their final states and the representation of women will endure as a compelling site of inquiry within feminist scholarship. It is possible that this research has inspired more questions than it has answered. In the words of Bernard Lowe, “let’s see where this path leads.”



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