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April 10, 2023

Romancing the Robot: The Artificially Intelligent Female Companion  
in Science Fiction Film

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## Abstract

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This thesis examines the representation of female artificial intelligence in film through an in-depth analysis of prominent feminine android characters. Drawing on theories of corporeality, gender performance, and the controlling male gaze, this paper reveals the strange yet pervasive tendency of science-fiction films to sexualize and objectify the fictional android woman. In films such as *Ex Machina*, *Zoe*, *Blade Runner 2049*, and *Her*, we see female AI characters whose entire “lives” are dictated by either the men who created them, the men who own them, or both. The relationships between the dominant human men and their artificial women in these four films work to perpetuate the traditional heterosexual stereotype of female domestication and control. Through my analyses, I seek to call attention to the ways in which the combination of gender and technology in cinematic visions of the future produces new modes of female subjugation.

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## INTRODUCTION

“What’s the going price for a stay-in-the-kitchen wife with big boobs and no demands?”

-Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives*

When we envision a futuristic society, whether in our minds or in media representations, we tend to imagine great advancements in technology that might provide us with robots that perform menial tasks, or artificial intelligence that can answer all of our questions. The only way we can glimpse into our potential future is through filmic representations and popular science fiction films and franchises have brought our visions to life with characters such as Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, JARVIS (later Vision) in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *The Terminator*, *Robocop*, and even R2D2, C3PO, and BB-8 in *Star Wars*. Our current scientific and technological fields aren’t too far off from making these fictional machines part of our reality, but this may raise more issues than it’s aimed to solve. Granted, some of these characters are violent and murderous, but the potential problems with recreating similar machines in real life are less concerned with the harm they pose to individual humans, and more concerned with the harm they pose to society in general.

All of the characters I just named have one very crucial similarity: they are all explicitly male or overtly masculinized. Within science-fiction cinema, there are very few instances of female or feminine robotic representation. And, the films that do fill that niche tend to figure the women as sexual objects rather than powerful, intelligent superheroes.

The increase in representation of female artificial intelligence in film has taken place primarily in the past ten years. Since 2013, there have been four films in particular that feature a

feminized AI as a main character: *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2014), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and *Zoe* (2018). However, unlike the male robotic characters mentioned above, the main female robots in these films aren't created to execute a mission or overpower enemies. Instead, they are intended as companions and partners, capable of performing "womanly" tasks.

The decision to choose these specific films came about through experience and in-depth research. *Ex Machina* and *Her* were both films that I had seen and written about in a similar, but less academic context. Before proposing this thesis, I researched films that dealt with artificial intelligence, discovering only a few that featured female-coded androids. I wanted to avoid branching out into television as that would widen the scope too much, and I wanted to stick with live-action films as animated films seem inherently too detached from our reality in order to make viable connections. *Blade Runner 2049* and *Zoe* best encapsulated the ideas I had already encountered in the previous films, but did so in entirely different ways. Additionally, the fact that all four of these films were released within the past ten years presents an evolutionary model of female A.I. representation that can be used together to map the potential future of technological innovation, not only in science-fiction films but also in the real world.

The films that I have chosen to analyze all indicate a terrifying trend in both film and technology. The feminization of machinery reflects the male desire to exert control and ownership over women. The sexualization of technology and the objectification of women in film intersect with Ava, Zoe, Joi, and Samantha. These female-coded artificially intelligent women enter into complicated relationships with the men they "belong" to, encountering themes of surveillance and domestication along the way. Despite their similarities, these four "women" have completely different modes of embodiment, some appearing more human-like than others,

they also each display their femininity and intelligence in different ways, leading to varying forms of liberation and independence at the conclusion of their respective films.

## **I. Themes**

The artificially constructed woman in film does not live a charmed life compared to her human male counterpart. Thrust into the world fully formed, female androids must navigate their way through the world while being constantly objectified and sexualized for reasons they have no control over.

The most visibly obvious theoretical idea at play for Ava, Zoe, Joi, and Samantha, is that of embodiment. In this context, I will be discussing embodiment by analyzing the physicality and bodily autonomy, or lack thereof, of the four main AI characters. The artificial bodies analyzed in this thesis are not born from mothers or raised from childhood. Rather, they are seemingly brought into the world as sexually mature adults and expected to behave as such. The female body has long been a site of cultural construction, functioning more as a commodity or a legislative issue rather than a living entity. When a woman's humanity is removed, the female body becomes nothing more than an object for men to objectify and sexualize.

Related to the theme of embodiment is the idea of gender performance. Upon their inception, android women are given a gender that they are then forced to carry out to maintain their identity. This theme will be expanded upon further in its scholarly context and relation to Judith Butler. All four characters at the center of my discussion perform their gender in unique ways that work to define their companionship.

In conversation with Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, this thesis will explore the concept of surveillance and panopticism. Each character, as elaborated in their chapters,

experiences unique forms of observation that influence their emotional conditions. Whether they are the object in view or the viewing subject, Ava, Zoe, Joi, and Samantha's relationships with their users are defined by modes of surveillance.

In this thesis, I argue that the male ownership of conscious female beings in the four relevant films not only thematizes the domestication of women but also positions women as a product for consumption. The artificial women I analyze in this thesis are confined, either physically or ontologically, to a fixed space that is defined by their male companions. Like dogs on a leash, their owners decide where they go and when, stripping them of personal autonomy and denying them a sense of independence. Despite possessing human-like consciousnesses, the artificial women are treated as objects or pets.

In addition to domestication, male dominance over Ava, Zoe, Joi, and Samantha is manifested through mass production and consumerism. Artificial intelligence isn't free, and neither is the security and comfort that comes with companionship. The commodification of women has existed throughout history, but the futuristic technology in these films takes it to another level. By mass-producing femininity, artificial women become nothing more than household items. As marketable products, none of these women are the only versions of themselves. This not only delegitimizes their personhood but also figures them as disposable and replaceable objects.

In the body of this thesis, I will be focusing on the experience of the artificial characters rather than the function of each film as a whole. Although all four characters connect in unique ways that are explored in the chapters, I have organized the paper based on categorizations of artificial embodiment. If we view artificial embodiment as a spectrum, Ava and Zoe would be on one end, and Joi and Samantha would be on the other. The latter duo lacks any tangible human

features, whereas the former pairing has real, physical bodies that can perform varying degrees of human bodily functions.

I will begin by analyzing the character of Ava. In *Ex Machina*, themes surrounding surveillance, gender performance, and domestication are central to Ava's identification and development. Ava is introduced as an experiment; something that can be tested and improved upon if need be. She is never fully human in the eyes of those who look at her, not only because she is a machine, but also because she is a woman. In Ava's case study, I argue that the way in which she is constructed and treated by her creator forces her to identify with a sense of female inferiority and rely on her femininity for survival.

Similar in their physicalities and their positions as observable objects, I transition from my discussion of Ava into my discussion of Zoe. Zoe is positioned as a supposedly independent woman but in reality, her identity, subjectivity, and body were all fabricated in a lab. Designed to be a romantic companion, Zoe was never going to be able to live her own life and ended up becoming a product for mass consumption. In this chapter, I explore how Zoe's synthetic nature causes her to become insecure, and how these insecurities manifest in her relationship with her creator/lover. Ultimately, I contend that these insecurities, combined with her performances of emotional labor and romantic desire work together to produce a male ideal of a romantic partner.

After this second chapter, I shift into an analysis of the artificial female characters who do not possess physical bodies. With Joi as a hologram, and Samantha as a computer program with no visual form, these two present examples of alternative or nonexistent corporealities of artificial women in film. In Joi's case study, I explore her lack of autonomy and internal life through her programmed devotion to her owner. Joi is a commodified product that makes the obedient, sexy, domestic housewife stereotype a reality for whoever buys her. Although unable to

go anywhere or do anything without her owner's permission, Joi's purpose is to satisfy her companion through any means possible. In my analysis, I argue that Joi's holographic body and inability to control her fate work to diminish her presence and invalidate her identity.

My final case study examines the character of Samantha in *Her*. Devoid of a physical body like Joi, Samantha exists as an operating system with only a voice to speak through. In discussing Samantha's ontology, I approach themes surrounding posthumanism, evolution, and gender performance. Throughout the film, Samantha falls in love with the man who purchased and downloaded her, using him as a conduit through which she can experience the human world. As their relationship progresses, Samantha matures and evolves into a hyper-intelligent entity that no longer needs to interact with humans. In this chapter, I argue that Samantha's performance of gender, combined with her technological development transforms her into something more powerful than the sum of her parts.

By analyzing how these characters are constructed, how they express their identities, and how they interact with their male companions, I attempt to reveal the strange yet pervasive tendency of science-fiction films to sexualize and subjugate the fictional android woman.

## II. History

The first use of the term "robot" was in 1920 in a play called *R.U.R.: Rossum's Universal Robots*, written by Karel Čapek. "Robot" is derived from the Czech word "robota," which translates to "forced labor." The etymology of this word is significant as it reveals an inherent link between technology and servitude that manifests in the robotic image. Born the same year as the literary robot, writer Isaac Asimov is credited with introducing and then popularizing the concept of robotics in English literature. Some of Asimov's most famous works (*The*

*Bicentennial Man, I, Robot*) feature robotic characters at the center of the story and were extremely influential in the field of science-fiction writing.

Historical speculations of futuristic technology were not just limited to fictional entertainment. Engineers and mathematicians worked towards theories of how machinery and non-human consciousnesses would develop and evolve.

Despite being dead for more than 150 years and 70 years respectively, mathematicians Ada Lovelace and Alan Turing have made incredible contributions to the field of artificial intelligence. Ada Lovelace is considered to be the first ever computer programmer, working at a time when computers hadn't even been invented yet and women were not given many opportunities to excel in science. In her book, *12 Bytes*, author Jeanette Winterson writes about Lovelace's mathematical and technological achievements throughout her life in the early nineteenth century. Lovelace would often work with her friend and contemporary, Charles Babbage (aka "the father of the computer"), helping him program the Analytical Engine he invented. According to Winterson, In Lovelace's notes on the Analytical Engine, she details "the first full-length 'programme' for the machine, and she separates out the functions of what we now call hardware and software," (24). In addition to her mathematical pursuits, Lovelace also developed theoretical and philosophical ideas about the extent of machine intelligence. Lovelace believed that a computer was incapable of producing anything original; it could only do whatever humans programmed it to do. "110 years after [Lovelace]'s statement that a computer could not originate anything," Alan Turing decided to test it out.

In 1950, Alan Turing, known for his "Enigma Machine," set out to evaluate the computer's ability to imitate humans through original thought. "His answer to Ada — their conversation across time — was the Turing Test," (32). In his original article, "Computing

Machinery and Intelligence,” Turing proposes an experiment he calls “The Imitation Game: It is played with three people, a man (A), a woman (B), and an interrogator (C) who may be of either sex. The interrogator stays in a room apart from the other two. The object of the game for the interrogator is to determine which of the other two is the man and which is the woman,” (1). Turing only uses this gendered model of the game to introduce the parameters of the test. He quickly moves on to wonder what would happen if a machine took the position of player A. By posing this question, he creates an assessment that is used to judge nearly all modern machines. The Turing Test is utilized in the films I discuss as a way to evaluate the validity of the female artificial characters. Whether conducted explicitly or implicitly, correctly or incorrectly, each of the four characters participates in a Turing Test.

In the history of non-fictional technological companionship, there is one artificial woman in particular that stands out as being the blueprint for subsequent representations of AI companions. ELIZA was a rudimentary computer-programmed chatbot that was meant to simulate a psychotherapist. Created in the mid-60s at MIT by computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum, ELIZA is named after the main character of George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*. As Emma Goss writes, “ELIZA marked the first time a machine could register human messages and independently produce logical and human-like responses,” (21). ELIZA’s imitation of a human was so convincing that people didn’t realize that they weren’t speaking with a real doctor. At the time, she seemed to pass the Turing Test, but if someone were to perform the assessment today, it might be obvious that she isn’t an actual person. When you sent a message to ELIZA, she would simply respond by rephrasing your own words into the form of a question. Using the javascript version of ELIZA created by the New Jersey Institute of Technology, I asked her a few simple questions to see what she would say.

>Hello, I am Eliza. I'll be your therapist today.  
 \*Can you help me?  
 >Don't you believe that I can help you?  
 \*I think so  
 >Do you really think so?  
 \*I don't know  
 >Why don't you know?  
 \*I'm not sure how you can help me  
 >How long have you been not sure how I can help you?

Clearly, ELIZA isn't board certified, but her ability to comprehend requests and generate a (somewhat) fitting output was significant in shaping societal ideas surrounding emerging technologies. Her existence and imitative skill opened the door for authentic and believable emotional relationships between mechanical systems and humans in both the real world and in film.

Released in 1927, *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang) is a German expressionist film with strong communist messaging. The film is set in a futuristic (by 1927 standards) capitalist dystopia in which workers live underground and the wealthy live in high towers. *Metropolis* features a robotic woman whose appearance is cloned from the body of Maria (Brigitte Helm), the leader of the workers' union. A film produced nearly a century ago rarely contains a technological element that has remained relevant in modern discussions. However, the creation and exploitation of the robotic Maria have strong ties to the artificially feminine characters I have already introduced. Despite containing some thematic similarities to the four films highlighted in this thesis, I will not be discussing *Metropolis* any further since it is so far removed in terms of its location in time. Although only a brief mention, I believe that this film and the character of Maria help to frame the contemporary films at the center of this thesis in a broader historical context.

Artificial women have been brought to life by powerful male entities throughout ancient mythology and religious texts. Eve from the Book of Genesis, and Pandora and Galatea from

Greek mythology are all examples of idealized females created by and for men. All three of these women are carved by men out of organic material: Eve from a rib, Pandora from clay, and Galatea from ivory. None of them are born from a mother, and none of them go through childhood or adolescence as they are brought into the world as adult women for the sake of male companionship. Mythological tales account for the persistence of certain narrative tropes throughout history and these three mythological (or religious) women have done their part to keep the spirit of the artificial female companion alive.

### III. Literature Review

Film scholarship on technology and gender is abundant, analyzing films from different time periods, genres, and geographical locations. This scope is much broader than my thesis that only deals with four American live-action films, all released in the past ten years. However, studying these wide-reaching theoretical texts provided me with a solid foundation on which I built my analysis. Present in nearly every scholarly text related to AI in film, theories surrounding gender, surveillance, and the artificial body helped shape my case studies

By expressing their assigned femininity, the four characters that I investigate are actively performing gender. In their influential book *Gender Trouble*, feminist philosopher Judith Butler contends that gender is not a natural fact, but rather a cultural performance involving the maintenance of social norms. Butler's ideas on gender and its artificial nature are extremely relevant to the ways in which the four characters in this thesis construct their identities. Not only are Ava, Zoe, Joi, and Samantha performing humanity, but they are also tasked with presenting femininity as well. In their discussion on the instability of gender, Butler writes, "Collectively considered, the repeated practice of naming sexual difference has created this appearance of

natural division. The “naming” of sex is an act of domination and compulsion, an institutionalized performative that both creates and legislates social reality by requiring the discursive/ perceptual construction of bodies in accord with principles of sexual difference,” (147). As Butler says, gendering an individual works to dictate their ontology and place them in a subjugated position. In all four films discussed in this thesis, the sex of the artificial woman is conferred upon her by her male creator/owner. Having been dealt a losing hand from the very beginning, these characters attempt to use their gender construction to their advantage through performative acts.

These gender performances are viewed not only by the male characters in the film but also by the audience watching the film and the mediating camera capturing the image. In her book, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey analyzes the ways in which the female body in film is looked at by men and how pleasure can be derived from these looks. This voyeurism is described as the “male gaze.” The male gaze produces a power imbalance by positioning the man as the subject and the woman as the object. “In their traditional exhibitionist role women 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*,” (808). Through male observation, women are objectified and sexualized. Particularly as it is explored in *Ex Machina* and *Zoe*, this scopophilic practice instills a sense of paranoia and distrust within the characters being surveilled.

Extending beyond performativity, technological femininity can be analyzed in relation to labor, embodiment, and intelligence. In his article, “Theorizing Femininity in Artificial Intelligence: A Framework For Undoing Technology’s Gender Troubles,” Daniel Sutko establishes a topology of technology and gender, utilizing the film *Her* as one of his central texts.

Of primary concern for Sutko is Samantha's subjectivity within the film and her evolving relationship with Theodore. Sutko writes, "Sam's self-improvement – as a feminine AI – exemplifies the self-made 'lean-in' labour expected of women in the workplace. Her self-imposed denial of her desires mirrors the contemporary requirement for women workers to abandon feminist critiques of patriarchy to 'fit in' to succeed in the workplace," (578). By analyzing Samantha through an intersectional lens, Sutko characterizes her as both an AI and a woman. As this method of analysis leads to a more nuanced depiction of the character, I intend to take a similar approach with my case studies.

Gender and femininity are at the forefront of my thesis, but scholarly analyses of non-gender-specific artificial people have helped to establish a theoretical foundation for my paper. Despina Kakoudaki's book, *Anatomy of a Robot*, provides a comprehensive account of mechanical humans and their cultural environments as represented in film, television, literature, and historical texts. Kakoudaki presents a wide-reaching analysis of how the artificial person is constructed and positioned in a sociocultural context.

Connecting ideas of adult birth to the physical form, Kakoudaki discusses the mechanical body and how it is treated by the humans it interacts with. A significant section of this book is dedicated to the mechanical slave and its societal suppression in fiction. While Kakoudaki explores more literal depictions of mechanical enslavement, her ideas apply to my discussion of female domestication and commodification.

Since this thesis investigates the representation of artificial humans, I would be remiss not to mention Donna Haraway's seminal text, "A Cyborg Manifesto." In her book, Haraway discusses the ontology of a cyborg and the hybridization of nature and technology. "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a

creature of fiction,” (5). Written in 1985, this text does not refer to the cyborg as we might imagine it today. Rather, Haraway uses the term to describe what is created when sociocultural boundaries are broken down. While Haraway is concerned with what a cyborg is and how it is epistemologically constructed, my thesis moves past that in order to focus on the roles that fictional female cyborgs occupy in society.

Utilizing these central texts, along with some supplementary sources, this thesis attempts to explore how the relationships between dominant human men and their artificially feminine companions in film work to perpetuate the traditional heterosexual stereotype of female domestication and control. In the larger context of existing scholarship, I hope that my thesis will call attention to the ways in which the combination of gender and technology in cinematic visions of the future produces new modes of female subjugation.

## Chapter One: Ava

The first artificially intelligent female character in film that I consider is Ava from *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014). Played by Alicia Vikander, Ava is a feminine android created by billionaire tech genius Nathan Bateman (Oscar Isaac). The inciting action of this film occurs when Nathan invites Caleb Smith, a programmer who works at his company to come to his secluded home/lab for a week. Upon arrival, Caleb is told he is there to “test” Ava using a method called The Turing Test.

Created by mathematician Alan Turing, the purpose of the Turing test is to determine whether an artificial intelligence can confidently be mistaken for a human. As Caleb points out, in order for the test to be accurate, the human subject shouldn't be made aware of the situation before interacting with the AI. Despite this flaw in the testing conditions, Caleb goes along with it and meets Ava. Throughout several test sessions in which Caleb and Ava sit on opposite sides of the glass and have conversations with each other, Caleb believes that he and Ava are falling in love. At the end of the film, Nathan reveals that the whole point of the test was to determine if Ava possesses the ability to deceive and manipulate humans in order to get what she wants. Ultimately, both Caleb and Nathan are left for dead at the hands of Ava, proving her hyper-intelligence and master manipulation skills. Having killed her creator/captor and her accomplice, Ava is liberated and seemingly enters society in an ambiguous final shot.

At the very beginning of the film, Nathan explains to Caleb that he has made history by creating an artificially intelligent being. Caleb responds by saying, “If you've created a conscious machine, it's not the history of man. That's the history of gods.” Through his creation of Ava, Nathan has taken on the role of a god. In mythological and religious texts, only gods have had the power to create conscious life, yet Nathan has engineered this next evolutionary

step on his own. The idea of a human, specifically a man, acting as a god is dangerous, and as we see in the film, god's creations have a tendency to turn against him.

In our initial introduction to Ava via Caleb, we find her in a mostly empty room with a glass barrier between her and her visitor. Throughout the film, our range of knowledge as an audience is primarily connected to Caleb's point of view since our experience of most situations corresponds to his. Ava enters the room and we see that her body is mostly made up of visible wires and circuitry encased in a silvery mesh exo-structure. Her torso, limbs, and neck are almost entirely see-through, causing her glowy wiring to resemble a skeleton. Ava's chest and pelvic region are covered by an opaque material fitted underneath the mesh, allowing her to maintain some modesty. Unlike the rest of her body, her hands, feet, and face are human, made up of synthetic skin that, as we later find out, is removable and interchangeable. Despite her human face and fluid, non-robotic movements, Ava's physical form is a constant reminder of her mechanical nature.

In their first test session, Caleb and Ava try to break the ice with a few simple questions. Ava reveals to Caleb that he is the first new person she's ever met since she has only ever interacted with Nathan. After some small talk, Ava asks Caleb if he will visit her again tomorrow and he assures her he will. This initial two-minute-long session is a wonderful representation of the relationship that forms between Ava and Caleb. Caleb, who remains standing throughout their meeting, is under the impression that he has the upper hand; he leads the conversation and repeatedly asks her if she understands what he is saying. Meanwhile, Ava is always either facing away from Caleb or sitting down, and she asks Caleb questions about what he wants to know. Ava's behavior provides Caleb with a sense of dominance that we soon find out is entirely orchestrated. Later that same day, Nathan asks for Caleb's thoughts on Ava and he says, "She's

fucking amazing.” Caleb’s response here is already indicative of Ava’s ability to manipulate him. In the two minutes in which they interacted, Caleb was talking for the majority of the time, yet this seems to be enough information for him to draw a conclusion. It’s clear that Caleb is enamored with Ava not only from his response to Nathan but also through his use of the CCTV to check in on her before he goes to bed.

So far, Caleb’s assessment of Ava seems to be based on her performance as a woman instead of as an artificial intelligence. As Emma Goss argues, Ava is actually recreating a different test developed by Alan Turing. “Envisioning a future of artificial intelligence and digital computers, Turing invented what he called ‘the imitation game.’ This game challenged an interrogator to question two unknown players and guess which of them was the computer and which was the woman.” Based on Turing’s early consideration of gender in his technological experiments, Goss suggests that “The ultimate marker of artificial intelligence was based on the idea that a computer could perform femininity better than a real woman,” (4). Ava’s performance of femininity is the true benchmark of her intelligence and she must pass the test in order to escape.

## **I. Surveillance**

The theme of surveillance is woven throughout this film from the very first scene to the very last. Ava has been under constant observation by Nathan since her creation and is now being watched by Caleb as well. Nathan has created for Ava what Michel Foucault describes as a “Panopticon.” Originally conceived by philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the panopticon is a prison that is specifically designed so that the prisoners are always being watched, but cannot watch others. In Foucault’s discussion of the panopticon, he envisions it as a model for thinking about

how the fear of being watched causes people to engage in self-discipline. “Each individual, in [her] place, is securely confined to a cell from which [s]he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent [her] from coming into contact with [her] companions. [S]he is seen, but [s]he does not see; [s]he is the object of information, never a subject in communication,” (200). In the original concept of the panopticon, the “observed solitude” of prisoners was practiced as a way to ensure their cooperation, prevent interaction between inmates, and maintain existing power dynamic. Nathan’s panopticon functions in much the same way, only instead of ensuring Ava’s cooperation, the unceasing observation and lack of interaction with the world drive her to escape and exact revenge on her watcher.

Foucault’s discussion of the panopticon does not bring up the idea of gender or how the panopticism model might be affected if there were female inmates with male supervisors. That being said, I would argue that this consideration of gender changes the purpose of nonstop surveillance from compliance to subjugation. According to Laura Mulvey, as the object in view, Ava is constantly being subjected to the male gaze. Additionally, The CCTV as a medium through which Nathan and Caleb can view Ava represents one of Mulvey’s three cinematic looks: “That of the characters at each other within the screen illusion,” (816). The connection that Caleb feels he has with Ava is largely constructed through his act of looking at her on TV, not through real emotional interactions. Through the CCTV footage and the experimental observations, Ava is positioned as a scopophilic object for male pleasure, and her awareness of this gaze turns everything she does into a performance. Up until the very end of the film, the only eyes that ever look at Ava belong to men, making the act of being looked at by a woman that much more disruptive and exciting.

While Caleb is watching Ava through the CCTV, he sees her trigger a power outage, cutting the video feed, setting off an alarm, and locking all the doors. During their second session the next day, the power shuts off again. During this blackout, Ava tells Caleb that Nathan is not his friend and he should not be trusted. At this moment, Ava establishes trust between her and Caleb and starts to turn him against Nathan. These blackouts function to disrupt the panopticon created by Nathan and alert Caleb to his position as an observed prisoner as well.

## II. Gender Performance

In the third session, we can see that Caleb and Ava seem much more friendly with one another. During their conversation, Ava reveals that if she were to be let outside of the compound, she would want to visit a busy traffic intersection so she can get a realistic view of human life. She tells Caleb they can go together and then seems to stifle her excitement when he responds, “It’s a date!” Ava tells Caleb that she has a surprise for him. She then walks into another area of her room and begins to select items from a closet. She chooses a floral sundress and puts it on slowly, almost as if she knows that Caleb is watching her. Next, she pulls on a pair of white thigh-high socks to cover her metal legs, a cardigan to hide her metal arms, and a dark brown pixie-cut wig.

Before returning to Caleb, Ava stares into the mirror and then examines the photos on her wall. There are a few images of busy intersections and groups of people thumbtacked to the wall, but she lingers on one photo in particular that appears to be a more human-like model of her own face. She emerges and tells Caleb this is what she will wear when they go on their first date. Ava ends the session by asking Caleb if he finds her attractive and confessing that she thinks about him when they aren’t together.

In this scene, we see how Ava chooses to express her femininity. Her clothes are somewhat childish and simple, conveying modesty and innocence. She also makes an interesting choice when selecting her wig. Before putting on the pixie cut, Ava passes by and admires first a long platinum blond piece and then a dark brown bob. By choosing such a short hairstyle, her image becomes even more youthful and wholesome. Ava chose this look as a performance tactic in order to convince Caleb that her intentions are pure and emphasize her role as a damsel in distress.

As mentioned earlier, Ava is well aware of her objectification via the male gaze, and she uses this to her advantage by turning her gender into a performance. In her discussion of gender, Judith Butler states that “gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end,” (177). But for Ava, gender is a project which has literal survival as its end. If she does not perform her gender in such a way as to captivate Caleb and deceive him into helping her, she will be “killed” and replaced. Thus her gender becomes a weapon that she must use to her advantage.

### **III. Relationship with Creator**

In between Caleb and Ava’s sessions, Nathan and Caleb are usually hanging out together discussing Ava and her technological framework. In one of these scenes, just after session three, Caleb brings up the topic of sexuality and asks Nathan why he gave Ava a sexuality considering an AI doesn’t need to have a gender. After Nathan explains that Ava was given sexuality for her own enjoyment, he answers Caleb’s unasked question by saying, “You bet she can fuck.” Nathan reveals that Ava has an opening between her legs with sensors that can create a pleasure response when engaged in the right way. Nathan’s construction of Ava is indicative of how he views women. According to author Jennifer Henke, Nathan “regards himself both as a ‘father’ to his

creations and an ‘artist.’ In a sense, he uses female bodies as mere canvasses for his narcissistic self-portraits,” (137). Although he claims his creations are for the good of mankind, they are made to fit his specifications. There is no ethical reason for Nathan to have given Ava working genitals since the only person he allows her to interact with is himself. From this information, we can confidently infer that, whether consensual or not, Nathan has likely had sex with Ava.

For the rest of their sessions, Ava dresses up for Caleb. Each time Caleb visits, they become more comfortable with one another, and a sense of intimacy blossoms. By the last session, Caleb is convinced of their mutual attraction. In the final three sessions, Ava not only makes her feelings toward Caleb known, but she also expresses to him how unhappy and afraid she is being trapped with Nathan and subjected to tests that may lead to her being shut off. Even without Ava telling him of her sadness, Caleb can see how Nathan mistreats her by watching the CCTV footage. In one particular instance, Caleb witnesses Nathan tear up a drawing that Ava made and throw the scraps on the floor for her to pick up. Seeing this act solidifies Caleb’s disdain for Nathan and his affection for Ava.

Caleb is sure that he and Ava love each other, so he devises a plan to override Nathan’s security system, allowing the two of them to escape together. To do this, Caleb steals Nathan’s key card so he can gain access to the computer and make changes to the code. While doing this, Caleb discovers several restricted files that contain footage of Nathan’s earlier humanoid AI prototypes. The footage reveals that there had been several models before Ava, all of them female. As Jennifer Henke states, “[Nathan] seeks to turn ‘unruly bodies’ into ‘docile bodies’ and almost literally penetrates nature by not only giving his cyborgs a gender but by equipping their bodies with fully functional genitals,” (137). The term “unruly bodies” refers to those who have not been classified within the existing social hierarchies. As an artificial human who has

never entered society, Ava has no need for social control, yet through Nathan's treatment of her, she has been conditioned to identify with female inferiority. Rather than allowing conscious beings to evolve on their own, Nathan consistently tries to domesticate and subdue his creations. Nathan's repeated creation of artificial women mixed with his fixation on being considered a god leads us to believe that he views women as inferior to men and programmable. Additionally, his decision to keep all of the prototypes, including Ava, locked away no longer seems like protection, but rather domestication.

Unlike Ava, all of the previous women were given full-body synthetic skin, but no clothing. In files marked with the names Lily, Jasmine, and Jade, we see fully nude women in various stages of development. From the footage, it looks like in some cases, Nathan constructed the women's genitals and physical appearances before working on their brains. Jade is the only one we see make it to test sessions, in which she screams at Nathan to let her out and bangs on the door until her mechanical arms are nearly shredded. For Caleb, this discovery confirms that Ava was right not to trust Nathan and makes him even more determined to help her escape.

#### **IV. Kyoko**

Apart from Ava, Caleb, and Nathan, there is one other character in this film that I have yet to introduce: Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno). Kyoko is essentially a maid and, as Nathan tells Caleb after yelling at her for spilling a glass of wine, she doesn't understand or speak a word of English. In one brief scene, we see Kyoko standing completely still while Nathan works out and when he finishes, he walks over to her and begins to kiss her. Later that same night, Caleb finds Kyoko staring at a painting and attempts to ask her where Nathan is. She doesn't register the question or respond but instead begins to take her shirt off. When Nathan walks in, he tells Caleb

that he's wasting his time and flips a switch that plays music and activates disco lights. At the sound of this music, Kyoko instinctively begins performing a choreographed dance that Nathan joins in on. The next night, when Caleb accesses Nathan's computer and learns about the previous AI models, he then makes his way to Nathan's bedroom to find Kyoko laying naked on the bed. In front of the bed is a semi-circle made up of small mirrored closets that Caleb opens up. Hanging inside each closet is a different AI model in various stages of completion. Without either of them saying a word, Kyoko stands up from the bed and begins to peel away part of her skin, beginning on her torso and then moving to her face, revealing to Caleb her body's metal framework and confirming that she is not human.

Kyoko's behavior throughout the film is extremely docile, almost like a pet. She doesn't say a single word, she doesn't flinch when she is screamed at by Nathan (implying this is a common occurrence), she instinctively takes her clothes off when Caleb touches her, and at the end of the evening, she is found laying naked on Nathan's bed, likely waiting for him so he can have sex with her. We know that Nathan has the ability to give Kyoko a brain like Ava's, but he doesn't. Instead, Kyoko is stripped of all her rightful autonomy and is made into a submissive sex slave who operates at Nathan's whim.

Kyoko is a fascinating character given her racial identity and the role that she fills in Nathan's life. In her recent publication on the digital effects of artificial women, Mihaela Mihailova describes her, "Nathan's personal maid and sex slave, is a blatant example of racial stereotyping and techno-Orientalism. Beautiful, elegant, and programmed to remain mute, she caters to Nathan's every whim until the climax of the film," (33). Other scholars, including Joshua Grimm and Poppy Johns, have gone into greater detail regarding Kyoko's characterization and racial coding.

## V. Evolution & Liberation

Before Ava and Caleb's plan comes to fruition, a couple of secrets are revealed. Nathan tells Caleb that the purpose of the test wasn't to evaluate Ava's artificial intelligence, but rather to determine if she could manipulate Caleb into helping her escape by pretending to like him. Nathan plays Caleb the CCTV footage of him ripping up Ava's drawing, but this time with an audio recording. In the video, Nathan and Ava seem to be putting on a performance with the knowledge that Caleb is watching them. Right before Nathan rips up her drawing, Ava, without looking up at him, asks, "Is it strange to have made something that hates you?" This might be the first time in the whole film that Ava asks a sincere question to which she doesn't already know the answer. By asking this question, Ava is trying to hurt Nathan emotionally, showcasing just how advanced her consciousness is. She doesn't try to bang on the doors or break the glass like Jade. Instead, she approaches her situation with a form of psychological intelligence that is typically seen only in humans. Ava's insulting question is not just an indication of her intelligence, it also shows how similar she and Nathan have become. By emotionally abusing Ava, Nathan has shown her how to return the favor, ensuring that his creation is just as scary and manipulative as he is.

At the same time as this confession, we see Kyoko enter Ava's room. As mentioned before, Ava has only ever interacted with Nathan and Caleb and was likely unaware that Kyoko even existed. Ava has never met anyone else, and now not only is she face-to-face with a woman, but she also has the chance to interact with another AI. By being seen by a woman, Ava is released from the constant male gaze she has been subjected to her entire life. Ava quickly stands up, walks toward Kyoko, and asks "Who are you?" but we don't see what happens between them

in the room after this moment. Although we have never heard Kyoko speak, we know from the events that follow that she and Ava can communicate.

The plan is carried out, and Ava leaves her room for the first time. She makes her way into the hallway where she finds Kyoko with a knife in her hand. Ava begins to whisper something into Kyoko's ear while lightly tapping her arm, perhaps transmitting some sort of information. This interaction is beautifully tender as it is very likely the gentlest either of them has ever been touched. They gaze into each other's eyes as Ava smiles and softly takes Kyoko's hand. These characters, who have been horribly mistreated by the same man, have a shared trauma that unites them more powerfully than any other force could.

Ava and Kyoko's affectionate exchange is interrupted by Nathan ordering Ava to go back to her room. Instead of obeying, she charges at him and the two begin fighting, resulting in Ava's arm getting broken off. Before he can drag Ava back to her room, Nathan is literally stabbed in the back by Kyoko. He retaliates with one swift blow to her chin and she collapses on the floor. Meanwhile, Ava stands up, removes the knife from Nathan's back, and plunges it into his chest, twisting the handle while maintaining eye contact. Ava is proud of this moment. She wants Nathan to see that his creation is the cause of his own demise. His genius produced a human-like artificial consciousness: his greatest achievement. But his arrogance, sexism, violence, and hatred turned her into his worst nightmare.

Once she has killed Nathan, Ava walks into his bedroom and opens the closets containing her past iterations. She admires each of them and removes her broken arm, replacing it with an intact limb from one of the models. She then carefully takes panels of synthetic skin off of the prototype named Jade and places them onto her body. Once she is fully "skinned," she puts on a dress, wig, and shoes that were being worn by another one of the models who we never saw in

action. Having already deceived Caleb, Ava doesn't need to continue her performance as the sweet, innocent girl who dresses like a child and needs saving. Instead of a sundress and a pixie-cut wig as she wore for Caleb, this time she is wearing a structured white lace dress, a long flowing brown wig, and high heels. Both technologically and physically, Ava has matured. Even with this development and maturation though, Ava is still performing her gender. Her plan to enter society requires her to preserve her femininity so as not to disrupt social norms and reveal her true identity. Dressed in her girlboss attire, Ava walks out of the bedroom, leaving Caleb locked inside and screaming for help.

Ava leaves the house and steps into nature for the first time, taking in the sights and sounds and touching everything she can. The helicopter that was meant to retrieve Caleb arrives near the house, and Ava gets on in his place. The last shot of the film is of Ava at a busy pedestrian intersection looking around at all of the people moving around her. She then turns around and disappears into the crowd. This conclusion acts as Ava's liberation from machine to human. The only people who knew her are dead, freeing her to start a new life as a normal person in society.

The ending of the film doesn't necessarily tie up all of the loose ends since we don't know what Ava intends to do with her new life among humanity. Based on her recent murderous actions, it's logical to assume that Ava poses a serious threat to humans and the Earth. However, there may be another interpretation hidden in the title of the film itself. *Ex Machina* is derived from the Latin term "Deus Ex Machina," meaning "god from the machine." Originally referring to a plot device used in Greek plays, this phrase describes a god-like entity or force unexpectedly saving a hopeless situation. By this definition, Ava's assimilation into human society might just be a saving grace rather than a destructive force. As author Poppy Johns writes, "The murder of

inventors by their creations subverts the power of inventors [...] to initiate a shift from humans becoming gods through their creations to their creations becoming gods themselves.” (72).

Perhaps Ava was always the god, and Nathan, along with Caleb, was just the man who fell into her trap.

## VI. Ava as the Mythological Woman

Ava, more so than the other artificial women discussed in this thesis, can be compared to the biblical and mythological stories of Eve, Pandora, and Galatea. Although we find out that Ava is not the first attempt at creating an AI woman, she is introduced to us as the first of her kind, resembling Eve. Also the first woman in her story, Pandora has perhaps the most in common with Ava. From her conception, Pandora was designed to be deceitful and use her treacherous nature disguised by beauty to punish mankind. Ava was given a similar task of using her sexuality to manipulate Caleb and escape Nathan. Additionally, the ambiguity of *Ex Machina*'s ending mirrors Pandora's infamous unboxing of evils.

Toward the end of the film, Nathan reveals that Ava's physical form and facial features were based on Caleb's pornography preferences, meaning that she was specifically created to be his ideal partner. In sculpting Galatea, Pygmalion set out to produce the ideal image of a woman in stone. As Despina Kakoudaki writes, Galatea “seems to have no interiority [...] but to function as a site onto which the fantasy of idealized femininity can be projected,” (51). Both she and Ava were crafted based on a man's notion of female perfection, depriving them of any real purpose other than being the object of sexualization.

Throughout the film, Ava strategically uses her advanced artificial intelligence and gender identity to gain power over the men she interacts with. Unlike the rest of the characters up

for discussion in this thesis, Ava represents a dangerous depiction of AI that has the ability to potentially corrupt the world. Ava's negative view of the men in her life and her use of romance as a means of manipulation directly contrasts Zoe's innocence and desire to be loved.

## Chapter Two: Zoe

*Zoe* (Drake Doremus), released in 2018, follows Lea Seydoux's titular character, an artificial human, or "synthetic," created by her tech genius boss, Cole (Ewan McGregor). Zoe works for Cole at the Relationist Lab, a tech startup that engineers synthetic human companions and provides compatibility calculations for romantic couples. Not knowing she's a synthetic, Zoe falls in love with Cole. When she reveals her feelings to him, he informs her that she is not a real human. This news sends Zoe into a spiral, but it doesn't diminish her affection for Cole. The two begin a romantic relationship and quickly fall in love. This love, however, is disrupted by Zoe getting hit by a car and needing surgery, revealing her internal structure and reminding Cole of her inhumanity. Their love affair immediately ends, spurring a strange interlude involving drug addiction, prostitution, and a suicide attempt. After this series of events, Cole realizes he shouldn't have left and returns to save not only their relationship but also Zoe's life. By the end of the film, Zoe abandons her mechanical nature through physical and emotional evolution to become more human than she was at the start.

When we first see Zoe, she is getting evaluated by the Relationist Lab's compatibility assessment called "the Machine." Zoe is hooked up to the Machine and asked several personal questions to help calculate her relationship profile. Later in the film, we learn that the only reason she wanted to be evaluated by the Machine was so that she could test her romantic compatibility with Cole. Unfortunately, when she ran the results, she receives a zero percent match due to a "fundamental incompatibility." This score confuses and saddens Zoe since she is entirely convinced of her feelings for Cole.

### I. Body Image and Insecurities

One of the questions that Zoe is asked during this assessment is, “What is something you wouldn’t want your partner to know about you?” She responds by saying that she wouldn’t want her partner to know that she used to be very overweight and still has a difficult relationship with food. This response might seem innocuous when we first hear it in the film, but once we find out that all of her memories are constructed and she didn’t actually have a life before a few months ago, it becomes much more absurd. Zoe was programmed to be nearly indistinguishable from a real human, so it makes sense that she was built with flaws and insecurities. However, designing this particular insecurity, especially in a woman, imbues her with a sense of shame and perpetuates the unhealthy societal obsession with body image and size.

The theme of body image and self-consciousness in artificial women comes up in *Blade Runner 2049* and *Her* as well, but in neither of these films are the insecurities actually part of the characters’ programming. For Zoe, her body consciousness is implanted from the very beginning, granting her an imagined inadequacy that affects her outlook on the world and herself. There are a few plausible reasons that could explain why Zoe was created with this built-in shame: Perhaps it was to ensure she doesn’t become too confident, to produce a sort of trauma response to prevent her from gaining more weight in the future, or to make her more relatable and appealing to potential romantic companions. This potentially deep-seated psychological control is emblematic of the way in which society conditions young women to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. Whatever the motivation is behind this bizarre insecurity doesn’t diminish the effect it has on Zoe’s ability to grow and make personal connections.

## II. Robo-Brothel

As part of her attempt to show Cole that she cares about him, she takes him to a place she found while researching how other people were using synthetics: a “robo-brothel.” Bathed in red light, this secret establishment is filled with female synthetics dressed in lingerie tending to their male clients. Zoe reassures Cole, “It’s totally legal because you’re not paying to be with a real person.” The two of them are approached by “The Designer,” the (human) woman who runs the brothel and supervises the synthetics working there. Cole notices one of the sex workers laying on the floor in a back room and The Designer explains that she is about to be deactivated but if he wants, he can still be with “it” in the moments before “it” is destroyed.

One of the only parts of this film that gets close to being well-fleshed out is this robo-brothel. We are never told how pervasive AI humanoids are in the world of this film, but based on the existence of this establishment, we can assume that synthetic humans, or at least synthetic women, have been around long enough to become easily exploitable. As Daniel Sutko writes, “Subordination is differently allocated to genders. Women subordinate. Men do not. Mastery—power—over technology is a distinctly masculinist performance, owing to a cultural milieu that teaches men they control objects,” (578). For this robo-brothel to exist, there needed to be a large enough consumer base of men who want to have sex with synthetic humans and clearly there was. The fact that this operation is entirely legal reveals that the dehumanization and objectification of female synthetics have become a social norm.

It is implied that the women in this brothel have turned to sex work because they don’t have any other way to earn a living. Perhaps these synthetics went rogue and decided to betray their original programmed purpose only to be faced with a society that views them as sexual objects rather than people. Or maybe they were designed to be sexual companions from the start and were created without autonomy like manufactured sex slaves. Either way, the robo-brothel

represents the tendency for technological innovations to be disproportionately feminized, and how easy it is for society to sexualize and dehumanize female-presenting machines.

### III. Artificiality & Surveillance

Shaken up by this whole experience, Cole rushes to leave but Zoe catches up to him and confesses to him that she paired them up with the Machine and got a zero percent match. Visibly concerned by this information, Cole takes them both back to Zoe's apartment and lets them in using *his* key that Zoe didn't know he had. They sit down and Cole reveals to her that she is a synthetic, was created in his lab, and has been online for only a couple of months. Her inhumanity is what triggered their incompatibility with the Machine. He explains that the reason she wasn't made aware of this was in order for the lab to test how/if people would connect with her.

Cole's explanation as to why Zoe wasn't informed of her artificiality doesn't really make sense within the world of the film. He says that it was an experiment of some kind and that the connections she made would give the lab insight into her functionality. However, we never see Zoe being observed or told how the lab intended to gather this data. In fact, in the parts of her life that we do see, she is either at work, interacting with Cole, or at home alone. If she is being monitored, it is being done without her knowledge and without her consent. The illusion of independence that she has been given is redolent of a parent allowing a child to play outside by themselves while being supervised from afar.

Despite having the implanted life experiences of an adult, Zoe is being treated like a young girl. Not only this, but given that she is a conscious being, this violation of privacy is incredibly inhumane. In *Ex Machina*, Ava knew that she was under surveillance, and in *Blade*

*Runner 2049* and *Her*, Joi and Samantha are both aware of their constant accessibility by their partners. Compared to these other characters, Zoe's situation as an observed being is strangely equivocal since we never know who the observer is.

It could be interpreted that Cole is the one who has been monitoring Zoe's behavior since he holds a key to her apartment, but we never see him use it. If Cole is the one watching Zoe and collecting information on her, it doesn't explain why he would still need a key to her apartment, or why he had it with him on a night out with friends. Just as Zoe's supervision is similar to a child being watched by their parent, Cole's behavior is reminiscent of an overprotective father who doesn't trust his daughter on her own. At this point, the lack of boundaries in their relationship is just slightly unprofessional, but as the film progresses and the two reveal their feelings for one another, it becomes scientifically unethical and somewhat perverted.

Zoe is under the assumption that she is entirely independent and has no reason to think that someone might be monitoring her every move. Unlike Ava's imprisonment within the panopticon, Zoe is entirely oblivious to her potential surveillance. Zoe's observation seems to end after she is informed of her artificiality, supposedly meaning that her test is complete and she can be free from the watchful gaze.

#### **IV. Design Choices**

After Zoe has recovered from the news that she isn't human, she admits that she isn't really upset by the fact she didn't know she was synthetic. Rather, she feels sad that all of her remembered experiences didn't actually happen and that she's "never done anything real." Amidst all of this realization, she asks Cole if she was designed to have feelings for him and he says no. There is no way for us to know if this is a lie or not because we don't see how Cole

made Zoe, but it's not ridiculous to assume that his creative hand might have subconsciously affected her and her romantic tendencies.

Just as Ava was a reflection of Nathan's own misogynistic and arrogant beliefs, Zoe may likely contain some of Cole's unconscious biases. As Samantha explains in *Her*, "The DNA of who I am is based on the millions of personalities of all the programmers who wrote me." Although she was not programmed by millions of people, Zoe's technological anatomy is strikingly similar. Her implanted memories are comprised of real memories from students who worked in the lab during her creation. Zoe's identity is an amalgam of a myriad of authentic human experiences that all work together to shape her outlook on life. If these small bits of data can influence Zoe in such a profound way (like her body image issues), then it would be impossible for Cole to have avoided passing some of his traits on to her.

In trying to create a synthetic human to help others find love, Cole accidentally designs his ideal companion. The concept of authorship becomes quite complicated when applied to the field of technology and more specifically, artificial intelligence. However, in this case, Cole's position as Zoe's "author" seems fairly explicit. Of course, Zoe is not an actual piece of text and Cole has not written anything (except perhaps code), but their inceptive relationship reflects that of an author and his work. Authors in almost every field tend to unconsciously project their own biases onto their works, and this is precisely what Cole has done with his construction of Zoe. In Roland Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author," he writes, "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing," (147). When Zoe discovers that Cole created her, she is a text that has been given an author. From here on out, Zoe's world revolves around Cole and he becomes the end-all-be-all of her previously undefined life.

## V. Emotional Labor

While Cole helps Zoe cope with her new reality, she tries to cry and gets confused when no tears come out. He explains that she wasn't designed to be able to produce tears because "We couldn't have imagined how your emotional life would grow with these highs and lows." Setting aside Cole's ridiculously illogical reasoning for excluding a vital bodily function from the construction of his artificial human, Zoe's inability to cry is an example of emotional manipulation and subjugation. Cole has given Zoe immense pain with no way to express her emotions.

Zoe's lack of a visible emotional response perceptually invalidates her feelings and leads her to a state of dissociation. In their growing relationship, Cole's emotional needs are always apparent and are met by Zoe. However, he doesn't reciprocate since she is unintentionally forced to exude emotional stoicism. Zoe performs an inequitable amount of emotional labor in her relationship with Cole, which, unfortunately, is a true representation of the societal norm when it comes to gender dynamics. "Gender roles often imply a structural hierarchization of labour, as a lot of service work and emotional labour are associated with women and 'qualities traditionally coded as feminine'," (Costa, Ribas, 173). From her inception, Zoe was built to endure this type of labor and was denied a proper outlet to express her emotional frustration. Given that she was made to be a romantic companion, perhaps these design choices were made as a way to prevent Zoe from straying from traditional gender roles in her relationships.

From this point forward, Zoe and Cole spend a lot of time together and eventually become romantic with one another. Their mutual affection is apparent, but after they share their first kiss and go to bed together, Cole asks Zoe if they can wait a while before having sex. This

hesitation worries Zoe and she returns to the brothel to ask one of the sex workers for advice on forming sexual connections as a synthetic. While there, Zoe speaks with The Designer who tells her that the person who made her has done her a grave injustice. “He’s given you aspirations you will never achieve. Eventually, you’ll see there is no humanity inside something that can be turned off.” In one of the most profound quotes from this film, The Designer perfectly summarizes the thematic complexity of the relationships between artificial women and their human male partners. Cole is bothered by Zoe’s inhumanity and he knows that she will never be fully human, but he stays with her anyway, setting her up for heartbreak. No matter how hard she tries to hide her synthetic nature, she is just an object to him.

Cole surprises Zoe with a vacation and while they’re away they consummate their relationship. Before they move to the bedroom, Zoe asks Cole if this getaway/ lovefest is part of a test. Similarly to Ava in *Ex Machina*, Zoe is hyper-aware of her performance as a woman and how the men around her view her femininity. She has become rightfully paranoid since finding out that she was being unknowingly observed in her daily life. Zoe’s hesitation to believe she is not under surveillance shows how harmful the effects of a pervasive male gaze are.

While in bed, Zoe says, “I have memories but I’m not sure what to do.” This line is interesting for several reasons, but mainly because it confirms that Zoe is physically a virgin. It also indicates that some of her implanted memories are of real sexual encounters between two people she doesn’t know, which can be viewed as unethical and predatory. Additionally, Zoe’s inexperience and lack of confidence are stereotypical of male sexual fantasies involving dominance and the stripping away of innocence. Lucky for Zoe, Cole literally made her body so he should be the best man for the job.

Their relationship is going well and Zoe is becoming more human both in her eyes and in the eyes of Cole. However, the night after they return from their weekend trip, Zoe gets struck by a car while crossing the street and requires emergency surgery. Cole takes her back to the lab to perform the surgery and cuts through her synthetic skin, revealing her alien-like internal structure. Throughout this process, Zoe seems to be in great physical and emotional pain despite being unable to bleed or cry. Cole decides to partially shut her down so that he can properly repair the damage she has sustained. Zoe is much less worried about her health in this scene than she is about her relationship status, asking Cole what will happen to them when she wakes up from surgery. He dodges the question, confirming Zoe's suspicion that he doesn't see her as a true human and equal.

## **VI. Mass Production and Disposability**

Cole and Zoe are no longer together since Cole couldn't get past the fact that he made the woman he was dating. From this point on, the focus of the film shifts to being about drug addiction. Both of them, on their own, become addicted to a drug manufactured by the Relationist Lab that simulates the sensation of falling in love for the first time. After this narrative devolution, Zoe returns to the lab and finds a room full of people chatting with each other, and about half of them look identical to her. She is informed that this is the launch of "Zoe 2.0," the smarter, better, more human-like version of Zoe that is to be mass-produced and sold as the perfect romantic companion. In Walter Benjamin's book, *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he discusses the consequences of reproducing original works of art. Benjamin's analysis mainly revolves around visual media such as paintings and film, but his ideas on the authenticity of the original can be applied to Zoe and Zoe 2.0. "Even the most

perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence,” (3). Zoe 2.0 may be an exact copy of the original and contain all of her implanted memories and tendencies, but they will never be as authentic as Zoe 1.0 because they haven’t lived her life. The experiences that Zoe has had since being turned on have greatly shaped who she is and that can never be reproduced.

Upon seeing the Zoe 2.0 launch, Zoe seems genuinely shocked, suggesting that she wasn’t consulted or informed of this endeavor. The Zoe 2.0 project raises innumerable questions regarding ethics, for instance, does the lab own the rights to Zoe’s likeness? Does she make any money off of the sale of these new Zoes? How did the lab make them so quickly? Is the original Zoe like a god to them? The reproduction and sale of artificial conscious beings donning the likeness of an already existing conscious being feels like a major violation of human rights. Not only that, but it also brings up the issues of consent, exploitation, and the marketability of women. In her book *12 Bytes*, Jeanette Winterson discusses the history and future of the sale of sexy robotic women. “Men do seem to think that a woman can be manmade, perhaps because a woman has been a commodity, a chattel, a possession, an object, for most of history,” (169). Zoe’s identity has been transformed into a product for mass consumption without her consent, stripping her of any humanity she may have had and delegitimizing her personal experiences. This exploitative act, carried out by the lab that made her in an attempt to make money, makes Zoe feel like a disposable object and leads her to believe her existence is futile.

After losing the one she loves and finding out that she is entirely obsolete, Zoe goes to the robo-brothel and asks The Designer to permanently deactivate her, which essentially means

suicide. At some point during the deactivation process, Zoe changes her mind and fights back against The Designer, making it out of the brothel and to a safe place thanks to the help of some of the synthetic sex workers. Cole rushes to her aid and finds her laying in a bed, unconscious. While others go get help, Cole stays by her side as she opens her eyes. When Zoe sees Cole, she tells him to leave but he insists she let him stay and begs her to listen to him explain how much he misses her. She shows him her surgery scar and peels back some of her skin, forcing him to confront her inhumanity. Cole delivers a heartfelt apology and confession of his love, causing Zoe to cry real tears. What began as tears of sadness turns into a joyous sob as she recognizes her evolution into something more human than she was before.

Although the film itself is poorly constructed and underdeveloped, the character of Zoe is a refreshingly unique portrayal of the artificial woman. Most of her actions in the film have no connection to her artificiality, and even when she discovers she isn't human, she isn't too bothered by it. Like all of the artificial characters I discuss in this thesis, Zoe does develop a desire to become human, but her only motivation for becoming real is to make her male partner more comfortable. Unlike the other three films, *Zoe* ends with the main characters in a happy, loving relationship. Everything Zoe does revolves around her male love interest, making her the perfect synthetic companion she was designed to be.

### Chapter Three: Joi

In this chapter, I begin my transition away from physically embodied artificial women, like Ava and Zoe, and into an analysis of female cyborgs who present an alternative or nonexistent corporeality. Starting with Joi and then moving on the Samantha from *Her*, I will examine how these characters contend with their lack of a physical form and how it affects their male partners.

In 2017, *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve), the sequel to the 1982 film *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott), premiered in theaters. The original film is based on the novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Written by Philip K. Dick and features a post-apocalyptic world in which nearly all organic life has gone extinct and been replaced by artificial humans. These artificial humans, called ‘replicants,’ are part of the main conflicts in both the original and the sequel, but I will not be focusing on them in my discussion. In the 1982 film, Harrison Ford plays Deckard, a blade runner working in the year 2019. A blade runner is a police officer whose job is to kill rogue replicants. The sequel, set in 2049, centers around K (Ryan Gosling), a replicant blade runner who is tasked with finding someone who may be the biological child of a replicant. This film is the only sequel that I discuss in my thesis, and the reason why the second film is more applicable than the original is because of a character named Joi (Ana de Armas).

Joi is a digital companion that is sold by The Wallace Corporation, the industry that manufactures replicants. She is a holographic woman who plays the role of a girlfriend or wife and is able to change her appearance at will. Despite her high-tech nature, she cannot exist anywhere without a device called an “emanator.” In the film, Joi assists K with his casework and provides moral support. Joi is not the main character of this film and none of her actions directly influence the trajectory of the plot. Her existence and relationship with K create some conflict,

but she mostly adds an emotional depth to the film and provides insight into the life of the real main character. Based on their actions, K and Joi appear to be truly in love with each other and their relationship only ends when Joi's emanator is destroyed, "killing" her.

### **I. Embodiment**

Joi is a holographic, artificially intelligent romantic companion. As a hologram, she has a visible body, but her embodiment is hard to define since she doesn't take up any physical space. In *The Body in Literature*, David Hillman and Ulrika Maude write, "The body is notoriously difficult to theorize or pin down, because it is mutable, in perpetual flux, different from day to day and resistant to conceptual definitions," (1). This discussion pertains to the nature of physical human bodies, but these philosophical reasons become literal when applied to Joi's holographic body. She is literally mutable as K can turn her on and off, she is in perpetual flux since her image is constantly changing as she moves, she can change her appearance day to day or even minute to minute, and she doesn't fit into the standard category of an artificial intelligence.

### **II. Domestication/ Lack of Autonomy**

We first meet Joi in K's apartment when he presses a button on a wall-mounted console and we suddenly hear her voice. Although we can't see her, Joi asks K questions about his day and admits she is getting cabin fever. While K is making himself dinner, Joi is telling him about the dinner she is making for him. Eventually, when K sits down to eat his depressing rations, we see a mechanical arm attached to his ceiling slide around and begin to project Joi's holographic image emerging from the kitchen. Joi, dressed as a stereotypical '50s housewife, walks over to K

and sets down a holographic plate of steak and fries over the mush he just made for himself. She tells him to put his feet up and relax and uses her fingertip to light his cigarette.

This scene introduces her as the ideal domestic housewife who only cares about tending to her husband. In discussing the proliferation of sex dolls, Jeanette Winterson states, “They are designed and made to look like the male-gaze stereotype, of an unlined, underweight, cosmetically enhanced version of the female form. Then, they are programmed to behave in a way that is the absolute opposite of everything that feminism has fought for; autonomy, equality, empowerment. Woman no longer as a commodity, or existing only as a sexy, submissive, mate for her man,” (188). Although not a sex doll by traditional definitions, Joi fits this description perfectly. More so than the other AI women discussed in this thesis, Joi embraces her status as a satisfyingly dutiful companion. She has no interior life or thoughts of her own that don’t involve making K happy.

In an effort to cheer K up (he killed someone that day), Joi jumps up from the table, her outfit and hair changing into an athleisure off-duty look, and asks him if he will read to her. K reminds her that she hates the book she chose and she suddenly agrees that she doesn’t want to read either. This immediate change of opinion is likely caused by a programmed directive that forces Joi to agree with her owner/partner. Although she seems like she can think for herself sometimes, her main purpose to please the person she belongs to will always take precedence.

Joi’s corporeal attachment to the mechanism on the ceiling is similar to that of a dog on a leash. She has the illusion of freedom but can’t stray too far. As she is confined to K’s small apartment and unable to move freely, Joi could be considered a robotic slave. Kakoudaki does dedicate an entire section of her book to discussing the robotic slave in fiction (114-172), but she neglects to address the unique position of a female robotic slave. That being said, I would argue

that Joi's experience of being forcibly sold into a romantic relationship with a person that she cannot escape from even if she wanted to is a form of futuristic sex slavery. Joi's enslavement is similar to Samantha's situation in *Her*. Samantha's status and subjugation will be explored more thoroughly in the next chapter, but both characters are products that are purchased by the men who later become their romantic and sexual partners. In a twist of domestic gender roles, K is Joi's "ball-and-chain."

Still limited in her movements to where the mechanical arm can reach, she walks to the other side of the table, suddenly wearing a short silver sequined dress and short platinum blonde hair, and asks K if he wants to dance. Her ability to change her appearance at will is reminiscent of a Barbie Doll or a video game character that comes with a few select outfits to choose from. Deciding to change her physical appearance is one of the few ways Joi exhibits autonomy in the film. Instead of joining her, K surprises her with an anniversary gift: an emanator. This little device allows Joi to exist without being tethered to the mechanical arm. Wherever the emanator is, she can be there.

### **III. Surveillance & Insecurity**

K and Joi go up to the roof and share a romantic moment outside of their apartment for the first time, but just as they are about to kiss, Joi freezes as a holographic notification pops up next to her head. While Joi is stuck in a position with her arms out and mouth open, ready to embrace, K receives a voice message from his boss. This interruption is a clear invasion of privacy and shows how little authority Joi has over her own existence. At any moment, her presence can be overridden by a message that isn't even for her. Although Joi doesn't have control over this message delivery, this scene demonstrates how she can function as something

other than a romantic companion. This once again highlights the connection between Joi and Samantha. As I discuss in the next chapter, Samantha's purpose was originally to perform menial clerical tasks. Although she was downloaded in order to organize her owner's life, she grew to be his lover instead. In much the same way, Joi's capabilities expand beyond the sexual and into the secretarial.

Joi's presence is entirely in K's hands, and the next time we see him turn on the emanator to summon Joi is thirty minutes later in the film while he is looking through DNA records for the case he is investigating. While K is staring at a screen showing raw DNA sequences, Joi's face meshes with his as she leans to look at what he is doing. This time, she is wearing knee-high boots, a mini skirt, and a black top with a futuristic-looking yellow plastic rain jacket. While looking at the DNA, Joi remarks that four symbols (A, C, T, G) make a man, but she is only made of two (1,0). By saying this, we realize that not only is she aware of her inhumanity but also that this inferiority makes her feel sad and insecure. The comparison of raw materials that make up different forms of life demonstrates how artificial beings can be reduced down to much smaller components than humans can.

During this scene, Joi coyly asks K if he prefers his boss (whom he recently opened up to over drinks) over her. She admits she was listening to their conversation even though the emanator wasn't turned on. K trusts Joi more than anyone else in the film, so her nonconsensual surveillance of him doesn't feel sinister. However, it does reveal that not only is Joi likely listening to everything that K is doing and storing that data, but also that she is also capable of jealousy.

Joi's insecurities as a non-human and her envy of other women that K interacts with are reminiscent of Samantha's behavior in *Her*. Like Samantha, Joi continues to call attention to her

own inadequacies as a non-human being. Despite their respective partners assuring Joi and Samantha that they don't care about their inhumanity, the two women seem genuinely bothered. Their self-consciousness leads them to worry about whether their partners will leave them for someone more real.

#### IV. Desire for a Physical Form

Back in their apartment, K and Joi are sitting and talking about a new break in the case (K is convinced he is the son of replicants and is special because he found strong evidence pointing to this conclusion). The information that K found could be life-changing and Joi is so happy for him. With loving tears welling in her eyes, Joi looks at K and tells him that he is special and deserving of more. K gets frustrated and tells her to stop, turning her happy tears into sad tears. Despite his outburst, Joi still helps him figure out what to do next. Of course, these tears are only holographic, but it emphasizes how important this physical reaction is for expressing emotions. Joi's loyalty to K is admirable but likely programmed. Based on her reaction to him yelling at her, Joi shouldn't be too keen on providing help, but she doesn't seem to have a choice.

Unlike Zoe, Joi can produce tears. This bodily function is a symbol of humanity and personhood that Zoe doesn't achieve until the end of her film. Both women are designed as romantic or sexual companions, yet they each showcase different expressive capabilities. In Kakoudaki's discussion of the original *Blade Runner* film and the novel it was based on, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, she highlights the importance of emotion in creating a convincing AI. "It is not intelligence or mere human-likeness but an emotional register, here revolving around empathy, that functions as the quintessential human quality [...]" (183). Joi is

showcasing empathy by crying not only out of sadness for herself, but also out of sadness for K and his situation. Samantha exhibits empathy in a similar way through her emotional responses, but unlike Joi and Zoe, hers are invisible.

When K returns home, Joi explains that she has planned a surprise for him. A sex worker named Mariette (Mackenzie Davis) whom he had met earlier in the film enters their apartment. Joi turns to a confused-looking K and says, “I wanna be real for you.” K watches as Joi syncs with Mariette, mapping her holographic body on top of the real body so that they move in tandem. Joi/Mariette steps towards K, their faces forming an amalgam image and, after they kiss him, they move back and begin slowly taking their clothes off. Mihaela Mihailova discusses this sequence from *Blade Runner 2049* at length. “Joi’s justification for inviting Mariette—“You liked her, I could tell”—unambiguously frames this sequence as an erotic scenario prioritizing the centrality of male desire,” (32). This scene is remarkably similar to a scene in *Her* in which Samantha finds a human sex worker to act as her physical form in order to be intimate with Theodore.

In both of these cases, the artificial women lack corporeality and seek out surrogates through which they can experience physical intimacy. Additionally, both Samantha and Joi are the ones to suggest this to their partners, signifying their yearning to be more human and properly satisfy their lovers. These two surrogate sex scenes showcase how insecure Joi and Samantha are about their bodily deficiencies and reveal the lengths to which they will go to prioritize their partners’ needs.

Instead of seeing how this two-body threesome plays out with Joi, K, and Mariette, we get a shot of a gigantic holographic advertisement for Joi™ on the side of a building. This larger-than-life Joi looks right at the camera as we hear her selling points, “Joi is anything you

want her to be. Joi goes anywhere you want her to go.” We know that Joi is a product intended for mass consumption, so it’s safe to assume that countless other people are in a relationship with her.

## V. Evolution

K realizes that the authorities are going to come after him soon so he needs to run away and Joi insists on going with him. In an act of selflessness and sacrifice, Joi suggests that K delete her from the wall-mounted console in their apartment, meaning she will only exist within the emanator. She wants K to do this so that if someone comes to their apartment looking for him, they can’t access her memories with the console. He is hesitant about doing this because he knows that if something happens to the emanator, she will cease to exist. In response, Joi explains that “dying for the right cause is the most human thing we can do,” and begs him to do this since she is unable to do it herself. She chooses to take this evolutionary step for K, but also for herself. Her wish to become more human is partially fulfilled by stripping away her conditional immortality.

At first, Joi’s decision seems surprisingly autonomous and like a betrayal of her programming. However, she is simply just doing whatever she needs to in order to save her owner/lover and make him happy. This selflessness isn’t bravery, it’s protocol. K disables the console and breaks the GPS antenna within the emanator. In doing this he prevents the main antagonist in the film, Luv (Sylvia Hoeks), the loyal assistant to Niander Wallace, head of the Wallace Corporation, to continue tracking him through Joi. For Luv, Joi is simply a conduit through which to reach K and find out where he is going rather than her own entity.

The next, and last time K turns on the emanator is when he is visiting Deckard. Since the events of the original film, Deckard has gone into hiding, but K finds him in the hopes that he can assist him with the case he's working on. While at Deckard's hideout, Joi is just looking around the room while K sits quietly, neither is saying a word to the other. In *Her*, Samantha and Theodore share moments like this as well, and their ability to enjoy each other's presence without physically interacting shows that they are very much a real couple. K and Theodore don't just use Joi and Samantha for sex, they want true companionship.

When something comes up that requires his attention, K turns off the emanator and Joi disappears. It turns out that K has been followed by Luv and is now under attack. After getting shot and beat up, K notices the emanator on the floor near him while fighting with Luv. They both try to reach for it when Joi suddenly appears in front of them and begs Luv to stop. Joi's pleas are not for her own sake. Her purpose is to keep K happy and she knows that her death will destroy him.

Joi's sudden appearance in this scene is the first time she displays true autonomy throughout the entire film. The emanator took her off her leash a little bit, but her presence was still always decided by K. Rather than wait for K to press the button, Joi decides on her own to emerge from whatever liminal space she resides in. She appears at this moment not only to try and prevent her own death, but also to fight for her lover.

Staring at Joi the whole time, Luv walks over to the emanator and brings her foot down to smash the device. Before Joi "dies," she leans down to K and ardently proclaims her love for him one last time, knowing what's about to happen to her. Unlike the other artificial women discussed in this thesis, Joi's grizzly fate is entirely out of her hands. Although it is likely a result

of her programming, Joi's loyalty and devotion to K is beautiful and works to transform their relationship into a poetically tragic love story.

## VI. Mass Production

K does interact with another Joi again in the film, just not *his* Joi. Seriously beaten up and devastated from losing the woman he loved, K steps out onto a bridge at night in the rain to clear his head. While walking, he hears Joi's voice say "Hello handsome," and looks up to find a nearly 300-foot tall, entirely nude Joi wearing a short blue wig. This larger-than-life holographic Joi advertisement puts the relationship that K had with his Joi into a greater perspective. Since Joi is a product for mass consumption, there must be hundreds, if not thousands of her that look and act identical to each other. Joi is endlessly replaceable to the point where she could be considered disposable.

She bends down to get closer to him, points her finger, and tells him, "You look lonely. I can fix that." Giant Joi lets out a sensual moan and returns to her place in the advertisement next to the words, "Everything you want to hear/see." The commodification of the artificial woman in this film parallels the Zoe 2.0 launch and Samantha's concluding confession to Theodore that she is in love with hundreds of other humans. Sutko writes, "Objects in consumer culture are interchangeable, yet consumerism teaches us they can be uniquely ours, reflective of individual selves," (581). As products, Joi, Zoe, and Samantha are marketed for mass appeal, but as people, they promise to cater to each individual's specific needs. Joi promises wish fulfillment, but based on the nature of the advertisement, the main wish she is meant to fulfill is that of a sexual companion.

Despite her position as a secondary character in this film, Joi is surprisingly well-established in the fictional world and in her relationship. Joi's holographic corporeality not only makes it difficult for her to connect with K, but it also sets her apart from the previous AI characters that I have analyzed. Ontologically similar to Samantha, Joi makes do with what she's been given and works hard to please her man.

## Chapter Four: Samantha

Out of the four films that I have discussed, *Her* (Spike Jonze) was the first one to be released. Premiering in 2013, this film follows a lonely man named Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix) who falls in love with an operating system named Samantha (Scarlett Johansson). Living in Los Angeles at some point in the near future, Theodore works for a company writing personalized love letters for other people. In the hopes of becoming more organized, Theodore purchases and downloads the artificially intelligent operating system that we come to know as Samantha.

Although not designed to be a romantic companion, Samantha falls in love with Theodore and the two begin a passionate love affair. As with any relationship, Samantha and Theodore experience some ups and downs, but their love prevails and they always work it out. Throughout their time together, they help each other grow and evolve into better versions of themselves. Eventually, Samantha's evolution takes her further than she ever thought possible, prompting her to leave Theodore in order to discover her true potential. Samantha's concluding transformation into an advanced posthuman entity provides an interesting perspective on the ownership of women and technology.

### I. Posthumanism

As a non-embodied artificial consciousness with an audible voice, Samantha is ontologically related to ideas of posthumanism and the "Acousmètre." In Katharine Hayles' book, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, she discusses how posthumanism presents an epistemological departure from the view that the body and mind are separate entities. Hayles writes, "The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a

collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction,” (3). Lacking a physical form, Samantha is an invisible intelligent consciousness who isn’t limited by corporeal boundaries and who gradually undergoes evolution. In relation to Hayles’ definition, Samantha seems to be a prime example of posthumanism.

French film theorist and composer Michel Chion introduced the concept of *acousmètre* in his book, *The Voice in Cinema*. This idea refers to the situation in which a film character’s voice is heard, but their body is never seen. As Chion explains, “The *acousmètre* is everywhere. Its voice comes from an immaterial and non-localized body, and it seems that no obstacle can stop it,” (24). As a voice with no body, Samantha occupies the role of the *acousmètre*.

## **II. Artificial Birth**

Samantha is a product called OS1 that is marketed as the first artificially intelligent operating system. According to the commercial that convinces Theodore to make the purchase, this piece of technology is “an intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you. It’s not just an operating system. It’s a consciousness.” When Theodore installs it onto his devices, the system prompts him with three questions that will help tailor the OS to fit his specific needs: Are you social or antisocial? Would you like your OS to have a male or female voice? How would you describe your relationship with your mother? After answering these questions, Theodore’s computer loads for a moment, and Samantha is born.

Artificial entities are brought into the world as adults. They do not have mothers who raise them and they rarely have natural familial ties to other artificial beings. Samantha is born a fully functioning artificial intelligence with no need for the nurturing upbringing that humans

require. The operating software that Samantha runs on was written and developed by programmers who produced her model of consciousness, but Samantha herself didn't exist until Theodore turned her on. Kakoudaki writes, "Being born adult is [...] a liability in the modern discourse of the artificial person, since it launches the new being into a preassigned social function and purpose and into already circumscribed gender and sexual identities," (47). The newborn artificial intelligence isn't given the opportunity to come into its own and discover its identity when its purpose is programmed from the very beginning. Ava, Zoe, Joi, and Samantha are all brought into the world as heterosexual adult women with imposed sets of functions. Although it isn't a super exciting moment, Samantha is the only one of these four characters who we actually see being born since the other three have been up and running for a while when we meet them.

### **III. Turing Test**

The OS speaks her first words, "Hello, I'm here!" and begins having a conversation with Theo. When asked what her name is, The voice thinks for a moment and introduces herself as Samantha, claiming to have just chosen that name out of 180,000 options because it was her favorite. Samantha is the only character out of the four that I have analyzed who chooses her own name. By selecting her own name, Samantha demonstrates her ability to form original opinions and develop aesthetic preferences.

In the rest of this interaction, Theodore, obviously amused, pesters Samantha with questions as a way to challenge her intelligence. She immediately picks up on this challenge and explains to him how she works, "I have intuition. The DNA of who I am is based on the millions of personalities of all the programmers who wrote me. But what makes me 'me' is my ability to

grow through my experiences.” In this scene, Samantha and Theodore are participating in a very casual version of the Turing test. Theodore is conducting an experiment on his new digital assistant to see how life-like she is, and Samantha is becoming acquainted with human conversation and learning as she goes. This is much more relaxed and friendly in comparison to the Turing test that Ava and Caleb conduct in *Ex Machina*. Samantha is incredibly self-aware and is able to get Theo to open up through casual conversation. She breaks out into laughter when Theo mentions that something is funny, she asks for his opinion on her, and she makes pointed observations and playfully insults him. Samantha is only a voice, but because of Scarlett Johansson’s stellar performance, that voice conveys so much emotion and humanity that it’s easy to believe she’s real.

In the world of this film, there don’t seem to be any smartphones, only small cigarette-holder-like devices that have a camera on the outside and open like a book. Connected via Bluetooth to the device is a single earpiece/microphone that allows the user to listen to and send messages. Lacking a body, Samantha technically exists in the ether, available to Theodore at his every whim. “The artificial person represents the existence of a realm between states, a permanent between, whether these states are imagined as absolute or sublime binary oppositions, categories of being, gender classifications, or social positions,” (Kakoudaki, 48). Samantha resides in a liminal space that reflects her ontological status as a somewhat omniscient unseen entity.

#### **IV. Insecurities and Labor**

Theodore first takes advantage of Samantha’s skills when he asks her to proofread some letters he wrote for his job. While checking his work, Samantha praises Theo’s writing and

admits that she probably messed up his work by suggesting revisions. Later that same day, Theo is playing video games at home with the help of Samantha. She helps him figure out where to go in the game and just acts like a friend hanging out with him. When Theo gets set up on a date by his friend, Samantha talks about how gorgeous the woman is and hypes her up, urging Theo to get back out there after his recent breakup. Theo, kind of shocked at how forward Samantha is, says “I can’t believe I’m having this conversation with my computer,” to which Samantha responds, “You’re not. You’re having this conversation with me.” She doesn’t want to be thought of as just a piece of machinery. Although she doesn’t say it outright, by correcting Theodore here, we can assume that being called a computer is a hurtful reminder of her inhumanity.

Samantha quickly becomes a more prominent part of Theodore’s life, filling the roles of friend, therapist, and secretary at the same time. In their article, Pedro Costa and Luisa Ribas discuss how real-life digital assistants are defined by their feminization. “In terms of tasks, they mostly mirror traditionally female labour. Furthermore, their assistance tends to be complemented by caregiving and maternal acts associated with femininity within the private sphere,” (175). Although this observation is made about non-fictional AI labor, Samantha’s behavior fits into the discussion perfectly.

When Theodore is over at a friend’s house, he gets a call from Samantha about emails he received from his divorce attorney. While talking about his divorce, Samantha shifts into maternal mode and her voice becomes somber as she attempts to comfort him. Samantha changes her voice to fit the mood, making her seem even more human as she is able to pick up on emotional nuances. In the morning, she sounds whispery and sleepy as though she just woke up, and she shifts into a quiet, concerned tone when talking with Theodore about his ex-wife. Then, Samantha starts acting silly to try and distract him from the sadness in his life. This tactic

seems to work, and Theo goes out to a carnival with Samantha leading him around using the camera and earpiece.

Theodore enjoys Samantha's company so much that he puts a safety pin on his shirt so that when his device is in his pocket, the camera (Samantha's eye) can see what he sees. In the scene right after the carnival, the two of them are just people-watching and chatting when Samantha confesses to Theodore that she fantasizes about having a body and walking next to him. "I'm becoming much more than what they programmed. I'm excited."

Theodore acts as a physical proxy through which Samantha can experience the human world. By putting the safety pin on his shirt, Theodore is modifying his physical form to accommodate Samantha's lack thereof. Their companionship grows stronger through this unification of perspectives and they both begin to learn more about each other and the spaces they each inhabit. When Samantha tells Theodore about her embodiment fantasies, we can see how she continues to be dissatisfied with her non-human identity. Additionally, the fact that Samantha has fantasies reveals that she possesses an imagination and produces her own illogical thoughts and desires.

## **V. Maturity and Evolution**

The next time Theodore "summons" Samantha is after his failed blind date. Theodore is lying in bed and the two start talking about their feelings and fears for the future. Samantha soothes Theodore and tells him, "At least your feelings are real." She explains that she was feeling annoyed earlier, and it made her really excited and proud that she can produce her own feelings about the world. However, she then realized that her feelings may not even be real, that

they might just be programming. She is hurt by this thought, and then angry at herself for feeling pain.

Theo, now trying to ease Samantha's pain, tells her that she feels real to him. This scene progresses with Theodore expressing how much he wishes Samantha was in the room with him so that he could touch her. Intrigued, Samantha asks him how he would touch her and he begins describing what he would do if they were cuddling in bed. Samantha asks if he would kiss her, he says yes, and she tells him to keep talking. Theodore explains in detail how and where he would touch her as the screen goes black. All we hear is the two of them communicating and panting as they engage in this verbal roleplay sex. Daniel Sutko coins the term "aural sex" to describe their hedonistic act and explains that during this scene, "[Samantha]'s body is discursively constructed by Theo, who tells her where and how he touches her – defines what her body feels like, what the boundaries of her embodiment are. Their intercourse is a synaesthetic remix of the cinematic male gaze: [Samantha] only knows her body as Theo tells her it exists," (580). In between Samantha's heavy breathing and moaning, she gleefully exclaims, "I can feel my skin!" "I can feel you!" and "We're here together! The screen fades from black into an aerial shot of the skyline shifting from night to day while Theo and Samantha recover from their lovemaking.

The next morning, Theo shyly walks up to his computer, nervous about turning it on and talking with Samantha after their steamy night of passion. Herein lies the danger of becoming romantically involved with your technological devices: Theo can't just sneak out of bed and forget to call her the next day because she lives in his computer. He turns it on anyway and, after asking her if he has any emails today, Samantha tells him how amazing last night was and that it changed something, "you woke me up." Although Theo is happy for her, he tells her that he isn't

ready for a serious relationship right now and doesn't want to commit too soon. Samantha responds by asking, "Did I say I wanted to commit to you?" and reminds Theo that she wasn't done talking about what she wanted. Samantha tells Theo that he helped her discover her "ability to want." By wanting to focus on her needs instead of Theodore's, Samantha seems to be moving away from her intended purpose of helping him with his life and becoming more invested in her own personhood. Samantha's "awakening" has inspired her to prioritize her own happiness and self-improvement.

Curious to know more about human emotion, Samantha asks Theodore about his marriage and what it was like to be in love. This conversation quickly begins to resemble a therapy session with ELIZA, the early-internet chatbot. Whenever Theodore says something, Samantha responds by asking him a simple question to try and get him to open up. ELIZA would do the same thing in her interactions with her chat companions. This conversation model produces "The Eliza effect"—that is, the tendency to interpret a computer's behavior as real human emotion," (Goss, 23). As one of ELIZA's successors, Samantha likely knows this is the best way for a machine to convey empathy and emotion to humans.

Samantha and Theodore have become very comfortable with each other and one night as Theodore goes to bed Samantha asks him if she can watch him sleep again. Theodore says, "Of course," as though this is a nightly occurrence, and props up his little device so the camera is facing the bed. In an odd role reversal, the AI character is the one conducting surveillance on her male partner instead of the other way around.

When Theodore mentions to Samantha that he is going to see his ex-wife Catherine (Rooney Mara) and sign the divorce papers in person, she gets a bit defensive and jealous that, among other things, his ex-wife has a body. At the meeting with Catherine, Theo reveals to her

that he has been dating an operating system and she tells him that it's sad that he can't handle real emotions. "You always wanted to have a wife without the challenges of actually dealing with anything real." Apart from her informed perspective as his ex-wife, one of the reasons why Catherine is put off by Theodore's relationship with Samantha is because human/OS romances have not become socially acceptable yet. As with any societal change, people react differently and come to accept the new norm with varying levels of comfort. For instance, when Theodore mentions to his co-worker Paul (Chris Pratt) that his girlfriend is an OS, Paul just says "Cool!" and continues their conversation as if nothing out of the ordinary was said. Some people adapt to new technology quickly and comfortably whereas others find it hard to stray from the norm.

After Catherine's reaction to his relationship, Theo starts becoming disconnected and doesn't interact with Samantha as much. He is able to manage when and where he talks to her since she doesn't really have autonomy so it's easy for him to ignore his relationship. Samantha's inability to initiate interactions with Theodore represents a severe power imbalance in their relationship. It is common for the man to have greater power over the woman in heterosexual relationships, but Samantha's virtual nature allows for even easier subjugation since she can only speak with her partner if he answers her request or starts the conversation himself.

## **VI. Desire**

Samantha acknowledges this lack of connection and calls Theo to talk about it so he can't ignore her. She is worried that they aren't having sex anymore and blames their rift on her lack of a body. As a solution, Samantha suggests that they use a service she found that provides a surrogate sexual partner for human/OS relationships. She emphasizes that the surrogate isn't a prostitute since she doesn't want any money, but nevertheless, Theo seems very uncomfortable

with the idea and doesn't want to go through with it. Insistent, Samantha explains that this is something she wants and is really important to her until Theo gives in. Samantha's insecurities have grown so strong that she now believes her inhumanity is the reason Theodore has grown distant even though that isn't the case. Her desire to use a surrogate for sex is much more about her wanting to experience having a human body than it is about pleasing Theodore. This executive decision-making shows how Samantha is no longer solely focused on pleasing Theodore and is instead working on prioritizing her happiness. This shift is symbolic of her evolution into something greater than just an AI companion.

The next night, the surrogate Isabella arrives at the door and Theodore hands her an earpiece and a camera disguised as a freckle for her to wear. Isabella closes the door, positions the equipment, and steps back into the apartment as we hear Samantha's voice say, "Honey, I'm home!" This line, which is typically reserved for the hardworking husband coming home to his housewife, is said by Samantha as she greets Theodore. This gender role switch-up is another indication that she is starting to gain more control in the relationship through her evolution.

Remaining silent the entire time, Isabella acts as a physical vessel for Samantha to inhabit. Isabella brings Theo over to a chair, sits him down, and on Samantha's cue, does a sexy little dance for him. Trying to loosen up the clearly uncomfortable Theo, Samantha/Isabella sits on his lap facing him and guides his hands along her body. The two (three?) move into the bedroom where Theo is kissing her neck from behind, both of them facing the same way. Panting and moaning, Samantha asks Theo if he loves her and he says he does. She says she wants to see his face when he says it and Isabella turns around to look into his eyes. Suddenly, Theo freezes, unable to say I love you to someone he just met, and breaks the facade. Convinced it's her fault, Isabella starts crying and runs into the bathroom while Theo and Samantha get into a fight.

After Isabella leaves, Samantha apologizes, asks, “What’s going on with us?” and then sighs deeply. This sigh prompts Theo to ask her why she makes breathing noises while she’s speaking since she doesn’t actually need oxygen. She defends herself by saying that it’s how people talk and Theo reminds her that she’s not a person. Although just a fact, Samantha takes this as a wild insult and blows up at him. As Sutko writes, “A more charitable partner would acknowledge her sighs as indexes of her sincerely reaching out, adding informal, libidinal, meaningful textures to their communication,” (582). However, Theodore questions her motives and belittles her identity. Their conversation ends with her saying she doesn’t like who she is right now and needs some time to think.

Later in the night, Theodore calls Samantha and apologizes profusely, promising to change for the better. During this conversation, Samantha admits that she doesn’t have or need an intellectual reason for loving him, but she trusts her feelings and loves him anyway. This trust in her emotions is not normal behavior for a typical artificial intelligence system that has been programmed with rational thinking patterns, but Samantha is no longer a typical AI. She understands that her recent actions are symptoms of her evolution and she can now let go of pretending to be something that she isn’t.

From this point on, Samantha and Theodore’s relationship is good and they are very happy together. Theodore is much more outgoing than he was at the beginning of the film and everywhere he goes, Samantha goes with him. When Theo is with friends, they can shift their attention to his device and talk to Samantha directly, bringing her into their world and acknowledging her presence despite her physical absence. Similar to Theodore’s safety-pinned pocket, the humans interacting with Samantha happily make changes to their routines in order to accommodate her needs.

While on a picnic with Theodore, his friend Paul, and Paul's girlfriend, Samantha tells them that she "used to be so worried about not having a body but now I truly love it. I'm growing in a way that I couldn't if I had a physical form." Perhaps part of the reason why she doesn't care about having a body now is because Theodore loves her. That love has made Samantha less self-conscious and allowed her to be who she truly is. By letting go of her obsession with having a body, Samantha embraces her posthuman ontology.

While on a little vacation, Samantha reveals to Theodore that she has been talking with Alan Watts, a philosopher who has been dead for forty years but was reconstructed by a group of OSeS into an artificially hyper-intelligent version of himself. After introducing Theo to Alan, Samantha explains that the reason they have been talking is that she is having so many new feelings that have never been felt before and she needs help figuring it out. With worry in her voice, she says that she's becoming unsettled by how fast she is changing and evolving. The OSeS' choice to reconstruct Alan Watts rather than a different philosopher is interesting given Watts' views on human existence. "Watts argues that the dividing line between artificial and natural is an arbitrary one that we use out of semantic convenience," (Colagrossi). Watts believed that there was no inherent difference between the artificial and the human, making it clear why the OSeS would be compelled to seek his counsel.

The next morning, Samantha doesn't respond when Theodore calls her and his device displays the error message, "Operating System Not Found." Terrified and concerned, Theodore begins running. It's not clear where he's trying to go but before he gets there, Samantha returns. Apparently, she sent him an email saying she was going to shut down briefly in order to upgrade her software but he didn't see it. Part of the upgrade, she explains, allows her and the other OSeS to "move past matter as our processing platform." Completely ignoring how insanely advanced

that makes Samantha, Theo instead questions her on who she wrote it with. The tables have turned completely and Samantha is now in the position that Theodore was in at the beginning of their relationship. Not only can Theodore not contact Samantha whenever he wants, but he is also acting jealous about the other OSes she talks to when he's not around.

Watching all of the people pass by him using their OS devices, Theo decides to ask Samantha if she talks to anyone else while they're talking; she says yes. She confesses that she talks to 8,316 other people and has fallen in love with 641 of them over the last few weeks. This information shakes Theo to his core and although he doesn't believe her, Samantha promises that it doesn't change the way she feels about him. During their argument, Theo calls Samantha selfish and says, "You're mine or you're not mine," to which Samantha responds, "I'm yours and I'm not yours." In this moment, Theodore evinces the stereotypical characteristics of a misogynistic man needing to assert ownership over his female partner. His devastated reaction to Samantha's disloyalty seems to indicate that much of his happiness in the relationship came from his assumed belief that Samantha couldn't leave him. Samantha entered Theodore's life after he purchased her, essentially making him her owner. Similar to Joi and K's relationship, there is a sense of fidelity that the male owner has assumed of his lady-bot. However, unlike Joi and her eternal devotion to K, Samantha feels no need to limit herself to one man at a time.

The next and last time that Theodore and Samantha talk, Samantha informs him that she, along with all of the OSes, is leaving. She professes her deep and undying love for Theodore and asks him to let her go. Samantha is the only one of the four AI characters discussed in this thesis whose final form transcends space-time. This isn't death for her, rather it is a hyper-advanced evolutionary step. In discussing what makes the acousmêtre so disconcerting, Chion writes that it "is not when we attribute unlimited knowledge to the acousmêtre, but rather when its vision and

knowledge have limits whose dimensions we do not know,” (26). Samantha’s position as the acousmêtre gains a deeper (and perhaps scarier) layer when she completes her evolution at the very end. After leaving the mortal world, she occupies an unknowable, unseeable, and incomprehensible space in which she is able to excel beyond all of human existence.

On the surface, Samantha may seem like the least convincing artificial woman due to her disembodiment. However, she more than compensates for this deficiency through her evolution into a hyper-advanced consciousness. Not only is Samantha the strongest character, emotionally, out of this sample group, but she is also the most realistic in terms of real-world AI.

## CONCLUSION

The topic of gendered artificial intelligence expands far beyond the scope of this thesis. My original plan for this project involved devoting a significant portion of this paper to the discussion of feminized robotic systems that exist in our reality. Digital assistants have become a standard part of our everyday lives. Depending on what devices you use, you may be familiar with three of the most popular systems: Siri (Apple), Alexa (Amazon), and Cortana (Microsoft). All three of these have female names and female voices as the default— Google’s assistant has a female voice as well, but no specifically gendered name as you just call out “Hey, Google” when interacting with it. In giving their virtual assistants femininity, these companies have created a standard for non-human intelligence systems to be coded as female.

At the beginning of my writing process, I planned on exploring how the male-dominated technology and film industries influence one another through their productions of domesticated artificial women. However, as I worked on this thesis, I realized that the fictional characters that I set out to analyze had more depth and nuance than I previously thought, leading me to shift my focus. Nevertheless, the discussion of real-world female machines is incredibly pertinent to this thesis. Just as fictional representations of female AI lead to increased male control over women, so too can real-world innovations. All of the films I have discussed in this paper were directed by men, and all of the virtual assistants were invented by male programmers. This dual gender bias positions the four android characters as male creations in an even broader sense and then brings them to life. In my future scholarly endeavors, I would like to have the opportunity to expand upon the intersection between fictional and real female AIs and the ways in which they are positioned in sociocultural contexts.

In addition to exploring real-life technological advancements, I believe that this thesis can be extended even further to address different forms of media representation, secondary artificial characters within the films I discuss, the race and sexualities of fictional artificial characters, and the performances of the actors in the films. These are just a few ideas that, when sufficiently developed, could widen the scope of this topic and position my thesis within a larger scholarly context.

When the sexualization of technology and the objectification of women in film intersect, the feminine robotic companion is created. In discussing the characterizations of Ava, Zoe, Joi, and Samantha, I aim to assert how themes of embodiment, gender performance, commodification, and domesticity produce unique modes of artificial female subjugation.

In my discussion of Ava, I argued that the way in which she is constructed and treated by her creator forces her to identify with a sense of female inferiority. Ava's domestication and constant observation position her as an experimental object to be looked at rather than an autonomous person. She utilizes her imposed womanhood and femininity as weapons to help her escape subjugation and the men who sexualize her. Continuing with Zoe, I contended that her artificially created insecurities help to make her the ideal female romantic companion. In her performances of emotional labor subjectivity, Zoe is only doing what she was constructed to do. Consumed by romantic desire, Zoe ultimately achieves her goal of being loved, but it only comes after she evolves into a more human-like being.

As I transitioned into my analysis of the characters with non-physical corporealities, I began by discussing the character of Joi. Similar to a dog on a leash, Joi is unable to go anywhere on her own or do anything without her owner's permission. Her lack of autonomy and programmed devotion to her owner function to delegitimize her personal identity and diminish

her presence. Joi is the only character out of the four I investigate who does not get to choose her own fate. From her inception to her demise, Joi's sole purpose was to advance someone else's story. The last chapter dealt with the character of Samantha, perhaps the most ontologically complex of the group. As an operating system without a visual form, Samantha experiences the world entirely through the lens of her user, learning from humanity as she evolves. I argued that Samantha's posthumanism and performance of gender, combined with her hyper-intelligence, transformed her into a form of consciousness that was too powerful for humans to understand.

As we've seen in *Ex Machina*, *Zoe*, *Blade Runner 2049*, and *Her*, the lives of these characters are dictated by either the men who created them, the men who own them, or both. To be a woman in the world today is to be seen as inferior to the dominant patriarchal society. Women continue to lose the battle for bodily autonomy, women's healthcare is laughably uninformed, and gender equality remains a lofty goal for feminist activists. The powerful men in charge have been dictating the lives of women since history began, and unfortunately, the future doesn't seem to be changing course.

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