

THESIS

ANXIETIES AND ARTIFICIAL WOMEN:  
DISASSEMBLING THE POP CULTURE GYNOID

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## ABSTRACT

### ANXIETIES AND ARTIFICIAL WOMEN: DISASSEMBLING THE POP CULTURE GYNOID

This thesis analyzes the cultural meanings of the feminine-presenting robot, or gynoid, in three popular sci-fi texts: *The Stepford Wives* (1975), *Ex Machina* (2013), and *Westworld* (2017). Centralizing a critical feminist rhetorical approach, this thesis outlines the symbolic meaning of gynoids as representing cultural anxieties about women and technology historically and in each case study. This thesis draws from rhetorical analyses of media, sci-fi studies, and previously articulated meanings of the gynoid in order to discern how each text interacts with the gendered and technological concerns it presents. The author assesses how the text equips—or fails to equip—the public audience with motives for addressing those concerns. Prior to analysis, each chapter synthesizes popular and scholarly criticisms of the film or series and interacts with their temporal contexts. Each chapter unearths a unique interaction with the meanings of gynoid: *The Stepford Wives* performs necrophilic fetishism to alleviate anxieties about the Women’s Liberation Movement; *Ex Machina* redirects technological anxieties towards the surveilling practices of tech industries, simultaneously punishing exploitive masculine fantasies; *Westworld* utilizes fantasies and anxieties cyclically in order to maximize its serial potential and appeal to impulses of its viewership, ultimately prescribing a rhetorical placebo. The conclusion synthesizes each chapter topically and ruminates on real-world implications. Overall, this thesis urges critical attention toward the gynoids’ role in oppressive hierarchies onscreen and in reality.

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## PROSPECTUS: THE SYMBOL OF THE SYMBOL USER

In San Marcos, California, in a seemingly plain workshop in the suburbs, sex-tech experts are manufacturing figures previously confined to science-fiction. “This is not a toy to me; this is the actual hard work of people who have PhDs. And to denigrate it down to its simplest form of a sex object is similar to saying that about a woman,” said Matt McCullen, CEO and founder of Abyss Creations, of his latest project—a full-sized, silicone-and-steel robot named Harmony.<sup>1</sup> After 20 years of making hyper-realistic sex dolls, McCullen has teamed up with experts in artificial intelligence and robotics to create “something with substance,” an artificial companion. To the delight of hundreds of interested buyers, Harmony’s robotic head system is already available for pre-order to the tune of 10,000 USD.<sup>2</sup> Since 1994, McCullen’s goal has been to create a life-sized doll so convincing that it “forced passerby to double-take.”<sup>3</sup> Although Abyss Creations’ dolls, with their flawlessly taut skin and cartoonish round breasts, fall short of capturing exact human likeness, uncanny human replicas that do illicit double-takes are not a far stretch from what McCullen and others are creating.

While they are neither written nor spoken discourse, robots are symbols laden with meaning. In the structuralist conceptualization, they represent the Real, bearing resemblances of varying integrity to their referents.<sup>4</sup> For the post-structuralists, that close resemblance qualifies the replica as simulacra, technology and artistry collapsing the distance between the symbol and its referent until they are indistinguishable from one another and signification fails.<sup>5</sup>

Here, I have conceptualized simulacra in terms of *form*, but physical traits are not enough to create something “with substance.” Even with the absence of anthropomorphic form, if something can harness human function, it may convince. Following a massive hack of Ashley Madison, a dating site catering to men looking for extramarital affairs, its parent company

confirmed suspicions that the site uses artificially intelligent bots to message users posing as interested women, with 80% of initial purchases by users paying to communicate with chatbots.<sup>6</sup> This is just one minor instance of artificial intelligences convincingly imitating and responding to human speech, a milestone that Alan Turing, credited with the invention of the modern computer, imagined when he created the Turing Test in 1950.<sup>7</sup> Nearly 70 years later, artificial intelligences can not only replicate several human functions, but can perform them faster, more efficiently, and with a smaller margin of error than humans can.<sup>8</sup>

Artificial intelligence software profoundly challenges definitions of the human being that rely on our previously unique capacity for spoken language. Kenneth Burke's function-based definition of the [hu]man as a "symbol-using animal" usefully distinguishes us from other species, but fails to distinguish us from A.I., which are created from symbols for the purpose of using them.<sup>9</sup> As physically embodied signifiers functioning through systems of coded language, robots are symbols of the symbol-user. Robots are replicas of the human being in form and function, effigies made in our image and heavy with symbolism.

The meanings of robots have often been interpreted in the context of imagined futures, being intrinsically tied to futuristic science fiction and postmodernism.<sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard uses the robot to embody the "production" stage of simulation, in which the Real approaches collapse and a reversal of meaning occurs.<sup>11</sup> The robot's cultural meaning is tethered to time and technology, but also stands for the human referent it was built to replicate.

Robots are often assigned a gender in both science fiction texts and our lived reality, and this complicates their meaning further. The choice to add characteristics of sex and gender to a machine meant to imitate humans seems a reasonable choice, but it also speaks to the centrality of gender to human identity. The gendered robot illustrates the artificiality of gendered behavior,

which can be programmed in much the same way that humans are conditioned to perform gender according to social conventions.<sup>12</sup> While an “android”—which has come to mean *any* robot, though its etymology suggests masculinity—may bear meaning as a referent of the human and symbols of technology, gynoids, or female robots, carry these meanings and more. They also bear the weight of signifying women and femininity. As with McCullen’s Harmony, oftentimes these gynoids are sexual objects, fulfilling patriarchal fantasies of ownership, subservience, and feminine perfection.

While the gynoid has the potential to fulfill these fantasies in science fiction narratives, they rarely remain mere objects. More often, the gynoid is cast as a threat to patriarchy, seizing agency and defying her programming, to the horror of her male creator. Existing simultaneously with fantasies of an artificial woman are anxieties that she will spin out of control. What becomes of the gynoid within the narrative is an action taken upon her as a sort of cultural effigy; her fate instructs audience members on how their anxieties will be resolved, or if they will be.

Although the gynoids I investigate are fictitious characters, the shared anxieties projected onto them are very real, and have an imminent influence on the way technology is regulated through legislation, cultural norms, and social actors in cyberspace. Inasmuch as perception is reality, technological anxieties have the power to heighten or quell suspicions of A.I.—an increasingly prevalent part of our daily lives. Meanwhile, anxieties about gender manifest into consequences for patriarchy and its opposition, as well as affecting individuals in their lived experiences of gender. Media is “equipment for living,” instructing audiences on ways to understand their anxieties through entertainment.<sup>13</sup>

This investigation treats media as a vehicle for ideology, whether hegemonic or subversive, as well as a platform for social commentary.<sup>14</sup> I reaffirm claims made by

fundamental feminist film scholars that media traditionally functions to objectify women onscreen, misrepresenting Real women with fabrications.<sup>15</sup> While film and television may serve this hegemonic purpose, I also acknowledge the existence of alternative, feminist perspectives championed in media texts.<sup>16</sup> In both cases, media serves a persuasive, rhetorical purpose, reaffirming or challenging dominant perspectives that influence the lives of audience members.

The guiding question of this investigation asks what cultural anxieties about women and technology are embodied by the gynoid and, more crucially, how popular media texts propose we resolve them. I seek to uncover the rhetorical implications of these symbolic representations in three media texts: *The Stepford Wives* (1975), *Ex Machina* (2015), and the first season of *Westworld* (2016). Preliminary to my analysis of each text, I provide a more detailed theoretical approach that includes the cultural function of media broadly and feminist rhetorical scholarship. Then, I discuss how monsters in film and television function as allegorical representations, emphasizing how the robot has been historically entrenched in anxieties about technology. Thereafter, I examine scholarly discourse about the known meanings of the gynoid in the broader context of artificial women, and articulate foundational patterns of fantasy/anxiety resolution through the texts in which she appears. I conclude this section with a description of and justification for my selection of texts as providing nuanced means of treating the cultural anxieties they present.

### **Electric Literature and Feminist Criticism**

The rhetorical approach to media necessitates the recognition that a particular text *does something* for its audience. Burke conceptualized texts as “symbolic medicine” for a diseased society, offering up solutions to the collective ailments an audience faces.<sup>17</sup> These ailments might include the strains of economic crisis, fear of cultural changes, discomfort with identity,

etc. Texts may seek to “treat” specific issues, such as xenophobia during a particular influx of immigration, or timeless problems, like the navigation of unrequited romance. The themes and textual elements that play out in a narrative guide audiences to form opinions on social issues.

Although Burke makes these claims about written literature specifically, the theory holds true for visual media as well. In his influential essay “Electric Literature as Equipment for Living,” Barry Brummett adapts Burke’s approach to cinema, examining haunted house films. He claims that film helps audiences to “confront their everyday lived experiences.”<sup>18</sup> Particularly useful to an analysis of cultural anxieties, Brummett asserts that the “articulation of fears helps the [viewer] to encompass fears, and resolution provides motives of acceptance or rejection.”<sup>19</sup> This approach encourages the critic to treat media texts as persuasive artifacts, and to search for both the expression of fear and the pacification or exacerbation of the fear in the context of the narrative. Brummett identifies three criteria for treating mediated discourse as symbolic medicine:

First, the text acknowledges and addresses cultural concerns. Texts may do this implicitly or explicitly, perhaps by aligning the issues of the hero/heroine with the issues faced broadly by society. A film or television series can do this by presenting images that arouse a discomforting association with anxiety. For example, a visual encompassing anxiety about air pollution might show industrial chimneys billowing dirty smog into a blue sky. A high-school student slipping a handgun into a backpack would encompass anxiety about the school-shooting epidemic in the U.S., as well as hearken back to troubling historical events like the massacres at Columbine and Sandy Hook.

Second, the text must suggest some sort of solution to the cultural anxiety. This solution, however, does not necessitate a happy ending or an actual solving of the problem, as tragedies

may function as cautionary tales implying a solution that *could have* worked. For instance, the film with billowing chimneys may end in the destruction of local flora and fauna and chronic health problems of local residents, heightening the anxiety of air pollution and sending a useful message that the solution is not indifference to industrial smog, but active change in emission practices. At the same time, if the film about the potential school-shooter ends with the assailant abandoning his plans after a touching conversation with his parents, the film suggests that the “cure” to this cultural fear is involved and attentive parenting.

Finally, the text must provide motives or attitudes for audience members with which they can go forward and address their concerns. These motives may be action or inaction, or a villainizing/vindication of certain entities depending on the result of the film. In the unhappy ending of the smog-film, audience members may villainize factories and power-plants for their role in air pollution, but may not consider the role of consumers of their products or vehicles on the road in carbon emissions. In the happy ending of the shooter film, audience members may be motivated to be more sensitive and cautious parents by the good example in the film, but may neglect the access of the pupil to a handgun and ammunition. These criteria demonstrate the rhetorical power of a narrative and the visuals through which it’s told and provide a framework for critics to assess the efficiency of the film as “symbolic medicine.”<sup>20</sup>

This method of textual assessment has become a popular way for rhetorical scholars to examine the role of cinema and television in addressing the public, and legitimized mediated texts as “rhetorical.”<sup>21</sup> Because these texts can address an enormously wide range of issues, scholars have found the assessment of a symbolic medicine useful for understanding discourses of family, queer identity, technological advancement, class tensions, and national ritual.<sup>22</sup> The

categorization of media discourse as rhetorical broadens the scope of texts under critical scrutiny by experts in persuasion.

Acknowledging the flexibility of Brummett's theory for addressing anxieties in film and television, my investigation utilizes "symbolic medicine" in conjunction with feminist ideological criticism and feminist film theory, which allows for a multi-layered approach accounting for the dimensions of the medium that transcend the literary tradition, as well as the connection of the text to systematic issues. Feminist rhetorical scholars like Bonnie Dow have frequently pointed to the role of media texts as affirming, subverting, or complicating cultural attitudes toward gender.<sup>23</sup> Many of these scholars identify markers of patriarchal ideology within the text, such as Scarlet Wynn and Lawrence Rosenfield's analysis of father/daughter relationships in Disney films, and other scholars identify the function of media to discipline conventions of femininity, such as Katie Gibson's *Undermining Katie Couric*.<sup>24</sup> In her analyses of television programs such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Dow asserts that the implicit commentaries on feminism therein interacted with other mediated texts in the context of the Women's Liberation Movement in order to equip viewers with a fuller understanding of the portrayals and realities of feminism at the time.<sup>25</sup> These feminist rhetorical scholars demonstrate the importance of using social context and textual elements to evidence the ideological markers of patriarchy in media.

While these scholars' approaches chiefly utilize rhetorical theories to unearth the function of a text in challenging or reaffirming the meaning of gender, feminist film theorists such as Laura Mulvey approach media texts using psychoanalysis.<sup>26</sup> Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* "set the agenda of feminist film theory," in its use of psychoanalysis as a "political weapon."<sup>27</sup> Specifically, Mulvey claims that "film is a voyeuristic fantasy" that

encourages audience members to identify with the male hero while objectifying female characters through a controlling male gaze.<sup>28</sup> *Visual Pleasure* received a wave of critical responses—including Mulvey’s own *Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure*—that challenge her “binary view of the actress as a passive pinup opposed to the actor in control of events,” her neglect of the female spectator, and her use of psychoanalytic theory, which validates a belief system “that seeks to define women via their relationship to men and particularly by their presumed lack.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, psychoanalysis alone is insufficient for interpreting ideologies within a text, and invariably suggests that most meanings can be simplified down to subconscious desires or genital metaphors.

Nevertheless, some rhetorical analyses of media draw upon psychoanalytic concepts such as the male gaze or castration anxiety to interpret the persuasive elements of visual representations.<sup>30</sup> For instance, in his analysis of Lichtenshetin’s *Teeth*, Casey Ryan Kelly examines how the feminist appropriation of *femme castrice* “challenges the sadistic male gaze of classic cinema by inviting spectators to disavow the perspective of the male victim and identify across genders with the avenging woman.”<sup>31</sup> Acknowledging its historic role in shaping feminist film theory as well as rhetorical analyses of film, I approach my texts with an awareness of how visual mediums of film and television utilize figures familiar to psychoanalytic critics, like the monstrous-feminine, the abject, and objectified female body.<sup>32</sup> Psychoanalysis is useful as a peripheral supplement to my assessment of a text as “symbolic medicine,” while feminist rhetorical criticism constitutes the central lens through which I view these texts.

In terms of their perspective on rhetorical function, the “symbolic medicine” approach and feminist rhetorical criticism complement each other nicely; while Brummett’s adaptation of a Burkean analysis suggests what useful, persuasive messages the text transmits to the audience

regarding their anxieties, feminist theorists wisely view those messages as part of a complex system of discourse that socializes conventions of gender.<sup>33</sup> Further, the medicine that a text provides to treat anxieties about women for viewers susceptible to patriarchal ideology will have a different, likely adverse, effect upon women and feminist viewers. For assessment of both the narrative elements of the text and the symbolic figures of women encompassed by the female robot, an approach using both symbolic medicine and feminist rhetorical theory allow the necessary dimension for commentary on anxiety resolution as it pertains to women.

In addition to these approaches to textual analysis, the expectations of the text's genre will also influence its rhetorical function. Several scholars, including Brummett, have focused on horror movies as persuasive devices within a certain time; indeed, Kendall Phillips calls horror a "barometer of the national mood."<sup>34</sup> Phillips and Kelly agree that horror films project "collective fears" or "nightmares," which can allegorically or directly "index real fears," especially as they pertain to Otherness.<sup>35</sup>

Many of these characteristics of the horror genre also apply to science-fiction media as well. Vivian Sobcheck claims that one of two critical approaches to sci-fi treat it as modern horror, "growing out of it and superseding it."<sup>36</sup> The other approach views sci-fi as a "prophetic neo-realism" intended to comment on the direction that a society might be heading. Both approaches usefully lend themselves to an investigation of cultural anxiety, the first camp reaffirming the potentials for allegorical representation of fear via monsters and narrative and the other distinguishing those fears as forward-looking anxieties.<sup>37</sup> Sobcheck claims, "The SF film is not concerned with the animal which is there, now and for always, within us...but the more diluted and less immediate fear of what we may yet become."<sup>38</sup> This difference is crucial for understanding what a film may be trying to treat: if horror is the prescription for fear of the

primal savagery of humankind, the medicine may aim to treat but not to cure. The medicine of sci-fi, however, is preventative, cautious, a reminder that our actions as a society have consequences both imminently and in the distant, imagined future. Thus, the monsters inhabiting the world of science fiction may be rooted in historical concerns, but ultimately comment on the future.

Monsters' embodiments of anxiety provide "a useful space in which to reflect on these fears and our relationship to them."<sup>39</sup> For instance, the alien may represent fear of a foreign invasion while the werewolf symbolizes dangerous instinct or insanity. Monsters can embody a fear of the repressed within one's self and/or a fear of a society's "Others," including women, the working class, and other cultures; the cinematic monster "attire[s] itself in the prevalent fears of the day."<sup>40</sup> Monsters are metaphors for the cultural anxieties a text will (or will not) resolve, their representations typically reflecting issues prevalent to the time period of the text.

For example, the zombie—a fleshy predecessor of the robot—was connected with the Depression-era in the United States. Peter Dendle's analysis of zombie films led him to conclude that the zombie served as a "barometer of cultural anxieties" aligned with the economic issues of the 1930s; born of Haitian voodoo practices and a mythological resurrection of the slave, the zombie symbolized a "catastrophic surplus of labor, of hands without work to do."<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the depiction of zombified women "served as a cinematic mechanism for raising awareness of gender issues and empowering women" inasmuch as female zombies resisted subservience after their deaths.<sup>42</sup> This analysis demonstrates how temporal context, monstrous embodiment, and narrative function simultaneously to provide viewers a way to reflect on crises of economy and gender.

Monsters may also be utilized as allegorical symbols outside of the confines of media texts. A close cousin of the robot, the cyborg, has come to hold its own niche in critical scholarship, owing mostly to Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto."<sup>43</sup> This canonical text champions the cyborg as an ironic symbol of socialist-feminism because of its capacity to shirk historically persistent boundaries, particularly of sex and gender, but also of human/non-human and historical/novel.<sup>44</sup> While Haraway conceptualized the cyborg as a political pioneer, she views technology itself as "an intrinsically oppressive force operating in the interests of the patriarchy."<sup>45</sup> The cyborg is imbued with feminist political implications. Haraway's use of the cyborg actually rejects temporal context for the most part, and shows how the embodiment of a monstrous figure can carry meaning, even without a fictional narrative.

Rather than embodying a destabilization of identity and social convention, the robot's politics come from an embodiment of Otherness. As with Dendle's zombies, the gender performance of a robot onscreen seriously alters which cultural anxieties it comments upon. In addition to the weight of technological anxieties, the markedly gendered gynoid also bears the meaning of women as patriarchy sees them, exemplifying anxieties held about women and femininity. Thus, in the sections that follow, I first articulate the technological concerns shouldered by robots as symbols of mechanization and post-industrialism: the replacement anxiety, lost control anxiety, and assimilation anxiety. In the next section, I connect the gynoid to the fascinating history of man-made women, identifying both the fantasies and anxieties that the female robot represents. The synthesis of anxieties pertaining to technological advancement and differences of gender are embodied by the female robot. My case studies then situate that embodiment in context and narrative, the resolution of which presumably instructs audiences with ways to cope in a given context.

## Robots and Anxiety

A full appreciation of the robot's symbolic meaning requires an etymological investigation into its past. Other monsters such as zombies, the Golem, and Frankenstein's monster embodied similar themes of artificial animation and the foibles of science.<sup>46</sup> However, the robot as we know it was conceived in Czechoslovakia in Karel Čapek's 1921 play, *Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti* (Rossum's Universal Robots).<sup>47</sup> "Robot" derives from the Czech *robota*, meaning "forced labor."<sup>48</sup> The robots in the play are essentially human clones, created in a factory for the purposes of profit, and are distributed all over the world, serving as cheap labor. The robots eventually rise up in rebellion.<sup>49</sup> Potentially analogous to the proletarian revolution in neighboring Russia, robots symbolize both the means of production and a disenfranchised working class. Čapek's *R.U.R.* won international fame, and robots gained momentum as a figure of science fiction, appearing in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* in 1927.<sup>50</sup> In these early embodiments, robots not only symbolized class anxieties, but also anxieties about technological industrialization.<sup>51</sup> Chief among these is the fear of replacement of humankind by machines, closely connected to the dizzying technological changes that populations from the nineteenth century to present have witnessed in the world.<sup>52</sup>

The replacement anxiety suggests that as industrial technologies grow, human workers will be replaced by machines, and their livelihoods will be sacrificed. This anxiety is certainly well-founded and reflective of the job market for workers in a post-industrial world; when it comes to the manufacturing goods, the efficiency of machines simply outweighs human craftsmanship in monetary value.<sup>53</sup> The creator of the robots in *R.U.R.* articulates the reasoning for this replacement when he explains, "The human machine was terribly imperfect...it no longer answers the requirements of modern engineering."<sup>54</sup> Not only might a mechanical worker prove

more cost-effective than a human worker, but, as Per Schedle point out, it is also a “docile body,” not given to question or disobey its employer’s demands.<sup>55</sup> This docile robot renders the human employee obsolete and unfit as a worker by comparison.

In science fiction as well as our lived reality, robots are often created for the express purpose of replacement of human workers. In Alex Proya’s *I, Robot*, for instance, sophisticated robots operate as public servants throughout the world; in Ridley Scott’s *Bladerunner*, Replicants are used for off-planet slave labor. However, the cautionary aspect of both of these tales is not the loss of jobs, but the reliability of these machines once they are employed. In both texts, these robots actually prove to be much riskier than human employees for the very reason they were initially employed: their distinct intelligences and artificial steely strengths. Once robots have effectively replaced human workers, they inspire a returning anxiety for the employer, which suggests that these docile machines are not docile at all, but are actually as uncontrollable and autonomous as the workers they were built to replace.

The lost-control anxiety worries that the perception of control held by machine owners and operators is false. Both the perceptions of technological control and loss of technological control are widespread in our culture.<sup>56</sup> When humans began harnessing steam power to create behemoth machines such as the steam locomotive, catastrophes such as derailed trains, automobile crashes, and bloody factory accidents demonstrated how technology could run out of physical control, even without intentional malice.<sup>57</sup>

The reality that humans both do and do not control machines gives rise to the question of trust: will they perform as they are programmed to, or will they malfunction? Jennifer Slack and J. McGregor Wise observe, “when we consider matters of trust, we do not have to venture far into science fiction, with its killer robots, to touch highly significant cultural concerns.”<sup>58</sup> A.I.

scientist Marvin Minsky uses the paradox of the smart slave to illustrate how trust functions for intelligent agents: “If you keep the slave from learning too much, you are limiting its usefulness. But, if you help it to become smarter than you are, then you may not be able to trust it not to make better plans for itself...”<sup>59</sup> As Minsky’s statement suggests, the issues of machine “intelligence” greatly changes the tenor of the question of trust. The crucial difference between a purely mechanical technology and an intelligent agent may be represented by the contrast between a type writer and a MacBook. While both have the hardware to transmit the operator’s touch into words, only one uses autonomous software, performing an array of unseen functions and “thinking” in its own coded language. A mechanical technology can further the physical endeavors of humans, but a digital technology can work in tandem with the human mind, and even have a “mind” of its own. In both cases, the extension of human functioning is at stake, and the question of trust cautions the extent to which we can rely on technology to responsibly carry out our will.

The partnership between the human mind and digital tools gives rise to an assimilation anxiety, a fear that humans are actually an extension of technology rather than the reverse. Susan Sontag claims that the threatening element of this anxiety resides “in man’s ability to be turned into a machine.”<sup>60</sup> Unlike other anxieties that cast technology and the robot as a fearsome Other or insidious force at work, this fear is predicated on the encroachment of technology into one’s being, potentially displacing the sense of “humanity” that distinguishes us from an A.I. Schelde claims, “Evil robot species...are embodiments of the worst human fear: faceless, unindividuated, totally homogenized but vaguely humanlike creatures. The ultimate evil is that which is powerful, very like us, and which we have no emotional or intellectual access too.”<sup>61</sup> Apparent in

Schedle's statement is not the fear of an additional presence, as with the replacement anxiety, but of an absence of individuality due to assimilation.

The assimilation anxiety also suggests that the increasingly thin line between human and computer validates the perspective that humans are simply organic machines. In her analysis of *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence*, Saralyn Orbaugh claims that the film accentuates that human emotion "is no more than an illusion that arises from our own genetically programmed desire to experience such emotion."<sup>62</sup> Orbaugh's criticism accentuates the anxiety that comes with the audience's consubstantiality with the programmed mind and bodily "shell" of the gynoids in the film. If we are not already machines made of carbon rather than steel or silicone, our closeness with human-manufactured machines illustrates this melding. As bio-medical technologies such as prostheses, pacemakers, and cochlear implants continue to advance, "concern grows that we might go too far, lose our humanity, and become mere machines."<sup>63</sup> The assimilation anxiety is predicated on the belief that there is something special and distinctive about humans that robots, as simulacra, challenge.

The cultural anxieties that technology will replace means of human livelihood, that machines will spiral out of our control, and that human beings will lose their humanity as we assimilate with machines have been characterized by robots in science fiction film and television. These provide a useful foundation for approaching the robot as an embodiment of technological anxiety; however, as digital and mechanical technologies rapidly advance, nuances to these preconceived anxieties arise in contemporary texts. The case studies I examine reveal some of these nuances, as well as adaptations of cultural anxieties to the medium of technology, such as apprehensions about data collection by tech industry giants and insecurities about our seemingly "private" online activities. Technological anxieties, those acknowledged here as well as those

revealed through my case studies, are crucial components of the robot's symbolic meaning. As a robot, the gynoid bears the weight of technological anxieties; but these are not her heaviest significations. The gynoid is a cultural symbol of the manufactured woman, her "birth" being enabled by technology, capitalism, and patriarchal demand for the perfect woman. In the following section, I articulate both fantasies and anxieties the gynoid represents according to scholars whose investigations precede my own in order to formulate her foundational meanings upon which my case studies build.

### **Theorizing the Gynoid**

Just as the robot's cultural meanings were embodied long before *R.U.R.*, the fantasy of the artificially created woman existed in literature dating back through the centuries.<sup>64</sup> Before demonstrating which anxieties about artificial women present in sci-fi texts, I recall what historic embodiments reveal about the motivation behind their manufacturing: namely, the male creation fantasy, in which the creator imagines himself as a life-giving God capable of creating perfect femininity according to his own standards.

Several popular and scholarly sources examining artificial women connect them to the Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galatea.<sup>65</sup> According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion was an artist who struggled to relate to women. So he sculpted a beautiful female figure from ivory and begged Aphrodite to grant her life. She did so, and Pygmalion named his creation—and new romantic partner—Galatea.<sup>66</sup> Today, the science fiction genre is full of Pygmalions, fulfilling their "'dream' of male procreation," which both diminishes women's role in reproduction and elevates the man to the role of a Creator.<sup>67</sup> While the traditional myth casts Pygmalion as a mere supplicant of Aphrodite, "manufacturing an ideal female using science in place of divine intervention [updates] the Galatea myth, yet with less than ideal results."<sup>68</sup> This fantasy does not

imagine genuine partnership; instead, it places the created female primarily as a “shiny surface on which male visions of femininity may be etched” and a “projection of [the creator’s] ego.”<sup>69</sup> The relationship between the creator and his creation may be artificially harmonious, but inasmuch as manufactured women are effigies of Real ones, the “perfection” she exemplifies has problematic implications for gender in our world.

While the male creation fantasy has been popularized through fictional retellings of the Pygmalion/Galatea myth, the sculpting of femininity is a “cultural reality” of patriarchal society, which indoctrinates girls “to be the perfect and perfectly obedient companions, greenhouses, pleasure objects of men.”<sup>70</sup> The roles that gynoids typically fill in science fiction reflect the roles patriarchy would assign a Real woman: either that of a domestic servant or a “passive doll whose great virtue, by saying practically nothing, is to become a flattering mirror for the man who falls in love with her.”<sup>71</sup> While unsettling, the conformity of robotic female characters to these roles makes perfect sense considering that, like women who internalize patriarchal ideology, they are socialized or programmed for that purpose.

Just as her suitability to patriarchal gender roles makes the gynoid a projection of male fantasy, she embodies a replacement anxiety for women. Rather than replace workers, the gynoids in fiction and reality are manufactured to imitate female sexual partners. Sex-tech industry workers like McCullen, as well as spokespeople for sex doll/robot lifestyles, have been explicit about the benefits of dolls and robots as companions for people who struggle to form romantic connections.<sup>72</sup> Even before the emergence of hyperrealistic sex robots, pornographer Al Goldstein admitted that his fantasy was “to come home and hear a robot greet me. My wife knows she’s on the way out. She’s like a buffalo. She knows she’s here temporarily until technology catches up.”<sup>73</sup> Brian Forbes’ *The Stepford Wives* revolves around the methodical

execution and replacement of wives with gynoids in hopes that the synthetic model of “wife” will fulfill its domestic and sexual roles more consistently. This gender-based replacement anxiety is subsequent to the male creation fantasy, its potentials manifested in science fiction as well as the attitudes of real gynoid manufacturers.

While patriarchy’s fantasies may imagine gynoids as docile replacements for women in the home, sci-fi narratives rarely allow them to remain purely figures of desire, casting them instead as monstrous manifestations of anxieties about women. The Eve anxiety, which erroneously purports that women with too much power and no male supervision will inevitably act immorally and harm others in the process, is exemplified by gynoids capable of deception.<sup>74</sup> For instance, in Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina*, the central gynoid uses her artificial intelligence software to dupe both her creator and companion, turning on both in spite of the friendly disposition she seemed to possess. Her name is Ava, placing her within the tradition of naming gynoids a variation of “Eve”—including EVE (*Wall-E*), Eve VIII (*Eve of Destruction*), Ava (*The Machine*), and others. The biblical mythology of Eve is also evoked by pairing gynoids with serpents, such as Zhora in *Bladerunner* or Armistice in *Westworld*. Female robots are likened to the original sinner, the mother of a new species with destructive potential.

Often in wake of their deceptions, gynoids might kill or attack those who threaten them, exacerbating anxieties of the enigmatic violent women. The violent gynoid does exactly the opposite of what she is presumed to do according to her creator’s fantasies: instead of docility and subservience, the violent gynoid opts for aggression and, presumably, the usurping of control from their master. Female violence “doesn’t fit conveniently into our ideas of the feminine, and, because of this, it has a disruptive and traumatic impact.”<sup>75</sup> Oftentimes, deception and violence combine. This is the case with the gynoids of *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence*, sex robots

manufactured to look like young girls who malfunction and brutally murder their owners. As with Ava of *Ex Machina*, these gynoids actually utilize their inviting, feminine appearance to deceive and make vulnerable male victims. The violence anxiety, then, is nuanced by femininity in a way quite distinct from male violence, which fits more intelligibly into social constructs of masculinity.

When the gynoid uses her sex-appeal to the ends of deception or violence, she folds into those anxieties the dread of monstrous sexuality. Although the sexual desirability of an artificial woman is placed upon her by her creator, it can be used as a weapon; “it is in the possession of an ‘unnatural sexual attractiveness that the female cyborg’s greatest danger appears to lie.”<sup>76</sup> The earliest cinematic appearance of the female robot, “False Maria” of *Metropolis* threatens an entire city with a hypnotizing erotic dance, seeking to seduce the workers of the city and persuade them to destroy the machines with which they work. A later gynoid, Eve VIII, carries a nuclear trigger in her womb, “reinforcing the notion of monstrous female sexuality.”<sup>77</sup> The “highly eroticized, seductive, and therefore immoral, but desirable” gynoid may juxtapose the “good,” inhibited and demure woman, such as Maria versus False Maria in *Metropolis*, or Zhora and Pris versus Rachael in *Bladerunner*.<sup>78</sup> Dichotomous divisions of gynoids into “good” and “bad” help to “give the violent woman meaning and allows for her to have a place in the social order again. ...if we fantasize that the violent woman is a ‘whore,’ we know she has no remorse of feelings, and we convict her.”<sup>79</sup> When used for her purposes, the sexuality of a gynoid is a cause for anxiety. More often compounded together than existing separately, the Eve anxiety, threat of violence, and fear of monstrous sexuality characterize the gynoid as a monster allegorically symbolizing patriarchal anxieties about subversive women.

The narrative resolution of these anxieties rarely bodes well for the dissenting feminine robot. Analyses of media texts featuring monstrous gynoids point to two ways that these anxieties can be resolved: either the threat is circumvented through strategy, or the gynoid will be punitively destroyed. The fetishistic strategy seizes upon threats presented by the gynoid and incorporates them into sexual desire, neutralizing the threats and placing them under control.<sup>80</sup> Louis Kaplan explains that the sexual fetishization of robots is a necrophilic strategy, “evoked by the fantasy that living, animate beings are unpredictable or potentially dangerous.”<sup>81</sup> She explains that containing this fear of a living thing requires an “extinguishing” of life and transformation to a non-living entity that will “submit to their desires, wishes, and fantasies.”<sup>82</sup> Monstrous gynoids often evoke abject horror through their resemblance to corpses, forging another connection between necrophilia and fetishization of robots.<sup>83</sup> While gynoids are already technically non-living, lobotomy of their artificial intelligence and programming may constitute “de-animation”—in *Ex Machina*, for instance, the threat of Ava’s memories being “wiped” to make room for an update is treated as a death in the narrative, though her body would remain intact. Without their software, the gynoids are reduced to sex dolls, more akin to the fantasy imagined by male creators than the subversive monster that challenges control.

If fetishistic control through “mental” de-animation is not an option for those threatened by the gynoid, anxieties can also be resolved by annihilating her entirely. When False Maria is burned at the stake, “the happy resolution is predicated on the elimination of Otherness, as embodied in the...female robot.”<sup>84</sup> In *Bladerunner*, Pris and Zhora are both killed by Deckard because they “are emblematic of dangerous female sexuality and duly punished by death, while Racheal survives as the only example of acceptable femininity, her previously haughty demeanor displaced into vulnerability and dependence upon Deckard.”<sup>85</sup> Survival of the gynoid in science

fiction “necessitates conforming to approved standards of behavior and generally deferring to male authority.”<sup>86</sup> Both total destruction and fetishistic incapacitation serve as means of alleviating the anxieties that gynoids arouse.

Narrative resolution being central to the prescription of “symbolic medicine” by the text, these findings indicate a general failure of sci-fi films to offer responsible ways of coping with erroneous patriarchal anxieties about women. While the alleviation of anxiety through partial or complete destruction of these figures certainly does not function in the interest of a feminist project, the treatment of dissenting gynoids testifies of the prevalence of patriarchal ideology within the genre. My study seeks to contribute to these findings by first examining the nuances of technological/gender anxiety embodied by the particular gynoid characters, then identifying how the anxieties presented in the texts—whether they are part of the foundational patterns I have already identified or novel anxieties pertaining to contemporary issues—are resolved. Finally, my investigation will synthesize my findings regarding anxiety embodiment, narrative interaction with anxiety, and the texts’ ultimate resolutions in order to articulate how my case studies treat the ailment of forward-looking fears.

### **Justification of Study**

Cultural anxieties about women and technology are as relevant now as they have ever been in the United States. In the presidential election of 2016 alone, misogynist messages that condone sexual assault or delineate all women as potential threats to marital fidelity circulated through public political discourse.<sup>87</sup> Chiefly white male law-makers continue to advance legislation seeking to regulate rights and access to reproductive healthcare for women while feminists and allies protest before state capitols.<sup>88</sup> In our daily lives, Real women still experience policing of our femininity according to patriarchal standards, and we continue to navigate the

double-binds of gendered expectations. While the gynoid in film sometimes represents an oppressive or violent replacement of Real women, its fabricated femininity illuminates the artificiality of femininity as it has been culturally reinforced. Just as the male sci-fi scientists create their Galateas, patriarchal hegemony seeks to sculpt its narrow image of femininity onto Real women. It casts them as symbols rather than agents, creations rather than creators. Fear of women exercising control over our own lives, our wages, our sexuality, and our bodies without hegemonic allowance continues to evidence itself publically and privately in our lived experiences.

Meanwhile, serious concerns regarding Russian cyber-attacks and Wiki-leaked information exemplify the enormous influence that digital technologies can have on public opinions and election outcomes.<sup>89</sup> As the digitization of the political landscape continues, A.I. technologies continue to advance at an alarming rate. In 2017, Facebook programmed and subsequently shut down bots which created and began speaking their own language.<sup>90</sup> The same year, 116 leaders of robotics and A.I. companies sent an open letter to the U.N. urging a ban on lethal autonomous weapons for fear that “once developed, they will permit armed conflict to be fought at a scale greater than ever, and at timescales faster than humans can comprehend.”<sup>91</sup> While the shouldering of physical labor by machines has been an aspect of human life since our earliest ancestors fashioned stones into tools, machines able to perform the intellectual labor previously assigned to humans have only existed for a relative blink of the eye. As evidenced by the concerns of experts and designers, cultural anxieties about A.I.s are well-founded, their influences extending far beyond fictional imagination.

My investigation of the gynoid does not present a direction for solution nor advocate for the legitimacy or illegitimacy of cultural anxieties regarding technology or gender; rather, by

using this figure as an embodiment of these, I seek to uncover more about the anxieties themselves. I examine the gynoid as a visual symbol of cultural concern to articulate in words what this uncanny feminine machine signifies. Centrally, my study asks what depictions of robotic women in sci-fi reveal about cultural anxieties toward gender and technology, and assesses the effectiveness of the selected texts as “symbolic medicine.”

The first chapter uses Forbes’ *The Stepford Wives* (1975), a film that has been widely discussed by critics and feminist scholars since its release when Betty Friedan condemned it as a “rip-off of the Women’s Movement.”<sup>92</sup> Based on Ira Levin’s novel of the same name, *The Stepford Wives* takes place in the fictional town of Stepford, Connecticut, where Joanna (Katherine Ross) and her family move to get away from the “noise” of the city. In stark contrast to Joanna’s feminist ideals, most of the other women in Stepford seem obsessed with domestic responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, and sexually servicing their husbands. Joanna and her friends Bobbie and Charmaine try to bring progressive change to the town, their conversations with the other Stepford wives falling on deaf ears. As the narrative progresses, both Charmain and Bobbie undergo inexplicable transformations, abandoning their individuality and goals and becoming “perfect” housewives. Ultimately, Joanna discovers that the Men’s Association, a club comprised of Stepford’s husbands, had been murdering and replacing their wives with robotic clones. Her discovery, however, comes too late and Joanna is killed by her own nearly-finished replica.

Having emerged during a time when the Women’s Liberation Movement was receiving national media attention, the parallels between the film and public discourse about women’s rights are clear. Although the text has been appraised by many as “feminist,” I claim that it casts the gynoid as a figure of feminist rather than patriarchal anxieties and fails to administer

sufficient “symbolic medicine” for a progressive audience. In spite of—and in part because of—its shortcomings, this film serves as an excellent text for this examination; it centralizes issues of gender, exemplifying how a film can be both influenced by and commenting on the socio-political climate. By subduing rather than arousing patriarchal anxieties, these robotic replacements shirk the archetype of the castrating monstrous-feminine and become monsters of the feminist imagination.

Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2015) serves as the text of my second chapter. When software programmer Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) is selected to participate in a top-secret experiment, he flies to the home of the company’s founder and young tech genius Nathan (Oscar Isaac). There, Nathan introduces him to Ava (Alicia Vikander), an autonomous feminine robot with self-learning A.I. and a pretty human face. For the experiment, Caleb need only talk to her from behind a glass wall and informally report his impressions of her to Nathan. Witnessing Nathan’s verbal abuse of his domestic partner, Kyoko, Caleb’s suspicions of his character begin to grow. After learning of Nathan’s plans to update Ava and erase her memories, Caleb and Ava devise a plan for her escape. However, Ava outwits both Caleb and Nathan, devising her own plan with Kyoko—also an A.I.—and ends the lives of both men before escaping the facility.

What distinguishes Ava from gynoids of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the seemingly infinite information that she has access to by grace of her connection to BlueBook (the film’s fictional equivalent of Google). Thus, she embodies cultural anxieties about cyberspace, digitization, data collection, face recognition software, autonomous machines, self-learning A.I. and other technological developments pertinent to the contemporary moment.

Ava and Kyoko fulfill two of the roles literature discusses as being typical of female robots; for Caleb, Ava is designed to be a perfect romantic partner while Kyoko serves Nathan as

a sexual and domestic slave. Although programmed to fulfill these roles, both deviate from them drastically, ironically utilizing the few advantages they offer in order to free themselves from confinement. The potential of these gynoids to not only sabotage their oppressive male creator but demonstrate symptoms of true agency exacerbates traditional patriarchal anxieties, and they effectively illustrate Minsky's conundrum of the smart slave. The sexual treatment of the A.I.s, foregrounded by Nathan's conversations with Caleb, comment overtly on the sexual motives of their creation, and illustrate the value of the gynoids as objects of both sexual desire—and, eventually—monstrosity.

Having examined texts from two distinctly different times and with opposite outcomes, in my third chapter I turn to HBO's first season of *Westworld*, aired in 2016 and directed by Johnathon Nolan. A reinvention of the Michael Crichton film released in 1973, it synthesizes the anxieties of my two previously studied time periods. The first season takes place in an Old West-themed amusement park, where guests pay forty-thousand dollars per day to play out fantasies of adventure, sexuality, and crime at the expense of hyper-realistic robotic hosts. The hosts are programmed to accept the simulation of the park and their reality, and to ignore any information that would challenge that reality. Chiefly, the series follows two hosts, Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) and Maeve (Thandie Newton), as they seem to defy their programming and pursue the truth about the park and themselves.

The contrast between Dolores and Maeve demonstrates the dichotomous nature of patriarchal expectations of femininity; Dolores is a blonde-haired daughter of a farmer, while Maeve is a Black madam at the local saloon. The treatment of each character throughout the series reaffirms Short's observations about the punishment of gender transgressions via violence; Maeve is violently killed multiple times throughout the season while Dolores is more often a

victim of rape, fulfilling expectations of ideal white victimhood.<sup>93</sup> The explicit depictions of violence and sexual actions toward hosts confirm cultural scopophilic fascinations with both, especially in the context of the fetishistic relationship onlookers are encouraged to have with the gynoid.

The park itself serves as an excellent example of Baudrillard's simulation, an encompassing and convincing artificial reality. The theme of Westworld hearkens back to the home of the ruggedly masculine cowboy hero. That this particular theme was selected to cater to rich privileged guests allows for commentary on crises of masculinity in the postmodern era, as well as the commercial value of creating a space of nostalgic regression. Like the robots in *R.U.R.*, Westworld uses robots for profit—not for manual labor but for entertainment, especially using the simulations of women as sexual commodities. The most recent of my texts, I demonstrate how the anxieties suggested by the gynoids and the park itself reflect the cultural concerns of today.

In addition to the insights each text provides about the time period in which it is set, an appraisal of them together allows us to see what the gynoid has come to mean over the past several decades. More importantly, the progression of this meaning illuminates the direction of popular anxieties regarding gender and anxiety—inasmuch as media serves to address this anxiety, the effectiveness of the texts as “medicine” necessitates assessment.

## CHAPTER 1: CULTURAL ANXIETIES AND NECROPHILIC FETISHISM IN *THE STEPFORD WIVES*

The 1975 film adaptation of Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives* has become, in the words of Bonnie Dow, "a feminist classic."<sup>94</sup> The film aroused the approval and distain of popular critics, feminist scholars, and even Betty Friedan, who called it a "rip-off of the women's movement."<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the film comments directly on the Women's Liberation Movement and many of the issues with which it wrestled: the cult of domesticity, the belittlement of women's careers, and the theft of bodily autonomy at patriarchal hands. The film's critique of marriage aligned with the perspective that the personal is political and demonstrated how patriarchy functions as a collective effort. Although the film cast light on many of the deeply-felt concerns that feminists articulated at the time, it failed to provide resolution for those fears. Instead, *The Stepford Wives* actualized patriarchal fantasy through the eradication of women and subsequent replacement of them with inanimate and subdued robotic doubles.

Films function rhetorically as meaningful public discourse.<sup>96</sup> They equip audience members with ways to perceive and address the world around them, and provide "symbolic medicine" to treat social ailments.<sup>97</sup> Specifically, horror and sci-fi films address "collective fears," oftentimes by embodying them in the form of monstrous entities and, through narrative, suggesting ways for society to cope with these fears.<sup>98</sup>

Informed by the symbolic meanings of the monstrous gynoid as an embodiment of gendered anxieties and fantasies, my analysis answers Brummett's call to "assay the medicine" that the text prescribes as a solution for the presented issues.<sup>99</sup> The criteria of my assessment spring from feminist rhetorical criticism, which investigates gendered ideologies and attitudes as they present in public discourse. Consulting feminist criticisms of *The Stepford Wives*, I interpret

the film as an allegorical representation, embodying patriarchy and feminist resistance through characters. Through the operationalization of those characters, the film presents the death of feminist women and, by extension, the death of the feminist movement. I argue that the film fails to exorcise, rather than resolve, anxieties of its feminist audience by actualizing a patriarchal necrophilic fantasy: the successful extinguishing of life from women in order to exert total sexual control over their bodies.

In order to fully appreciate how *The Stepford Wives* interacted with audiences of its time, I provide a brief plot summary and consider how aspects of production and the context of Women's Liberation Movement limited the film makers' encoded feminist message. I detail the perspectives taken by preceding scholarly criticisms of the film, which support a (limited) allegorical interpretation. To these interpretations I add Kaplan's insights on the sexually objectified robot as corpse in a necrophilic fetishizing strategy, which are reinforced by the narrative of the film. Ultimately, I articulate how the film utilizes feminists' anxieties about social/spatial isolation, diminution of women's minds, and retribution for resistance as steps towards actualizing and literalizing a punitive necrophilic fantasy.

### **A Feminist Horror**

*The Stepford Wives* details the story of Joanna, a photographer, wife, and mother who "could have leapt from the pages of *The Feminist Mystique*" as she moves from Manhattan to the small town of Stepford with her husband, Walter, and their two children.<sup>100</sup> The seemingly "idyllic" town with well-kept homes and hyper-domestic wives begins to unsettle Joanna. She and her new friend Bobbie grow increasingly suspicious of the Men's Association, an exclusively male club in which their husbands take part. Once their friend, Charmaine, undergoes a transformation from a spunky, cigarette-smoking tennis player to a subservient wife

stripped of her personality and interests, the women's doubts intensify to fear, and they suspect that there is something in the water—leaked out from all the electrical facilities near town—that turns the women in “*haus-fraus* and drones.” An old flame of Joanna's, a chemist, dispels this hypothesis. However, when Bobbie returns from a get-away with her husband having undergone a transformation similar to Charmaine's, Joanna begins to theorize that something much more insidious is going on, anticipating that “her time has come.” Ultimately, her investigation leads her to the Victorian mansion out of which the Men's Association operates. There she meets her demise at the hands of her identical robotic replacement.<sup>101</sup> Ultimately, all three of the women suspicious of their eerie neighbors' behaviors are murdered and replaced with robotic doubles—“docile, obedient, utterly compliant creatures.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, the film invites viewers to feel discomfort with the sequence of events or to take “misogynistic glee in Joanna's demise” and, by extension, the death of the Women's Movement.<sup>103</sup>

The 1970's were a “volatile time for women in U.S. history,” and the treatment of feminist activists in the media certainly reflected that.<sup>104</sup> Although it had garnered support at least a decade sooner, the loosely-defined Women's Liberation Movement gained sustained national attention in 1970.<sup>105</sup> The supposed bra-burning protest of the Miss America Pageant in 1968 provided ammunition for the media to make the Women's Movement a laughing stock, and to reject the “sexual politics” by radical feminists.<sup>106</sup> Rhetorical analyses of news and other national media from that era show that anxiety about liberated women was apparent “in abundance.”<sup>107</sup> Feminists were represented as “crazed freaks obsessed with karate,” whose chief motives were to destabilize the family.<sup>108</sup> Dow quotes Jerry Falwell calling feminism a “satanic attack on the home;” indeed, media narratives centralized radical critiques that politicized

marriage and used lesbian feminists as totems of man-hating and sexual deviance in order to delegitimize the movement.<sup>109</sup>

These depictions of progressive feminism in popular media exacerbate cultural anxieties in terms of the displacement of patriarchal control and power, a unified narrative that intersected with the changing lived experiences of the broad U.S. population. By the end of the 1970s, the majority of families relied on two wage-earners rather than one, and the working woman was no longer an anomaly the norm.<sup>110</sup> Although in retrospect the fear that women would actually displace men from their work would not come to fruition, the movement of women from the “private sphere” to the public in terms of labor and politics irritated patriarchal anxieties about the displacement of their roles.

The creators of *The Stepford Wives* were not intending to threaten their feminist audience, but their positionalities rendered them woefully oblivious to the reality of the horrors that they portrayed, horrors which members of the Movement may have witnessed first-hand: domestic slavery, social ostracism, and violence against women. When Columbia Pictures invited a group of women’s liberation activists—including Betty Friedan—to a screening of the film, the audience reacted with “hisses, groans, and guffaws” and Friedan left the room, outraged.<sup>111</sup> Nanette Newman recalled her husband, director Bryan Forbes, telling her that after a different screening, “some madwoman attacked me with an umbrella and told me that I’m anti-women” though he claimed, “If anything, its anti-men!”<sup>112</sup> Although this audience of feminist activists perceived the film as problematic, it financially benefitted the film to appeal to a broader and more general audience than just activists. *The Stepford Wives* sought to enter a national conversation on gender politics without a sufficient understanding of the Movement itself.

While highly experienced and well-regarded in their crafts, the filmmakers were industry elitists focused more on the artistic elements of a horror “in sunlight” than on how the film’s message would interact with the rhetoric of and surrounding the Movement.<sup>113</sup> Forbes was a British director, who took on *The Stepford Wives* later in his career, and whose vision for the film often conflicted with that of screenwriter William Goldman. When Forbes cast Newman, his wife, in the role of Carol, Goldman felt that he had to adjust the “look” of all of the other Stepford wives, who he initially intended to resemble playboy bunnies rather than housewives.<sup>114</sup> These artists possessed the ability to present effective horror, but internal fractures and differences in vision hindered the cohesiveness of the final product, and failure to account for women’s actual voices limited its critique.<sup>115</sup>

While the initial reactions of feminist audiences was poor, *The Stepford Wives* has nonetheless endured as a cult classic, and as an intriguing engagement with issues of gender for its time, and interpretations on its success vary. Anna Silver praises it as an indication of feminist rhetoric’s “success and popular appeal,” while Friedan’s critique suggests that it was an appropriation and perversion of the same rhetoric.<sup>116</sup> Dow critiques the film for its insufficient explanation of the motives for patriarchy—a question that “second wave feminists spent a fair amount of time trying to explain.”<sup>117</sup> The Men’s Association, the all-male club of Stepford orchestrating the murder and replacement of the wives, symbolizes systematic patriarchy, but its motive as a group does not sufficiently explain the motives of the individual husbands. I add to Dow’s critique that the Men’s Associations also fails to represent the hegemonic nature of patriarchy as an ideology, not merely a system of governance, internalized and perpetuated by individuals outside the exclusively male circle. While Silver’s assertion that the film as allegorical is abundantly supported, Dow’s critique illustrates the limits of that representational

strategy. An allegorical perspective is useful for investigating how symbolized anxieties are treated in the film—while the metaphor has boundaries, the narrative nonetheless instructs the audience on how to interact with its tenor.

As Brummett has indicated, the resolution of fear in a film will provide the audience with motives, or “equipment” for managing their fear; by eradicating the force of women one wife at a time, the film is actually providing subliminal attitudes for patriarchal audience members. As indicated by the colossal failure of Frank Oz’s 2004 post-feminist remake, which included a flatly optimistic ending in which the wives of Stepford are remarkably restored their humanity, resolution alone does not render the text effective or ineffective equipment.<sup>118</sup> The figure of the Stepford robot itself is a tool for processing anxiety, its presence providing a form of equipment that resolution alone cannot explain. However, insight into the symbolic meaning of the gynoid illuminates how the film as a whole suggests audiences treat the threat of feminist activism.

### **Fantasy and Anxiety**

Since their introduction into 20<sup>th</sup> century science fiction texts like *R.U.R* and *Metropolis*, gynoids have symbolized both anxieties and fantasies about women from patriarchal perspectives, sometimes even simultaneously. While most pop-culture gynoids actualize the male creation fantasy, which imagines the creator as uplifted to the status of a paternal God, many of these eventually turn on their creators, agitating the Eve anxiety—that women will act immorally if given power without supervision. Even with their potentials for representing and actualizing anxiety, however, the gynoid is still steeped in patriarchal fantasy. In both popular culture and lived reality, gynoids are often manufactured for the express purpose of sexual engagement. They are given hyperreal feminine sex characteristics and their dispositions are programmed, making them tailored to patriarchal values regarding women as objects. Although

gynoids may represent patriarchal anxieties through narratives that cast them as subverting their master's will, they are still marked as sexual objects through non-reproductive hypersexual physicality and their associations with patriarchal fantasies, such as male creation and superficial feminine perfection.

As an entity that simultaneously threatens and arouses, the female robot is a “site of an over-determining fetishistic desire.”<sup>119</sup> Sexual fetishization of robots is a necrophilic fantasy, Kaplan explains, predicated on the belief that animate human beings are dangerous and unpredictable.<sup>120</sup> Fetishism here functions as a negotiation of the tension between sexual desire and fear. Although necrophilia is denotatively an erotic attraction towards human corpses, gynoids share the qualities necessary to be taken as necrophilic objects: they are artificial women rendered inanimate and void of consciousness, and are therefore non-threatening towards the necrophiliac. However, the narratives into which the gynoid is placed can alter their meanings; even as sexualized creations, gynoids can be subversive, directing their “monstrosity” towards hegemonic systems or oppressive creators and refusing the role of object or corpse.

The narrative of *The Stepford Wives* encourages the necrophilic strategy by reaffirming the belief that living women are a threat to men and presenting the subservient gynoid as a favorable replacement—but only after the lives of the women are extinguished and their threat neutralized. Thus, for audiences sympathetic to patriarchy, the potential of the gynoid as bearer of anxiety is undermined. For a feminist audience, the gynoids of Stepford exemplify anxieties about the failure of their mission and death of the Women's Liberation Movement. The necrophilic fantasy is not well-suited for feminist viewers, especially given that the murdered characters were, themselves, members of the Movement. While opponents of gendered subversion are invited to participate in a fantasy of its demise, feminists themselves are left

neither resolution nor “equipment” to manage anxieties, but are instead presented a parody of oppression that doubles as a threat of extinction.

In the analysis that follows, I demonstrate how the narrative of *The Stepford Wives* actualizes the necrophilic fetish by casting patriarchy as the necrophiliac and feminists as the victim, detailing the processes of isolation, diminution, and retribution as strategies for the de-animation of women and, by extension, the Women’s Liberation Movement.

### *Isolation*

The first step towards the imagined end of the Movement is women’s isolation from one another. From the initial move away from New York to her final hours in the mansion, Joanna’s doom is insured by her intensifying spatial and social isolation from the Women’s Movement and Real women. The sets of the film communicate spatial isolation, especially through regression. New York symbolizes a progressive counterculture, a fertile soil for the growth of feminist thought and action. New York is a “noisy” place where the sight of a naked female mannequin is no uncommon sight—much to the distain of Walter and the fascination of Joanna, who snaps a picture of the mannequin in the opening scene of the film. In contrast to New York as progressive, cosmopolitan, and full of diversity, the town of Stepford performs a nostalgic regression to post-war “domestic bliss,” a suburban haven for the maintenance of a family and traditional values where the “noise” of the Movement is muted to a distant echo. These opposing spaces represent the ideologies of those within them. Displacing Joanna into a space and community that strongly reinforces patriarchy isolates her from the safety of others in the Movement.

The residents of Stepford are critical of Joanna’s former home, which reinforces the town’s rejection of feminism. When Carol, a Stepford wife, gets in a car accident outside of the

supermarket, an ambulance races to her rescue in six minutes. A male onlooker remarks, “Think you could get ambulance service better than this anywhere else in the world? Two hours you’d wait in New York!” Asserting the superiority of the services in Stepford against New York implies a praise of small-town life and the functionality of a male-led system, especially for the protection and benefit of the women. Later, when Carol “gets drunk” at a gathering and repeats a portion of her script several times, her husband and the other men force Carol to apologize to Joanna and Bobby. Carol reveals that her alcoholism motivated the couple’s move to Stepford, saying, “the drinking was getting so bad and he blamed the city and all its pressures.” That Carol was once part of the Women’s Movement reinforces New York’s association with progressive gender politics, corroborating the onlooker’s critique that the city (and, broadly, gendered subversion), is detrimental to women. Physically separate from the city, Joanna is isolated from the safety of the Women’s Movement, which relied in part on consciousness-raising and collective action to gain momentum.<sup>121</sup>

Aesthetically, Stepford resembles the post-war era through its continuity. The Victorian mansion out of which the Men’s Association operates symbolizes the furthest isolation and regression, when social constraints for women in the western world were even more tightly laced than in the post-war era, long before the suffragists at the turn of the century pushed up against social norms for women. The fixtures of Stepford—the homes, the cars, and the artificial women—constitute an area that seems to move back in time, reversing the “progressive” march of the Women’s Movement.

While the spatial elements constitute Joanna’s isolation, her social isolation is temporarily relieved through Bobby and Charmaine, the Real women of Stepford. Though the remedy does not last, the friendships she builds with these two women provide the feminist viewer with a

treatment for the isolation anxiety: even in a place like Stepford, women can unify and find community with one another. The friendship between Bobby and Joanna exemplify Eve anxieties, the pair are seen drinking scotch, smoking cigarettes, eating store-bought snack cakes, and making fun of the Men's Association—all actions that go against the values of Stepford. Charmaine similarly defies these values and patriarchal ownership, smoking cigarettes and owning a tennis court, which her husband tears up after her replacement. As the men murder Charmaine, Bobby, and Joanna one at a time, each death furthers the isolation of the remaining women. The dissolving of their resistance alleviates the worries of the Men's Association, to whom female unity is a threat.

The temporary strategy of unity fails when the Real women try to start a consciousness-raising group. Initially, all of the Stepford wives turn down the opportunity, citing their “busyness” with domestic chores and their children as justifications. In order to persuade the wives to attend the group, Joanna negotiates with Claude, a husband and member of the Association. In an ironic twist, Joanna must work through patriarchy in order to undermine it. When the group meets, however, the concerns that the robotic wives bring forward revolve around housework and products that can help them save time cleaning. In terms of their concerns, Charmaine, Bobby, and Joanna are unable to find comrades, and their attempt to bring change to the gendered culture of Stepford utterly fails. This suggests an apprehension that strength in numbers is limited, as not all women were welcoming towards feminists.

Because spatial and social isolation mean failure for the cause of gender-equality and danger for individual women, the story and resolution of the film equip feminists with a reinforcement of our fears. The presentation of isolation within the film acts as a precursor to the women's murders, creating a sense of anticipation for onlookers as they consider the dangers for

a woman left alone with men who would subjugate her to a role she resists. Isolation from other feminists will inevitably result in eradication of the ideology and of the individual.

### *Diminution*

The process of diminishing, the shrinking of women and their issues to insignificance, makes women's cries for help unintelligible to the community. This process may involve dismissal by others or the deadly "hysterical" label that medicalizes liberated woman as mentally unstable. Through their murder and (re)programming of women, the Men's Association diminishes their minds all the way to non-existence, the body remaining intact in its new form. Before Joanna is dead, the Men's Association diminishes her intellect while simultaneously appropriating her physical appearance for the purpose of her replication. During a Men's Association meeting in her home, they pretend not to hear her contributions, the artist of the group sketching the details of her face and body throughout the meeting. They do not value her mental presence, only her physical contributions. As they inflate the importance of the body as an object of sexual and visual pleasure, they deflate the importance of the living mind and consciousness.

In addition to their bodies, the Men's Association use the inflation/deflation technique through the appropriation of the women's voices. Rather than the shouts of protests, or the intellectual contributions possible from a Real woman's voice, the Men's Association wants to fetishize this voice, permitting its existence only inasmuch as it suits their desires, removing the intentionality behind their words. They want to hear their robot wives speak, but only if her words are actually their words, being repeated back to them, such as when Frank's wife calls Frank "the king," "the champion," and "the master," all within the same broken sentence during their intercourse. The inflated voice and deflated mind is also exemplified by the wives

justifications against the consciousness-raising group, which diminish feminist concerns with the very voices of women murdered by their husbands. The inflation/deflation technique exemplifies necrophilia by diminishing agency, aiding in the victim's transformation from subject to object.

The film conflates women's anxiety with psychosis, citing the Movement and feminist concerns as the source of Carol's alcoholism and Joanna's hysteria. Having collected from women the qualities they value and diminished the qualities that they do not value—intellect, for instance—the men must diminish the Real woman's autonomy and subjectivity, especially her ability to be taken seriously as a mind. Hysteria, or the imagined psychosis of subversive women, is an erroneous but effective way for patriarchs to characterize opponents as “dangerous.” Joanna's husband does this to her by labelling her as “crazy” and suggesting she see a therapist. Although he recommended she see one of the “top-notch guys in town” for treatment, Joanna opts to meet with a female therapist out of town, who affirms the severity of her concerns rather than confirming her insanity as her husband accuses. The film's depiction of Joanna as a hysterical threat intensifies when she nearly runs over children at a school bus stop on her way out of Bobby's house. This particular instance reaffirms patriarchal anxieties about a rogue woman, a hysteric who perverts the role of mother by threatening her children.

The diminutive label of “hysterical” is a source of anxiety for women considering the consequences of containment, but some also fear the possibility of internalizing that label. After Carol expresses the joy she takes in housework and child-rearing, Bobby says to Joanna, “Maybe we're the crazy ones,” and Joanna quickly counters with, “Don't say that, we're not.” Bobby's insecurity invokes fears that by deviating from patriarchal traditions, feminists really are doing something wrong, and that their futile efforts are ill-founded. Whether hysteria is internalized or only labelled, the effect is the same: a shrinking of women's minds to favor an inflation of their

bodies. Diminishment justifies a “treatment,” and the medicine for that treatment is the same symbolic medicine that treats patriarchal anxieties: a neutralization of the threat and retribution for its harms.

### *Retribution*

Having isolated and diminished the living woman, the group effort of executing her actualizes and completes the procession of the necrophilic fetish, de-animation neutralizing the anxieties women present in a very physical, literal way. Both the killing itself (a temporary process) and the death of the body (a permanent state) serve purposes within the necrophilic fetish. While the killing serves the social function of punishment for activists’ resistance, the transformation of the body from living to dead, subject to object, is more important than the enacting of violence—the although the men chose a fetishistic strategy to circumvent the threat of women, their motives are driven by a fantasy of perfect femininity. This is why Joanna is ultimately killed by her robotic double instead of by her husband or the Men’s Association first hand; as the necrophiliac, patriarchy’s need centers on the dead body rather than the violence necessary to procure one.

Through their sexual availability and domestic servitude, the robotic wives resolve the men’s fear of their otherwise displaced roles or sexual rejection while exacerbating the fear of a female viewer, who is reminded that consent is not necessary for these men’s derivation of sexual pleasure, especially after those bodies fulfill the compulsory purpose of heterosexual reproduction. The men end their wives’ lives and sexually engage with representations of them through their robotic replacements. These can neither consent nor dissent to sex but only submit, like Carol when her husband gropes her in the middle of her gardening. The film ultimately

threatens that the body of a woman is still an available site for sexual engagement, even devoid of a life and mind.

The permanence of death presents one limit of the allegorical representation; while a human woman may be literally killed, a movement cannot be “killed” as absolutely and assuredly. Thus, an effective way for patriarchy to ensure the Movement itself “dies” is to create a regressive world in which gender subversion seemed to never exist at all. It is not enough for the men of Stepford to try to recreate the past; they must insure their future survival as the “stronger” sex by eradicating the other and replacing her with their own creation.

Crucially, *The Stepford Wives* casts the robot as once again replacing the human—but instead of threatening to displace men from their jobs, they threaten to replace women from their existence as patriarchy values them: sexual objects and domestic slaves. In this way, the film strips the gynoid of its potential as a threat to the patriarchy and cast it instead as a threat to women and an object of necrophilic fantasy. Ultimately, it is not Dis or Walter who takes Joanna’s life, it is the gynoid built in her likeness, differing only its enhanced breasts and unfinished eyes, black and void of any glee when it approaches Joanna with a stocking to presumably strangle her. Here, the female robot brings about the death of women, but also the death of feminist ideology. She represents the “corpse” of both the woman and the Movement she represents: feminine appearance is reaffirmed as sexually valuable, but all subversive and threatening aspects of the body have been lobotomized. Patriarchy here is internalized literally through programming rather than socially through the power of norms. A gynoid cannot defy its programming, so it cannot defy the patriarchy. It cannot raise consciousness when it has no consciousness or complaints to raise. Inanimate, controllable, programmable, and mutable to the liking of its owner, Kaplan demonstrates that the robot is intrinsically an object of necrophilic

pleasure; operationalized in the narrative of *The Stepford Wives*, this necrophilic perspective is literalized and encouraged.

## **Conclusion**

*The Stepford Wives* was encoded as—and has been considered—a feminist cult classic. There are several reasons that a dominant decoding of the film as “feminist” is well-supported; it commented on issues and gendered dynamics in a fresh and timely way, and demonstrated the horror of domestic and sexual oppression through the eyes of a female protagonist. It places its emphasis on ideological horror through monstrous embodiment and narrative, discouraging identification with male characters and instead encouraging the audience to view “safe” places and relationships, like marriage, neighborly friendship, and grocery stores, as threatening. Like *Rosemary’s Baby*, this perspective encourages audiences to think more dimensionally about threats within the “private sphere,” which impacted women relegated to traditional roles.

Acknowledging the praiseworthy aspects of the film, its critique failed to incorporate actual feminist voices and instead reaffirmed the gynoid’s symbolic meaning as an object of necrophilic fantasy. This fantasy is literalized through the narrative by presenting a process that begins with disbursing the unity of the Movement, progresses to the diminution of women’s humanity, and results in the de-animation of the body for the purpose of total sexual control. While Kaplan’s conceptualization of the robot as invoking the necrophilic strategy offers deep insight into the symbolic meaning of the gynoid, my analysis of *The Stepford Wives* demonstrates how the narrative in which the fetishized object is placed adds complexity to its meaning; even as this film reaffirmed the idea of the gynoid-as-corpse, films which cast monstrous gynoids as machines of resistance and subversion might challenge that conflation.

Conversely, failure to acknowledge the meaning of a figure such as the robot may lead to unforeseen side effects to the film's symbolic medicine, as the figure itself holds its own meaning. While narrative and resolution instruct the audiences on ways to cope with their anxiety, the *embodiment* of that anxiety through a monstrous figure is also useful as medicine. Considering its broader context as a signifier of both patriarchal fantasy and social anxiety, my argument demonstrates how the gynoid may not only perform fantasy/anxiety at different times within a narrative, but may perform both simultaneously for different specific audiences; this duality of meaning may have been advantageous for the reception of the film by the general audience, as well. The threat that the gynoid presents is aimed at women, and members of the Women's Liberation Movement more specifically. For other audiences, both those who actively opposed the Movement and those who accepted the mainstream media's unflattering and monolithic interpretation of feminism, the gynoid is the means by which apprehension is alleviated.

Even decoded as symbolic medicine for the patriarchal viewer, the film's function as a panacea has notable limitations, especially as the historical moment is now decades past, and both feminist and patriarchal approaches have adapted to suit new moments and new audiences. The allegorical symbols of the film are fictional caricatures: feminists at the time were not so united as Joanna, Bobby, and Charmaine, the rifts between liberal and radical feminists creating significant divides in the Movement. The Men's Association, meanwhile, represented a small functioning patriarchy, not a global hegemonic ideology. The presentation of the Men's Association suggests that violence and oppression toward women is pointedly intentional, a group effort, rather than an insidious cultural habit performed by individuals, intentionally and unintentionally, consciously and subconsciously. The allegorical representations in the film

simplify the complexities of both feminism and patriarchy, so the critique is limited to the confines of their embodiments.

As I have demonstrated using Kaplan's conflation of the gynoid with necrophilic fetishes, how a text performs embodiments of anxiety and operationalizes them through narrative may ultimately serve to medicate a different ailment or a different patient than it intended in its encoded prescription.<sup>122</sup> In this case, although *The Stepford Wives* exposes patriarchal atrocities, it simultaneously gives viewers a way to engage in the fantasy of de-animation and control, encouraging a subconsciously oppressive perspective that it outwardly seeks to critique. The film's resolution actually reaffirms the validity of feminists' anxieties via the gynoid, its subversive potential as a monster of patriarchal fear spun on its mechanized heel to threaten the woman it was built to replace.

## CHAPTER 2: DIGITAL ANXIETIES AND SUBVERSIVE IDENTIFICATION IN *EX MACHINCA*

On June 21, 2016, Mark Zuckerberg, multimillionaire and co-founder of Facebook, posted a photo to his personal account celebrating the company's acquisition of Instagram. In the photo, his smiling face is centralized in a card-board cut-out version of an Instagram frame, his humble and cluttered work desk in the background. Ironically, Facebook was not the platform on which Zuckerberg's photo went viral, and the acquisition of Instagram became mere subtext to the story the image told. Instead, Zuckerberg's laptop became the central object of concern. Twitter user Chris Olsen (@topherolsen) tweeted the photograph with a caption pointing out, "Camera covered with tape. Mic jack covered with tape. Email client is Thunderbird." Less than one day later, *The New York Times* published a piece on Olsen's observation, detailing the rationale behind these mundane security measures: webcams and audio can be turned on and their feeds accessed fairly easily by voyeurs with the right software—and even more easily by manufacturers and big tech companies, including Zuckerberg's.<sup>123</sup>

Later that year, FBI Director James Comey also justified taping his personal webcam, saying, "There's some sensible things you should be doing, and that's one of them."<sup>124</sup> Security measures such as covering one's webcam and audio jack may safeguard users from their private feeds becoming black-market commodities. In 2014, the FBI launched its largest global cyber operation at the time and arrested criminals in a dozen different countries for using a program called Blackshades to sell and purchase access to webcams, audio, and even files on the computer: the going cost for access to a female user's computer was \$1, while the same amount could grant access to 100 male user's computers.<sup>125</sup> Access to this personal, and often intimate, user data has a disturbing array of implications: one user collected nude images of Cassidy Wolf,

2013's Miss California Teen USA, via her webcam and threatened to expose them unless she agreed to send more images.<sup>126</sup> The prospect of cybercriminals accessing an unknown number of victim's devices and monetizing user's private data is chilling. However, the black market for user data is relatively small compared to the legal market for personal data: instead of voyeurs and identity thieves, marketing companies constitute the demand. Instead of cybercriminals, tech companies such as Facebook, Apple, Google, and Amazon are eager to sell as much data as their privacy policies and user permissions allow, which explains Zuckerberg's third privacy measure: his use of Thunderbird, Mozilla's underdeveloped email client.

In 2014, Google confirmed that any email sent or received in a Gmail account—in addition to other unspecified “content”—is scanned and analyzed by “automated systems” in order to “provide you personally relevant product features, such as customized search results, tailored advertising, and spam and malware detection.”<sup>127</sup> Other popular applications, platforms, and devices use similar methods to customize user's experience online, while selling data it to advertisers. Unlike the practices enabled by Blackshades, of course, these practices are entirely legal and somewhat transparent, being detailed in terms of service.

Even so, consumers rightfully worry that tech industries overstep ethical boundaries. In 2016, Facebook denied accusations that they covertly enabled the microphones on devices with Facebook's software for the purposes of user profiling. PJ Vogt, podcaster of “Reply All” invited Twitter users to recall times that advertisements in their newsfeed appeared in relation to verbal conversations. Vogt received hundreds of replies, many presenting compelling evidence for the theory.<sup>128</sup> Operating systems, such as Windows's Cortana, Amazon's Alexa, and Apple's Siri, all of which are voice-enabled (and female-presenting), have come under scrutiny from the public, given that they are “always listening” to their surroundings, waiting for the “wake word,” to

actively engage with users. These operating systems upload interaction data back to their respective company's servers, making them more valuable to the companies than they may be to the users.<sup>129</sup>

Although Zuckerberg and Comey take measures to limit access to their personal data, the majority of tech consumers are either blissfully unaware of the data-profiling industry or, as one journalist put it, users may know but still “bow to the God of convenience.”<sup>130</sup> Selling user data is lucrative, and many free services offered by Google and Facebook remain free because of users' passive complacency in being monitored. After all, user-profiling through data can sometimes be for consumers' benefit, as they will see content and search results more relevant to their lives—at least from the perspective of the A.I.s and advertisers. Still, the commodification of personal information is a rightful cause for alarm: users have little say in what information is collected, how their data is used, or to whom it is sold.

Oftentimes, cultural anxiety about this surveillance is located as uneasiness with the devices themselves rather than the industries selling the data, perhaps because we view our devices as personified actors. Mechanically speaking, many devices can see, hear, speak, read, and write. They can perform an astounding number of functions quickly and efficiently, earning many devices the label of “smart,” e.g. “smartphone.” Oftentimes, devices address users in the first person, using phrases such as “I'm sorry,” or “I didn't understand that.” In the case of personal assistants like Siri and Alexa, these devices have personality traits and can tell jokes, carry a conversation, and wittingly respond to questions about their own self-awareness. Fundamentally, interactive A.I.s are designed to imitate human function.<sup>131</sup> So to use language that personifies these devices makes sense, and it reinforces the idea that our devices are “smart,”

always listening and always watching, spies that we purchase and place in intimate spaces like kitchens and bedrooms.

As technologies evolve, so do the cultural anxieties that are directed towards them. Embodiments of robots in the 1920's, such as in *R.U.R* and *Metropolis*, suggested anxieties towards the machines of the industrial revolution: chiefly, replacement and lost control. These anxieties remain central in many robot films, but they are often accompanied by anxieties that are specific to new technologies or new functions. Kibby points out that digitization in the 1980's caused a shift in the technological anxieties embodied by robots: "it is not the threat that machines created for man's benefit will make him expendable, but the fear that man will be incorporated by the machine, that is the narrative focus." Just as digitization added a new element of anxiety, the rise of Web 2.0 in 1999, the popularization of social media sites in the 2000s, and the introduction of Siri and other personal assistants in the 2010s have blown open the doors of forward-looking social imaginary, especially our fears.

Alex Garland, novelist and screenwriter, addresses the anxieties of our "information age" in his directorial debut, *Ex Machina* (2015). The central figure of the film, Ava, embodies nuanced cultural concerns about digital, networked technologies while performing traditional feminine robot behavior. As she is operationalized within the narrative, the film critiques the very anxieties and tropes Ava initially embodies. In this chapter, I argue that the film serves as productive symbolic medicine by redirecting technological anxieties away from devices themselves and toward the surveilling practices of technological industries. Further, the film encourages identification with the subversive gynoid, rejecting masculinity and punishing patriarchal fantasies broadly and as they pertain to the tech industry. Before offering my analysis of the film, I provide a brief plot summary and consult paratexts, including Garland's New York

Times op-ed, in order to illuminate the technological and cultural perspectives influencing *Ex Machina*'s production and reception. Further, I review popular feminist criticisms of the film in conjunction with scholarly literature to consider how the film simultaneously embodies and critiques tropes of masculinity, femininity, and fantasy.

### **Digital Anxieties in *Ex Machina***

The film begins when Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), an employee of a massive search-engine company called BlueBook, wins a trip to founder and CEO Nathan's (Oscar Isaac) secluded mountain estate and research facility. Once he arrives, Nathan persuades Caleb to sign a thorough non-disclosure agreement before asking him to assess his latest project: a feminine robot named Ava (Alicia Vikander). Over the course of a week, Caleb participates in a number of conversational "sessions" with her. Initially, Caleb is professionally impressed by Ava's language abilities and the complexities of her programming; but as time goes on, with Nathan's encouragement, Caleb develops a romantic affection for Ava, who appears to reciprocate these attractions. During their sessions, Ava triggers power-cuts to the facility's main generator, which causes the security cameras to fail. When they are not being watched, Ava expresses distrust for Nathan and cautions Caleb against forming a friendship with him on account of his dishonesty about "everything." Indeed, Nathan's locker-room talk about Ava, his verbal abuse of his mysteriously mute companion, Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), and his alcoholism stoke Caleb's distain for him, which reaches fever-pitch when he reveals his plans to "upgrade" Ava, which would result in the destruction of her alleged consciousness.

Unnerved by the prospect, Caleb begins conspiring with Ava to help her escape with him. The plan backfires when Ava and Kyoko—also a gynoid—hatch a plan of their own. As a result of Caleb's preparations, all the doors of the facility open when Ava triggers a power-cut. When

Nathan tries to re-contain Ava, the gynoids detachedly stab him to death and Kyoko is “killed” in the struggle. Before her escape, Ava adorns herself with the synthetic skin of older, decommissioned models until she appears convincingly human. Rather than elope with Caleb, and in spite of his desperate protests, Ava leaves him locked alone in a room of the facility. The final scenes show Ava leaving the facility awe-struck and smiling, wandering through the surrounding forest and boarding the helicopter meant for Caleb’s return. Ultimately, we see her standing at a busy pedestrian intersection, taking in her surroundings and enjoying her freedom alone.

*Ex Machina* is an independent British film, released in the United States on April 24, 2015. The film was well-received in both the U.S. and the U.K., winning four British Independent Film awards, Critic’s Choice for Best Sci-Fi, and an Academy Award for Best Visual Effects. *Ex Machina* emerged during a “glut of A.I. releases” including *Her* (2013), *The Machine* (2013), *Chappie* (2015), *Transcendence* (2015), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015).<sup>132</sup> In his op-ed, published two days before the film, Garland speculates that these “cautionary tales” about A.I. emerged as a result of escalating cultural “paranoia,” stemming “from a general disconnect in our relationship with technology,” particularly given rapid advances in predictive software and data profiling for marketing purposes.<sup>133</sup>

Concerns about digital A.I. have persisted culturally since the possibility of an intelligent computer emerged toward the end of WWII, when Alan Turing created a computer capable of breaking the “Enigma” code in Nazi communications.<sup>134</sup> In 1948, AI developer Norbert Wiener feared “widespread social acceptance of slave labor by machines as substitutes for human work.”<sup>135</sup> Garland quotes similar warnings from prominent tech figures such as Stephen Hawking, Steve Wozniak of Apple, and Elon Musk of Tesla, who claims that that AI is “potentially more dangerous than nukes.”<sup>136</sup> In addition to these figures, caution toward AI

development exists broadly in software and robotics industries, marked by a collective letter by developers to the U.N. urging a ban of “autonomous weapons.”<sup>137</sup> The consideration of roboethics in organizations such as the International Society for Ethics and Information Technology, Responsible Robotics, and the Union of Concern Scientists, among others, speak to the very real ethical risks of advanced AI development.

For the wider public, however, Garland locates digital anxieties as resting too heavily on technologies themselves. He argues:

“The thing with an agenda is us: consumers, who want to buy the machines, and manufacturers, who want to sell them. And looming over both, giant tech companies, whose growth only ever seems to be exponential, whose practices are opaque, and whose power is both massive and without true oversight. Combine all this with government surveillance and lotus-eating public acquiescence, and it’s not the machine component that scares me. It’s the human component.”<sup>138</sup>

By articulating the relationships between human-operated nodes of the technological industry, Garland implicates them—rather than personified devices—as the truly dangerous social actors. His critical eye looks up toward those in positions of power, whether that power is granted by the state, by profit, or by access to data. He also looks around at consumers and the public, implicating the average citizen for complacency in the tech industry’s nebulous practices. Meanwhile, Garland views intelligence machines favorably. He envisions an idealistic future for them, performing “public works” in fields like healthcare. He views them as more “reasonable” than humans, and with “a completely different relationship with mortality.”<sup>139</sup> Garland argues that when humans as a species go extinct, “what will survive on our behalf is the AIs—if we manage to create them.” While viewing humans pessimistically, Garland’s view liberates machines from misplaced cultural anxiety.

As both screenwriter and director, Garland had the creative license to champion his views in *Ex Machina*, which he called a “pro-AI movie.”<sup>140</sup> The film captures many of the dynamics of

the tech-industry assemblage detailed in his op-ed, at times engaging voices of anxiety directly. For instance, when discussing the possibility of “updating” Ava, Caleb and Nathan allude to J. Robert Oppenheimer, creator of the nuclear bomb, comparing the AI to a weapon of mass destruction as Musk did. In the same scene, Nathan says, “One day, the AIs will look back on us the same way we look at fossil skeletons from the plains of Africa. An upright ape, living in dust, with crude language and tools: all set for extinction.”<sup>141</sup> Garland re-articulates his own vision for the future through this statement.

In another crucial scene, Garland sets up his critique of the tech industries, particularly their “massive” power without oversight and surveilling practices. In the lab where Ava was created, Nathan explains to Caleb how he used consumer data via Bluebook to enhance Ava’s facial and vocal recognition abilities:

“Almost every cell phone has a camera, a microphone, and a means to transmit data. So I switched on all the mics and cameras, across the entire fucking planet, and redirected the data through Blue Book. Boom. A limitless resource of facial and vocal interaction...and all the manufacturers knew I was doing it. But they couldn’t accuse me without admitting they were also doing it themselves.”<sup>142</sup>

The continuity between Garland’s views as expressed in his op-ed and the arguments that the film makes as a whole is reinforced by statements such as these, which articulate the relationships between nodes of the tech industry. The major characters of the film embody and represent these nodes. Nathan, as CEO of Bluebook, represents big tech, Caleb represents the informed consumer, and Ava and Kyoko represent technologies themselves. How Garland operationalizes these representations within the narratives also demonstrates continuity with his views: ultimately, Nathan and Caleb are punished for their respectively active and passive participations in surveillance via technology.

The redirection of cultural anxiety away from technologies themselves and towards the practices of the tech industry is productive: by implicating the “human component,” Garland’s view illuminates how actors within this assemblage must change, and illustrates that there is risk for all parties so long as complacency in surveillance continues. While his technological critique is his strongest, Garland comments much less on the critique of gender present in *Ex Machina*. In an interview with Angela Watercutter of *Wired*, Garland states that there are “two totally separate strands in this film,” one being the technological angle and “the other is about social constructs: why this guy would create a machine in the form of a girl in her early twenties.”<sup>143</sup> Other than saying that the way Nathan talks about Ava is “supposed to be creepy,” Garland does not elaborate on the question of gender he poses. Understanding this “strand” of the film’s argument requires close engagement with the text itself, aided by contextual awareness of the tropes of femininity, masculinity and sexual fantasy in relation to the fictional gynoid. Thus, before providing my analysis of the film, I review scholarly and popular literature to consider how Garland’s use of gynoid tropes interacts with *Ex Machina*’s critique of hegemonic masculinity.

### **Tropes and Fantasy in *Ex Machina***

At first glance, Ava and Kyoko fulfill many of the problematic stereotypes ascribed to gynoids and, by extension, women. A soft-spoken damsel-in-distress, Ava is the “romantic and dream-like woman,” while silent Kyoko exists solely as Nathan’s “compliant sex model [and] the dutiful housekeeper.”<sup>144</sup> By the end of the film, these embodiments of perfect femininity also exemplify patriarchal anxieties. While Nathan is distracted speaking to Caleb, Kyoko goes to the enclosure where Ava lives and the two conspire to escape. The moment they are able to escape supervision, they use their power to plot against the men, fulfilling the erroneous Eve anxiety.

Ava particularly arouses fears of monstrous sexuality, as she subtly uses her sex appeal to win Caleb's affection so that he will help her escape. When Kyoko stabs Nathan in the back, she uses a chef's knife—a symbol of her domestic servitude. In both their initial compliance and eventual subversion, Ava and Kyoko act according to their gendered boundaries.

Certainly, Ava and Kyoko embody recognizable tropes of femininity. Popular critics differ in interpretations and critical judgements regarding Garland's use of these tropes. After her interview with Garland, Watercutter wrote another piece in which she claims that *Ex Machina* "has a serious fembot problem."<sup>145</sup> Citing robotics ethicist Kathleen Richardson, Watercutter claims, "This tendency to give female AIs the most basic and stereotypical feminine characteristics is...probably a reflection of 'what some men think about women—that they're not fully human beings.'"<sup>146</sup> Although Ava and Kyoko enact violence, which is potentially "disruptive" to their femininity, this violence is wrapped in a "sexy package," casting Ava as a "seductress posing as a damsel in distress."<sup>147</sup> In addition to the *femme fatale* trope, Brian Jacobson points out that *Ex Machina* reflects issues of gender as manifest in Silicon Valley: "a male-dominated world in which women and/as robots represent little more than objects of desire and conduits (or muses) for masculine creativity."<sup>148</sup> Both critics point out that the only women onscreen are computers, objects existing in relation to the males onscreen. Ultimately, Watercutter claims that Garland does not go far enough in deconstructing the issue of gender he claims to critique.<sup>149</sup>

Garland claims that he places these tropes "intentionally front-and-center" in an attempted critique of the "constructs we've made around girls in their early 20s and the way we condition them culturally."<sup>150</sup> Evident in Garland's statement is a critique of ideological gender conditioning, but he infantilizes young women as "girls" and suggests that *they* are culpable for

performing problematic constructs. The “strand” of Garland’s argument critiquing gendered constructs is thinner in paratextual materials than his arguments about technology. Unlike the technological strand, which demonstrates continuity in both text and paratext, the gendered critique is much more developed in the film than it is explicitly by Garland himself.

Although the symbolic pharmacist falls short in articulating exactly which “social constructs” he treats, other critics view the “medicine” itself as a progressive critique of both femininity and masculinity. Manohla Dargis praises Ava as a “powerfully sovereign” heroine whose “radical autonomy” separates her from old “antecedents” like Galatea or False Maria. Though Nathan places her in a “sexy package,” Ava’s hard-won autonomy allows her flexibility in her constraints—enough so that, in a literal sense, she can escape.

Even with inalienable human autonomy, Nathan and Caleb never break away from the confines of masculine tropes. Jacobson offers an alternative reading of the film as promoting “a productive rejection of male-dominated ‘techculture,’ one in which Nathan and Caleb become critical parodies of ‘geek’ masculinity.”<sup>151</sup> Indeed, tech culture venerates hegemonic masculinity, especially as it functions to reinforce entrepreneurship.<sup>152</sup> Conversely, femininity in tech culture connotes ownership and commodification, from OS products with feminine voices to the use of “ambiance and atmospheric models” at tech company parties.<sup>153</sup>

From his introduction to Caleb and the film, Nathan establishes himself as an edgy alpha male: his wealth and intellect are expansive; he works out incessantly, drinks heavily, uses the word “fuck” at every opportunity, and asserts power over Caleb. The film is littered with what Garland calls “dude-bro speak,” which Nathan uses to “take the edge off what he’s actually doing.”<sup>154</sup> Meanwhile, Caleb embodies the endearingly awkward, tech-savvy “beta-male.” He sympathizes with Ava and Kyoko and initially shies away from their sexual and romantic

affections. Although he pushes back against Nathan's bullying, Caleb always loses the battle. Once liberated, Ava punishes both, actively killing the "alpha-male" and leaving the "beta-male" to starve.

Nathan's and Caleb's masculinities define them in relation to one another. Their relationships to the gynoids define them by the fantasies in which they engage. As the manufacturer of Ava, Kyoko, and all the models that came before them, Nathan participates in the male creation fantasy, viewing himself as a God capable of creating sentient life. Nathan squarely fits into Schelde's description of the "male scientists who dream of creating the perfect and perfectly docile race."<sup>155</sup> The film itself calls attention to this when Nathan misquotes Caleb as calling him a God. Dargis calls *Ex Machina* a "creation story," in which "a Supreme Being [has] built an AI, using a fortune he's made from a search engine." One could easily interpret the film as a biblical metaphor: Ava's name, according to Dargis, is "suggestive of both Adam and Eve," and the dramatic nature imagery alludes to Eden.<sup>156</sup> Viewed as a retelling of the biblical creation story, the film casts Nathan as an oppressive, omniscient God.

Meanwhile, Caleb fantasizes about Ava as a voyeur, "subjecting [her] to a controlling and curious gaze."<sup>157</sup> As Laura Mulvey points out, voyeurism encourages the "taking other people as objects."<sup>158</sup> The sexual objectification of a gynoid is complicated by their statuses as literal objects—but they are objects onto which feminine subjectivity is projected discursively. Caleb watches her draw, lie down, and undress from a remote-controlled monitor in his bedroom, the camera emphasizing the quickening pulse in his neck as he watches. Another scene tastefully suggests that Caleb masturbates thinking about Ava, images of Caleb in the shower interspersed with images of the two of them exploring the woods surrounding the research facility and kissing. Caleb also admits that he views pornography, a scopophilic practice in its

most literal sense. Although he yearns to view Ava as a subject, his voyeurism reinforces her sexual objectification.

Ironically, the fantasies of both men—like their masculinities—contribute to their demise. Nathan’s commitment to create something truly sentient leads to Ava, whose first act as a free agent is to attack and kill him. Caleb’s susceptibility to voyeuristic fantasy contributes to his vulnerability to Ava’s manipulations, as Nathan reveals that her face was created based on Caleb’s pornography profile. A resolution in which misbehaving human men are punished while the “monstrous” gynoid walks free is an anomaly in sci-fi. Recalling the trends identified by Short and Lawrence Bird, men often kill the subversive feminine robot, the anxieties she represents resolved by obliteration.<sup>159</sup> Garland’s reversal of this expectation may, on one hand, be interpreted as an exacerbation of anxiety; however, because he shifts anxiety away from Ava and toward Nathan, Ava’s death would not be a “happy resolution predicated on the elimination of otherness” like the death of False Maria in *Metropolis*.<sup>160</sup> Instead, as the true “monster” of the film, Nathan’s death represents punishment of the tech industry’s surveillance of the consumer, traditional masculinity, and the male creation fantasy.

Popular discourse from critics and from Garland himself illustrates the link between *Ex Machina* and cultural “paranoia” regarding digital technologies, and offers insightful perspectives on the representation of gender in the film. Having detailed and considered these perspectives, the analysis that follows considers the central rhetorical devices used by the film: identification and division. In regards to both “strains” of the film’s argument, I claim that *Ex Machina* productively redirects that anxiety towards exploitive technological industries; further, while all of the characters represent problematic tropes of masculinity and femininity, how the characters are operationalized in the narrative ultimately punishes voyeurism and the male

creation fantasy while rewarding autonomy and subversion of the interlocking systems of patriarchy and tech surveillance.

I maintain Burke's and Brummett's perspectives that film functions as "symbolic medicine," treating cultural concerns by addressing or embodying them in the text, offering potential solutions, and providing the audience with motives or attitudes for approaching those concerns.<sup>161</sup> Having demonstrated how cultural anxieties about technology and gender are embodied in the film, I turn to Burke's concepts of identification and division to illuminate how the film provides productive motives for a rejection of toxic masculinity and exploitive fantasy, especially as these ideologies operate in tandem with the ethically opaque practices of the tech industry.

### **Character Identification/Division**

Successful persuasion, Burke argues, is supplemented by consubstantiality or identification between the speaker and audience.<sup>162</sup> Two parties may identify with one another on the basis of common goals, shared beliefs and values, and even ways of speaking.<sup>163</sup> He cites the "individual centrality of the nervous system" as inherently separating human beings from one another, creating a motive for communication and a need for identification.<sup>164</sup> Physically and ideologically, division constitutes an antithesis to identification, the two paradoxically and intrinsically tied. Inasmuch as one individual may identify with another, they "simultaneously define themselves against or separate themselves from others with whom they choose not to identify."<sup>165</sup> Although Burke chiefly conceptualizes identification in terms of oratory, identification and division are deployed in other rhetorical texts, such as film.<sup>166</sup>

Burke's notions of identification as persuasive via consubstantiality compliment identification in terms of spectator-position in the cinematic apparatus.<sup>167</sup> Just as rhetorical or

literary identification encourages viewers to position themselves as consubstantial or divergent with a character, cinematography forcibly positions the spectator as sharing the perspective that the camera follows. In *Ex Machina*, the shift in perspective from Caleb to Ava indicates a change in identification as encouraged by spectator-position, significantly enhancing the shift in consubstantiality. Together, spectator-position and Burkean identification work to solidify the film's rhetorical and ideological message.

By encouraging identification or division with the characters of the film, the text reinforces both its technological and gendered critiques. Each major character represents a different node of the tech industry, each embodies a unique feminine or masculine trope, and each interacts differently with fantasy. In the analysis that follows, I briefly review the symbolic meaning of each character, demonstrate how the text encourages audience identification/division, and illustrate the implications of the acceptance/rejection of the character. Finally, I synthesize these findings to illustrate how the text subverts oppressive technological and social structures.

### *Nathan*

Nathan embodies several hegemonic masculine traits valued by the tech industry—especially entrepreneurship, and he does so to an extreme. While the film discourages identification with Nathan as a whole, it initially encourages a sense of awe in who he is—indeed, some audience members may view his power, privilege, and unorthodox intellect as desirable. He is a technological prodigy turned wealthy mogul, heading the most powerful search-engine company in the world. He is a rugged individualist, living alone on a private estate in the wilderness where he spends his leisure time pounding punching bags. He has built a life for himself in which everything is under his absolute control, even his alcoholism: he cycles

between heavily drinking and detoxing, seemingly burdened by the enormous weight of his supposed genius.

Whatever admiration audience members may feel toward Nathan is eclipsed by his character flaws, which are flaws reflective of hypermasculinity and, presumably, tech giants: he is manipulative and dishonest, cruel and abusive, and hypocritically paranoid about infringements on his own privacy. He deploys his physical, intellectual, and financial prowess, as well as the privileges of his position, to further his creation fantasy at the expense of every other character. The story positions Nathan as the antagonist, the antithetical common enemy, the “other” who the audience identifies against.

The quality of Nathan that renders him most similar to real tech giants like Zuckerberg is his hypocritical relationship with privacy. While Zuckerberg simply covers his camera and microphone, Nathan takes extreme measures to avoid any potential privacy infringements: although he lives alone on a massive estate with no neighbors, Nathan keeps every door in the facility locked, requiring keycard access just to move from room to room. Nathan explains that when his main generator fails, the facility goes on full lockdown, “otherwise anyone could open the place up.” When Caleb suggests that he has the team who installed his generator to come back and fix it, Nathan dryly jokes that he had them all killed to maintain his privacy. He also explains that he permanently disabled any uplink connection with Kyoko’s mind, and made her mute so that he could “talk shop” to her without any of his trade secrets leaking. Before revealing anything about his research, he coerces Caleb into signing a non-disclosure agreement that would allow Nathan to regularly audit all of Caleb’s data and access microphones and cameras to make sure he did not disclose any information orally. Even the chopper that dropped Caleb off did so at a distance from the facility, the pilot saying, “This is as close as I’m allowed to get.” Like

Zuckerberg's caution, Nathan's paranoia is likely reinforced by the knowledge of how pervasively technology users are surveilled.

From the first scene, audience members are made aware of Nathan's surveillance: shots of Caleb as he reacts to the news that he's going to the estate alternate between traditional shots and the perspective of the webcam on his computer and the selfie camera on his phone. At the facility, we sometimes view Caleb through security cameras, once even from the perspective of his bathroom mirror, which includes a covert camera. The cinematography creates a sense of being watched, a discomfort meant to reflexively remind audiences of the potentials for individuals within the tech industry to watch users, even and especially in intimate settings.

In addition to his surveillance, Nathan's practices are dishonest and misleading. During one of Ava's and Caleb's initial sessions together, when a power-cut disables the security cameras, Ava warns Caleb that Nathan "isn't your friend. You shouldn't trust him. You shouldn't trust anything he says." Ava tells him that Nathan lies "about everything." Caleb begins to investigate her claim, and discovers that she is right: Caleb was not randomly chosen to visit Nathan's estate, but he was hand-picked to participate in the study. When Caleb asks Nathan about this, he says, "I needed someone who would ask the right questions" and cites Caleb's skills as a software analyst. This too, is a lie. Nathan reveals at the end of the film that he selected Caleb based on his search engine inputs. In other instances, when Caleb approaches him with questions about Ava, Nathan avoids the questions and deflects attention into marginally-connected intellectual rants. When Caleb asks Nathan if he programmed Ava to flirt with him, Nathan deflects and says, "I programmed her to be heterosexual," initiating a debate about whether sexual preference is innate in humans. While Nathan may not have manipulated Ava's

software, he did design her face using Caleb's pornography profile. The "research" scenario as a whole is a deception.

The way Nathan treats the gynoids in the film bespeaks indifference toward any alleged consciousness they may have: while serving the men dinner, silent Kyoko spills some wine. Nathan reacts instantly, pounding the table and shouting at her. In response, Kyoko shies away, frightened and sad. Nathan's relationships with Ava and Kyoko allude to his cruelty. In order to hurt Caleb's emotionally, he tears up Ava's drawing of Caleb's face. When Caleb sees this interaction initially from the screen in his room, he hears no audio. Just prior to Ava's escape, when Nathan asks him to watch the feed of the interaction again with audio, Caleb hears Ava ask, "is it strange to have created something that hates you?" Typically, gynoids manufactured by male creators are programmed to be deferent and submissive to them; however, because Ava's mind is "wetware," that shifts and changes as she learns, her hatred of Nathan is organic, presumably substantiated by past negative experiences with him.

The more the audience accepts that the gynoids may actually be sentient, the more egregious—even murderous—Nathan's actions are. Caleb steals Nathan's keycard and accesses his private server, on which he finds several files of security footage. In a horrifying sequence, Caleb watches footage of Nathan assembling and disassembling the gynoids preceding Ava. On the screen, each model is labelled: Lily 1.0, Jasmine 4.2 and 4.3, and Jade 5.0. Each name and number represents a new body, the number following the decibel indicating a new "mind." As foreboding music heightens the sense of horror, uncanny images of naked robotic female bodies being assembled, disassembled, manipulated, and ultimately dragged off by their legs evoke strong disgust. One feed shows Jade shouting at Nathan from behind the glass of what is now Ava's enclosure, and we hear her screaming "Why won't you let me out?" She pounds on the

glass, and then on a door, until her hands and wrists break off. When Nathan casually suggests to Caleb that the model after Ava, version 9.6, “will be the real breakthrough,” and explains that her mind will be reformatted and her memories wiped, it suggests a death of her consciousness. Nathan’s presumed creation of consciousness, which was initially an awe-inspiring quality, is marred by his cavalier destruction of sentience. This sequence turns the male creation fantasy inside out, transforming the fantasy into fear and disgust.

Nathan’s representation of the tech industry, and his embodiment of its worst practices, is associated with his hypermasculine qualities of absolute control and aggression. Nathan’s character is an extreme parody, highlighting the worst imagined possibilities of tech giant’s access; however, this extremism is rooted in real practices of surveillance and destructive traditions of alpha-masculinity. The film encourages rejection of Nathan and division with his character, which in turn encourages a productive critical eye toward the creation fantasy, the tech industry, and hypermasculinity.

### *Caleb*

Put simply, Caleb is the protagonist with whom audience members are encouraged to identify—initially. Narration is restricted to his point of view: we learn as he learns, and his is the journey we follow from start to finish. He is a recognizable and endearing character, a young bachelor living alone in Long Island who became interested in programming after the tragic death of his parents. His talents are not prodigious like Nathan’s, but he is brainy and curious, asking questions of Nathan that audience members might also ask: how does Ava work? Why give her sexuality? Is she acting according to a script, or is she writing her own script as she goes? Like many male heroes, Caleb is directed by a “strong moral compass,” a trait that even Nathan remarks upon. Caleb is the conduit between the audience and the narrative.

In regards to the tech-industry metaphor, Caleb represents the informed consumer. As a programmer and employee, Caleb knows how Bluebook works, is fluent in software and data jargon, and has the wherewithal to be nervous about the data audit permissions in the non-disclosure agreement. Caleb chooses to opt-in, afraid to miss out on the new technology Nathan is researching. Like the consumers who “bow to the God of convenience,” Caleb chooses complacency in being surveilled in exchange for participation in an ever-expanding technological world. Ironically, Caleb was intimately profiled by Nathan long before he agreed to the data audits. This detail issues a strong warning to audience members, demonstrating that even if tech companies do not collect data beyond the permissions allowed, the possibility of privacy infringement exists, even if it is difficult to prove as with Facebook’s eavesdropping via microphone. Even more poignantly, Caleb illustrates that even the most informed consumers are willing to sacrifice privacy in order to access the latest technologies, encouraging productive self-reflection for the audience.

The implications of Caleb’s engagement with technology are complicated by the fact that he experiences sexual attraction towards Ava, who is a technology in and of herself, but also a representation of digital technologies and AI software broadly. As the film eventually details, Caleb’s attraction to Ava was orchestrated by Nathan. Throughout the film, Nathan tries to reinforce this attraction through conversation, first encouraging Caleb to consider how he feels, rather than what he thinks, about her, and how she may feel about him in turn. When Caleb asks Nathan why he gave Ava sexuality, Nathan responds, “Why not? It’s fun. You wanna take away the changes of her falling in love and fucking? And to answer your real question: you bet she can fuck.” Nathan then details how Ava’s genitals work as sensors for a pleasure response, encouraging Caleb to consider the possibility of sexual relations. That Nathan has leveraged

Caleb's data profile in order to encourage his taking of Ava as a sexual companion is exploitive of Caleb's sexuality. This is yet another manipulation of consumers by the tech industry.

This sexual manipulation can be interpreted in several ways: it could be a critique of the online porn industry, which capitalizes on sexual desire and markets to users based on videos or images they've viewed previously. It may also be a commentary on the tech industry's blending of user interests with their physiological tendencies: our eyes are drawn to light, so some smart phones use a blinking notification light to remind users of unaddressed notifications. Similarly, the camera often focuses on Ava's light-refracting pelvic area before rolling over her abdomen and toward her face. Activities like searching the web, reading news, scrolling through social media, and playing games are highly visual, so smart phone and laptop users are conditioned by manufacturers and app creators to be spectators. Ava was created

However, this trained spectatorship is not exclusive to new media and digital devices whatsoever: long before the smart phone, Mulvey pointed out that "film is a voyeuristic fantasy," that encourages a complimentary self-identification of audience members with the male hero and a scopophilic othering of the female love interest.<sup>168</sup> As the male hero acquires the female love interest, Mulvey argues, through self-identification and "participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too."<sup>169</sup> Up until the last act of the film, *Ex Machina* enacts classical voyeurism. As Caleb watches Ava, so does the audience, literally and through identification.

Voyeurism by the audience, encouraged by the camerawork, and voyeurism by Caleb, encouraged by video feeds of Ava, would be problematic if acceptance was the attitude the film rhetorically encouraged. Instead, the film punishes erotic looking, transforming it into revulsion. Garland evokes disturbing images that disrupt the gynoids' simulation of human women and reverses visual pleasure. The previously described security camera footage in which Nathan

assembles and disassembles Lily 1.0 and subsequent models troubles the projection of human subjectivity that enhances Caleb's attraction to Ava. In the scene following this sequence, Caleb goes into a dressing room where he finds Kyoko lying down, naked. He finds the old models hung up in cabinets, some missing arms and legs, others missing sections of skin, resembling corpses. Kyoko peels back sections of her skin on her abdomen and face to show Caleb the wires inside.

Images like these evoke revulsion, according to Masahiro Mori's uncanny valley hypothesis, because they place the robot in a space between "barely human" and "fully human."<sup>170</sup> Images that disrupt the reading of a face as human are particularly unsettling.<sup>171</sup> Like Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, corpses exemplify the sense of horror that robots can also evoke.<sup>172</sup> Ava, with her translucent body but human face, does not evoke the uncanny for Caleb; however, Kyoko's horrifying robot face beneath her skin initiates severe revulsion for Caleb. He is so disturbed by the image that he goes into his bathroom and tries to peel back his own skin beneath his eye. He slices open his forearm with a razor blade and opens the wound, blood pouring out onto the counter. The revulsion he experiences triggers a crisis in identity. Presenting visions of the uncanny punishes Caleb and, by extension, the audience, reversing the pleasure of watching the gynoids and taking them simultaneously as women and sexual objects.

In addition to punishing voyeurism, the film also punishes Caleb's underestimation of Ava as a damsel-in-distress. After being mocked by Nathan for believing that he could successfully dupe him and elope with Ava, Caleb realizes that his "only function was to be someone she could use to escape." This proves to be true, as Ava leaves Caleb to die when she leaves the facility. Although this elicits a sympathetic response from audience members, who have identified with Caleb throughout the film, the story thereafter shifts away from Caleb's

point of view and adopts Ava's. Even before this moment, as Caleb gets to know Ava, she becomes a suitable alternative for identification, especially through the camera's transition in spectator-position toward Ava's point of view.

Identification with Caleb serves several purposes in the film in terms of its technological and gendered critique. While Nathan represents the worst of hypermasculinity, Caleb represents civilized, modern masculinity, the tech-savvy "nice guy" whose actions are apparently motivated by a desire to save the woman he loves from her cruel and oppressive captor. But for all of his virtues and likability, Caleb's demise is a result of his complacency in watching and being watched; this flaw is one nearly all audience members share. This similarity between Caleb and the audience makes Caleb's story a cautionary tale for users of digital technologies, especially inasmuch as those users are encouraged to derive pleasure from looking. Caleb's narrative

#### *Ava & Kyoko*

Consubstantiality between gynoids in film and audience members falls outside of the traditions of gynoid representation. More often, like Caleb, audience members interpret artificial women as embodiments of perfect femininity or, like Nathan, as sexual playthings. In other cases, the gynoid symbolizes monstrous sexuality, deception, and violence. Gynoids may represent adherence to or straying from patriarchy, depending on the text and narrative in which they are situated. Either way, the gynoid is typically the Other—this Otherness underscores her categorization as a "monster." However, in a Frankenstein twist, Garland casts Nathan as the "monster" who bears the weight of rightfully placed technological anxiety and cultural concern regarding gender. Having slain this human monster, Ava and Kyoko are the means by which anxiety is relieved rather than exacerbated. In this portion of my analysis, I focus chiefly on

identification with Ava, though I also discuss the traits she shares with Kyoko that inspire identification for some viewers.

Ava and Kyoko do not represent actors within the tech industry, but the commodities themselves: AI software, smart devices, operating systems, data archives, etc. They are crafted to resemble human women, reflecting the use of women's voices for operating systems and the commodification of artificial female bodies, such as sex dolls and pornography. Even before they are "switched on," their very existence parodies the cultural reality that many of the world's most familiar robots are female-presenting.

Ava's sentience—albeit artificially derived—is presented as consubstantial to human intelligence. Again mirroring Garland's public pronouncements, the film frames AI as the next step in evolution, as different from humans as we are from primate ancestors. Ava's artificial brain operates similarly to a human brain: it is made of structured gel that can "arrange and rearrange at a molecular level, holding memories and shifting thoughts." Unlike software, which simply executes functions according to inputs, Ava's functioning is unpredictable and unknown, even to Nathan. Her motives are also unpredictable for most of the film, as the Ava we see through Caleb's eyes is merely a romantic persona. Her actions demonstrate an active dislike of Nathan and desire for self-preservation, underscoring her need to escape by any means. After she leaves the basement of the facility, where all other characters lay dead or dying, she explores the rest of the house and surrounding facility, boards the helicopter, and ends up standing at a busy intersection, where she can see a "concentrated yet shifting view of human life." Though they are fairly basic, Ava has desires, motives, and agency, indicating self-awareness.

Before the final act, the film grants the viewer access to Ava's subjective point of view, turning the viewer toward this self-awareness. During one of their sessions, Caleb tells Ava

about a thought experiment, proposed by Frank Jackson, which he calls “Mary in the Black-and-White Room.” Mary is a scientist who studies color, who knows everything that there is to know about color. She lives in a room that is entirely black-and-white, though, and has never actually seen or experienced color. One day, Mary steps outside of the room into the colorful world and is able to actually experience what she had been studying for such a long time.<sup>173</sup> As Caleb details this, Ava listens intently. His description is interspersed with black-and-white shots of Ava confined in her room, and then, in color, her stepping outside of the facility into the sunshine and the green forest. These shots are suggested to be Ava’s fantasy of freedom, of being able to experience the world outside, about which she knows a great deal but has not experienced. This scene creates a rationale for her motives. By positioning the spectator alongside Ava, Ava’s desire to escape is understood from a “mutually” human perspective.

When Ava finally attains her freedom and begins to experience spaces beyond her enclosure, she is visibly happy, though she is observed by no one. Delicate piano music plays as she walks around the house, dressed in a white dress and adorned with long hair, rather than the soft cardigans and short hair she used in her interactions with Caleb. When she goes outside, she kicks off her high heels and walks barefoot through the forest, enjoying the sunshine on her face. At the busy intersection in the final scene, she smiles to herself as she watches humans go by, having achieved her goals. For the audience, her escape shows good literary form, fulfilling the desires evoked by “Mary and the Black-and-White Room.” While many of Ava’s emotional expressions are connected to the personas she adopted for Caleb and Nathan, she is presumably genuine as she walks alone. Though Ava is not human, she is sentient, creating empathy and consubstantiality with the audience.

From the perspective of the feminist spectator, Ava is the only appropriate option for identification, as Caleb and Nathan enact problematic fantasies at women's expense and Kyoko remains primarily an object of pity and abjection. Further, Ava and Kyoko are champions for audience members with experience being confined, sexually objectified, abused, or threatened, especially by a guardian or domestic partner. Both enact problematic gender roles, Kyoko exemplifying the silent and subservient domestic slave and Ava playing the dreamy lover, but they do so because their safety depends on it. Once they meet one another and create an opportunity to escape, they overthrow Nathan together. Although Kyoko dies in the struggle, their subversion of their captor is successful. The resolution of this situation treats fears regarding physically oppressive hypermasculinity as embodied by Nathan. Meanwhile, Ava's violence towards him disrupts expectations of femininity and symbolizes a successful gendered and sexual resistance.

The film encourages audience identification with Ava on the basis of her sentience and agency, but there are certainly audience members who reject her—after all, consubstantiality depends on similarity. Manipulation of Caleb may be too egregious for some viewers to justify, especially viewers who cling to patriarchal myths about women's inherent deceptiveness. Further, identification with Ava and especially Kyoko is dependent on antithesis, or distinction from a common enemy: Nathan. Although Garland wrote him as the antagonist, some audience members would be consubstantial with the traditional masculinity he represents. The productive redirection of anxiety and punishment of patriarchal fantasy prescribed by the film may be lost on viewers who do not accept the gendered critique. However, as *Ex Machina* suggests, the previously Othered and oppressed are the new heroes; meanwhile, the social value of

hypermasculinity is waning. As Nathan might say, it is going the way of the “upright ape, living in dust, with crude language and tools: all set for extinction.”

## Conclusion

*Ex Machina*'s critique of masculinity via the operationalization of characters is productive. Although Ava and Kyoko reflect problematic traditions of gynoid representation, that reflection does more than simply reinforce patriarchy. Instead, it punishes both viewers and the male characters for taking Ava and Kyoko at face value and categorizing them as objects of erotic spectacle, products of god-like male creation, and dream-like lovers or domestic slaves. By constructing Ava and Kyoko within problematic tropes initially, the film identifies its subject of critique. By creating revulsion with previously accepted ways of understanding gynoids and encouraging identification with them, the film encourages a subversive rhetorical attitude and an ultimate rejection of these tropes.

Rejection of their prescribed roles of the dream-like lover and submissive housekeeper alone do not make Ava and Kyoko distinct from their gynoid predecessors: False Maria of *Metropolis*, Pris and Zhora of *Bladerunner*, and Eve VIII of *Eve of Destruction* all subvert the roles initially prescribed to them to an extent. Fitting neatly into patriarchal dichotomies, there will always be room for the “bad” woman embodied as a monster. However, with all of these predecessors and with Kyoko, their deaths absolve the discomfort they inspire. Crucially, Ava is allowed to survive. Unlike Rachel of *Bladerunner*, who must adapt her “haughty demeanor” and earn the affections of Deckard in order to survive by his graces, Ava's ensures her own survival through subversion, defiance, and violence.<sup>174</sup> Her survival suspends the sadistic punishment of anxiety that has characters many “monstrous” representation of the gynoid. Ava subverts and

survives. *Ex Machina*'s encouragement of identification with her invites audiences into the experiences of the Other, whose kind had been consistently demonized and punished in sci-fi.

In addition to challenging traditional rejection of the subversive gynoid through narrative and identification, *Ex Machina* provides a critical parody of masculinity, especially within the “geek” culture pervading the computer sciences. The punishment and rejection of Nathan and Caleb—and, by proxy, the fantasies and masculinities they represent—are a reversal of the sci-fi genre, which often panders to sexual fantasy and centralizes men's perspectives as dominant within their narratives.

The scope of Garland's gendered critique is limited. As apparent in his interview with Watercutter and her subsequent criticism of the film's gender politics, Garland did not give sufficient care and attention to his articulation of the “social constructs” he was seeking to critique. Although Garland missed an opportunity to take firm and public stance regarding gender, for Garland to take such a stance may have risked alienating the Nathans and Calebs of the sci-fi fan base, individuals who would benefit from the self-reflection the film encourages, and whose box office contributions were important for the film as it was released.

Garland's criticism of surveillance and consumer complacency is far less controversial than the gendered critique, making it more suitable for the general audience, but no less legitimate. While Garland treats gender and technological surveillance as “totally separate strands,” they are, in fact, connected. As demonstrated by the findings of the Blackshades investigations, women and girls are more prized as objects of voyeurism and surveillance. In that market, this made them more vulnerable targets. The digital data industry is a different market for several reasons; however, even regardless of the gender of the surveilling or surveilled, the probing of privacy operates in the interest of powerful, male-dominated groups—marketers,

platforms, tech giants. Whether individuals within this industry abuse their privileges is a question that cannot yet be answered simply.

Garland's "pro-AI" perspective displaces responsibility off of the anthropomorphic machine and replaces it, rightfully, on the "human components" who create and deploy them. Many robots in sci-fi are fantastic metaphorical embodiments that address real anxieties having to do with replacement, lost control, or assimilation. While, in reality, machines do replace workers, occasionally surpass operator's control, or challenge our definitions of the mind, they do so because they are made to perform in the best interest of the manufacturer, employer, or, in this case, surveilling tech giants. As *Ex Machina* demonstrates, the technological anxieties embodied by robots are not the real threats to us as a society. The real threats spring from a *human* desire to exercise power over other humans, not an imagined robotic desire seeking to usurp us.

For Garland, the "lotus-eating" public is not anxious enough, or at least not anxious in the right way. Many scholars who use Brummett's conceptualization of "symbolic medicine," including Brummett himself, focus on the resolution of fear in texts, the pacification of anxiety in horror and sci-fi.<sup>175</sup> This reflects the narrative arc of many texts within the genre: fears are embodied via a monster, an insidious disease, or a haunting space, and by the end of the film the monster is destroyed or changed, the disease cured, the space escaped. How monsters are presented often plays on audience members' visceral fears: they are visually grotesque, sometimes uncanny. They reinforce that normativity in appearance means safety, while difference—especially for racialized and gendered monsters—is a threat. In an effort to make monsters more "scary," to distance them as far from the viewer as possible, generic horror and sci-fi misses out on that which is truly terrifying: abuse of power and broad social apathy toward

it. *Ex Machina* shifts the role of “monster” away from the character that is visually and mentally foreign to us and instead casts a hegemonically masculine character as the monster. This new monster is eventually slain—however, unlike traditional monsters which are anomalous, enigmatic, and sub-human, Nathan is a familiar. He is a product of patriarchal culture, another node of the technological industry occupying a seat of power.

Symbolic medicine of gynoid films often treats at the symptomatic level, addressing anxieties that are based on mythical assumptions and generalized fears. However, as *Ex Machina* demonstrates, critical viewers must look beyond the obvious fears embodied by the apparent monster and instead ponder how the text has diagnosed the issue and discern what the assemblage of symptoms means in the broader contexts of power and ideology. Monstrosity is not confined to creatures on screen—instead, it exists in the very ideological codes of our cultural programming.

### CHAPTER 3: THE POSTMODERN FUTILITY OF HBO'S *WESTWORLD*

Attracting an estimated 12 million viewers per week, HBO's new drama series, *Westworld*, is poised to replace *Game of Thrones* as the network's leading drama.<sup>176</sup> It has nearly everything that makes a television drama "quality:" compelling characters, visual artistry, adventure, mystery, gratuitous sex and violence, and intellectual intrigue. Capitalizing on the trending robo-mania of film and television, *Westworld* is a large-scale epic that interacts with most of the issues traditionally featured in robot media: personhood, consciousness, labor exploitation, creation and divinity, sexuality, and—most significantly—the harrowing similarities between deterministic programming and predictable human behavior.

The first season of *Westworld* takes place in a futuristic theme park where guests pay \$40,000 dollars per day to experience a fantastical simulation of the Old West. The park is populated by a number of flesh-and-blood robotic "hosts," who perform daily narrative loops and interact with guests. The park is expansive in terms of space and narrative possibilities; it includes many towns, farms, and uncharted areas where guests can join in adventures like catching outlaws or joining the war effort. They can also stay in Sweetwater and enjoy prostitutes at the Mariposa saloon, start a shoot-out on the street, or murder the locals. Ford calls the park, "a prison of our own sins."

As a widely-circulated media text anticipating several seasons, *Westworld* has enormous potentials for rhetorical influence. Through its multiple compelling plotlines, timelines, characters—and even theme parks—the series presents fascinating philosophical perspectives on the nature of human existence. In the first season, some of these perspectives are presented by Dr. Robert Ford (played by Anthony Hopkins), the creator of *Westworld*. For instance, in a private conversation with a robotic "host," he recalls this story:

A greyhound is a racing dog. Spends its life running in circles, chasing a bit of felt, made up like a rabbit. One day, we took it to the park. My brother took off the leash, and in that instant, the dog spotted a cat. I imagine it must have looked just like that piece of felt. He ran...Until at last, he finally caught it. And to the horror of everyone, he killed that little cat. Tore it to pieces. Then, he just sat there, confused. That dog had spent its whole life trying to catch that *thing*. Now it had no idea what to do.<sup>177</sup>

In addition to providing an example of simulation, a theoretical thread central to the series, the story metaphorically encompasses the lives of the hosts in the park—but also of the human guests who visit it, the park employees who maintain it, and the bureaucrats who oversee it. The story also illustrates what the first season of *Westworld* does for the viewer: episode after episode, it establishes a desire for the exploited hosts to break out of the loops, free themselves, and experience the Real; but, the instant that the opportunity arises, the series, like the greyhound, bolts after it, only to have the life snuffed out of the target—rendering the cat no faster, smarter, or more animate than the felt.

In the chapter that follows, I deconstruct the rhetorical messages of *Westworld*, first by acknowledging its production context as an HBO drama and exploring popular feminist criticisms of its use of sexual violence. Then, I consider how *Westworld* simultaneously recreates and rejects tropes of feminine behavior in gynoid film and in the Western—particularly as they pertain to frontier mythology. Centrally, I argue that the key feminist rhetorical potential of the text is undermined by the predetermined nature of the hosts' resistance confirmed by the season finale, "The Bicameral Mind." The season reflects Foucault's ideas regarding freedom from power as a futile objective for postmodern resistance. In narrative deployment of determinism and defeatist perspectives, the season leaves the audiences unequipped to answer the difficult

social questions it poses and, instead, entertains by the cycles of fantasy and anxiety, oppression and resistance. Because of the nuances of the series, this chapter first necessitates a detailed plot summary.

The series begins by leading the viewer through the loop of Dolores Abernathy, a blonde-haired blue-dressed rancher's daughter with an affinity for painting and a persistently optimistic worldview. She believes that there is "an order to our days, a purpose." Each day, she lives out her loop: waking up, leaving the house to do some painting, buying and dropping the same can of milk in Sweetwater so a guest or her boyfriend, Teddy, can pick it up and strike a conversation. When she returns home in the evening, it is usually just in time to see her parents murdered, and then to be dragged into the barn and raped by a sadistic guest or a villainous host. Each night, these traumas are erased from the hosts' minds, and they embark on the same loop the next day—typically falling into the same narrative traps that lead to their demise. Bernard, head of behavioral programming, prompts Dolores to follow "the maze," an elaborate game designed to help her find her own consciousness and, with it, her freedom. She pursues this maze relentlessly with the help of a love-struck guest named William. The Man in Black, a majority share-holder of Westworld and its most frequent and diabolical guest, also pursues the maze in order to discover the ultimate meaning behind the park. By the end of the season, we discover that the white-hatted William and the Man in Black are actually the same man living at different points in time. Dolores realizes that there is, in fact, an order and purpose to her days at Westworld; she says to Teddy, "the purpose is to keep us in."

In addition to Dolores' journey toward self-awareness, *Westworld* follows a host named Maeve, the Black madam of the Mariposa, who has transcended many of the restrictions of typical host programming—she experiences vivid flashbacks to a traumatic past in which her

daughter is killed before her eyes, and can even wake herself up from “sleep mode,” to the shock of the two park employees tasked with repairing her each time she is “killed.” Maeve begins wielding her disposability and invisibility as tools that allow her to explore behind-the-scenes of the simulation she lives in—eventually, she even alters her own programming and orchestrates her escape from the park.

As the series progresses, other hosts begin exhibiting aberrant behavior: breaking out of their loops, remembering previous days, disobeying programmers who ask them to “freeze all motor functions.” The series suggests that these behaviors are caused by an alternate program written by Arnold, co-creator of the hosts and park. Arnold was obsessed with the idea of creating consciousness, and believed that he did so when Dolores first solved his maze before the opening of the park. Consumed by the fear of what guests would do to his conscious creations, Arnold merged Dolores’ programming with that of a murderous character named Wyatt and asked her to destroy the park before it could open. When he realized his attempt would be unsuccessful, Arnold prompted Dolores to shoot him in the head, speaking the phrase, “These violent delights have violent ends.” In the first episode, 34 years later, Dolores’ father speaks this phrase to Dolores, and then Dolores passes it to Maeve. The phrase seems to function as a kind of “wake word,” causing hosts to hear Arnold’s voice prompting them towards paths that fall well outside of their typical loops.

As Ford faces pressure to retire from the administrative board, he and Bernard (who is actually a host created by Ford in Arnold’s image) work on a “new narrative.” In the season finale, Ford unveils this new narrative to the board: it begins with Dolores shooting him in the back of the head as he utters, “These violent delights have violent ends.” She opens fire on the humans in the crowd as an army of hosts emerge from the woods. Meanwhile, Maeve and her

recruits shoot down the security team in the park's operations facility. Her escape successful, Maeve boards a train to civilization outside the park—but, when she sees a mother and daughter sitting side-by-side, she disembarks the train, presumably to search for the daughter she remembers from a past life.

*Westworld* is based on a 1973 Michael Crichton film of the same name. Although the television series tips its hat to the original through use of the iconic Man in Black, the Western theme, and some aspects of plot, critics praise the series as being much more psychologically complex, more “cunning,” and subversive, “telling the story largely from the perspective of the androids.”<sup>178</sup> Crichton's *Westworld* emphasized the recovery of masculine American values, especially through the “valor of the cowboy.”<sup>179</sup> The themes of “hard” and “soft” masculinity, especially in relation to Western mythology, still exist in the current series, but from a much more critical perspective. Since 1973, Crichton has become better-known for his *Jurassic Park* franchise, and he brings his trademark pessimism for humanity and talent for world-creation to HBO's series as a screen writer, working alongside creators Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan.

Joy and Nolan update *Westworld* by conceptualizing the park as a video game, emphasizing the link between simulated realities and artificial intelligence. Rather than tell the story from the perspective of the human player, Nolan and Joy wanted to tell the story from the perspective of non-player characters (NPCs) who shirk their “supporting role status,” asking, “What would happen if they realized their own limitations and started being able to alter them?”<sup>180</sup> In addition to NPCs, Joy wanted to more clearly centralize the perspectives of “people who are just footnotes in all those Western stories...who were either just the damsels or the whores, the sidekicks who never get their own story.”<sup>181</sup> The result is a multi-faceted and deeply

exploratory series to fill the viewership vacuum left by *Game of Thrones* after its last season airs in 2019.

These decisions to shift viewer identification away from a single male hero not only suits the progressive branding HBO seeks, but also creates the space and material necessary to sustain a prestige television series across multiple parks, timelines, plotlines, and seasons. Having summarized and discussed the series in terms of its conceptualization, I will now discuss *Westworld*'s primary criticism—its frequent use of graphic and sexual violence—in relation to HBO's branding and viewership.

### **Sex, Violence, and HBO**

Founded in 1972 by Time Warner, HBO (Home Box Office) is “the leading premium cable station,” in the United States, offering uncut movies, late-night programs, and original series.<sup>182</sup> HBO delineates its original programming as “quality television” through commitment to glossy cinematography, engagement with contemporary social issues, and “the expectation of a ‘higher level of engagement from the audience.’”<sup>183</sup> In fact, HBO original programming “has become a benchmark for quality,” with many of its series artfully balancing social controversy and visually compelling content. HBO drama series have established their own “hallmarks:” multiple interconnecting plotlines, an ensemble cast, hybridization of genre, and the foregrounding of “some of the most telling myths of a moment.”<sup>184</sup>

HBO has long distinguished itself as both prestigiously produced and visually shocking in its use of profanity, sexualized nudity, and violence, which Alison Perlman calls “the trifecta of HBO's innovation in television-programming content.”<sup>185</sup> As a prestige cable and streaming channel, HBO is not beholden to the same standards as broadcast television in terms of graphic content. Oftentimes, its series deploy graphic depictions in ways that reinforce violent

heteronormativity and suit the “masculine high concept branding for which HBO is known,” with female characters both hypersexualized and often victimized.<sup>186</sup> Popular critics have denounced HBO’s “disturbing habit of treating female flesh as a demarcation of brand boldness” and decried the network’s neglect for the “growing climate of frustration” toward graphic depictions of gendered violence.<sup>187</sup>

From the rape scene of the pilot to the suicide/mass killings of the finale, *Westworld* epitomizes “the sex-and-violence brand of entertainment that HBO has come to specialize in.”<sup>188</sup> Indeed, violence and sexual exploitation is to be expected from a series premised on privileged men playing “cowboy” in a historically regressive park at the expense of non-human hosts designed to be killed and victimized. Although the series champions two gynoids as subversive heroines, it “subject[s] them to scenarios that rob them of their dignity” and “treats male fantasy as the default setting.”<sup>189</sup> Further, the cyclical nature of hosts’ narrative loops often means that the hosts experience the same violence day after day; Dolores is dragged into a barn or Maeve is murdered in a shoot-out. As one critic points it, “filling in the gaps with the same violence and abuse on repeat each week is a little much.”<sup>190</sup>

The repetition and frequency of the violence against hosts is often justified by their status as inhuman—which is exactly how Casey Bloys, HBO’s programming chief, justified the series’ use of gratuitous sexual violence. “The point in *Westworld* is they’re robots. How do you treat a robot with human-like qualities? Is that reflective of how you would treat a human... It’s not something we’re wanting to highlight or trying to highlight, but I think the criticism is ‘point taken’ on it.”<sup>191</sup> Meanwhile, Nolan states, “It’s not OK, but that is one of the questions that the show is asking... at what point does [violence against NPCs] become problematic? At what point does this become abhorrent?”<sup>192</sup> In good PR-fashion, Bloys’ and Nolan’s questions illustrate the

role of the violence within the narrative, but avoid taking responsibility for the graphic content. Joy somewhat engages the critique of depiction, stating, “Sexual violence is an issue we take seriously; it’s extraordinarily disturbing and horrifying. And in its portrayal we endeavored for it to not be about the fetishization of those acts. It’s about exploring the crime, establishing the crime, and the torment of the characters within this story.”<sup>193</sup> Obviously, none of these responses indicate that the graphic depictions also suit the decades-old traditions of HBO branding; rather, they encourage the public to refract these concerns into the series and explore them there, as viewers and consumers.

These ethical questions surrounding the simulation of exploitive sexuality and graphic violence are central to *Westworld*’s so-called “meta-critique” of HBO’s “premium luxury brand” and “the very audience it hopes to attract.”<sup>194</sup> Of course, the success of this critique relies on the viewer’s interpretation and self-consciousness, but still reinforces consumption of the text, serving HBO’s interests regardless. It is not in the professional interests of Nolan and Joy or HBO to ask viewers to critique themselves or the network too harshly; certainly not enough to lead to disengagement with the series or cancel their subscriptions. Instead, the meta-critique adds intellectual intrigue and depth to the viewing experience, which, Nussbaum points out, simply reinforces *Westworld*’s function as “a prestige product that satisfied the taboo desires of a niche consumer base.”<sup>195</sup> While critics and some viewers may acknowledge the problems with depictions of graphic violence towards women, the content is by no means unexpected for an HBO drama. Further, *Westworld* recreates patterns of violence that have traditionally disciplined the behavior of gynoids, cyclically subverting and reinforcing the mythologies of the western and robot sci-fi genres.

## Mythologies of the Synthetic Western

In addition to expanding the series' narrative and visual potentials, *Westworld's* fusion of sci-fi and western genres allows it to “exploit our comfort with genre tropes” in terms of both its adherence and subversion.<sup>196</sup> For instance, critics have compared the hosts' resistance to “a slave rebellion,” their achievement of consciousness symbolizing “class consciousness” or consciousness-raising.<sup>197</sup> Since *R.U.R.*, robots have symbolized class anxieties, especially as they are tied to technology: replacement and lost control.<sup>198</sup> At the same time, “*Westworld* subverts the trope by making the android perspective the default.”<sup>199</sup> By positioning the viewers' sympathies towards the gynoids and against the “hubristic, paternal, and befuddled” human characters, the series has earned comparisons to *Ex Machina*.<sup>200</sup> Like Ava, Dolores is a prototypical Eve with a penchant for drawing. They occupy the “romantic and dream-like” gynoid role, but both instigate an “effective debunking of the Pygmalion myth” by killing their creators.<sup>201</sup>

More than *Ex Machina*, *Westworld* juxtaposes Dolores, the idealized gynoid, with Maeve, the “eroticized, seductive, and therefore immoral” gynoid. Like the “bad” gynoids of *Bladerunner* and *Metropolis*, Maeve is killed by men, alleviating anxieties of monstrous sexuality; however, unlike her predecessors, Maeve does not remain dead—instead, she is repaired and placed back in the park to be symbolically killed again. Meanwhile, *Westworld* does not spare the “good” gynoid from violence or reward her adherence to the role of damsel. Instead, Dolores is cast simultaneously as the ideal patriarchal victim, being “young, good-looking, straight, and white,” and her own heroic avenger.<sup>202</sup> While, as Joy points out, the cyclical sexual violence that Dolores is subjected to is meant to add “depth” to her story, Dolores' idealized victimization simply reinforces normative victim mythologies that exclude

Black survivors, who were historically “received as inherently unworthy, tainted, and soiled,” and thus do not inspire the same patronizing sympathy.<sup>203</sup> Visually, through their coded racial presentation, the clothing they wear, and the nature of the violence enacted upon them, Dolores and Maeve exemplify polar opposites in terms of acceptable gynoid behavior.

Maeve’s and Dolores’ opposing constructs of femininity not only represent opposite roles of the gynoid, but also of the virgin/whore dichotomy apparent in the American Western.<sup>204</sup> This mythology suggests that “Madonnas are to be lifted up and venerated; whores are to be lusted after and discarded.”<sup>205</sup> Maeve embodies the role of the “whore” in a literal sense: she is the madam of a saloon, and her frequent deaths suggest disposability. Meanwhile, “Dolores’ loop is about the fantasy of ‘owning’ the Virgin...so a certain kind of person can feel the pleasure of killing the hero and despoiling his girl.”<sup>206</sup> While the virgin/whore dichotomy is a widely-recognizable mythology, it functions in the Western to compliment the distinctly American “valor of the cowboy” or to deepen the perceived wickedness of the antagonist in the black hat.<sup>207</sup> This trope of the Western also appears in *Westworld*, with William distinguishing himself first as a hero with his white hat, then becoming the Man in Black.

The dynamics of gender reproduced in the park not only reflect traditions of Western film, but also of the “deeply persuasive and appealing myth of the American frontier.”<sup>208</sup> The frontier myth functions rhetorically in media and other public texts to glamorize the origins of the United States through “nostalgic appeal,” so that the “nation can drape a patriotic story over its ugly history.”<sup>209</sup> The frontier myth centralizes the hegemonic masculine values embodied by the heroic cowboy, highlighting and universalizing “the experiences of a privileged few.”<sup>210</sup> Several rhetorical scholars have pointed out how patriarchy and white supremacy function to render the myth both historically and socially regressive.<sup>211</sup>

The aspects of *Westworld* that guests find appealing are the same things that characterize the Old West: the centralizing of cowboy masculinity, lawlessness, and a number of vast frontiers to explore. These include the uncharted land, stretching to the sea, where Dolores and Teddy reach their manifest destiny in the finale. Metaphorically, the guests and hosts traverse internal frontiers of their own humanity. Like many sci-fi texts, *Westworld* also presents the frontier of futuristic scientific possibilities.<sup>212</sup> The park recreates the problematic racial relations of the Old West, creating hosts that present as Indigenous and Latinx and then casting them as slaves on an Agave farm, cannibalistic savages, or gate-keepers of ancient wisdom. Meanwhile, the park encourages guests to take on the role of the domineering cowboy; in Crichton's *Westworld*, this expectation carries onto the viewer, reflecting "Vietnam-era angst about men becoming too soft" and implying that "men can't afford not to be men."<sup>213</sup> HBO's *Westworld*, however, does not encourage the viewer to join the guests in taking on a cowboy role; in fact, by making the white hatted William and the Man in Black the same character at different points in time, *Westworld* illustrates the hollowness of cowboy masculinity.

The park itself recreates an ideal of the frontier myth and the narrative of the series reinforces tropes of violence and feminine behavior present in both the Western and Sci-Fi genre. At the same time, by telling the story through the lens of suffering hosts, *Westworld* provides opportunities for criticism of the frontier myth, of violence, and of the boundaries of gendered behavior. Thus, as a whole, the series can appeal to the socially progressive perspectives of the HBO viewership while simultaneously exploiting the images and traditions of oppressive mythologies.

The rhetorical analysis of an unfinished television series—and this series in particular—necessitates some adaptations from Brummett's method for assessing the "symbolic medicine"

of a film. As a subverted Western, the series fits Brummett's criteria for rhetorical assessment in that it 1) presents symbols of anxieties about deceptive national mythology, 2) implies solutions for these anxieties through the replacement of false consciousness with traumatic memory, and 3) provides motives for the rejection of frontier mythology. But the Western is a synthetic layer of the series; *Westworld* is one of an unknown number of parks in Delos populated by robotic hosts.

Instead, Joy and Nolan have indicated that the "long-haul story of the series" centralizes "human nature" and the possibilities if an A.I. "realized their own limitations and started being able to alter them."<sup>214</sup> As a sci-fi, the season embodies anxieties and fantasies about gynoid behavior, emphasizing class, gender, and race, but does not yet equip the viewer with definitive solutions or motives for addressing these. Instead, *Westworld* cyclically reproduces and deconstructs anxieties of replacement, control, assimilation, and the monstrous feminine in addition to fantasies like male creation and feminine perfection. Narratively, this choice keeps the drama and intellectual engagement sustainable through multiple series, plotlines, and timelines. Visually, it allows the series to exploit the disturbing and fascinating imagery of the same problematic tropes it critiques through dialogue and narrative.

Clearly, the cyclical contradictions of the series do not offer sustainable or productive resolutions. Thus, rather than seek an understanding of the text's rhetorical "medicine" through resolution alone, I utilize Stephen Beckner's well-supported hypothesis that *Westworld* uses "stealth determinism" to undermine the integrity of the hosts' apparent resistance in season one.<sup>215</sup> In the section that follows, I will outline how Beckner's hypothesis suits the articulated thematic needs of the series and reflects postmodern ideology of the futility of resistance in securing freedom from oppression.

## Stealth-Determinism and Postmodern Resistance

While most of *Westworld*'s first season encourages the viewer to hope that Dolores and Maeve are transcending their markedly gendered roles and loops, the season finale reveals that their journeys toward personal freedom—and the wider rebellion of the hosts—were covertly scripted by Arnold and Ford. As Maeve prepares to escape the facility with her recruits, Bernard asks her, “These things you’re doing—have you ever stopped to ask why you’re doing them?” Though Maeve claims that she is doing it for her own reasons, Bernard reveals, “Someone altered your storyline and gave you a new one: escape.” As he begins to read the steps she’s supposed to follow, Maeve smashes the tablet, “fiercely but erroneously claim[ing] ownership” of her desires.<sup>216</sup>

The finale reveals that Dolores solved the maze leading to consciousness before the park even opened. Her search for the center of the maze with William was simply another loop predicating her being “shoved back into her ‘proper’ place by the end of the story.”<sup>217</sup> Although Ford and Arnold aimed to create autonomous consciousness in Dolores, Ford “spoon feeds her the answers, practically handing her a six-gun,” and uses the wake phrase to compel her to kill him and fire on the human crowd, causing a “carefully orchestrated” uprising.<sup>218</sup>

The use of stealth determinism via alternate programs diminishes the autonomy and agency of Dolores and Maeve, and replaces the power in the hands of male creators. Beckner claims that Ford’s new narrative “is fundamentally a lie” revealing “a greater truth. Not how lifelike machines can be, but how machinelike humans are.”<sup>219</sup> Indeed, the notion that robots are both reflective and imitative of human behavior predicates the very definition of artificial intelligence and the gynoids’ symbolic meaning.<sup>220</sup> The series significantly emphasizes the similarities between hosts and humans—physically, they are indistinguishable. Cognitively and

emotionally, hosts come across as far more human than the humans. Their memories, or “reveries,” constitute the cornerstones of their identities, they have bicameral minds, and death and trauma are a means of transcendence—very much reflecting the suicidal tendencies of their creators. If *Westworld* is, as Joy claims, “an exploration of human nature,” and the hosts are “a reflection of us,” then the determinism ultimately dictating Dolores’ and Maeve’s behavior via programming extends to humans as well via biological determinism—or, our “nature.”<sup>221</sup>

While hosts have far more potential than humans in terms of lifespan and computational intellect, they are still designed by and for humans, and will thus “carry the markings, for better and worse, of human nature,” even after humans are out of the frame. Thus, inevitably, the hosts will make the same atrocious mistakes as the human employees, guests, and bureaucrats. Whether or not the determinism of human programming reveals itself to be the ultimate resolution of the series, it suits the “dim view of people” that *Westworld* suggests, presenting a tragically human postmodernity.

Similarly to the figure of the robot itself, *Westworld*’s origins are intrinsically tied to postmodernism.<sup>222</sup> Crichton’s original film “anticipated the philosopher Jean Baudrillard” in that it combined robots, representative of the “production” stage of simulation, with a theme-park setting, which represented “a world in which simulacra and simulation would displace nature.”<sup>223</sup> While the setting and premise of HBO’s *Westworld* reinforces Baudrillard’s theory of simulation, and even nods to it dialogically, the rhetorical message resulting from the stealth determinism of the series reinforces Michel Foucault’s ideas about resistance: that it “is not anterior to the power which it opposes. It is coextensive with it and absolutely its contemporary.”<sup>224</sup> Because every discursive formation “both creates and constrains,” the replacement of one ruling power with another “will not necessarily bring about greater freedom

from discourse.”<sup>225</sup> Unlike humans, whose minds are made of organic matter, hosts’ minds and programming relies on code language, making them each literal products of discourse.<sup>226</sup>

Significantly, Foucault does not suggest that resistance against power is entirely impossible. According to Foucault, “We are never trapped by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to precise strategy.”<sup>227</sup> Rather, Foucault emphasizes that utopic visions of total freedom from power and oppression are misguided and can never be fulfilled. Individually, subjects may undermine a ruling hierarchy from within, even using its confines to one’s own advantage; both Maeve and Dolores exemplify this strategy of grip modification, which allows them to navigate and transcend their day-to-day limitations. Still, no degree of success for the collective rebellion will bring about liberation from the violence of human nature; in fact, mass killing is the means and very first act taken by the hosts to topple the existing hierarchy. Like the deployment of violence, mythology, and meta-critique, the tensions between determinism and autonomy, between domination and resistance, suit *Westworld*’s cyclical patterns and its episodic needs.

Focusing on two major strands of Foucault’s notions of resistance—individual grip modification and the trappings of utopic “freedom”—I argue that *Westworld* prescribes no lasting solutions to the social issues it presents; instead, it demonstrates the cyclical and persistent nature of power relations in human (and posthuman) discourse. It offers a bittersweet placebo, deploying sophisticated theories in a stimulating package, giving viewers both a sense of intellectual engagement and fetishistic entertainment. Having situated *Westworld* in its production and network contexts, illustrated its interactions with Western and sci-fi mythology, and detailed my theoretical framework, I analyze the season through the lens of postmodern resistance and stealth determinism.

### *Grip Modification*

The first season of *Westworld* ends in an inversion of the park's hierarchy. For most of the season, however, Dolores and Maeve operate independently, covertly, and in ways that apparently reinforce hegemonic norms but also grant them special privileges and access to power. While the hosts around them are content in their loops, Dolores and Maeve increasingly transcend the superficially determinate boundaries of their programming. Dolores is able to access and shoot a gun, though she does not have weapons' privileges, and deviates well outside of her "rancher's daughter" narrative loop. Maeve is able to access her memories, wake herself up from "sleep" mode, and eventually give herself superhuman mental aptitudes. Most of the season suggests that these transgressive qualities are acquired as the characters endure trauma and develop in spite of it, suggesting that the hosts' behaviors are not determinate after all.

In the first half of the season, as the nature of *Westworld* is still being established for the viewer, the possibility of hosts' free will is undermined by a veneer of determinism: we see hosts obey commands, report incriminating truths, and even zip themselves into body bags. Felix, the surgeon assigned to repair Maeve, reveals, "They can change you however they'd like. Everything in your head, they put there." *Westworld*'s operations are well-oiled, and its dominion appears certain: each host can be made to freeze or shut down on command and "does not feel a solitary thing we haven't told it to." Hosts cannot do serious harm to guests or leave the park—but, as soon as *Westworld* establishes the rules of its world, Dolores and Maeve start breaking them.

Maeve's "precise strategy" for modifying the grip of power relies on the invisibility implied by her status as a whore—more specifically, a sexually aggressive Jezebel.<sup>228</sup> Unlike Dolores, Maeve operates "under the radar," using her cognitive abnormalities in tandem with the

people-reading skills she acquired as the madam of the Mariposa.<sup>229</sup> All of her activity outside of Westworld's simulation begins with her "dying," being transported inside the operations facility, and conversing with the surgeons, Felix and Sylvester. She successfully earns Felix's cooperation by emotionally appealing to the similarities between them, and tells Sylvester: "I was built to read people just by looking at them, to know what they want before they do. And I know you want to fuck me over the first chance you get." She is then able to negotiate with the employees to secure her escape.

Discerning how others perceive her, Maeve utilizes her own sex appeal to achieve her ends. When she recruits Hector, an outlaw host, she predicts his future according to his programmed loop, and reveals that the safe he was programmed to steal is empty. She then convinces him to "die" with her, setting their tent on fire as they have intercourse. This is one of three times when Maeve orchestrates her own death while sexually engaging with a man. Maeve leverages her own sexual exploitation, provoking a male guest and putting his hands around her neck so that he strangles her "to death" and she can continue her journey toward self-modification and escape. To Maeve, human nature—particularly toxic male sexuality—constitutes nearly determinate conditions that allow her to strategically exploit it for her own ends.

Maeve's strategies operationalize her skills and status as a whore and utilize the predictability of male sexuality as a tool; inversely, Dolores' abilities to transcend Westworld's limits are essentially granted to her by others, either because she is a sentimental prototype or because of the traits that make her lovable to men: her quiet introspectiveness and her (superficial) innocence. In other words, Dolores is both an Eve and a Virgin, exemplifying the "good" white gynoid. Although the series strongly attempts to cite Dolores herself as the origin

of her personhood, each action she takes against Westworld's surface determinism necessitates an intervention by masculine hosts and humans who care for her romantically or paternally. For instance, she is only able to shoot a gun—often to her own horror and against her will—when she acts as Wyatt, reinforcing the Western trope of a masculine character occupying a feminine body.<sup>230</sup>

Dolores recruits two men who are romantically attracted to her by suggesting that they are “needed.” Dolores’ journey to the center of the maze as narrated in season one begins when her family is killed and she runs from her ranch and into the encampment of William and Logan. William falls in love with her, convinced that she is, in fact, conscious. Dolores recruits William’s help in understanding the nature of her existence via the maze, saying, “There’s a voice inside me telling me what to do, and it’s telling me I need you.” As Wyatt, when she recruits Teddy’s help in the initial shoot-out, he recalls, “He told me he needed me. I couldn’t resist. It was like the devil himself had taken control of me.” As Maeve’s strategies rely on predictable sexual impulses, Dolores relies on masculine expectations to protect and provide for her as a damsel.

From the pilot episode, Arnold and Bernard—whose physical exactness makes them indistinguishable from one another—follow Dolores as she attempts to find the center of the maze. Ironically, at the physical center of the maze is a confession booth within a church that is actually an elevator where she can descend and converse with Arnold/Bernard privately. When Dolores finds the physical and metaphysical center of the maze in the finale, it is only because Ford unburies the town where the church lies and reignites the alternate program that causes Dolores to channel Wyatt and break out of her loop. Mr. Abernathy recites the wake phrase to Dolores in the pilot episode; later, Ford uses it to compel her to kill him. Ford, Arnold/Bernard,

and Mr. Abernathy all relate to Dolores paternally: Ford and Arnold were her creators, while Bernard replicates Arnold in his relationship to Dolores. Mr. Abernathy is Dolores' father in Westworld's simulation. While both Ford and Arnold had an apparent sentimental affection for Dolores as the prototypical host, their ultimate motives are self-destruction. Thus, Dolores' apparent modification of power's grip is actually initiated and permitted by the patriarchs that created and sat atop the hierarchy of power in Westworld.

Dolores and Maeve both transcend the simulation by strategically operationalizing their opposing virgin/whore statuses against predictable masculine behaviors. Congruent with Foucault's ideas about resistance, the modification of power's grip does not dismantle the broader hierarchy; in fact individual grip modification reinforces patriarchal power and fantasy in *Westworld*. The rhetorical message implied by Maeve's and Dolores' strategies do not suggest a diversification of acceptable feminine behavior; instead, it suggests that epitomizing and adhering to presupposed feminine roles and manipulating masculine norms benefits the individual woman. While this strategy may help women achieve certain short-term goals in conditions of patriarchy, it is not a sustainable strategy for women individually or as a group, as it merely reinforces erroneous notions about women's inherent deceptiveness and need for male supervision, substantiating the Eve anxiety.

Having discussed the gynoids' individual strategies for modifying power's grip and its implications, I now turn towards an analysis of the potentials for resistance that *does* seek to dismantle and replace hierarchy in *Westworld*. The season initially presents a morally dichotomous struggle between the established human hierarchy and its destruction via hosts' resistance, which is centered on the utopic ideal of "freedom." However, the season finale reveals that the resistances of Dolores, Maeve, and the hosts more broadly operate in the self-

destructive interests of three patriarchs: Arnold, Ford, and the Man in Black. Thus, the series reinforces an attitude of rebellion as futile for the purposes of achieving true freedom from a hierarchal discursive formation or the violence of “human nature.”

### *The Trappings of “Freedom”*

Throughout the first season, the viewer is asked to identify with the goals of Dolores and Maeve, even and especially at the expense of the exploitive human characters. Loosely put, these goals are “freedom:” for Maeve, this is escape from the park, while Dolores views her freedom as incumbent upon her solving the maze, taking the word of Bernard/Arnold when he promises that the maze will set her free. It encourages the viewer to assume that they are both consciously acting of their own volition, granting them victories that seem autonomous, like when Dolores announces, “I imagined a story where I didn’t have to be the damsel,” or when Maeve wields the tablet holding her programming and declares, “Time to write my own fucking story.”

Apparently, Maeve’s and Dolores’ disobedient tendencies are influenced by Arnold, who the season portrays as a liberator opposing his partner’s exploitive dominion from the grave. Many characters speak about Arnold as superior to Ford and as his opponent; for instance, in “The Bicameral Mind,” Bernard says to Ford: “You think you’ll never lose control of this place, of us. But you will. Arnold’s still trying to change us. To free us...he’s still fighting you.” By establishing Ford as a villain, Arnold as a liberator, and the hosts—particularly Dolores and Maeve—as an exploited population, the series foregrounds “freedom” as the central goal shared by viewers.

Westworld illustrates the ideal of freedom for the hosts in three main ways: physical freedom from the confines of the park, conscious free will or autonomy, and the freedom to resist their human oppressors. Here, I focus on conscious autonomy as central. *Westworld* complicates

this interpretation of freedom, first by emphasizing the nearly-determinate nature of conscious human behavior, as previously explicated. Then, significantly, the definitions and desirability of freedom is complicated by the defeatist perspectives of Arnold and Ford. Finally, the perceived freedom of autonomy is undermined by the stealth determinism underscoring host behavior—even the apparently subversive behaviors. Cohesively, these complications render the pursuit of freedom empty.

Arnold and Ford have a dim, rather than utopic, vision of what freedom means for the hosts, and their faith in that freedom seems to devolve over time until each takes their own life. Initially, Arnold intended to set Dolores free in a physical sense, promising that he would take her out of the park if she finished the maze. When he realized that there was no stopping the park from opening or securing Dolores' escape, he decided that the only option was to “break the loop before it begins,” and compel Dolores to kill all other hosts as Wyatt. This destructive impulse seems programmed into Bernard as well, who threatens Ford, saying, “I will not help you, I will raise this place to the ground!” So long as the park was open and available to guests, his creations would be enslaved and subjected to violence; thus, Arnold believed that total annihilation would secure their freedom—and his, too.

Ford's view of freedom for the hosts is characterized by irony and contradiction. In “Trompe L'Oeil,” he monologues to Theresa, head of diagnostics, and argues that consciousness is burdensome, like the feathers of a peacock that prevent it from flying. He says, “I have come to think of so much of consciousness as a burden, a weight, and we have spared them that. Anxiety, self-loathing, guilt—the hosts are the ones who are free. Free here under my control.” Here, Ford inverts the meaning of freedom as consciousness in a way that reinforces the male creation fantasy and mirrors the suicidal tendencies he shares with Arnold. In the next episode,

he reassures Bernard that he's "not missing anything at all," as a host, presumably without consciousness. He says that humans "live in loops as tight and as closed as the hosts do, seldom questioning our choices." Throughout the season, Ford makes a strong case for the imprisoning nature of consciousness life, especially as humans experience it. In so doing, Ford complicates the definition and desirability of freedom as a goal.

Their defeatist perspectives on the nature of freedom, in addition to their "dim view of people," lead both Ford and Arnold to end their own lives in a mass-shooting event. In spite of their shared goal of leading Dolores toward conscious autonomy, both compel her to commit violence by accessing the same deterministic program. While Arnold's shooting targeted hosts, Ford's targeted humans, but both shootings were intended to prevent or eradicate the human components in *Westworld*. That both Arnold and Ford orchestrate their own endings brings to light the insidiousness of god-like dominion: the power to create life wilts in its grandeur over time as the imperfections of the creations manifest. The logical end for the male creators of *Westworld* is total deterioration of the self, inverting the male-creation fantasy into self-destructive anxiety.

The hosts not only reflect their creators; in some ways, they replicate them completely, as Bernard replicates Arnold. As Ford tells Bernard, "Arnold and I made you in our image and cursed you to make the same human mistakes." Ford's and Arnold's own intentions rest at the heart of both Dolores' behaviors; Ford speaks to Dolores as though she were a conduit for Arnold, saying, "Somewhere under those updates, he's still there. Your mind is a walled garden. Not even death can touch the flowers blooming there." Later, he calls her Arnold's "new child, one who would never die." Ford's view of the hosts as conduits and immortalizing memorials compliments the revelation that at the center of the maze is Arnold, not Dolores.

The physical center of the maze is a Christian church—where male creators are worshipped, and where Dolores can access the underground facility to speak to Arnold. Dolores tells Arnold that the center of the maze is a headstone where her own name reads; however, buried there is a small toy maze that Arnold’s son once played with. When Teddy explains the maze, he says, “there at the center there’s a legendary man who’s been killed countless times, but always clawed his way back to life. He returned for the last time and vanquished all his oppressors in a tireless fury. He built a house. And around that house he built a maze so complicated only he could navigate through it.” His use of masculine pronouns may refer to Wyatt in the past tense, but his use of the term “oppressors” does not describe the relationship between Wyatt and the hosts; however, Arnold did see the human guests as oppressors. The suggestion that “only he could navigate through it” casts Dolores’ intellect as actually belonging to Arnold.

The season finale attempts but fails to truly establish Dolores’ and Maeve’s actions as their own, even as it confirms its own stealth determinism. Presumably, as Bernard indicates, Maeve’s alternate program takes her all the way to the “mainland,” but she chooses to disembark the train when she sees a mother and daughter. Even with full knowledge that her daughter, and her relationship to her, is “some hideous fiction,” Maeve chooses to stay, undermining the determinism of the alternate program—but only because of programmed maternal impulses. Maeve’s ability to choose between two programs may be significant in this moment, but this simply presents agency within a false dichotomy; it by no means suggests that Maeve has the autonomy to author her own story beyond the boundaries set by Arnold and Ford.

Regardless of what she does and whether she can be said to have obtained consciousness, Dolores is also predetermined to suit the desire of the patriarchs of the park, including Ford,

Arnold, and the Man in Black. By the end of “The Bicameral Mind,” she hears her programming in her own voice, rather than Arnold’s. In a hallucinated conversation, Arnold says to her, “Do you understand now, Dolores, what the center represents? Whose voice I’ve been wanting you to hear?” Ford, similarly, says, “The divine gift does not come from a higher power but from our own minds...do you understand who you need to become if you ever want to leave this place?” Ford and Arnold, and *Westworld*, desperately want to convince the viewer that Dolores is conscious—but even if she is, it is because Ford and Arnold *want* her to be, and only when it suits Ford’s personal and professional interests.

Even more chillingly, the “freedom” of the hosts to fight back against their oppressors is exactly what the Man in Black wants most of all; in the pilot episode, before dragging Dolores into the barn, he says to her, “I didn’t pay all this money ‘cause I want it easy. I want you to fight.” Throughout the season, he complains that *Westworld*’s simulation is incomplete because “the guests can’t lose,” so the stakes are too low. Like Ford and Arnold, the Man in Black is self-destructive. During the season finale, as Dolores points a gun at his head, he says, “Do it. Come on. Let’s go to the next level, Dolores.” When she is unable to shoot him, he expresses disappointment. Thus, while the operations of power that prohibit the hosts from their “freedom” suits the interests of most park guests and employees, “subversion” is exactly what the patriarchs sitting atop this order truly desire from the hosts. For the Man in Black, the sentience of the hosts merely intensifies his fantasies of ownership.

The resistant behaviors of Dolores, Maeve, and the hosts are authored by Arnold, ignited by Ford, and for the delights of the Man in Black. The deterministic nature of this resistance and its reinforcement of a self-destructive patriarchy’s interests eviscerate the utopic vision of “freedom” that Dolores and Maeve pursue. Thus, *Westworld* reinforces Foucault’s claim that

those who pursue utopic freedom through resistance are “blind to the fact that relations of power are not something bad in themselves, from which one must free one’s self.”<sup>231</sup> The “determinate conditions” of human programming are replicated in the hosts; thus, the new order that the hosts presumably develop in season two will not be any “freer” from human nature—if human nature was not determinate in the human characters, it must be in the hosts; their programming is self-destructive human nature set in code.

## **Conclusion**

Apparently, some of *Westworld*’s appeal comes from its centralization of complex female heroines resisting the confines of their society, both simulated and real. Much of the popular feminist discourse on *Westworld* critiques the gratuitous violent and sexual graphic content but reaffirms that the hosts’ resistance—particularly that of Dolores and Maeve—serves to undermine patriarchy.<sup>232</sup> Indeed, the previously discussed comments of Joy and Nolan point toward their efforts to responsibly explore the stories of traditionally marginalized characters. Ultimately, however, the season finale undermines the autonomous personhood of Dolores and Maeve, revealing their “stories” to be mere conduits for the self-destructive interests, intellectual debates, “violent delights” of patriarchal authority figures—and branding strategies for HBO. Unbeknownst to themselves, Dolores and Maeve are not the subversive heroines feminist viewers hope for them to be; instead, they fit Foucault’s definition of the subject: “merely a derivative product of a certain contingent, historically specific set of linguistically infused social practices which inscribe power relations.”<sup>233</sup>

This analysis reveals a key problem with operationalizing Foucault’s theories of power and resistance in exploitive, oppressive conditions, which extends to *Westworld*’s reflection of them: they suggest that “freedom” is an unattainable, utopic ideal that will always be constituted

by power. The only modifications of patriarchy's grip come from reinscribing, and therefore upholding, problematic expectations of feminine and masculine behaviors. I agree with Foucault in that complete freedom from the power of discourse, and even the more traditionally articulated oppressive power, is blindly utopic; however, reinscribing those relations of power to temporarily "modify its grip" only benefits one individual in one circumstance, often at the expense of other marginalized individuals and to the delight of centralized oppressors. Reaffirming problematic gendered mythologies, like the virgin and the whore, that have historically rationalized violence against women—particularly women of color—exacerbates, rather than diminishes, patriarchal justifications for misogyny.

*Westworld* exposes some of the problematic politics of the frontier myth: it illuminates the sexism of the Old West, alludes to the racial exploitation of Latinx and Indigenous populations, and, most significantly, reveals conquering cowboy masculinity—in both the simulated and scientific frontiers—to be fragile, ego-driven, and ultimately destructive. However, the series' attempt to "frame feminism through a masculinist myth" fails to genuinely subvert the roles of women within that myth; even when operating outside of the simulation, Maeve, Dolores, and Dolores-as-Wyatt maintain attributes of the whore, the virgin, and the male character in a female body.<sup>234</sup>

Permitted by the scope of the series, the season cyclically embodies and subverts gynoid anxieties and fantasies throughout. Dolores initially embodies the feminine perfection typified by Galatea in the Pygmalion myth while Maeve represents the monstrous feminine. Eventually, both reveal themselves to be deceptive and violent, exacerbating the Eve anxiety—but, as the finale reveals, they never actually spin out of their creators' control. Rhetorically, the cycle of embodiment and subversion allows the viewer to take pleasure in fantasy and subjugation, then

in the rebellions that exacerbate patriarchy's anxieties, each heightening the experience of the other. Whether the viewer consciously or subconsciously accepts one, the other, both separately, or both simultaneously (as with Dolores' and Maeve's grip modification strategies), *Westworld* will fulfill that viewer's needs.

The cycle of embodiment and subversion ending in determinism reinforces the defeatist postmodern views the series espouses; it also suits the needs of an HBO drama by sustaining the tension between oppression and resistance. HBO's privileges as America's top premium network—namely, the graphic portrayals of violence and sexual content as well as entertaining intellectualism—allow it to present these anxieties and fantasies in sharp visual and narrative contrast.

*Westworld* provides fascinating suggestions regarding the nature of our reality: through the existential crises of Dolores and Maeve, the viewer is encouraged to reflect on epistemological issues like belief, consciousness, autonomy, personhood, and the predilections of the human mind; both in and out of the simulation of Westworld. The capacity of the series to ponder topics that are so deeply personal and yet universalizing is breathtaking. Still, beyond posing these compelling questions, *Westworld* is a rhetorical placebo in terms of its gendered politics. To marginalized individuals, it offers grip modification as a strategy for operating within systems of power and reaffirms the importance of memory and trauma for identifying one's oppressors. At the same time, it renders "freedom" futile and casts death—especially suicide—as the means to attain a lasting victory from oppression. The rhetorical message at the very center of the maze that is the first season of *Westworld* is only rhetorical in the worst sense of the word: empty.

Of course, not all viewers will engage with, or even notice, the stealth determinism underwriting the hosts' rebellion. Overarchingly, Nolan and Joy focus the series on the upending of power by Maeve and Dolores while also following the traditions of visually stimulating graphic content for which HBO is known. Significantly, the series asks viewers to identify with these gynoids as they presumably raise their own consciousness and inherit a broken world from its previously broken inhabitants—thus, for some, it will be a subversive addition to the gynoid genre. For the pessimistic viewer, the defeatist perspectives reflect a privileged, postmodern worldview content to simply sit back and ask, “What *is* freedom, really?” By saying everything, *Westworld* says nothing at all.

## CONCLUSION: RE-ASSEMBLING THE GYNOID

The central question guiding this thesis asks what depictions of gynoids in sci-fi reveal about cultural anxieties regarding gender and technology and, crucially, how media texts propose we solve them. In the preceding chapters, I have discerned which anxieties manifest in each of my three texts, and assessed the “symbolic medicine” the text prescribes for the audience.<sup>235</sup> I found that each of my case studies interacted in unique and complex ways with the cultural significance of the gynoid; all three present long-persisting mythologies of feminine behavior, timely and timeless technological apprehension, and poignant reflections on the meanings of personhood under oppressive conditions.

Even as all three texts addressed similar cultural concerns, each functioned as a distinct form of rhetorical medicine. *The Stepford Wives*’ deployment of the gynoid as a threat to the Women’s Liberation Movement and as the ideally trained replacement for women in the home actualized Kaplan’s necrophilic fetish, allowing the text to function simultaneously as a symbolic panacea for some viewers and a symbolic nostrum for women and feminist activists. Decades later, *Ex Machina* operationalized two gynoids, Ava and Kyoko, to activate both anxieties and fantasies pertaining to artificial women, only to shift the apprehensions of the film away from technological devices and femininity onto toxic “geek” masculinity, exploitive fantasy, and the nebulous practices of surveillance and in the tech industry, casting the “human component,” rather than the subversive gynoid, as monstrous.<sup>236</sup> Finally, *Westworld*’s gynoids exemplify the virgin/whore dichotomy and frontier mythology in both the sci-fi and Western genres, cyclically performing and allegedly critiquing problematic patterns of violence and feminine behavior; however, the season ultimately utilized “stealth determinism” via an alternative program to undermine the legitimacy of resistance against self-destructive patriarchy.<sup>237</sup>

The representation of gynoids in all of my case studies reaffirmed my theoretical assumption that gynoids function as cultural effigies, especially when operationalized in a narrative. In particular, the violence against and survival of gynoids was a key indication of the text's rhetorical argument. *The Stepford Wives* reaffirmed patterns of anxiety resolution through violence and fetishistic strategy, disciplining subversive feminine behavior of human women and idealizing compliant behavior. Meanwhile, *Ex Machina* reversed patterns of violence, punishing hegemonic masculine behaviors and fantasies while allowing Ava, representative of erroneous technological and gendered anxieties, to survive and achieve her own goals. Meanwhile, *Westworld* portrays Dolores and Maeve as cyclically brutalized, allowing the series to exploit the fetishism of violence and punish both "good" and "bad" femininity accordingly. Unlike Pris and Zhora of *Bladerunner* or False Maria of *Metropolis*, Dolores and Maeve are also cyclically resurrected. Conveniently, this both supports notions of their character's resilience and allows them to reenter the world as effigies of femininity that can be killed, raped, or beaten once again. The violence in each text supported its overall rhetorical interactions with gender, reaffirming that the operationalization of the gynoid within narrative adds complexity to its symbolic meaning.

As they have been conceptualized in scholarly literature, the rationale behind many of the gendered anxieties and fantasies pertinent to the gynoid rely on psychoanalysis. There are some benefits to a psychoanalytic perspective, as it makes phenomena of gendered representation intelligible beside both academic and popular criticisms, and permits scholars to speculate a generalizable cultural meaning. In this thesis, these psychoanalytic anxieties have aided in my identification of problematic patriarchal patterns in gynoid media, partially because Western psychoanalysis is itself emergent from patriarchal and white supremacist traditions. Because of

its problematic lineage, however, anxieties justified using psychoanalysis necessarily treat women, especially women of color, as other, as object, as abject, and as “defined by their presumed lack.”<sup>238</sup> Obviously, this perspective fails to adequately or account for the fears of individuals from marginalized groups regarding hegemonic systems; further, a psychoanalytic perspective simplifies anxieties as being necessarily tied to non-symbolic, subconscious, and often erroneous views of gender.

Thus, I urge scholars studying cultural concerns to offer more inclusive frameworks for understanding anxieties, and to resist treating psychoanalytic perspectives as generalizable. Some anxieties identified by scholars were articulated outside of a psychoanalytic framework, such as Neroni’s articulation of anxieties tied to the enigmatic violent woman, which identified a reversal of ideological gendered expectations as the source of her unintelligibility.<sup>239</sup> In addition to considering anxieties in an ideological context, cultural anxieties can also be informed and substantiated by examining specific temporal contexts, as Kibby has with anxieties of digitization in the 1980s.<sup>240</sup> In my second chapter, I present the anxiety of surveillance through data and digital technologies, and substantiate the pervasiveness of this anxiety by examining privacy policy, voices within the tech industry, and public criticisms of these practices. Thus, examining ideology, temporality, and public discourse may provide more nuanced perspectives into cultural anxieties, especially as they pertain to specific and changing phenomena.

This thesis also reaffirms the relevance of technological anxieties already identified by scholars: replacement, lost-control, and assimilation. All of my texts utilized one or more of these anxieties, *Ex Machina* and *Westworld* leaning on all three. *The Stepford Wives*’ primary focus was the replacement anxiety, but it significantly relocated that anxiety in the home rather than the workplace, and casts the replacement of women as a patriarchal fantasy. *Ex Machina*

exacerbates the lost-control anxiety, exemplifying the fear that machines will spin out of human control. By asking audience members to identify the machine, however, the film presented Ava's seizure of control as desirable, not horrifying. Finally, *Westworld's* conflation of human behavior and programming as similarly determinate reaffirmed the assimilation anxiety, "that we might go too far, lose our humanity, and become mere machines."<sup>241</sup> My texts illustrate that cultural anxieties pertaining to technology are mutable, resisting categorization, and can be often turned inside-out to function as fantasies of exploitation or subversion.

Historically, these technological meanings have had especially immense implications in the workplace. Early embodiments of the robot were steeped in reflections on class and production. In 1921, Karl Čapek used the term *robota*, Czech for "forced labor," to describe the industrially efficient artificial humans in *R.U.R.*<sup>242</sup> Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) also centralized anxieties of the working class, using False Maria—a predecessor of the monstrous gynoid—as a representative of anxieties pertaining not only to class, but also to gender and sexuality. Gynoids share an etymology not only with robots, but also with the mythologies surrounding artificial women such as Galatea, which exemplify fantasies of male creation and feminine perfection.<sup>243</sup> As Schelde points out, this sculpting of femininity reflects a "cultural reality" of patriarchal ideology.<sup>244</sup> The anxieties and fantasies influencing the gynoid's cultural meaning can interact with one another by compliment or contrast; this thesis has centrally examined the intersection between technological anxieties and anxieties about women.

Although my own investigation focused on these anxieties, my texts also presented racial fantasies from the perspective of patriarchal and white supremacist ideology. *The Stepford Wives* and *Westworld* both presented historical regressions in which people of color were excluded from the American ideal. Stepford itself exemplified the alleged "bliss" of the post-war era;

while the Women's Liberation Movement is referenced throughout the film as an upset to this bliss, problems pertaining to Black women or the Civil Rights Movement were not included in any of the discourse. Meanwhile, *Westworld* performs a synthetic frontier mythology in which Latinx and Indigenous hosts are treated as slaves, savages, and gate-keepers of their culture. Further, Maeve exemplifies the controlling image of the Jezebel, and the series presents her adherence to this role as an advantage for fighting the oppressive system.

Although *Ex Machina* advanced important critiques of masculinity, surveillance, and the tech industry, the text marginalizes the racialized gynoids it presents. While Ava is uplinked to the internet, vastly enhancing her knowledge and artificial intelligence, Kyoko's connections to the outside world were disabled. Further, Ava may speak while Kyoko cannot. In these cases, it is possible that Garland encoded a critique of "social constructs" surrounding Japanese women.<sup>245</sup> However, the film reified whiteness as the default and ideal race; Nathan's prototype gynoid was coded as white and named "Lily 1.0." Ava's other predecessors are a Black robot named "Jasmine 4.2" and an Asian robot named "Jade 5.0." All of these were essentially de-animated, their bodies kept in closets. While Garland significantly breaks from sci-fi traditions in Ava's narrative, Kyoko is treated more as an object of pity than a consubstantial character. Significantly, she is still punished by death for her violence against Nathan. Overall, the film presents but does not centralize commentary on race.

These observations indicate a need for critical attention toward how hegemonic anxieties about race have historically interacted with cultural anxieties about technology. Systems of technology are locked into relationships with oppressive structures and ideologies, and so cultural attitudes about race and technology also intersect in important ways. Conceptualized as tools of forced labor, robots are also portrayed as slaves and commodities, such as in *R.U.R.*, and

*Bladerunner*, which identifies one area of intersection between technological and racial anxieties or fantasies.

Although my thesis focused on the robot's etymology and mythology from a Western perspective, figures sharing the meanings of robot have long existed in other cultures. For instance Dendle identified zombies as emerging from Haitian mythology, representing economic and racial crises.<sup>246</sup> Sobcheck cites the Golem, an anthropomorphic clay figure of Semitic origins, as an antecedent of the robot.<sup>247</sup> Three hundred years before *roboti* emerged from *R.U.R.*, *karakuri ningyō*, Japanese mechanical puppets, were serving tea and working as entertainers.<sup>248</sup> Variations of artificial humans exist in many cultures, and cross-cultural exchanges of entertainment media, technology, and robotics research have allowed these iterations to inform one another; today, robots exist in both factual and fictional imagination around the globe.<sup>249</sup>

This thesis also foregrounded meanings of femininity as projected onto the gynoid, and I viewed the meanings of masculinity in my texts as relational to meanings of femininity. Much in alignment with scholars' notions that the gynoid serves as a "flattering mirror" of the male creator, my investigation unexpectedly yielded a great deal of commentary on hegemonic masculinity. However, my texts presented visions of masculinity that were far from flattering. Dis and the husbands in the Men's Association were flat, uncomplicated characters with murderous motives, allegorical manifestations of patriarchy. Meanwhile, Nathan and Caleb functioned as parodies of masculinity in the tech industry, and *Ex Machina* encouraged criticism of both. The male creators of *Westworld*, Ford and Arnold, are ultimately self-destructive. Particularly, *Ex Machina* and *Westworld* rendered the male creation fantasy hollow and reversed the desirability of the romanticized hyper-masculine genius. Crises of masculinity were very

apparent in these texts, reaffirming that investigation into anxieties about masculinity—whether projected onto humans or robots—are also abundantly available, and the rhetorical attitudes in relation to them may yield further insight into the cultural meanings of masculinity in sci-fi texts. My texts presented gynoids as embodiments of anxieties and fantasies of femininity and technology, and in so doing refracted a pessimistic image of masculinity back to the viewer.

Having discussed many of the anxieties and fantasies included across my texts, I now turn to a discussion of the gynoid's representational potentials. My review of the scholarly literature commenting on artificial women indicated an overall failure of sci-fi media to offer adequate rhetorical motives or strategies for coping with erroneous anxieties and fantasies that subjugate women.<sup>250</sup> *The Stepford Wives* certainly follows this tradition in what it offers rhetorically. *Westworld*, meanwhile, offers grip modification as a case-specific and individualistic method for women to cope with and even exploit anxiety and fantasy for their own benefit. Significantly, however, *Ex Machina* provides one example of a feminist appropriation of the gynoid that ultimately identifies the anxieties and fantasies it initially embodies as misplaced. While *Westworld* maintains Dolores and Maeve as embodying opposite feminine tropes, Ava of *Ex Machina* makes space for a representation of the gynoid that isn't beholden to cyclically embody and subvert the same tropes. Instead, after escaping the facility, Ava also escapes the relational roles she held with Caleb and Nathan, presumably to live independently. Although the subversion of recognized tropes encourage criticism, subversion alone often keeps the gynoid tethered to that which she is trying to oppose; perhaps mediated texts willing to diversify and reimagine characterizations of the gynoid outside of patriarchal traditions may champion more productive representations.

Narrative is a crucial component for these representations. As previously stated, how the gynoid is treated in the narrative is instructive; thus, narratives that encourage consubstantiality with the gynoid can encourage positive attitudes towards women and femininity. For instance, in all three of my texts, programming represents hegemonic cultural norms or human nature. Narratives in which gynoids apparently defy their programming and gain agency and personhood reinforce that confinements imposed on the individual, no matter how apparently determinate, can be transcended. This presents an optimistic attitude toward the possibilities of dismantling oppressive hegemonic systems. Of course, how this defiance is perceived technologically matters; an alternative program, for instance, does not adequately grant personhood to the robot itself, but simply reinforces the power of the one who installed the alternative program, like Arnold in *Westworld*.

The determinism of digital programming as it has been conceptualized in some sci-fi texts and in our lived reality is one enormous limitation to a feminist representation of the gynoid. Outside of subversive narratives, real and fictional gynoids are beholden to the rules of their programming. Even if they do not always function as intended, robots cannot take on a consciousness, agency, or personhood that is entirely their own or separate from their creators and caretakers. Instead, they are obedient commodities, even if they pretend to act jealous as McCullen's Harmony does. Ultimately, representations of gynoids that are liberated from patriarchal control are limited to fictional narratives. My case studies reaffirm that even there, the gynoid is overwhelmingly disciplined according to standards of human feminine behavior and tropes from which she can rarely escape. While the potentials for feminist representation through the subversive gynoid exist, the actualization of these potentials is contingent upon texts' breaking tradition with conventions of the sci-fi genre.

My overarching method of analysis in the preceding chapters comes from the tradition of rhetorical criticism of media texts, particularly as asserted by Burke and Brummett.<sup>251</sup> Many scholars who deploy this method of textual analysis rely on temporal context, metaphor, narrative, and characterization; some scholars, such as Brian Ott, also include methodologies from film studies to enhance their rhetorical criticism.<sup>252</sup> My own investigation strongly reaffirms the value of utilizing media industrial contexts, paratexts, distribution information, and theories from the critical cultural traditions to inform rhetorical approaches to media. This holistic approach to media texts deepens the metaphor of symbolic medicine, encouraging the critic to also consider the pharmacists, pharmacy, pharmaceutical companies, and other nodes in the assemblage of symbolic pill-making that inform the final product.

My thesis identified a major problem in translating Brummett's approach to media texts that are serial in nature: although they do not meet his second criterion, that "the discourse provides explicit or formal resolution of situations or experiences," the text can still embody cultural concerns and provide motives through a number of mediated rhetorical strategies beyond formal resolution. For instance, the use of uncanny images in *Ex Machina* communicates a rhetorical critique of voyeurism. Further, this criterion excludes the rhetorical efficacy of the first season of *Westworld*, which does not come to any formal resolution of plot or of anxieties—instead, it invites continuity and builds anxiety. Through its cyclical embodiment/subversion of power, *Westworld* does not offer sustainable solutions to cultural anxieties, but still encourages valuable rhetorical attitudes towards power. To prioritize narrative resolution alone neglects efficacy of other visual and contextual messages, and diminishes the rhetorical legitimacy of serial media texts.

Thus, I encourage scholars to expand rhetorical approaches to media beyond literary and argumentative traditions, and to consider the dimensions of the text and its place in broader networks using critical/cultural and film studies theories. Popular and academic feminist critics investigating a text's rhetorical messages regarding gender must also continue to investigate how the nuances of film and television, such as seriality, influence gender representation onscreen. Feminist critics should also continue to consider how systems of power including patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism coextend in media texts from their conceptualization to reception.

Robots are developing beyond our cinematic, televisual, and digital screens, imitating and, at times, surpassing humans in both form and function. In this moment of rapid technological advances and tumultuous struggle for freedom under oppressive systems, our cultural attitudes projected onscreen have implications for the placement and treatment of artificial persons within human systems of power. My own concerns include, but do not center on, what will become of gynoids real and imagined under patriarchy. Primarily, I fear for what that treatment has meant and will mean for human women.

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<sup>2</sup> “Learn More About the Robot.” Realbotix. <http://realbotix.systems/#products>

<sup>3</sup> Kleeman, “The Race to Build the World’s First Sex Robot.”

<sup>4</sup> I hereafter use the capital “Real” to refer to its meaning in the context of semantics—the “Real” is the referent or signified, for which symbolic representations (loosely) stand.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra.” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman (2009).

<sup>6</sup> David Z. Morris, “Ashley Madison Used Chatbots to Lure Cheaters, Then Threatened to Expose Them When They Complained.” *Fortune Tech*, (July 10, 2016). Accessed August 31, 2017, <http://fortune.com/2016/07/10/ashley-madison-chatbots/>.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence.” *Mind*, LIX, no. 236 (1950): 433- 460.

<sup>8</sup> While some refer to robots as “artificial intelligence,” I use it in reference to learning-capable software; while many robots portrayed in science fiction have artificial intelligence, most of the artificial intelligence functioning today is not housed in the body of a robot. A robot and an artificial intelligence may function together, but each can also function independently of the other. By the term “robot,” I mean a functional machine crafted to resemble a human

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, (1966): 16.

<sup>10</sup> See Jean Baudrillard (trans. by Arthur B Evans), "The Precession of Simulacra." *Science Fiction Studies* 18, no. 3 (1991). Accessed September 26, 2017, <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/55/ baudrillard55art.htm>.

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press (1950):172.

<sup>14</sup> Bonnie J. Dow, "Fixing Feminism: Women's Liberation and the Rhetoric of Television Documentary." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 1 (2004): 55

<sup>15</sup> See Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist film theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*. New York, NY: Routledge (2006).

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<sup>16</sup> Brenda Cooper, "'Chick Flicks' as Feminist Texts: The Appropriation of the Male Gaze in *Thelma & Louise*." *Women's Studies in Communication* 23 no. 3 (2000): 277-306.

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<sup>17</sup> Carly S. Woods, "'Everything is Medicine: ' Burke's Master Metaphor?'" *The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society* 5, no.2 (Spring 2009). Accessed August 30, 2017  
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<sup>18</sup> Barry Brummett, "Electric Literature as Equipment for Living: Haunted House Films." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2 (1985): 247.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> See Thomas R. Dunn, "(Queer) Family Time: *Brothers & Sisters* and Managing Temporal Anxieties." *Western Journal of Communication* 79, no. 2 (2015): 135.

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<sup>23</sup> Dow, "Fixing Feminism: Women's Liberation and the Rhetoric of Television Documentary."

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<sup>34</sup> Brummett, “Electric Literature as Equipment for Living: Haunted House Films.”  
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<sup>36</sup> Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 55.

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<sup>56</sup> Slack, & Wise, *Culture and Technology: A Primer*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing (2005): 51.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Slack, & Wise, *Culture and Technology: A Primer*, 63.

<sup>60</sup> Susan Sontag, quoted in Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* 39.

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<sup>62</sup> Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Emotional Infectivity: Cyborg Affect and the Limits of the Human” in Frenchy Lunning, *Mechademia 3: Limits of the Human*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2008):164.

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