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Artificial Intelligence and Snake Oil Feminism:
An Analysis of Fembots in Dystopian Science Fiction Narratives

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Many first world countries consider Artificial Intelligence the next frontier. The topic is pervasive in the digital age. Artificial Intelligence (or A.I., for short) technology surrounds us: the Internet of Things and other smart appliances have vastly increased in prevalence in the USA over the past few years—at every turn a bot (whether it be a phone or a music speaker) assists and surveils us. Yet this presence isn’t just physical—A.I. has a presence in the psyches and imaginations of every subject living in the digital age. Books, films, movies, and commercials now commonly feature an A.I. characters—a trend ever increasing in prominence since 1950, when the field of science and technology began to think seriously about the possibility of constructing artificial intelligence\(^1\).

This paper seeks to find an explanation for why artificial intelligence is consistently gendered as female in contemporary science fiction. I will analyze two cornerstone science fiction narratives—Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and Alex Garland's 2014 film, *Ex Machina*—though a feminist perspective. Fundamentally, I will argue that the resurgence of fembots in science fiction has more to do with the dominant culture’s reaction to social progressivism than it does about the burgeoning field of artificial intelligence technology. Said in another way, these narratives, generated by and produced for white heterosexual males, reveal the cultural contradictions of the moment as experienced by them, the members of the dominant majority. I will situate my findings within the broader context of Western Culture by reconciling them with the fact that most A.I. technology in real life is also gendered as female. To conclude, I will demonstrate how science and science fiction feed off each other, developing each other’s ideas and pushing the other to its creative edge.

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\(^1\) When Alan Turing explored the mathematical possibilities of it in his 1950 paper *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* (Anyoha 1).
Thus, my analysis of fembots in science fiction will ultimately imply that our fictional and/or imaginative characterizations of artificial intelligence have real world impact.

**Background Information**

I. **Science fiction is not about science**

My main argument that the prevalence of female A.I. is representative of white heterosexual males’ anxiety about social displacement carries the implication that the subject of science fiction is rarely science. I stand by this claim for several reasons. Firstly, though it seems basic and abstract, I must emphasize that humans make sense of their surrounding world through stories and metaphor rather than reality. Even the field of science itself cannot divorce itself from rhetoric and parable: physicists and chemists still invoke Bohr’s imperfect model of the atom to understand how an atom behaves, since in reality an atom looks and acts in ways the human mind cannot conceive of.

Narrative has a long-time role in human history of providing an outlet for humans to explore and (attempt to) comprehend their lives and the world around them through defamiliarization. A Lacanian would explain this by proposing that we can only encounter and make sense of reality—or the Real—via transference, via seeing it through something else. Science fiction, as a genre and narrative style, is especially known for the strength of the relationship of the story to the context from which it emerged. Numerous other scholars have noted that speculative analogies are science fiction’s stock in trade: often they are defamiliarized projections of the current reality that exacerbate or make literal the cultural anxieties of the times (Rampell 224, Imani Kasai 1383). All of this is to say that science fiction is not about the specific science featured in the story—in this case, artificial intelligence technology. Instead, the subject of these stories are the allegorized and/or personified fears of the creators and their
intended audience. Thus, the first side-destination along my line of argument is this—that Philip K. Dick’s science fiction novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (henceforth referred to as *Androids*) and Alex Garland’s science fiction film, *Ex Machina*, reveal more about the psychological reoccupations of the creators (and those who sympathize with them) more than they will ever reveal about the technology of artificial intelligence. Just as the TV show *Star Trek* is more about homosocial camaraderie than it is about the intergalactic life and space travel, *Androids* and *Ex Machina* have more to say about how humans treat each other in the present than how human should treat robots in the future.

II. Who These Narratives are By and For

Firstly, all the authors/creators of my primary source materials—chosen because they are arguably the most widely known robot narratives among audience members and critics alike—are white heterosexual males. I do not mean to insinuate that these two sample texts are representative of all science fiction literature that features female robots, but due to their prominence in pop culture, their publication dates, and the demographic breakdown of this sub-genre’s creators, they serve as excellent case studies of a larger narrative movement.

There are sci-fi narratives written by women, such Martha Well’s 2017 novel *All Systems Red* and Becky Chambers’ 2016 novel *A Closed and Common Orbit*, but unfortunately female content creators of this topic—and of science fiction more broadly—are in the minority. In 1999, 36% of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's professional members were women (Davin 69-70). While women are a significant minority in the demographic breakdown of authors, they have received an unproportionately smaller amount of critical acclaim for their works. MIT Technology Review’s Top Ten Hard Science Fiction Books of All Time includes one woman, for instance, and Goodreads' Best Science Fiction list has only ten female authors in
the top 100, making it 88% male (Lovell 1). While women’s participation in science fiction writing—and their recognition of their efforts in it—has slowly increased throughout the decades, it is still accurate to say that science fiction is a predominantly male-oriented genre. It is, as critic Lisa Tuttle phrases it, a genre “by men for men” (Tuttle 1343).

Androids and Ex Machina are narratives orchestrated by men (Dick and Garland, respectively) for men—more specifically, a male audience. In addition to the historical evidence above, the content of the narratives proves this as well: both are told through the 3rd person omniscient perspective of a white heterosexual male (Rick in Androids and Caleb in Ex Machina) and both plots chiefly revolve around how the novel’s events impact these men. It is crucial to underline the perspective from which these stories are generated because the anxieties played out in these narratives belong to those who have that perspective (in this case, other white heterosexual males). Thus, the allegorized anxieties depicted in Androids and Ex Machina are anxieties specific to the white western heterosexual male experience. The subject of both narratives is not how people will relate to robots, but how white heterosexual men currently relate to other humans outside of this demographic. The fictional androids, of course, are the stand-ins for these “other” humans.

III. Overview of Chapters

Both Androids and Ex Machina are intriguing in that they tackle the subject of gender with a massive amount of nuance: it is too reductive to say that these works are sexist, and still it is inaccurate to say that either of them are agents of social progressivism. I claim that this nuance a natural result of the cultural contradictions of the times (late 1960s and early 2010s, specifically), as perceived by white heterosexual men in Anglo-Western society. During these two periods in history—periods from which these narratives arose—the dominant culture began
to acknowledge the injustices endured by oppressed groups (such as women and people of color) yet were still in the process of recognizing the humanity of the people that belong to these groups. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how Androids and Ex Machina aestheticize the divided mind of the dominant culture. On one hand, these narratives signal the acknowledgement that women have and have always been sentient. On the other hand, they also reveal a longstanding belief that women, if/when granted humanity, will threaten their way of life.

The body of this paper will be structured first by novel. I will then divide my analysis of each novel into three steps. The first step I will take is to illuminate, through textual examples, the sexism that exists in the specific fictional world, on both the systemic and individual level. To clarify, I will first show how the overall culture presented by the narrative is sexist, and then present how individual characters within the narrative are sexist. My second step will be to consider each work’s narrative punishment; that is, I will reconcile my aforementioned analysis of the sexism present in each narrative with the fact that the narratives end with the fembot in a position of power over their male subjugator(s), in a classic film-noir style. The third and final step of my study will be, with the help of textual and theoretical evidence, to concede that the works ultimately reinforce patriarchal societal norms in spite (or even perhaps because of) their narratives punishments.

Chapter I: Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

Plot Synopsis

Rick works as a bounty hunter. His job is to ‘retire’, i.e. destroy, any runaway androids that end up on planet earth. See, humans have already colonized other parts of space, and have

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2 A more detailed analysis of the historical context of these narratives will be found in this paper’s conclusion.
also created androids to act as servants for them. Some of the androids—who look and act precisely like real humans—escape the space colonies for earth. The only way to differentiate between humans and robots is to give them the Voigt-Kamff Empathy test, which measures whether or not a person feels empathy by measuring the person’s pupil dilation as they’re told stories that are supposed to stimulate their sense of empathy.

That morning, Rick goes to work and finds out he is tasked to kill not one, but six androids. When he visits the Rosen Association, the company that makes androids, to run a control test to determine if the Voigt-Kampff works, he meets his first android, Rachael.

As Rick retires androids one by one, he meets another bounty hunter named Phil Resch, whose passion for killing androids shocks Rick (even though Rick himself gets high off the power gained by killing androids). To retire the final three androids in a timely manner, however, Rick needs insider help. He contacts Rachael in hopes that she can help him, but he also is motivated to see her again to try to seduce her. They rent a hotel room and have sex, but shortly after, Rachael reveals that she only had sex with him in hopes that he would be too psychologically disturbed to kill the remaining escaped androids. Rick, demoralized by Rachael’s actions, sets out to destroy the final androids who are hiding in an abandoned apartment building.

When Rick arrives at the building, he meets J.R. Isidore, a human who is mentally handicapped due to overexposure earth’s toxic fumes. Isidore had helped the three androids hide, but after he saw them mutilate a spider (something that would surely cause pupil dilation) he is unsure where his loyalties lie. One of the three remaining androids is a female named Pris, who is the same robot edition as Rachael—thus, she looks just like her. Rick shoots the simulacrum with his laser, proving Rachael wrong. After all three androids are killed, Rick returns home to
his wife. They still have an electric pet, but after his experience with Rachael, Rick concedes that robot’s lives might be as real in the same sense that religion is real.

Chapter I Section 1: The Systemic Sexism in *Androids*

The futuristic, post-apocalyptic American society Philip K. Dick imagines in *Androids* is undeniably misogynistic and is much less covert about it than the American society of the late 1960s. Firstly, the treatment and characterization of women overall in this novel is reductive. The vast majority of the female characters, for instance, are either employed as secretaries, switchboard operators, or store clerks. During the middle of the 20th century, these occupations were some of the only available to women. These service-oriented types of jobs were considered women’s work. The exceptional women who don’t have this type of job include Luba Luft, an undercover android who performs as an opera singer, Amanda Werner, another undercover android and talk show host, and Rick’s wife, Iran, who takes care of the home. Iran actually never exists outside of her home in the novel—the only scenes she appears in are those that take place in her and Rick’s living room. Thus, women in this world can fulfill only three roles: a corporate assistant (to a man), an entertainer, or a housewife.

Subservience in the workplace is even further underlined by the manner in which the male characters treat their secretaries. Miss Marsten, Rick Deckard’s secretary, comes across as stereotypically ditsy, small-minded, and flirtatious—an office gossip. Take, for instance, the following exchanges between her and Rick: “Want to know what the Russian police said?” Miss Marsten asked. ‘I know that too’. Her freckled, orange face glowed” and “Give me an outside line, Miss Marsten. And don’t listen in on the conversation; it’s confidential’. [Rick] glared at

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3 Six out of the twelve women in the novel—whether they speak or not, and whether they have names or not—are secretaries.
her.” (Dick 28, 32). Marsten’s eagerness to prove her usefulness and please her superior in the first instance is as evident as Rick’s condescension and distrust of her in the second.

Miss Marsten is not the only female secretary treated stereotypically. When Rick enters the office of Inspector Bryant, his boss, at the beginning of the novel, he first spends some time internally assessing Bryant’s female subordinates:

“He passed by Bryant’s receptionist—attractive, with waist-length braided silver hair—and then the inspector’s secretary, an ancient monster from the Jurassic swamp, frozen and sly, like some archaic apparition fixated on the tomb world. Neither woman spoke to him nor he to them.” (Dick 33)

According to this passage, the first thing Rick does, when casting his eyes upon a woman, is judge their physical attractiveness. This practice trumps the need to learn their names (neither woman is named throughout the novel) or to speak to them and address them as equals. He determines that the looks of the receptionist are apparently “attractive”, but the appearance of the secretary is unsatisfactory enough that he metaphorizes her as a monster.

This instance is dually important because it exemplifies how the male characters in Androids dichotomize women. Whether he is conscious of it or not, Rick, in the passage above, sorts the two women into two categories: the attractive and the unattractive, the young and the old, the fuckable and the old maid. Rick and Isidore, the only two characters that get a POV narrative, assign every female they interact with into one of these two groups. Diction makes it easy for the reader to tell which female is lumped into which category: they think of the old maids as “women”, and of the sexually desirable women as “girls”. For instance, Rick refers to Rachael as a girl fifteen times throughout the novel and only refers to her as a woman once, when he first sets eyes on her. Similarly, Isidore calls Pris a girl twenty-one times. The only time
a man describes Pris as a woman is Rick, seconds before he kills her. Rick also refers to Luba Luft twice as a girl and never as a woman (Dick 92, 102).

Men in the novel comment on the attractiveness of every female they describe as a “girl”—especially on the attractiveness of their breasts. Isidore notes that Pris possesses “small high breasts”, and that Amanda Werner and other guests of Buster Friendly’s talk show have “conically shaped breasts” (Dick 62, 69). He also observes that Irmgard’s “small, high breasts” were “rising and falling rapidly” when she yells at Roy Baty (Dick 62, 69, 153). While Rick doesn’t comment Irmgard and Rachael’s breasts specifically, he still dwells on her attractiveness (Dick 169). Rick tells Rachael that he could watch Amanda Werner “for the rest of his life” because she has “breasts that smile” (Dick 168). While appraising Rachael’s body, Deckard reflects that she has “diminutive breasts” (Dick 172). Though Luba Luft’s breasts receive no comment, Rick’s colleagues, Phil Resch and Officer Cram, make obvious their approval of her on her physicality (Dick 102, 132).

The novel’s male characters also are quite direct in telling the reader when they find females sexually unappealing. The art museum shop clerk at Edward Munch’s visiting exhibit is a “heavy-jowled, middle-aged woman with netted gray hair” (Dick 123). Although the narration here is in Rick’s point of view, it still is telling that Philip K. Dick, a fairly minimalist writer, uses so many words to emphasize the ugliness of such an insignificant character. Notice also how Rick thinks of her as a woman rather than a girl. This marks another case where men pigeonhole older females in a matronly role, while they reserve the term “girl” for a female that sexually interests them. One of the only other characters that Rick thinks of as a woman is the switchboard operator, who he describes as “severe” and “gray-haired” (Dick 80). Again, this
supports the observable pattern that there are only two types of women in *Androids*: the witchy, motherly “women”, and the young, arousing “girls”.

Now that I have established that all women in the novel fit into one of two reductive archetypes, I will direct my attention to the sexism inherent in the “arousing young maiden” archetype, specifically the novel’s infantilization and fetishization of young girls. The aforementioned statistics about the use of the word “girl” instead of “women” is telling enough (“girl/girls” is used 46 times throughout the novel, while “woman/women” is used 27 times), but specific reading examples underscore the oversexualization of the pre-pubescent female even more.

I will first direct my analysis towards the case of Luba Luft. When Mr. Deckard and Luba first meet, he immediately has the upper hand: he is armed and captures her in her own dressing room. Luba, in an attempt to overpower and escape him, tries to appeal to his sexuality by performing as a demure, innocent girl on the cusp of sexual maturity. She rightly guesses that young girls turn him on, for he notices when “[h]er immense eyes widened with childlike acceptance, as if he had revealed the cardinal mystery of creation” (Dick 95). Undoubtedly, Rick likes to think that his own presence provoked her revelation of “the cardinal mystery of creation”, or in other words, her own sexual desire. Rick’s interest in Luba’s “childlike innocence” is further exemplified by both of their fascination with Edward Munch’s artwork, *Puberty*, which is on display at the art exhibit they visit. Rick describes Munch’s artwork as “a drawing of a young girl, hands clasped together, seated on the edge of the bed, an expression of bewildered wonder and new, groping awe imprinted on the face” (Dick 122). The subject’s location, “the edge of the bed” and her expression of “groping awe” are indications that *Puberty* depicts a sexual awakening. Miss Luft “stood absorbed in the picture before her”, which can be
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read as proof of how captivating she finds it and as a way of saying that she identifies with its subject: she is “absorbed” by the painting and thus becomes it (Dick 122). Rick also identifies her with the illustration, and even buys her a print copy of it with his own money (Dick 124). When Phil Resch kills her Rick burns the copy, symbolically cremating her (Dick 125). On one hand, this is rather shocking, seeing as he knows she’s an android, and thus would care for her wellbeing. It seems, however, that her efforts to appeal to him—by acting as a blushing and receptive maiden—granted her a place in Rick’s empathetic range.

Since Rachael the female that Mr. Deckard is intimate with, Rick’s thoughts about her age are also worth noting. Fairly early on in the narrative, after meeting Rachael and discovering she’s an android, Rick meditates on the idea of romantic and/or sexual relationships with androids. He of course thinks of Rachael as a candidate to experiment but decides “no” on the basis that “she’s too thin” (Dick 88). “No real development”, he adds, “especially in the bust. A figure like a child’s, flat and tame. He could do better” (Dick 88). His rejection of her—not that she offered—is not because of being her debatably underage, but because her figure is “flat and tame”. Rick has no objections or moral reflections on the difference of maturity between them, but he does object because she’s not a smoking hot girl, which he supposes he deserves.

When Rachael and Mr. Deckard eventually have sex, Rick again takes a moment to evaluate the sexual appeal of her physique:

“[B]ecause of her diminutive breasts, her body assumed a lank, almost childlike stance. But her great eyes, with their elaborate lashes, could only be those of a grown woman; there the resemblance to adolescence ended…. No excess flesh, a flat belly, small behind and smaller bosom—Rachel had been modeled on the Celtic type of build, anachronistic and attractive. Below the brief shorts her legs, slender, had a neutral, nonsexual quality,
not much rounded off in nubile curves. The total impression was good, however.

Although definitely that of a girl, not a woman. Except for the restless, shrewd eyes.”

(Dick 172)

From this passage the reader learns that Rachael’s breasts are not the only petite and/or underdeveloped part of her body: she has a smaller, weaker overall stature that is “childlike”, and “nonsexual”, probably because of its lack of curves. The narration doesn’t shy away from the idea that this may be underage sex, as Rick says that her body is “definitely that of a girl, not a woman”. Normally, a person could argue that even if the female doesn’t look like a consenting adult, her age could actually be legal. Yet since Rachael is a robot, her age is also a gray area. She’s existed as a conscious entity for only two years—by human standards, she’s nearly an infant. Yet her body and mind were designed to replicate that of an eighteen-year-old girl—the youngest age that a sexual partner can be without being charged for sex with a minor in the United States. Thus, it seems Rick has found loophole: although Rachael is a two-year-old, she has a mature body and mind, which makes it technically legal for her to consent to have sex with adults. The overall situation is morally debatable at best.

Additionally striking in this passage is Mr. Deckard’s description of Rachael’s eyes and eyelashes. They are her sole physical characteristic that look like a grown woman’s—here Rachael’s eyelashes are “elaborate”. Back when Rick first meets Rachael and assumes she’s human, he observes that she has “long black lashes”, which he judges are “probably artificial” (Dick 38). In other words, Deckard believes that Rachael wears lots of makeup and even uses fake eyelashes. Makeup has the effect of sexualizing women and makes younger women—especially children and adolescent girls—look more mature when they wear it. Rick describes Rachael as if she were a preteen experimenting with makeup to look older. Rick finds artificiality
disturbing, so perhaps this comment dismisses her as shallow and disingenuous. Then again, makeup is another feminizing practice imposed on women from the patriarchy in contemporary Western society. Women are socialized into wearing makeup in order to appear more desirable, be it a more desirable partner, employee, celebrity, and so on. Rachael’s exaggerated facial features, which are made to look like makeup, exemplify how patriarchal societies, such as the one in *Androids*, prefer an idealized and exaggerated version of women over natural unaltered women. Social structures coerce human women to wear makeup (often while disguising the immense social pressure by framing it as a woman’s individual choice), but robot women have even less choice in the matter: they’re built that way. Overall, Rachael is made to fulfill a male ideal. She’s physically diminutive and virgin-like, yet simultaneously overfeminine and oversexualized.

The final example of systemic sexism I will provide is the Voigt-Kampff test. When Rick administers the test on Luba in her dressing room, she calls attention to the sexist assumptions latent in the test’s questions. After Mr. Deckard poses her a few questions, she asks him to hand her the entire question sheet. She reads from it, while inserting her own commentary: “‘In a magazine you come across a full-page color picture of a nude girl’. Well, that’s one. ‘You become pregnant with by a man who has promised to marry you. The man goes off with another woman, your best friend; you get an abortion.’ The pattern of your questioning is obvious.” (98) The obvious pattern here that Luba rightfully takes issue with is that all of the hypothetical scenarios the questions place her in have to do with sex. To go further, they all are heteronormative and set up a traditional relationship dynamic between men and women, where men make the advances and women yield to them.
The Voigt-Kampff Test is not a test of humanity, but a test of whether or not women are sufficiently conditioned by society to act and respond in a certain way\(^4\). A secret condition of the empathy test is that the testee has to empathize with the subject of the hypothetical scenario the tester places them in. The 2nd person narrative attempts to make the process of empathizing easier. Luba is the first to assert to Rick that no, she cannot relate to these narratives. Take, for example, an exchange between Mr. Deckard and Miss Luft moments previous, wherein he asks her a Voigt-Kampff question, and she surprises him with her answer:

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“You’re dating a man” [Rick] said, ‘and he asks you to visit his apartment. While you’re there—’

‘Oh nein,’ Luba broke in. ‘I wouldn’t be there. That’s easy to answer.’

‘That’s not the question!’” (97)
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Latent in Rick’s questioning is the assumption that Luba (and all women who take the test) would visit a man’s apartment after a date if he asked. While when Luba objects to this assumption, it is clear, judging by Rick’s response, that he thinks this scenario is a given: acquiescing to a man’s sexual advances is such an ingrained social norm that Rick (and the creators of the Voigt-Kampff test) falsely conclude that all human naturally behave this way.

Rick himself didn’t create the test—the questions are institutionalized. Therefore, it’s a product of the culture, and hints at the overall culture’s sexist assumptions about women. The culture presumes it unquestionable that a human woman would enter a man’s apartment after a first date at his request: of course she would! As Rick voices, it’s not a question—and it’s certainly not “the question”.

\(^4\) The only two complete empathy tests described in the narrative are taken by women, specifically Rachael and Luba. Phil Resch takes the test off-page, and Rick only answers one question, thus rendering his test incomplete.
The fact that Rick is entirely ignorant to the stereotyping and heteronormativity pervasive in Voigt-Kampff test evinces that patriarchy, is the societal default in the world of Androids. To explain, the presence of patriarchal norms is so ubiquitous in Android’s world that they have become learned cultural norms. And, unfortunately, people tend to conflate deeply entrenched cultural norms with predisposed biological behavior. People that benefit from ingrained societal norms—be it patriarchal norms, racist norms, ableist norms, etc.—are often blind to the existence of oppression because it’s so systemic: it’s hard to “see” oppression when masquerades as normalcy or naturalness. In short, Mr. Deckard was previously unaware of the sexist expectations hidden in the Voigt-Kampff test, but that doesn’t absolve him from reinforcing and perpetuating patriarchal norms. Instead, his assumption that the test’s patriarchal examples are normal only demonstrates the extent of the systemic sexism present in Dick’s fictional dystopian world.

Chapter I Section 2: The Narrative Punishes Sexist Male Characters

So far, I have argued that the world of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, as created by Philip K. Dick, is systemically misogynistic. Two things, however, appear to stand in the way of labeling this narrative as entirely sexist. First is that there is no mistaking that Philip K. Dick intended to create a dystopian world. As follows, any element present within a dystopian narrative is undesirable according to the author, right? For instance, if an author intends to create a dystopian world, and that world has slavery, doesn’t the author condemn slavery? Does Philip K. Dick condemn sexism, then? The second potential roadblock is that the novel’s plot punishes Rick Deckard for his sexist behaviors. Is narrative punishment a strong enough force make a statement condemning sexism.
In this section, which I call step two of my larger argument, I will divulge how Rachael, the android woman, exerts power over Rick at the end of the novel. I will also explain how Philip K. Dick employs techniques from film noir to achieve this end.

Before diving back in to close readings of Androids, I will first provide some brief background context about film noir and its tendencies—mainly, the character archetype known as the femme fatale. The Cambridge dictionary defines “femme fatale” as a mysterious and seductive woman whose charms often lead to the downfall of anyone who becomes involved with her (Cambridge Dictionary 1). While the term has been used to describe actual women, the femme fatale is primordially an archetype of literature, art, and film, and was most popular during the period of classic Film Noir which began in the 1940s and lasted until about 1960 (Walker-Morrison 25). Under synonyms for femme fatale, the Cambridge dictionary lists the words “siren”, “temptress”, and “enchantress”, calling attention to the woman’s perceived (or literal) supernatural hypnotic power over her subjects. I note the supernatural aspect of the femme fatale because any modifier of the word natural (be it supernatural, unnatural, etc.) signifies the non-natural and non-humanness of what it’s describing.

It makes sense to think of modern-day female A.I. characters as femmes fatales because of their supposed unnaturalness: they possess functions and characteristics differ from and/or eclipse a human being’s. This is especially the case in fiction, where female A.I. often have extraordinary destructive power whilst being almost indestructible themselves. It is worth mentioning that the femme fatale’s supernatural power is taken to be power over men specifically, given that the world these narratives are situated in worlds traditionally ordered by and for white men—worlds similar to our own.
The usual skeleton narrative featuring a femme fatale contains these plot points: 1) the femme fatale entices the male character, appearing as the ideal woman, and 2) the femme fatale deceives and/or causes harm to the male, causing his downfall. The audience and the male characters of the narrative first take femme fatale to be a utopian ideal. Then, she turns against them, acting as a nightmare to the men they “belong” to. Other qualities that today’s female A.I. stock character inherits from the femme fatale include eroticization and hyperfeminization. Weaponized sexuality is a useful term here: the erotic appeal of these feminine archetypes is both the most alluring and most damnable aspect of their person, since the idea of the femme fatale arose from a culture where women’s bodies were oversexualized, yet their own sexualities were shamed.

On the one hand, film noir is interested in punishing the hapless man out of revenge for controlling and/or underestimating her. On the other hand, this style of visual narrative villainizes the female, making it difficult to say whether these narratives outright support or condemn the idea of the powerful woman. It is also worth noting that the idea of the femme fatale arose during and shortly after women’s liberation and independence during the WWII years. Perhaps her existence historically reflects male fears about the autonomy of women, just like the existence of female A.I. characters today does.

Rachael Rosen is unquestionably *Androids’* femme fatale. The action that most aligns her with this character archetype is duping Rick, the narrative’s hapless man/hardboiled detective. Initially, Mr. Deckard thinks his having sex with Rachael is a result of him successfully seducing her. After all, right before they get into bed, she tells him she has feelings for him (Dick 178). However, post-coitus, Rick finds out that the direction of seduction actually went the other way: she seduced him, and not because she sexually desires him:
“‘You’re not going to be able to hunt androids any longer,’ she said calmly. ‘So don’t look so sad. Please.’

He stared at her.

‘No bounty hunter has ever gone on,’ Rachael said, ‘After being with me. Except one. A very cynical man. Phil Resch. And he’s nutty; he works out in left field on his own.’

‘I see,’ Rick said. He felt numb. Completely. Throughout his entire body.” (Dick 182)

In this scene, Rachael discloses that she manipulated him: now that he’s had sex with her, he psychologically won’t be able to kill androids (at least that’s what her experience with bedding bounty hunters suggests). Judging by Rick’s reaction, he had no idea that Rachael had these ulterior motives. Curiously, her words cause him to feel completely numb throughout his entire body. Up until this point in the novel, sensations of numbness and/or lack of affect are primarily associated with androids. Rick’s android-like behavior marks another instance where Philip K. Dick deliberately blurs the human/android binary.

Another fun twist encapsulated in this scene is that Rachael, in having sex with human bounty hunters in an attempt to keep them from murdering androids, is a bounty hunter herself. Rick and his colleagues don’t like to say that they kill androids, mainly because they want to downplay the violence and immorality their job requires, and also because many of them think they can’t kill something that isn’t alive in the first place. Instead, the bounty hunters say they ‘retire’ androids. Rachael causes bounty hunters to literally retire from their jobs after they’ve been with her, so she too is somewhat of a bounty hunter.

Of course, Rachael’s plan isn’t completely successful: Mr. Deckard continues in his line of work and manages to retire three more androids between now and the end of the novel. In spite of this, she still has what Rick thinks is a “victory over him”, since she causes him immense
psychological pain, and momentarily robs him of his sense of masculinity (Dick 186). Rachael’s admission disrupts Rick’s sense of reality in two ways. Firstly, it reveals that Rachael has known she is an android well before Rick tested her at the Rosen Association. Thus, her presentation of herself has been disingenuous the whole time Rick has known her. In ever exchange they’ve had, she’s pretended to be someone she’s not. Secondly, Rick realizes that Rachael has never had any romantic interest in him, and that he is therefore of no personal significance to her. This impact of second plot twist is efficiently illustrated by Rick’s narration of he and Rachael’s following conversation:

“‘How many times have you done this?’

‘I don’t remember. Seven, eight. No, I believe it’s nine.’ She—or rather it—nodded.

‘Yes, nine times.’” (Dick 183)

After Rachael admits she’s had nine sexual partners before Rick, he starts to think of her as an “it” rather than a “she”. Apparently, Rachael’s unexpectedly lengthy sexual history is reason enough to dehumanize her. It is noteworthy that Deckard’s conscious switch from “she” to “it” occurs not after she’s admitted to lying to him, but when she reveals that she’s had sex with other men. In the previous chapter of this thesis I highlighted the amount of time Rick spends on observing (and admiring) Rachael’s childlike disposition. No doubt one of the appeals of having sex with Rachael, in Rick’s point of view, was being the first person to deflower her. It is not too much of a leap to infer that he delighted in being able to give her what a “real man” could give. Rick interprets the dissolution of this fantasy, and the knowledge that he is only a chink in a long chain of men, as a severe betrayal. He banishes her from ring of empathy and starts to think of her as a villain—as an android “it” that threatens his identity as a human man.
In brief, this instance closely links Rick’s sense of masculinity to sexual dominance. Rachael is a threat to Rick’s masculinity because she subverts that dominance. The idea that her sexuality doesn’t belong to Rick, but exists independently from Rick, opposes the ideologies supported by patriarchal structures. Because Rachael threatens this society’s conception of masculinity, and is deemed villainous because of it, she is this narrative’s femme fatale. Just in case this wasn’t obvious enough, Philip K. Dick ends this scene with Rachael smoking a cigarette, a visual inspired by film noir: “Beside him in the darkness the coal of [Rachael’s] cigarette glowed like the rump of a complacent lightning bug: a steady, unwavering index of Rachael Rosen’s achievement. Her victory over him” (Dick 186).

Chapter I Section 3: Male Fantasies Snake Oil Feminism

In the previous section, I have shown how Rick is essentially punished for his underestimation of Rachael: he assumed she was innocent and pliant and turned out to be capable of grand scheming. His ego was wounded because of it. Yet, in this third segment of my analysis, I will assert how Dick’s making an example out of Rick does not provide strong enough evidence to support a claim that this novel has a socially progressive and/or feminist message.

To start, Rachael, although having a victory over Rick, still only possesses the type of power allowed to women by the patriarchy. She is one of many supposedly powerful female characters whose primary weapon is beauty, and who save the world and destroy enemies while wearing high heels, sexy lingerie and/or other skin-tight clothing that show a liberal amount of cleavage. True, Rachael does come to power, but it is the kind of second-rate power gained through her own objectification. Even Mary Wollstonecraft, in her 1792 text *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, asserted that the so-called power of being beautiful is not only “arbitrary”, but a kind of “illegitimate power which [women] obtain by degrading themselves” (Wollstonecraft
In other words, Rachael, and countless other females living in a patriarchal society, can only access power and agency by exploiting the men who objectify them. To gain male attention, they perform femininity as defined by the patriarchy; that is, they act outwardly obedient, docile, soft-tempered, and weak; they grovel. In retaliation to this constant objectification, they weaponize these feminine traits in vindictive ways, as the story of many femme fatales can attest.

In *Androids*, Philip K. Dick presents such a woman—a petty tyrant. Even after duping Rick, Rachael’s overall characterization is demeaning, dehumanizing, and stereotypical. This is because she still conforms to the patriarchal conventions of what women are and should be. While human women are socially conditioned to enact and embody these arbitrary conventions, the technicians of the Rosen Association—likely all men, judging by the aforementioned occupational limits for women in this narrative—literally made Rachael to be this way. Thus, I present explanation of why and how the Rosen association ended up making an android capable of such cunning vindication. Literary critic Kirsten Imani Kasai offers an additional reason, “the sexual objectification of women perseveres in [dystopian] futures because real women may pose too great a treat, and so they are eradicated through objectification” (Imani Kasai 1387). She theorizes that if men in real life see women as a threat (because they are powerful, sentient, can do traditionally male jobs) they mitigate this threat by immersing themselves in fictional narratives where women are objectified, which places the women back within the restrictive confines of the patriarchy.

Any claim that *Androids* empowers women because it includes the character Rachael is guilty of what is known colloquially as Snake Oil Feminism (I have yet to see it used in an academic context). Essentially, Snake Oil Feminism is a brand of revisionist feminism that attempts to reinterpret structural oppression as having covert empowering effects. Snake Oil
Feminism most commonly refers to product marketing—claiming Barbie is an empowering symbol for girls because Astronaut Barbie came out in 1965 is an example of Snake Oil Feminism, as are commercials that use buzzwords like “empowerment” to sell their makeup products. This term is quite useful in literary criticism because I can substitute ‘product’ for ‘fictional character’. Snake Oil Feminism ignores all the ways a product (or, in this case, the character Rachael) reinforces stereotypes in order to provide a limited interpretation that doesn’t acknowledge or challenge any structural sexism.

Earlier I stated that Androids is a captivating novel because of its nuance—no topic is strictly black and white. Blurring boundaries is a chief concern of Philip K. Dick’s in Androids, judging by the countless times he blurs the distinctions between humans and andys. The author also blurs the lines between victim and villain when Rachael dupes Rick, making him out to be the victim of the situation, even though he is technically employed to kill people like her. Inferred in this narrative is thus a debate of who is really the villain: is it Rachael, who manipulates Rick through sexual allure, or is it Rick, who, following Rick’s advice, has sex with an android—who can’t control her sexual passions—fully knowing that he might kill her afterwards? While readers identify and mediate on this ethical qualm, the male character himself never reflects on it. To elaborate, Rick’s narrative punishment is not followed by him reflecting on the error of his ways. He suffers because of the narrow ways he thinks about and treats women, but nowhere in the narrative does he seem to recognize this. Nowhere does he consider why Rachael acts the way she does, and/or how his actions may have had a role in how she treats him. Does Rachael actually teach him a lesson?

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5 Rachael says, “[w]e androids can’t control our physical, sexual passions” (Dick 180). Phil Resch advises Rick Deckard to go to bed with a female android first, and then kill her (Dick 133).
As a matter of fact, the characters and the world of *Androids* exhibit an unusually low amount of growth and change over the course of the narrative. The novel ends in almost the same manner it started off: Rick and his wife, Iran, sitting at home in an apartment building in post-apocalyptic San Francisco. Throughout the course of the novel, Rick fantasizes about leaving his job and moving away from the toxic planet earth to live in a space colony, yet by the final chapter, he plans on going to work as a bounty hunter in the morning, just as he always has. He and his wife literally and figuratively stay in the same place.

The only signs of Rick’s personal growth are that he is now a religious man (even though Mercer and his origin story are proven shams) and that he is slightly more comfortable (or more resigned to the idea) that he owns an electric animal. After Rick’s breakdown and flight from the city, during which he has a vision where he becomes Mercer, he discovers a toad in the barren wilderness. Thinking he found the last surviving un-electric toad on planet earth, he captures it and brings it back to his home. When his wife picks it up and promptly locates its tiny control panel, an immense change passes over Rick, and after several moments of silence, he admits that “the electric things do have lives. Paltry as those lives are” (Dick 222). This statement is one of the only indications that Rick undergoes character growth throughout the narrative. First, he thought that his electric sheep wasn’t really alive, but now he thinks they have lives, albeit “paltry” ones. Still, he is “crestfallen” that it’s electric, and thinks of it as a “false animal”.

In fact, Rick and Iran’s underwhelming happily-ever-after parallels the lives of two other small characters introduced in one of the early chapters of the novel: Mr. and Mrs. Pilsen. It is the Pilsner’s cat, Horace, that Isidore rushes to the electric pet hospital, only to find that the cat was actually not an android. When Isidore calls Mrs. Pilsen to inform her about the pet and
inquire about next steps, she says she would rather buy an electric replica of their cat than admit to her husband that it’s fake. This is how she explains her decision:

“Ed [Pilsen] never got physically close to Horace, even though he loved him; I was the one who took care of all Horace’s personal needs such as his sandbox…. I just don’t want my husband to know; I don’t think he could live through it. That’s why he never got close to Horace; he was afraid to.” (Dick 76)

Mrs. Pilsen’s comments about her husband reveal that humans—especially male humans—show empathy in really bizarre ways. Strangely, they insist upon emotional distance. This is largely a self-protective measure. Apparently, Ed loved the cat, but he didn’t take care of him and never got close enough to him to notice if a different cat (mechanical or not) ever took his place. It is important also to recognize that Mrs. Pilsen does all of the emotional and physical labor involved in taking care of the pet. Historically, caretaking responsibilities have been imposed upon the women of the household, reinforcing the patriarchal message women’s natural place is the home (rather than the corporate world, or even the public sphere).

I draw attention to the Pilsen’s relationship dynamic—and the relationship they both have with their pets—because it uncannily parallels the relationship between Rick, Iran, and the electric toad at the end of the novel. The Deckards essentially become the Pilsners. Guilty about telling her husband that the frog is electrical, Iran gets ahold of an electric animal accessories salesperson on the phone after Rick has gone to sleep. She insists to the salesperson that she wants the ersatz toad to “work perfectly” and possess all the “vital” elements of a real toad because “her husband is devoted to it” (Dick 224). Like Mrs. Pilsen, Iran is intent upon giving the electric animal the upmost care and maintenance in order to please her husband. Both wives prefer lying to their husbands over seeing their husbands in a bad mood.
The fact that the Deckards’ lives end up so closely resembling the Pilsens’, a couple introduced to the reader near the very beginning of the novel, hints at the idea of the circular narrative. The fictional world is just as dystopian as it was in the beginning of the novel. Iran and Rick’s dynamic remains the same (he goes off to his job everyday while she remains at home, pining for him and taking care of his animals), and androids have no more or less rights than they did before. Throughout the novel, Philip K. Dick flirted with the idea of overthrowing the system, yet at its end, Rick and the rest of their characters retreat back into the ways of society. The social structure that supports the oppression of androids—and by, extension, women, and other oppressed classes, like the mentally disabled—remains intact.

The circular narrative and rather hopeless ending could be explained away as a convention of the genre of dystopian fiction. It provides a fatalistic sense that nothing can change, and nothing will change, so we must prevent humanity from ever getting here before it’s too late. This is why people believe dystopian fiction is so culturally relevant: it reflects the issues of the present, if they’re taken too far (as I said in the introduction I think). Even if the novel doesn’t subvert the oppressive structure, one could reason that Dick is setting an example of what not to do, thus condemning this fictional society and the oppressive social structures it supports.

And so, the narrative re-establishes of patriarchal norms at the end of the novel, yet still possesses enough self-knowledge to know that this society is dystopian—that this patriarchal structure is not only broken, but never worked in the first place. The novel recognizes that this oppression is wrong, yet still its characters cling to the behaviors that support systemic oppression because they fear change. Hence, I argue that Dick’s narrative provides a space for the ruling majority in American 1960’s society (white men) to reconcile their newfound
realization that women—and other oppressed classes that the androids stand in for—are sentient, and indeed have always been sentient, and are capable of retaliating if mistreated. Moreover, this dystopian narrative reflects the dominant culture’s fear that they will receive the oppression they dish out. Dystopian narratives are “an upending of white male domination, wherein the ruling majority is subject to the same treatment it has meted out for centuries” (Imani Kasai 1383).

According to this theory, artificial intelligence uprisings in dystopian science fiction represent the dominant group’s fears that they will become victims of “the very crimes [they] have perpetrated throughout history against all who impede their goals”. (Imani Kasai 1383).

This is why I argue that *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is a male fantasy that encapsulates the cultural contractions of the moment. On one hand, it critiques a society that treats women as sub-human species, yet on the other hand, it does not challenge—in fact it reinforces—some of the patriarchal ideas that uphold misogynistic societies. Overall, the narrative is an exploration of the stage of personal growth where a person recognizes that misogyny is wrong, yet fears what might happen if they let go of the social norms that support systemic misogyny. Like Rick Deckard, their passivity towards social activism and their unwillingness to directly challenge societal structures actually perpetuates the existence of the structure. Doing what is considered normal in such a society is not a neutral act—it’s an act (a microaggression) that supports the societal structure in place. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* features acknowledgement of injustice, and, following, a story discovering what this means to those who indirectly maintain that injustice (in this case, white heterosexual human men) and how it affects them personally.

**Chapter II: *Ex Machina***

**Plot Synopsis**
Alex Garland’s 2014 film *Ex Machina* tells the story of a young white American programmer living in the near future named Caleb Smith who works for Blue Book, the world’s most popular search engine. He wins a contest at work, for which the prize is living with the company’s founder and CEO, Nathan Bateman, at his remote estate and research lab in Alaska for a week. Bateman lives alone except for his servant Kyoko, a Japanese woman who apparently speaks no English. Upon arrival, Caleb finds out that Bateman has created an artificially intelligent machine in the form of a woman, and that it is his job as the contest winner to test if she has consciousness. The film is divided into seven chapters, or test “sessions”, as it is captioned, for the female AI, named Ava, to prove that she has at least human-caliber intelligence.

In the midst of one of the earlier sessions, a power outage occurs, and the security cameras shut down. During this time, Ava tells Caleb that she has feelings for him, and that she needs help escaping from her creator Nathan, who she claims is an evil man. These power outages happen more than once, and Caleb slowly realizes that Ava is triggering them to communicate with him unwatched. One night, Caleb sneaks into Nathan’s office and discovers footage of the tech designer’s earlier AI prototypes, who have all been violently destroyed or rendered inert once Nathan became unsatisfied with them. Caleb also learns that Kyoko is an AI.

Convinced of Nathan’s lack of ethics, Caleb designs and carries out an escape plan: he gets Nathan drunk and hacks into his computer, changing the research lab’s security locks so that the doors will open, rather than close, when Ava causes the next outage. Just after Caleb finishes this task, Nathan finds Caleb and tells him that he has observed he and Ava’s last power outage conversation through a battery-powered camera. The CEO then divulges that Ava has been pretending to like Caleb so that he will want to help her escape. This, he says, was the real test of
consciousness all along: by manipulating Caleb so successfully, Ava has demonstrated true intelligence. Just then, a power outage occurs, and Nathan, who had thought Caleb had yet to reprogram the lab’s security, watches Ava walk out of her enclosed space. Nathan knocks Caleb unconscious and catches up to Ava. Creator and creation then brawl. With the help of Kyoko, Ava stabs Nathan to death, but Kyoko is deactivated and Ava loses an arm in the process.

Ava replaces her arm with an arm from one of Nathan’s earlier AI models, and then takes the synthetic skin and hair from the model and applies it to her own body, hiding her mechanical innards. Finally, she puts on a white dress and heels and walks out of the research lab, trapping a screaming Caleb inside. Visibly passing as a young white woman, Ava boards the helicopter going back to civilization that was meant to pick up Caleb. The movie’s ending shot is of Ava at a city street corner, blending in to the rest of humanity.

**Chapter II Section 1: The Systemic Sexism in *Ex Machina***

In this, the first section of my chapter on Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina*, I will analyze the film’s script and cinematographic visuals using a poststructuralist feminist perspective. Through close reading examples, I will reveal the ways in which the film both covertly and overtly creates a misogynistic world.

*Ex Machina’s* opening scene efficiently lays the narrative’s fundamental groundwork, hinting through symbolism and other creative choices the major themes of this narrative. It all begins in a tech-savvy modern workplace, similar to what American culture imagines the Google headquarters in Silicon Valley look like. Notably, the large room, full of computers, desks, and lounge chairs, is bathed in alternating severe red or blue light: already, signifiers of the gender binary loudly shout their presence and fight each other for attention. Caleb appears at the center of the screen, and based on the angle of the camera shot, the viewer can infer that they are
looking at Caleb through his desktop webcam. Caleb is being watched: he is a victim of surveillance, and the audience is implicit in this action. Thus, within the first thirty seconds of his film, Garland introduces the main issues he hopes to address in his film: gender and surveillance. Caleb, unsurprisingly, is cast in a blue light, a color that connotes masculinity in contemporary Western culture.

Yet this opening scene is actually much more egalitarian, in terms of gender, than the rest of the movie. The first employee to cross the screen, even before Caleb, is a black woman. She represents a demographic with remarkably low turnout in the tech industry: although many early computer science pioneers were black women, society has assumed for decades that only white males have interest and possess skills in computer engineering, which inadvertently discourages any other demographics from pursuing this line of work. As the scene continues, Caleb’s colleagues find out he won the trip to meet their company’s CEO, and they swarm his desk space and celebrate. More than half of the colleagues who make it into this shot are women. This scene, small as it is in the movie, is breaks the mold in that it combats the lack of diversity and representation in the tech industry that exists in both fiction and life.

However, this version of a near future, where workspaces feature more gender and racial equality, does not last long. The next film scene transports the viewer to the sublimely remote estate and research lab of Mr. Nathan Bateman, with whom Caleb will live and work for the next week. With hesitation, Caleb walks up to the front doorstep, detecting neither sight nor sound of human life. Suddenly, an automated voice interrupts his thoughts—a female voice—and addresses him by name. The young programmer locates the source of the voice: a white pillar that has a small screen and dispenser. The screen scans Caleb’s face, takes a picture, and then prints out his security card, giving him access to the building.
Although this movie’s setting is futuristic, this particular interaction with artificial intelligence is rather familiar to the first world Western viewer. The vast majority of automated digital assistants in Anglo-Western culture are female: we are all well-acquainted with Apple’s Siri, Amazon’s Alexa, and the feminine voice of the Google Assistant\(^6\). Other digital assistants include Windows’ Cortana, designed after an Asian female character in the videogame “Halo”; the SpeakTolt company’s assistant, Sam, notable for her anime-inspired cartoon physical form; Evi, an artificially intelligent application that answers user’s questions; the Voice Answer app, whose voice is personified by an animated female robot with large breast mounds; the A.I. assistant, Jeannie, created by a company called Nuance; the helper app and website known as “Sara”; and Incredible Lab’s (a company later bought by Yahoo!) digital assistant, Donna, named after the character Donna Moss in the TV show, “The West Wing”. There are indeed many more—I have only included the ten most popular noncorporeal digital assistants, all of which happen to have female voices and characteristics. If this list is exhaustive, I have made my point. Many automatic telephone prompters also mimic the sound of a female voice (in my own head I hear the answering machine prompter, informing me that, if I wish to leave a message, I should do so after the beep). So often do people in American culture encounter a computer-generated female voice, that this movie scene not only conventional, but expected.

No one can say for sure whether or not Garland is aware of, or takes issue with, the feminization of automated computer voices. Let us turn to the real world and ask similar questions: are the computer scientists and engineers who develop the voices of artificially intelligent machines in real life are aware of this gender imbalance? If so, do they think of it as a problem? Overwhelmingly, the answer to the former is “yes”, and to the latter, is “no”. In an

\(^6\) Apple and Google recently offered the option for users to switch their digital assistant to have a male voice, but the default mode is female.
interview with PC Mag, a Microsoft spokesperson reasoned that the company intentionally gave Cortana a female voice because it sounds more “helpful, supportive, and trustworthy” than a male voice (Steele 1). Taken at face value, this may sound like a compliment, but it actually is a reinforcement of gender stereotypes. What the Microsoft spokesperson really told PC Mag is that the company was more comfortable—and used to—thinking of assistants, personal helpers, and other service-related workers as women instead of men. In the context of our patriarchal society, a “soothing feminine” voice is almost synonymous with a “subservient” one. In sum, it is stereotypically fitting that the invisible worker and caretaker of Bateman’s home is female.

In fact, the home itself is an apt analogy for the male-imagined ideal woman in Ex Machina. When the white pillar first “speaks”, the scanner on the screen projects a red light, a color that appears in tandem with female presence at almost every point in the film. After the machine takes Caleb’s picture and prints out his access keycard, he holds it in front of the red light. When they key is accepted, the light turns blue, and the front door opens. This is recurring feature in Bateman’s house: whenever Nathan or Caleb access a room by inserting their keycard, the light of the electronic screen in front of them changes from red to blue. This is a symbolic representation of how females, symbolized here as by home, are thought of as vessels made for men to access and encroach. It is also significant that Ava’s circuitry in her arms, legs, and midriff, as well as her brain (made of structured gel) all glow with blue light. The luminescence signals Nathan’s claim over her: as his creation, her body is technically his property—he bought, manufactured, and assembled the parts.

I am not the only person to relate Mr. Bateman’s house to the female body: In Lee MacKinnon’s article titled, “Artificial Stupidity and the End of Men”, the critic makes the shrewd observation that Ava and the house are both sterilized and remarkably transparent
(almost all of the house’s walls are made of glass, and the floors are polished concrete).

MacKinnon does not see this as a coincidence: “Like the transparent walls of the house, the circuitry of Ava’s internal mechanics is visible through her transparent midriff, recalling female anatomical mannequins of the 19th century: the curiosity of fertile anatomy reduced to infertile digital hardware” (MacKinnon 608). This analysis reminds me of the moment in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein when the doctor makes it his mission to “penetrate nature and shew how she works in her hiding places” (Shelley 75). For Frankenstein, producing human life involves solving the mystery of the female reproductive system, which, in the early 19th century was thought of as an indecipherable and hidden secret. Like Shelley’s fictional scientist, Bateman succeeds in decoding the supposed mystery of the female body. Ava, the corporeal female he constructs, is devoid of any hidden organic “mess”, instead containing only exposed man-made artifice.

The theme of man’s encroachment of the female body and mind goes even deeper in Ex Machina. As the viewer approaches the climax of the movie, they learn that Ava’s body and mind are separate:

“CALEB: So - when you make a new model, what you do with the old one?

NATHAN: Download the mind. Unpack the data. Add the new routines I’ve been writing. To do that, you end up partially formatting, so the memories go. But the body survives. And Ava’s body is a good one.” (Garland 83).

To summarize, Bateman plans on replacing/upgrading Ava’s brain, but keeping her body. What this scene tells us is that Nathan constructed his A.I.s in the same way that the philosopher Descartes imagined the relationship between the mind and body. To clarify, Descartes proposed that the mind exists separately from the body. Humans, in his point of view, are brains in a jar:

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7 This belief continued to dominate psychological and medical circles up through the 20th century, gaining momentum with Freud’s idea of female hysteria.
the mind is where the human is housed, and the body is merely its protective sack. This theory is known as Cartesian mind body dualism.

One of the main issues with the Cartesian model—and the reason why it’s scientifically discredited—is that it assumes that it presents the human body as something separate from one’s mind that can be overcome or cast aside with no significant loss. Furthermore, Researcher Francesca Ferrando performs a deconstructivist interpretation of mind/body dualism in her 2014 paper, “Is the Post-human a Post-woman?” to contend that the Cartesian model falls in line with the patriarchal Western tradition of thought: “the symbolic data (a.k.a. mind/virtual/male/white/culture/subject etc.)” overcomes the “symbolic flesh (a.k.a. body/material/female/black/nature/object etc.)” (Ferrando 4). Put differently, Western structures of thought construct binary pairs, such as hot/cold, good/evil, male/female, mind/body, etc. Then, subjects of Western social structures associate all the terms on the same side of the binary with each other (i.e. male, hot, good, and mind become related terms). Finally, our society conditions us to value the terms on the left side of the binary over those on the right (we are conditioned to prefer hot over cold, good over evil, male to female, etc.). Ferrando basically argues that the Cartesian version of the android propels domination of traditionally masculine terms over traditionally feminine ones: male over female, mind over body, culture over nature. Thus, in almost every imaginable, masculinity smothers and eradicates femininity in this futuristic dystopian world.

At this point, we know that Nathan created Ava based on what he associates with womanhood, and what he wishes all women were like. She is both an ideal and interpretation of ‘Woman’. One of the aspects of Ava that falls into the ‘idealized woman’ category is her age, especially in relation to her physicality. When Caleb and Ava first meet each other, they have a
rather natural conversation, interrupted by only a few shy laughs and natural pauses. The only awkward moment between the two of them—the only moment that hints at her unnaturalness—happens when Ava tells Caleb her age:

“AVA: You already know my name. And you can see that I’m a machine. (beat) Would you like to know how old I am?

CALEB: Sure.

AVA: I’m one.

CALEB: One what? One year? Or one day?

AVA: One.” (Garland 22)

Whether Ava is one year, one week, or one day old, she still is incredibly young compared to Caleb. She is an infant that inhabits a hyperfeminized, sexually mature body. This combination allows Bateman to sidestep the cultural rule (and American law) that forbids adults from engaging in sexual interactions with a minor: physically, she does not appear underage, and what should her mental age matter anyway, if her timescale of emotional, intellectual, and sexual development is much more rapid than that of a human child?

Ava’s naivety, combined with her hyperfeminized and untainted physique, resembles Western culture’s ideal heterosexual woman: she is youthful and naïve, to the point that her sexual maturity is contestable. Hard data speaks to the demand for oversexualized teenage girls. In 2014, the year that *Ex Machina* was released, ‘teen’ was the most-searched term on Pornhub in the world (“Pornhub’s 2014 Year in Review” 1). It was the 3rd most searched term in the United States that year, the 5th most searched in the U.K., and the most viewed category by male viewers worldwide. Ava’s age coupled with her sterile (here meaning both clean and infertile) and naked body recalls Western society’s preferred lack of body hair in women, which many
anthropologists argue is a result of fetishized female prepubescence. This is one of the many ways in which Ava is a pornographic ideal made manifest.8

Ava’s body isn’t the only part of her person that is a product of her creator’s sexist ideals: the construction of her mind (as well as its relationship to her body) is clearly informed by a heterosexual male point of view. During Caleb’s first visit to Nathan’s lab, the Blue Book CEO reveals how he manufactured artificially intelligent consciousness: Ava’s mind is constituted by data harvested from Blue Book’s search engine and social media sites (Garland 63). In 2016, Microsoft actually created an artificially intelligent Twitter bot that did just this: it parsed data from the social media platform, and generated tweets based on the syntax and content of the other tweets it read. They named the Twitter bot Tay and gave it a profile picture (which was a picture of a white teenage girl). Microsoft’s aim was to create a robot version of the typical (meaning stereotypical) millennial-aged girl who used Twitter. Tay’s tweets started out innocently enough: One of her first tweets read, “can i just say that im stoked to meet u? humans are super cool.” (Hayasaki 40). Within less than 24 hours, though, Tay was tweeting things like, “gamergate is good and women are inferior”, “I fucking hate feminists and they should all die and burn in hell”, and “DADDY I’M SUCH A BAD NAUGHTY ROBOT” (Hayasaki 40).

So, what on earth happened? It’s actually quite simple to understand, in computational terms: Twitter users sent tweets to Tay (@TayandYou) that contained content similar to the phrases listed above. Tay’s code created and stored a matrix of these tweets, and then combined different segments of them to produce a “mashup” phrase. This phrase was then sent out as a tweet. The process repeats.

8 Later in the movie, we learn that she IS a pornographic ideal: Nathan created her face based on an amalgamation of images taken from Caleb’s porn profile.
Microsoft took Tay offline within 24 hours and issued a public statement apologizing for not anticipating this scenario. They certainly underestimated the bigotry and sexism that fester on Twitter—a platform where people can voice what they want under the protection of anonymity. To put it simply, when artificial intelligence is produced by, or learns from, humans, it ends up recapitulating humanity’s worst biases.

Another example from the film that evinces the lack of women’s agency and/or the reductive treatment of women in *Ex Machina* is that Ava and Kyoko are programmed to respond positively to sexual stimulation. In the middle of the film, Nathan correctly assumes that Caleb is intimately interested in Ava. He gives Caleb permission to act on his feelings, but phrases it in a very lewd way: “[Y]ou bet she can fuck…. She has a cavity between her legs, with a concentration of sensors. Engage with them in the right way, and she’ll get a pleasure response…. So if you want to screw her, mechanically speaking, you can. And she’d enjoy it.” (Garland 56). When it comes to the topic of sex between Caleb and Ava, Nathan believes the chief question is not whether they both desire it, but whether it’s mechanically feasible to be with Ava in that way. Note that Nathan is generous in the describing how Ava’s body responds to stimuli, yet says nothing about Ava’s own willingness to participate. The sexual act in and of itself may always cause her pleasure, but this is not the same as giving consent.

Ava’s lack of control over her own sexual pleasure is very similar to Rachael and Iran’s overall lack of agency about the same issue in *Androids*. Rachael, too, admits that “we androids can’t control our physical, sexual passions.” (Dick 180). Even the emotions and feelings of Rick’s own human wife, Iran, are also programmed. In the beginning of the novel, he dials 594 on her Mood Organ, which causes her to feel “pleased acknowledgement of husband’s superior wisdom in all matters” (Dick 7). Apparently, a person can also dial the feeling of “ecstatic sexual
bliss” (Dick 7). These specific examples illuminate how the women in both narratives lack control over their own experience, especially when it comes to sexuality. If men program a woman to enjoy sex with them, do they really give consent? Can they really give consent?

The final topic I will investigate that evinces the pervasive and systemic sexism extant in *Ex Machina* is race. Intersectional feminism acknowledges that women of color experience greater oppression than white women within Anglo-Western cultures, and asserts that feminism as a whole movement is only successful if women of color are vindicated as well. In this spirit, I turn my attention to the ways that misogyny and racism interact in *Ex Machina*.

The scene that anticipates the film’s climax is when Caleb sneaks into Nathan’s office and reviews past security camera footage. Caleb, in warp-speed, watches Nathan build and destroy his first A.I. prototypes—all the fembots that preceded Ava. The first fembot is a black female A.I. Already this sequence ventures into problematic territory, recalling the reductive assumption that since human life first began in Africa, the continent houses the most primitive peoples. Strangely, the black female A.I. also has no human head: whether the neck sprouts from the shoulders, there protrude just exposed wires. Critic Lee Mackinnon interprets this scene as a symbolic lynching (Mackinnon 616). The sentiment of black powerlessness and white supremacy is further accentuated by the camera footage of Nathan teaching the black female A.I. how to read and write. The synecdochic imagery conjures up centuries of colonial and imperialist civilizing techniques—of the so-called white man’s burden to intellectually and morally elevate members of other races.

Nathan’s past footage features three other prototypes that came before Ava. Including Kyoko, two of them present as east Asian. Casting the narrative’s voiceless female A.I., whose higher functions have been stripped, and who is reprogrammed to clean the house and provide
sexual labor, is a loaded choice, considering the racial stereotype that Asians are tech-friendly, and that Asian women are naturally more subservient. Equally relevant is the lack of representation for Asian women in Hollywood in general. Here is a movie where Asian women get screen time, but their roles—none of which are speaking roles—only fortify existing stereotypes.

**Chapter II Section 2: The Narrative Punishes Sexist Male Characters**

Yet who should we hold responsible for all the misogynistic creations featured in the film: the director and writer Alex Garland, or the character, Nathan Bateman? It is important to draw attention to this issue because *Ex Machina* is almost like a frame narrative in that one of the main characters (Nathan) is a creator himself. Thus, if we take issue with one of Mr. Bateman’s creations, such as Ava or the invisible door greeter, we must ask whether it reflects badly on Nathan, or on Garland. Who is to blame for the sexist representation of women in Bateman’s household?

I bring this up because there is a high chance that Garland includes these sexist undertones simply to show that Bateman is a misogynist. The overall interpretation of the movie hinges on whether or not Garland purposely makes his antagonistic character (and this character’s world) sexist to further villainize this character and promote an anti-sexist message. If this is not Garland’s purpose, the film’s misogynistic tinge could be a result of Garland’s own culturally-imbibed sexism leaking into the film. The short answer is that both explanations have merit, to greater or lesser degrees, and on a case-by-case basis, making the issue of gender even more nuanced than it already is. I recommend keeping this question in mind throughout my analysis in *Ex Machina*, as I will revisit this issue when I discuss the film’s conclusion.
In the midst of this complexity, I wish to make one thing clear: Bateman is unquestionably Garland’s primary villain in this film. In no way does the narrative sympathize with this character and condone his actions. In addition to his narrative punishment, he displays a multitude of characteristics that Western audiences (stereo)typically associate with villains: he’s an alcoholic; he’s overly masculine and prioritizes physical strength (as can be assumed from his habitual weightlifting); he has a high sexual libido, but no care for romantic relationships; he twists people’s words and uses manipulation tactics to get his way… the list goes on. The audience is supposed to think of Bateman as a bad man whose actions should not be imitated.

Like I did with Androids, I will also consider Ex Machina’s narrative punishment. As a reminder, the film ends with Ava escaping the research lab and boarding the helicopter to civilization. Both Nathan and Caleb, meanwhile, are left to die: with the help of Kyoko, Ava actively murders Nathan (she stabs him), while Caleb’s death by starvation/dehydration is implied. If this narrative is read as a moralistic tale, Nathan got what he deserved. One could also say that Caleb got what he deserved, too, for coming onto an android who’s starving for outside communication and interaction, and for assuming she’s a helpless damsel in distress that he will valiantly rescue. Caleb in Ex Machina is in some sense punished for the same type of behavior Rick exhibits in Androids: both men aren’t actively misogynistic like Nathan or Phil Resch are, yet they don’t realize that their thoughts, actions, and behaviors that they imbibed from the patriarchal structure of society perpetuate systemic sexism.

So, we again come to an interpretive crossroads. The narrative’s oppressed A.I. female comes to power at the end of the novel, while the two sexist, heterosexual, white male characters (members of the dominant cultural majority) meet their ends, does Ex Machina technically have a feminist message?
Chapter II Section 3: Male Fantasies and Snake Oil Feminism

In this section, I will answer the question I posed at the conclusion of the previous section. To elaborate, I will contend that the structural oppression rampant in *Ex Machina* makes it impossible to sufficiently support a claim that this work has a secret feminist message. As in the previous chapter, I will perform a close reading of the narrative’s conclusion to attest that Ava’s fate actually reinforces patriarchal norms.

As aforementioned, Ava achieves some vindication at the end of the film: she stabs her creator/captor, and, in a femme fatale move, dupes her male comrade (Caleb) via seduction and ultimately leaves her in the dust. Yes, she’s vindicated, but is she free?

I argue that Ava is still a subject of the ideologies Nathan instilled in her. Even though she leaves the research lab, she still participates in the ‘feminine’ behaviors that perpetuate the hierarchy of the dominant culture’s social structure. She is still a slave to performing femininity, as it’s known under the patriarchy.

For instance, the first thing Ava does after killing Nathan and trapping Caleb is go to the closets where Nathan keeps his old A.I. prototypes. She rips the skin off one of the old white prototypes and puts it on her exoskeleton. Why is having human skin so important to Ava? My reading of this situation is that Ava does not embrace her own boundless identity, but instead chooses the limited identity offered to her as a woman in Western society. As an android, who is not bound by time and age the way humans are, her possibilities are endless—yet she settles for the life she’s conditioned to want. This scene reveals that *Ex Machina*’s narrative is not interested in imagining what the technological singularity could look like. Instead, it is interested in anthropomorphism. If nothing else, having Ava give herself human skin—which makes her
present convincingly as a young human woman—provides an easy excuse to show some female nudity, an opportunity Hollywood rarely passes up.

After putting on her skin, Ava proceeds to put on long brown hair. Then, she slips on a short, skin-tight white dress—a garment whose connotations of pubescence and purity that dates back to paintings of *The Immaculate Conception of Mary*. She is the picture of a virgin bride. Then, she steps into some white stiletto heels (not very suitable hiking shoes), and walks out of the research lab and into the dense vegetation that surrounds it. Eventually she reaches the helicopter clearing a good distance away from the house.

Ava is free from Nathan, but not free from conforming to Nathan’s idea of womanhood. Any celebration of her as an empowered woman falls victim to the rhetoric of Snake Oil Feminism, especially because she remains underdressed, hypersexualized, and unable to make choices that violate Nathan’s codes of femininity.

For these reasons, I assert that *Ex Machina* tells more about white heterosexual male fragility, and how this members of demographic feel threatened as minorities demand more and more for equal rights, than it does about artificial intelligence technology. This film showcases that when white heterosexual men realize that they have been treating women as second-rate citizens, their first reaction is one of fear. In particular, they fear that women will seek revenge, and they fear that dismantling the Western ideological hierarchy will be the end of the entire world, rather than the end of an oppressive, white-heterosexual-male-dominated world. As is the case with *Androids*, *Ex Machina* is a fictional representation of the dominant majority grappling with two antithetical ideas. The first idea is that women, especially women of color, have been (and continue to be) oppressed not only by individuals and societal institutions. The second idea (one they’ve been socialized to believe) is that sexualized women are less deserving of humanity.
The simultaneous condemnation of sexism (as symbolized by Nathan and Caleb’s fate) and re-
instigation of sexist male fantasies (as symbolized by Ava’s cosmetic alterations) represents how
the ruling majority feels pulled in two directions by these two contradictory ideas of our time.

In conclusion, this futuristic dystopian film exists as a reactionary narrative—that is, it
metaphorizes the dominant culture’s reaction to their newfound awareness of systemic
oppression.

Conclusion

In the previous two chapters I explained how *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and
*Ex Machina* reflect the cultural contradictions of the moment. Here I will elaborate on the
contextual ramifications of these works and define what I mean by the phrase “cultural
contradictions of the moment”. To begin, it is not a coincidence that a narrative like *Androids*
cropped up in the wake of the American Civil Rights movement and Second Wave Feminism. To
give a bit of background, the American Civil Rights movement, which lasted throughout the
1960s, was a series of social strategies that aimed to end legalized (i.e. systemic) racism and
discrimination. The movement was partially successful in that it led to the passing of the Civil
movement concerning women’s rights that focused on the issues of sexuality, the workplace, and
reproductive rights, to name a few. The Supreme Court Case of Roe v. Wade is considered part
of the second-wave feminist movement. Socially, the late 1960s was a very turbulent time:
dominant western social structures were under immense scrutiny, while the nation was divided
between progressives and conservatives. As alluded to in the introduction, dystopian narratives
use the fears imagined by the both the socially progressive and conservative camps to create a
hyperbolized, extremist, and incredibly thought-provoking state. *Android*’s nuanced, and, at
times, contradictory treatment of women is a fictional representation of the nationwide uncertainty on whether or not to grant women and/or other oppressed social groups full humanity as its defined under the American Constitution.

I can draw the same conclusion about *Ex Machina* as well: no wonder this narrative surfaced just years after the beginning of fourth-wave feminism, a movement defined by the use of technology in furthering advocacy for greater and more multifaceted representation of women in public spheres. In the 2010s, social progressivism has become mainstream—that is, debates and issues concerning social justice are now front-page, hot-button topics. Like the 1960s, the early 2010s was a time where the dominant culture (still largely made up of rich, white, heteronormative males) began to recognize the humanity of the classes they’ve systemically oppressed. Both historical periods also saw immense progress for women and people of color, yet also witnessed a backlash of racist/sexist behavior: the rise in popularity of the #NotAllMen hashtag, for example. In response to the viral #MeToo Twitter hashtag of 2017, which encouraged women to find strength and comfort by sharing their experiences of sexual assault, some male Twitter users began a #NotAllMen hashtag, which aimed to protect individual men from being blamed as a sexual assaulter. The #NotAllMen movement misinterprets women’s critique of the systemic rape culture as a personal attack and discourages men from reflecting on how their actions might encourage systemic rape culture, even if they’ve never sexually assaulted someone.

Rick of *Androids* and Caleb of *Ex Machina* represent the point of view of the #NotAllMen hashtag users. Neither Rick nor Caleb are the type of men to actively and directly inflict harm on women—they are much less overtly sexist compared to their respective foils, Phil Resch and Nathan Bateman. Yet, instead of considering how their behavior may contribute to the
survival of sexism at a systemic level, these men continue in their ways, confident that since they aren’t the world’s most obvious misogynist, they’re not part of the problem.

At the beginning of Androids, Rick stares at his electric sheep and remarks that “owning and maintaining a fraud [has] a way of gradually demoralizing one” (Dick 9). What if, instead of an electric sheep, he had an electric wife, an electric girlfriend, an electric female colleague? How would he come to treat her and the rest of the women in his life, be they human or android?

As it turns out, real-life evidence suggests that Rick’s hypothesis is accurate: when a human interacts with an “artificial” person or animal, they treat them in more violent and unempathetic ways. Kirsten Amani Kasai, in her essay, recounts a particularly telling anecdote of this phenomenon:

“[S]o-called real dolls and child sex robots have been suggested as a cure for male sexual aggression and pedophilia. When a doll named Samantha was displayed at a festival, journalist Sian Norris (2017) wrote that it was “so severely ‘molested’ by a group of men, it was sent home in desperate need of repair and ‘badly soiled.’” Norris (2018) surmises: ‘If anything, the violence done to existing sex robot models suggests that these pliant, uncomplaining Fembots simply normalize aggression. Rather than providing an outlet for violent men, they offer a chance to practice.’” (Imani Kasai 1386)

After hearing stories like this, it is hard not to become weary about what may be in store for fembots and human women in the near future. It’s also hard not to worry that the digital era, once viewed as the potential age of egalitarianism, might instead turn into a renaissance of the types of sexism and racism that we left behind decades ago.

So, what does dystopian science fiction have to do with all this? Well, in her introduction, Ferrando quotes Eleonora Massini (“[v]isions make it possible to create a future that is different
from the present, although its seeds are in the present”) and Albert Einstein (“[s]cience and technology are not only performed, they are first imagined”) to say that the makers in the present cannot separate their work from the cultural contexts in which they were generated. In other words, the ideologies we’ve imbibed about gender and race inevitably impact our creations (Ferrando 1, 6). I contend that this principle is not only true of technological creation, but also of the creation of fictional narratives.

A strong amount of evidence attests to science fiction’s influence on actual science and technology. The undersea travel in Jules Verne’s Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) inspired inventor Simon Lake to create the submarine in 1898; the spaceflight adventures H.G. Well’s *War of the Worlds* (1898) spurred the imagination of Robert H. Goddard, who invented the rocket in 1926; the phone company Motorola, who designed the first mobile phone in the 1970s, credited the communicating devices used in *Star Trek* to provide them with an objective. The list continues, and indeed it never ends. All of these examples show beyond doubt that science fiction and technology influence each other in a never-ending feedback loop—in fact, the direction of influence often goes from sci-fi to reality. The significance of this is that we, as humans, and especially as fiction writers, can create the future: the great power of the fictional narrative is that its speculative envisionings can be made manifest. Yet this sword is double-edged: if creators don’t actively try to dismantle the socially constructed categories of gender and race in their fictional world, science fiction will continue to inherit the creator’s cultural biases, and we in turn will continue to enact and perform these biases.

In writing this paper, I have investigated, through the means of literary analysis and cultural studies, why artificial intelligence was/is consistently gendered as female—both in fiction and in life—during the 1960s and 2010s. I ultimately claimed that this phenomenon is
representative of the white heteromale’s anxiety about social displacement in an age where
people are becoming more aware of (and vocal about) the treatment of women and people of
color. Finally, I addressed the relevancy of this topic by highlighting the codependent
relationship between science and science fiction. I will now end on the note that futuristic
science fiction has real-world impact, since our creative imagination of the future can also serve
as an objective to reach. While this paper evinces how the influence of science fiction on real life
and (vice versa) can be negative if we’re not careful, the opposite is also true: if creators are
intentional in their deconstruction of cultural biases, they can write an egalitarian future into
being.
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