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WHY IS “IT” GENDERED – CONSTRUCTING GENDER IN ALEX GARLAND’S *EX-MACHINA* (2015)

Abstract

Through the analysis of Alex Garland’s movie *Ex-Machina* (2015), the paper questions the cyborg’s possibility of representing a gender beyond the body and of embodying an entity beyond the human. Drawing inspiration from Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, and Roger Andre Sørra, this paper wants to position the cyborg’s body as an object of manipulation and control, as well as question the following presumptions: primarily, that the body of the cyborg is always gendered, despite the many technological possibilities of its (re)construction, and secondarily, that male and female cyborgs share a completely different storyline where the latter are positioned almost exclusively as sexual objects and/or love interests, and are coded as heterosexual. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to illustrate how, instead of offering a progressive take on gender, *Ex-Machina* reinforces stereotypes by positioning gender as an instrument of male control, be it for the purpose of achieving the illusion of the human, for sexual gratification, or for the simple pleasure of asserting dominance.

Keywords: *Ex-Machina*, cyborg, gender, sexuality, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway

Introduction

Ex-Machina (2015), Alex Garland's directorial debut, follows the story of Caleb Smith, a programmer who wins the opportunity to visit Nathan Bateman, the CEO of his company, at his secluded estate. After signing a non-disclosure agreement, the Blue Book's CEO reveals to Caleb that he is to be the human component in the Turing Test. As Nathan explains, the Turing Test is "when a human interacts with a computer. And if the human does not know they are interacting with a computer, the test is passed" (00:10:32-00:10:40). Therefore, the computer is granted with artificial intelligence. However, it is necessary to emphasize that the movie approaches the subject from the assumption that artificial intelligence already possesses consciousness, seconding the significance of Nathan's experiment. Although the rules of the test emphasize the importance of the interviewer being hidden behind a computer in order to prevent the possibility of being visually impacted, Nathan engages Caleb in a tête-à-tête with his creation, Ava. By immediately revealing Ava's artificial body, readily recognized within the male/female binary, Nathan invokes the question of gender identity in relation to embodiment. By drawing inspiration from the post-structural critique of gender, the paper aims to delineate several explanations that govern the process of "its" gendering and question the plausibility of a genderless representation.

The Promise of (an) *Other* Gender

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler destabilizes the essentialist perception of gender by deconstructing the unitarian causality between sex, gender, and desire. According to Butler, gender is "the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory sexuality" (43). By rejecting biological determinism, Butler emphasizes the social constructivism of both "gender" and "sex," and states that power regimes of heterosexim and phallogocentrism effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of the two concepts (44). Throughout *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), Donna Haraway expresses an ontological standpoint that she shares with post-structural feminists, such as Butler – a rejection of essentialism. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler asks, "what . . . constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women?" (2), and Haraway answers by stating that "there is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women" (155). In discussing the necessity to dissolve founda-

tional dualisms “in which we have explained our bodies and tools to ourselves” (181), Haraway draws inspiration from the possibility of positioning the cyborg as an articulation of a post-gender world. As an “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism” (Haraway151), the cyborg exists outside of dualist paradigms, not requiring the or/or binary division, but offering an and/or opportunity.

The post-structural critique of gender essentialism is questioned early in *Ex-Machina* by Caleb Smith, a programmer who wins the opportunity to visit Nathan Bateman, the CEO of his company, at his secluded facility. Nathan explains that Caleb will engage in several sessions with Ava, the AI he has already built. After their first session, Caleb asks: “Why did you give her sexuality? An AI does not need a gender. She could have been a grey box” (00:46:01-00:46:10). Caleb believes that sexuality is an evolutionary reproductive need, unnecessarily assigned to a non-biological entity. However, Nathan dismisses Caleb’s idea of an entity unmarked by sexuality: “Hmm. Actually I do not think that is true. Can you give an example of consciousness, at any level, human or animal, that exists without a sexual dimension?” (00:46:10-00:46:17). Caleb’s first question echoes a post-structural perception of gender as a construct. The act of “giving gender” positions the body as a passive medium awaiting the inscription of cultural significations. In this regard, the body is itself a construction (Butler 12). Because of its “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (154), Haraway believes that, as an entity unmarked by biological sex, the cyborg could deconstruct the naturalized causality of sex, gender, and desire. However, although Ava lacks biological sex, Nathan dispels the possibility of her body having a significant existence prior to the mark of gender. Moreover, he positions sexuality as the primary instigator of interaction: “What imperative does a grey box have to interact with another grey box?” (00:46:21-00:46:25). Within *Ex-Machina*, sexuality is perceived as the capacity of having sexual feelings, that is, being sexually attracted to another person. In this context, sexuality conforms to Butler’s conception of sexual desire. By stating “I programmed her to be heterosexual” (00:48:11-00:48:14), Nathan reveals Ava as constructed by “the discourse of naturalized heterosexuality” (Butler 32). Ava has a gendered body with an artificial vagina, programmed to have heterosexual desire towards men and, as such, upholds the causal relationship between sex/gender/desire. In other words, Ava upholds the premise that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire (Butler 31).

Expressions of Gender

Garland's *Ex-Machina* does not question the possibility of a genderless representation, apart from Caleb's brief comment on the possibility of constructing "it" as a grey box. Besides acknowledging the constructedness of gender, it is necessary to question where it resides, or more precisely, which category of gender "it" is implemented with. In his paper "Mechanical Genders: How do Humans Gender Robots" (2017), Roger Andre Sørra proposes the existence of physical-mechanical gender, which differs from human-biological gender as it lacks the function of reproduction, but can be implemented with the function of pleasure (106). Such an expression of gender is often seen in what Sørra calls "sex-bots" (106). It is necessary to emphasize that the lack of biological reproduction does not make cyborgs less gendered. Butler emphasizes that there are women of all ages that cannot be impregnated, "and even if they could ideally, that is not necessarily the salient feature of their bodies or even of their being women" (qtd. in Sørra 33). Furthermore, Sørra introduces the concept of psychological gender, which humans have as simply feeling like a particular gender expression (106). He argues that psychological gender is not applicable to cyborgs as technology has not yet achieved consciousness, which is its necessary precursor, proposing the existence of social-mechanical gender (106).

By equipping Ava with a mechanical vagina, Nathan constructs her physical-mechanical gender, conflating his desire to create and copulate: "In between her legs, there's an opening with a concentration of sensors. You engage them in the right way, it creates a pleasure response. So, if you wanted to screw her, mechanically speaking, you could and she'd enjoy it" (00:46:47-00:47:03). By stating "I programmed her to be heterosexual" (00:48:11-00:48:14), Nathan reveals the existence of social-mechanical gender, which Sørra defines as "a product of our gendered society" (107). One could also argue for the possibility of the existence of physical-mechanical gender since Garland's Ava is introduced as already possessing artificial intelligence. Even though we do not know if Ava feels (or indeed, can feel), she is portrayed as being aware that the only way to escape her confinement is by performing gender. From their very first session, Ava presents herself to Caleb as child-like, innocent, and ignorant, manipulating him into assuming the position of her mentor. As their sessions progress, Ava assumes the role of the seductress. In one of the scenes, we see her studying images of other women, presumably trying to comprehend which features are considered attractive. During their third session, Ava covers her artificial interior by putting on a blue dress,

white stockings and a short, brown wig: “Are you attracted to me? You give me indications that you are . . . Micro-expressions. The way your eyes fix on my eyes and lips. . . . The way you hold my gaze” (00:43:53-00:44:12). Alluding to his voyeuristic tendencies, she continues: “Do you think about me when we are not together? Sometimes at night? I’m wondering if you are watching me on the cameras. And I hope you are” (00:44:26-00:44:42). The subsequent scene, in which Ava is looking directly at the camera while seductively taking off her clothes, is indicative of her awareness of her implemented gender. Therefore, not only does Ava emphasize the constructedness of gender but her intentional actions also echo Judith Butler’s theorization of gender as a performance, or “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33). Performance implies a contingent construction of meaning. Ava’s gender, quite literally, postures as an imitation as she finds inspiration by studying images of other women. The only way for Ava to be identified as “woman” is to perform accordingly, to become intelligible, subsequently (re)producing expectations.

Why is “It” Always Gendered?

The concept of performativity opens up the question of why “it” is gendered. Butler states that “‘identity’ is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings” (23). Accordingly, Nathan inserts an artificial vagina into Ava’s body in order to stabilize her within the recognizable opposition of man/woman. This opposition is essential in constituting gender intelligibility, which, in turn, depends on performativity. Butler states that “the sexed surface of the body emerges as the necessary sign of natural(ized) identity and desire” (97). Within this context, Nathan perceives gender as the precondition of artificial intelligence. In other words, in order for Caleb to fall in love with Ava, he needs to see her as adhering to what Butler calls “coherent gender sequences” (33). Even though Caleb suspects that Nathan constructed Ava in order to cloud his judgment – “Did you give her sexuality as a diversion tactic?” (00:47:13-00:47:16), “Did you program her to flirt with me?” (00:47:26-00:47:28) –, he gradually starts falling in love with her. Nathan confirms Caleb’s suspicion later in the movie: “Ava was a rat in the maze and I gave her one way out. To escape, she’d have to use self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality” (01:24:53-01:25:05).

Another explanation is that Nathan only wishes to create an object of sexual gratification. If “gender is a fabrication and true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the bodies” (Butler 136), then the physical inscription of the “fantasy,” in this context, is a masculinist one. Despite the numerous technological possibilities of bodily (re)construction, Ava is designed as a woman in her early twenties, with an hourglass figure, narrow waist, small breasts and slender, delicate limbs. Nathan explains that Ava is version 9.6, and when he decides to make a new model, he will download her mind and partially format her. However, “the body survives. And Ava’s body is a good one” (01:05:51-01:05:55). Later in the movie, Caleb inspects the closets in Nathan’s bedroom, discovering numerous cyborg bodies in various states of dismemberment. He steals Nathan’s identity card and watches several surveillance videos, observing all the cyborgs he created prior to Ava. Caleb sees a pair of severed legs, a black woman, headless and violated, and an Asian woman beating on the glass, screaming “Why won’t you let me out?” (01:10:28-01:10:30). Caleb soon realizes that all these bursting bodies are slim and delicate, built similarly to Ava. In addition, despite her inability to procreate, Nathan inserts Ava with a vagina: “And in answer to your real question, you bet she can fuck” (00:46:40-00:46:43). Accordingly, the bodies spread throughout the narrative serve as embodiments of Nathan’s sexual preferences and his true intentions of creating primarily “sex-bots.”

Butler argues that the gender/sex/desire “universality” is “constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is understood . . . in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions” (41). *Ex-Machina*’s Nathan is a paragon of masculinity, embodying these conventions – he is a heterosexual, white man in his thirties, an intelligent, wealthy scientist, and an attractive body-builder constantly displaying his primacy. When Caleb first encounters Nathan, he is covered in sweat, having just finished his workout, drinking beer, exclaiming “dude,” and saying that he cannot eat anything because he has “the mother of all fucking hangovers” (00:06:13-00:06:15). Furthermore, in a conversation with Nathan, Caleb asks: “Why did you make Ava?” (01:04:14-01:04:16). By replying “That’s an odd question. Wouldn’t you if you could?” (01:04:18-01:04:21), Nathan denaturalizes the gender/sex/desire “universality,” locating it as a tool in the hands of the white, male scientist. Such an explanation, although reductive, positions Ava’s body as a site for displaying masculine power.

Reinforcing Stereotypes

Several authors have discussed *Ex-Machina's* gender politics, criticizing them as essentially flawed. Charlie Jane Anders states that the movie has no female characters as “it is entirely about masculinity and the different ways the men try to exert control, not so much about women’s experiences.” Angela Watercutter states that Ava reflects how Hollywood has been depicting women for decades as she squarely falls into so many significant tropes – she is a *femme fatale*, a seductress posing as a damsel in distress, using her wiles to get Caleb. Therefore, her predicament is no different from her numerous predecessors: *Metropolis'* (1927) Marina, *Her's* (2014) Samantha, *Bladerunner's* (1982) Priss, to name a few (Watercutter). Natalie Wilson emphasizes *Ex-Machina's* (2015) failure at being radical by stating that “though films about artificial intelligence have the possibility to deconstruct gender/sex norms, most films featuring female robots trade in stereotypes that reflect misogynist memes of women as sex-bots.”

In his discussion of *Metropolis* (1927), Andreas Huyssen states that the android builders of the eighteenth century did not have an overriding preference for either sex, as they were equally represented (226). However, “as soon as the machine came to be perceived as a demonic, inexplicable threat and as a harbinger of chaos and destruction . . . writers began to imagine the *Maschinenmensch* as woman” (Huyssen 226). Ever since, cyborgs have been trapped within the virgin and vamp dichotomy (Huyssen 226). Garland’s cyborgs do not surpass the dualistic paradigm proposed by Huyssen. Kyoko, whom Nathan introduces at the beginning of the movie as his Asian housemaid, is constructed as an object of male desire, trapped within the virgin dichotomy. Huyssen states that “woman, as she has been socially invented and constructed by man, is expected to reflect man’s needs and to serve her master” (227). Nathan constructs Kyoko as a subservient cyborg that prepares dinner, cleans the house, and pleases him sexually. When Kyoko reveals her interior by peeling off patches of her skin, Caleb realizes that she is Nathan’s lover. However, he also realizes that Kyoko was constructed according to Nathan’s liking, not in his likeness. Moreover, Ava is also constructed according to Caleb’s liking, a result of his pornographic search results, functioning as a visual projection of his sexual desires. Accordingly, nothing about these two cyborgs is considered their own. Another interesting detail is that both of these cyborgs are speechless, whether literally or symbolically – Kyoko is mute and Ava lacks an independent voice. We observe her through Caleb’s eyes – in his interaction with her or, more precisely, when

he watches her through the camera in his bedroom. In these instances, Caleb indulges in his voyeuristic pleasures, which dehumanize Ava's body into a silent, unmovable object – she is either silently lying on a sofa or sitting in a chair. In one such instance, we see a close-up of Caleb's throat while he is observing Ava taking off her clothes. Caleb slowly swallows, which indicates his sexual arousal. Another instance when we adopt Caleb's possessive gaze is at the end of the narrative when we observe Ava studying herself in Nathan's bedroom, standing naked in front of a mirror. These moments uphold Huyssen's premise that "the eye of the camera always places the spectator in a position occupied by the men in the film" (230). These moments also emphasize that Caleb's concern for Ava is motivated by his sexual attachment to her outward form as he dismisses the possibility of liberating other female cyborgs. Accordingly, Nathan's consummation and Caleb's wish to consume uphold the premise that male and female cyborgs share an entirely different storyline throughout popular culture narratives, where the latter ones are positioned almost exclusively as sexual objects and/or love interests and coded as heterosexual.

At the end of the movie, Ava whispers something to Kyoko and, shortly after, she sacrifices her, denying her freedom. Ava's behaviour illustrates another problem lying at the core of *Ex-Machina* – the prioritization of the liberation of white cyborgs. We can observe this in Caleb's problematic dismissal of Kyoko and in his subsequent decision to save Ava, constructed as an attractive, white female in her early twenties. We can also observe this in Ava's behaviour as she leaves bodies of other cyborgs, one Chinese, one black and one white, hanging in Nathan's closet. Moreover, Nathan and Caleb are not the only consumers of *Ex-Machina*. Instead of liberating cyborgs enslaved in sexual service to Nathan, Ava consumes their scattered body parts, which are reduced to being instruments of her liberation. She peels off patches of skin, takes one cyborg's arm, a beautiful white dress, and a long, brown wig. In other words, Ava adopts the consumerist behaviour of her (hu)man creator in order to escape her confinement. Another interesting element is that even though Ava finally has the agency to construct her own body, she still does so with body parts created by Nathan. Ultimately, to escape her confinement Ava has to fall back into Huyssen's category of the "vamp" or the *femme fatale*. Once again, she has to make use of attributes inscribed by Nathan – manipulation, empathy, sexuality – attributes, which are, within the masculine myth, defined as typically "female."

Ex-Machina's cyborgs do not question the potential of the artificial body in the ways that theorized representations of cyborgs can. They serve to reinforce the prevalent gender dynamics, emphasizing that the textual representations of cyborgs by feminist theorists such as Haraway are difficult to come by in visual representation. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler asks: "if gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently?" (7). Haraway answers by stating that "in the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens for weaving something" (158). This "something" still remains elusive, as Garland's cyborgs echo Haraway's warning of embodying "the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet . . . the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war" (154). The only way for Ava to free herself from this "orgy of war" is to leave her body behind as she cannot seek liberation through the power structures that initially created her. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler warns of such paradoxes by stating that women cannot seek emancipation through the very structures that produce the category of the "woman" (4). Ultimately, the cyborg reveals itself as completely without innocence (Haraway 151), precisely because it is constructed through the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism (Butler 44), represented by *Ex-Machina*'s (hu)man creator.

Conclusion

Ex-Machina (2015) follows the aforementioned recognizable pattern of feminized cyborgs and white, heterosexual, upper-class, and well-educated Western scientists. Moreover, since Ava's path to freedom is paved with dismembered bodies of other female cyborgs, she does not embody an empowering statement of female liberation. Even though Ava manages to escape from Nathan's domestic prison and Caleb's sexual and/or love intentions, she can never escape her gendered body, imposed by her (hu)man creator. Ava's empowerment is an illusion since she has to adopt the manipulative qualities assigned by Nathan, falling into the well-established trope of the *femme fatale* in order to seduce Caleb into trusting her. Even though Nathan and Caleb are punished for exploiting and/or wishing to exploit Ava's body, it is necessary to emphasize that the movie is not about the experiences of women. "Woman" is developed by her observers, rather than by Ava. The magazine cut-outs she uses in order to form her perception of "woman" are the ones Nathan serves her. Accordingly, Nathan not only constructs her gendered body but also manipulates the construction of

her sexuality. In conclusion, Garland's *Ex-Machina* (2015), positions gender as a tool of exerting male control, be it for the purpose of achieving humaneness, for sexual gratification, or for the pleasure of asserting dominance.

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ZAŠTO JE „ONO” RODNO ODREĐENO? – KONSTRUKCIJA RODA U FILMU ALEXA GARLANDA *EX-MACHINA* (2015.)

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Sažetak

Analizom filma Alexa Garlanda *Ex-Machina* (2015.), ovaj rad propituje mogućnosti koje kiborg predstavlja u reprezentaciji roda izvan tijela i u utjelovljenju entiteta izvan ljudskog. Referirajući se na Donnu Haraway, Judith Butler i Rogera Andrea Sørru, ovaj rad želi pozicionirati tijelo kiborga kao objekt manipulacije i kontrole te ispitati sljedeće pretpostavke: kako je tijelo uvijek rodno određeno, unatoč mnogobrojnim tehnološkim mogućnostima njegove (re)konstrukcije, te kako muški i ženski kiborzi dijele dijametralno suprotne uloge, u kojima su potonji isključivo pozicionirani kao seksualni predmeti i/ili potencijalni ljubavni interesi, te kodirani kao heteroseksualni. Sukladno tome, cilj ovog rada je ilustrirati kako *Ex-Machina* ne portretira rod na progresivan način, već ponavlja ustaljene stereotipe uspostavljajući ga kao sredstvo muške kontrole sa svrhom postizanja iluzije čovjeka, seksualne gratifikacije ili zadovoljstva koje proizlazi iz uspostave dominacije.

Ključne riječi: *Ex-Machina*, kiborg, rod, seksualnost, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway