

Monsters and Misogyny: Femininity and Disempowerment in *Ex Machina*

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As we brave the new world of artificial intelligence, which human biases will we carry with us? Can we disentangle the promise of AI from historical gender inequities? Alex Garland explores the boundaries of misogyny in his 2014 science fiction thriller *Ex Machina* in which Ava, a remarkably intelligent and disarmingly intuitive robot, attempts to escape from her calculating male creator, Nathan, and his young intern, Caleb. Ava manipulates Caleb by feigning maturation before his eyes, developing from a cowering youth to an alluring adolescent to a threatening woman in order to emancipate herself. However, although she is successful in leaving her physical prison at the close of the film, Ava remains trapped by the male gaze and its confining female archetypes, both of the weak girl and of the monstrous feminine. By presenting the duality of victimhood and power, *Ex Machina* is ultimately a tale of the shackles of male scrutiny and a bold statement about the unique challenges on woman's path to freedom.

Ava initially presents herself as a semi-androgynous juvenile; in doing so, she strategically disarms and captivates Caleb and the viewer. By modifying her behavior and taking full advantage of her appearance, she projects subservience to Caleb in order to gain his sympathy. Initially, Ava's small, delicate features and lack of hair enhance her childlike appearance. Her voice, soft and high pitched, is strikingly human in its lilting, girlish tone, especially in comparison to Caleb, who clips his voice patronizingly, as if to ensure her understanding. Ava is spritely, the whirl of her mechanical body a soothing lullaby as she treads softly through the confines of her prison. When Caleb asks her to converse with him, she sits before him, a sign of deference (Garland 14:07). She proceeds to emphasize her youth in their conversation, repeating that she is "one," without specifying whether she means one "year" or one "day" (Garland 14:33). This suggests that not only is Ava young, she is new, unique, and singularly captivating. As she responds to Caleb's questions, we cannot help but be struck by her lack of clothing. Her torso, made of glass, allows the viewer to see her internal wires; in her naked state, she is transparent, symbolic of her apparent trustworthiness. Her submissive positioning and lack of clothing serve to lull Caleb, and the viewer by proxy, into a false sense of security, attracting our undivided gaze with her youthful allure.

As the film progresses, Ava begins to shift her tactic from presenting herself as a genderless innocent to emphasizing her femininity, strategically intensifying Caleb's attraction. During one of their meetings, Ava asks Caleb to close his eyes as she leaves the room to dress herself (Garland 41:47). Her flowing, flowered dress and modest cardigan that she grips timidly are endearing and demure, transforming her harsh, mechanical body into that of an insecure woman. As she looks at pictures of beautiful women on the walls and assesses herself in the mirror, we cannot help but be drawn to what feels like an expression of gendered weakness (Garland 42:18). Because Ava is alone in the room where she dresses, and not under Caleb's watchful eyes where she has a motivation to alter her behaviors, it is challenging to differentiate her vulnerability from her manipulative plot. Garland forces viewers to question whether Ava's choice of outfit and extended gaze in the mirror are signs of authentic insecurity or simply strategic. By initially leaving the possibility of Ava's genuine self-doubt open to interpretation, Garland allows his

audience to experience the full breadth of Caleb's attraction, emphasizing the allure of female vulnerability. Of course, we later learn that Ava was never an unwitting victim of Caleb's viewership. In fact, she hoped he would be "watching her on the cameras" and "thinking about [her] when [they] aren't together" (Garland 44:34–44:45). This manipulation is revealed to be part of her plan to make Caleb fall in love with her, a ploy for escape, a weaponization of her victimhood.

As Ava succeeds in captivating Caleb and holding the viewers' gaze, we are left disturbed by the lengths she must take to ensure this attachment. After dressing herself and receiving Caleb's praise, it is Ava's blunt question — "are you attracted to me?" — that results in perhaps her most disempowering line of the film: "I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable" (Garland 44:23–44:57). Ava leans forward to deliver it, shrugging her shoulders slightly, eyes wide with sincerity. As the camera pans in on her face, we are struck by her disturbingly accurate portrayal of the unassuming young woman, existing to please men and never to take for herself. What is even more concerning is that Ava, a machine who could presumably outmatch Caleb with her physical strength, finds that conforming to this misogynistic stereotype is necessary for her emancipation. This is further emphasized in the shots of Ava undressing as Caleb watches her on the cameras. The scene feels performative; Ava undresses slowly, seductively, pausing once to stare at something, presumably the monitor from which Caleb watches. Her naked body is infinitely more intimate now that we have seen her in clothes; just before the scene cuts, a blue light shines over Caleb's features as he reaches out a hand, failing to grasp anything at all, foreshadowing his downfall in her hands (Garland 45:15–45:48). Ava's actions to conform to the image of the disempowered female in order to draw the male gaze remain some of the most chilling of the film.

Ava shifts her tactic from seducing Caleb to threatening him by embodying the abject and monstrous feminine; ultimately, the fear she inspires can be attributed both to her inhumanity and to her femininity. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as detailed in Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine*, an analysis of femininity in the horror film, is highly applicable to Ava's apparent maturation from demure girl to powerful woman. Kastrava defines the abject as that which is disconcerting because it "disturbs identity, system, order," which Creed argues is how women are often portrayed in film (8). Creed explores this theory in the context of female figures in horror movies, often represented as witches and vampires, symbols of death and decay, meaning they "exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens extinction" (10). Ava, a prime example of that which is inhuman yet exists on the cusp of humanity, is a source of the abject. When she initiates a power cut during a conversation with Caleb, so that they "can see how they behave when [they] are unobserved," we are reminded of the threat she poses to him, both as a robot and as a woman (Garland 53:25). A red light is cast over the scene as sirens blare in the background; the camera pans up Ava's mechanical body as she rises from her seat, glaring menacingly at Caleb while his back is turned. Though her face is blurred in the light, her breast and hips are highlighted and her plea for Caleb not to trust her male captor Nathan or "anything he says," emphasizes the intimidating nature of her femininity. Caleb may sense this too; he turns towards her in fear, his voice cracking with strain (Garland 31:04). By invoking such terror, Ava forces the audience to question the most basic principles of her nature: is she good or evil? Weak or powerful? Human or inhuman? Like any object that embodies the abject, Ava plagues these questions with ambiguity; her body and

maturation process exist “at the place where meaning collapses” (9). Indeed, Creed highlights the power in the uncertainty of the menacing woman, whose influence is derived from her simultaneous terror and appeal to her male counterpart.

Although Ava’s intimidation tactics and ultimate violence are successful in freeing her from captivity, a deeper analysis reveals that by embodying the monstrous feminine, she is trapped in a unidimensional archetype. At the conclusion of the film, Ava murders Nathan, leaves Caleb to die in her former prison, and shows no remorse even for Kiyoko, another female robot, who lies unresponsive on the floor. Ava displays no empathy for these victims, and while we might not condemn her for killing Nathan, there seems no justification for leaving an innocent woman behind. Ava has assumed the role of the monstrous feminine as defined by Creed, a figure whose monstrosity and terror are related to their patriarchal tasks, body, or sexuality. While we may be able to attribute part of her lack of empathy to the differences between humans and artificial intelligence, the feminine nature of the murders suggests an added layer of complexity. The killing scene is eerily quiet and graceful. Ava walks down the hallway toward Nathan softly and even when she stabs his chest with a knife, there is an ease and elegance to her movements. As the camera angle shifts upward, obscuring the knife from view, the shot of their intense eye contact as she stabs him seems almost romantic (Garland 01:31:35). Absent is the gore and glorification of violence that usually characterizes a murder scene; in this sense, the killings feel uniquely feminine.

While there is some power in Ava’s emancipation as she walks away from Nathan’s dead body, the close of the film reveals that she remains limited by the male gaze. Creed notes that the monstrous feminine is not a “feminist” or “liberated” image, but speaks more to “male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity” (7). Indeed, when Ava leaves Nathan’s home, she dons the skin of an attractive white woman, a white lace dress, and high heels. Her walk up the steps into the outside world as classical music plays in the background verges on bridal. Although Caleb’s screams are muted through the glass, it would be difficult to believe that with her lack of empathy, she has left her unsympathetic cruelty behind. In fact, at this point in the film, it is her defining feature. Indeed, by choosing to put on a dress and the skin of a human female, Ava has willingly accepted two limitations to her freedom: she will, at least for the foreseeable future, have to hide her true identity from the world, and, as a woman, she has consented to the harsh male gaze, under which she has already undergone so much pain. The last shot emphasizes the constraints of her emancipation; once she reaches a “traffic intersection” where she had once expressed desire to go, we watch her through a sheet of glass, not dissimilar to the glass walls that surrounded her at Nathan’s complex (Garland 40:09). Ultimately, although Ava has freed herself from Nathan and Caleb’s voyeurism, she has not succeeded in freeing herself from the shackles of the patriarchy.

As she develops from a disempowered girl to a terrifying woman, Ava succeeds in taking revenge on her captors and emerging into the world. While the film can be viewed as a feminist piece due to Ava’s triumph, a more compelling analysis reveals that because of the archetypes she has embraced, both of victim and monster, she has not escaped the reductionist male perspective. Much like Caleb asked Ava’s creator, Nathan, we must question why Alex Garland decided to make Ava female in the first place. In the film, Nathan responds that “sexuality is fun,” brushing aside Caleb’s concern (Garland 46:39). However, the conclusion of the movie,

with its murder and terrifying prediction of a new reality for artificial intelligence, suggests that femininity is anything but fun. In his exploration of the boundaries of misogyny, Garland flips its implications on the viewer. Early in the film, when Caleb first spies on Ava, Garland retracts the camera so that we only can see his back, cast in shadow, suggesting that his perspective and the perspective of any other male figure are interchangeable (Garland 19:22–19:47). By forcing the viewer to adopt Caleb’s perspective, even for a moment, Garland makes us complicit in his seemingly non-consensual gaze. Though Garland presents an expanse of innovation at our fingertips, he ultimately reveals that we, like Ava, are still trapped in biases that transcend not only his exposing camera lens, but the very border between what is human and inhuman.

Works Cited

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