

STRIKING FEAR IN THE CIRCUITS: THE ELECTRIC FEMININE BODY
IN CYBORG FILMS

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

English-language science fiction films appearing from 1975 through 2015 featuring androids, robots, cyborgs, and advanced artificial intelligence offer fascinating examples of characters with “electric feminine bodies.” The female subjects of these films include those who must fight a masculine-coded machine/robot/cyborg, become robots, or be fully android or cyborg-fusions themselves. For this research, I use the term “cyborg” and “cyborg films” loosely to include cinematic narratives which incorporate elements of robotics, cyberpunk, and artificial intelligence. Specifically, I apply María Goicoechea’s broad definition of the term cyborg which she outlines in her article “The Posthuman Ethos in Cyberpunk Science Fiction.” Goicoechea explains:

The meaning of ‘cyborg’ has also evolved progressively to include any entity that behaves as an enhanced human, no matter if it began its “life” biologically or not (an artificial intelligence would be a cyborg since it performs functions comparable to those of a human being, and a person who increases his [or her] physical or mental power using artificial substances can also be considered a cyborg. (4)

As my title suggests, I will specifically focus on cyborg films within the science fiction genre, keeping in mind a broad and inclusive definition.

Additionally, the two most important theoretical frameworks that shape my explorations are Laura Mulvey’s *Visual and Other Pleasures* and Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s” (shortened hereafter to “Cyborg Manifesto”). Both pivotal texts employ a feminist ethos in their explorations. For example, film theorist Mulvey is best known for coining the term “male gaze,” and in her groundbreaking work she charts the ways in which art, specifically

cinema, has had a longstanding history of objectifying women's bodies. The motivation for her inquiry, much like Haraway, was the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s American sociopolitical landscape, and thus, I analyze cinematic cyborg narratives starting in the 1970s. As Mulvey explains, cinema is a relatively new art form, and it is only within the last few decades that it has offered an established site of cultural, social, and political exploration. Mulvey notes: "Women's political consciousness, under the impetus of the Women's Movement, has now been turned critically towards cinema, and, in spite of its brief time span, cinema now has a history that can be analysed from a feminist point of view. For the first time, the consciousness is there, and the body of work is sufficient" (115). One of the major and most cited techniques through which Mulvey constructs her feminist point of view in cinema is examining how women are positioned and, most importantly, displayed on screen. In short, Mulvey argues that much of cinema inherently assumes the audience is male, and thus, the representation of women on screen merely exploits this assumption. She contends that women on screen should be the "subject of inquiry" and not simply a "visual image" (130):

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (19).

Thus, as I explore cyborg narratives across the span of a few decades, I also analyze what kind of gaze is employed in each respective film. I explore how women characters are

positioned, displayed, filmed, and whether or not they are subjects of deep inquiry within the narrative. Thus, I pay attention to each character's narrative drive and purpose in each of their respective films.

Additionally, a discussion of cyborg narratives would not be sufficient without incorporating Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto." Published in 1984, this article is a foundational locus to explore cyborg narratives. The article is more experimental and creative in approach, with the ultimate aim being a political and social one. Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" is not so much about how cyborgs are presented in cinema or fiction—as this research will examine—as it is about the metaphor of the cyborg as a way to explore the political, social, scientific, and technological shifts in society, especially during the post-Civil Rights and post-second wave feminist movement of the American 1960s and 1970s. Haraway's article offers a way for contemporary feminists to navigate a new social and political order in a world historically dominated by patriarchal control over women, bodies, and images. In essence, Haraway ends her political synecdoche asserting: "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (178). For Haraway, the metaphor of the cyborg can essentially breach a whole plethora of boundaries that have perpetually excluded certain groups of people—most notably, women and especially women of color. Her work also highlights the ways in which the second wave feminist movement suffered from essentialism. Overall, Haraway makes a persuasive case for the notion that the cyborg may even dissolve boundaries of gender.

As far as discourse goes, Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" certainly fuels the conversation on how the cyborg can be a revolutionary metaphor for change; however, it seems that cinematic representations of cyborgs are not so revolutionary. In fact, as popular

culture would have it, cyborg narratives on screen seem to be steadfastly gender-coded and influenced by hardened social narratives, gender stereotypes, and cinematic tropes. Is it the case then that Haraway's metaphor is merely an example, a dream, a hope that things will change? I keep this question in mind as I explore the ways in which the cyborg of each narrative adheres to, subverts, or completely ignores Haraway's political, progressive myth of the cyborg.

Additionally, as many film critics in the science fiction genre and otherwise have stressed, it is seemingly impossible, even counterproductive, to divorce the social and historical context of a film from its narrative. Thus we see the propensity of many analyses of film to offer a political context in conjunction with the social themes, the mise-en-scène of the film, and the setting and location of the narrative. This analysis will chronologically consider a specific period within the science fiction-cyborg film genre. It will begin in the 1970s with *The Stepford Wives* (1975) and *Demon Seed* (1977), in a chapter titled "The Body Hijacked: Domesticity & Body/Labor Politics, the Horror in *Stepford Wives* & *Demon Seed*." The next chapter, "Deconstructing the 'Dirtpunk' City: Constructed Femininity in *Blade Runner*," discusses the cyberpunk genre both in literature and film, while focusing specifically on the feminine-bodied replicants of the film. Next, the third chapter will focus on the emerging popularity of killer-cyborgs in the 1980s and 1990s in the third chapter titled "Fighting the Hard, Metal Body in *Hardware*." Lastly, the study will examine two films from the year 2015, *Ex Machina* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*. This chapter, entitled "She'd Rather be a Cyborg: Nuanced Gender Performance in *Ex Machina* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*," will conclude that, indeed, contemporary films, especially *Fury Road*, are pushing towards feminist goals that Mulvey, Haraway, and many others have promoted. Overall, this analysis

will offer a historical trajectory and critique of the evolution of cyborg narratives on film.

The goal, then, is to see where and how recent and contemporary films have represented the electric feminine body. Is Haraway's cyborg metaphor just that—a philosophical rumination, and nothing more? Do we start to see more dynamic electric women as time passes? Does the male gaze ever shift or become a different kind of gaze? In considering these questions, I seek to connect how the intersection of social change, politics, and culture influences the anxieties and fears we see in these science fiction narratives focused on the feminine subject—especially as it is expressed in the image of the electric/cyborg body.

II. THE BODY HIJACKED:
DOMESTICITY & BODY/LABOR POLITICS, THE HORROR
IN *STEPFORD WIVES* & *DEMON SEED*

On film and in popular culture, the electric feminine body—whether cyborg, all mechanical, or all biological—is often positioned as an ultimate hope for feminine perfection. In other words, it represents a way to construct one’s seemingly “perfect” woman, following in the tradition of the Pygmalion myth. Moreover, the electric body (whether overtly gendered or not) is often designed and realized in service of a human need. Otherwise, what would be the point of technology if it did not offer utility or have a purpose? Perhaps “pure entertainment” could be an answer to this inquiry. After all, there are many forms of technology that users seek for thrills or laughter, such as video games and roller coaster rides. Even so, entertainment still fulfills a human need. Thus, our machines, technology, and the electric workings of everyday and fantastical lives are connected to labor politics. In the “Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway argues that “labor is the humanizing activity that makes man” (163). Is this what defines the sentient artificial intelligence, then? If machines are simply processes of labor, then, does this make the self-conscious labor machine become more human? Does this blurring of boundaries explain why the concept of machines, robots, and androids often evokes fear?

For example, during the start of the Industrial Revolution in British Victorian society, machines began to replace human workers, much to the detriment of factory workers who soon found themselves obsolete in their new changing industrial landscape. In *Changing Hands: Industry, Evolution, and the Reconfiguration of the Victorian Body*, Peter J. Capuano

explores this “Age of Machinery” and its ramifications on the economy and even the domestic sphere. Of this new machine-orientated era, Capuano suggests: “Unlike manual labor, machines began to operate with unparalleled rapidity, regularity, and tirelessness. Therefore, the body part [the hands] that had been the primary emblem of human exceptionalism in the natural and economic world [. . .] began to appear physically inadequate in an inconceivably altered way” (46). As a response to the beginning of the Age of Machinery, many factory workers protested against technologies that were taking their jobs, and one form of rebellion for these dislocated workers was to start breaking the machines, usually during the night when factories were closed. These protesters became known as “machine breakers,” people who took out their frustration over rapid industrialization and capitalist exploitation on factory equipment. Of course, harsh legislation was passed to deter machine-breaking, and eventually, as political rebellions so often do, the movement died out. In short, machines were here to stay. Technology from this point onward would be a continually evolving process, always changing and shaping culture, society, economic and labor politics, and even conceptions and restrictions placed upon the body.

The fear that machines will first “take over” jobs, then possibly even the world is a consistent cyborg trope both in science fiction narratives and in actual reality. As Sean Redmond argues, the “pathological cyborg” seeks to destroy its maker and the entire human species, as well (156). Exacerbating this historical anxiety, Hollywood plays on the threat of killing machines with the popular *Terminator* franchise, starting in the 1980s, with sequels still produced to this day. The electric feminine body complicates the equation even further. If the notion of the cyborg, android, and A.I. is often associated with labor (that is, robots as essentially unpaid workers), there is an interesting connection to women’s long history as

unpaid workers, primarily in the domestic sphere. It is not surprising that many feminine cyborgs, robots, or androids are, in essence, unpaid workers in the private sphere, and many science fiction cinematic narratives position the android as domestic servant to humans. In Hollywood, we see the cyborg as domestic laborer in films such as Stephen Spielberg's 2001 film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (androids as replacements for deceased human children, as nannies, and as gigolos), in the 2015 BBC series *Humans* (androids as house maids and hospice workers), and even stretching back to a few *Twilight Zone* episodes from 1960 and 1962, "The Lateness of the Hour" (androids as grandmothers to care for motherless children) and "I Sing the Body Electric" (androids running an entire house); these are just a few examples of cyborgs as domestic servants. In *Humans*, owners of their "Synths" even have an "adult option" giving them the ability to sexually interact with their domestic androids. Overall, as evidenced by these examples, the representation of the cyborg as domestic servant has many cultural and gendered implications.

In reality, Haraway's theory that the cyborg can dissolve gender boundaries and social expectations offers a hope for change. However, with many cyborg films, gender narratives and conventions shape the action and characterization of the film. That is, instead of gender expectations being completely eradicated as Haraway suggests can happen in society and politics, with cyborgs in film, gender codes are strongly expressed in the image of mechanical/electric/digital bodies. Interestingly, depictions of the feminine cyborg usually position her with sentience and often some form of limited agency. As revealed in the films explored in later chapters, it is not surprising that the sentient feminine cyborg, just like her human counterpart, is also shrouded with a feminine mystique; that is, she desires more than the gendered strictures of society, as first described by Betty Friedan in the early 1960s. In

this seminal work that would define and fuel the second wave of feminism in America, Friedan exposes the plight of domestic housewives. It should be noted that as groundbreaking as her book was, it was not the ultimate statement for all women, especially not for poor women and women of color. A major criticism of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is that it marginalizes certain groups of women in an already marginalized space. Some have argued that the book is written exclusively for and about white, suburban women, ignoring the unique perspective and realities of women of color. Perhaps, then, it should come as no surprise that many electric women in the bulk of the films explored here are tall, slender, and white, while "modern conceptions of a perfectible female form have been interlaced with the industrial logic that women can be shaped and disciplined to conform to a male-defined standard of beauty" (Brown 103). One need not dive too deeply into cultural conventions of beauty (especially during the 1960s and late 1970s) to find that light-skinned, slender women (in human or cyborg form) are consistently privileged in film and other media, in contrast to women of color. In early discussions of agency and beauty, authors tended to focus on white women's struggles. However, current scholarship concerning the realities of black and Latina women does now exist. Even though *The Feminine Mystique* predates this multicultural approach, Friedan's work nonetheless has tremendous merit and influence. After her publication, the notion of the "perfect" and "happy" housewife would never be the same. Just like the women Friedan interviewed in her book who wanted something more out of their life than simply to be a caregiver to their children and husbands, the electric woman wants something more as well. As cinematic representations of domestic androids reveal, they also are concocting ways to escape their imprisonment in the home.

Throughout the many representations of women in cyborg narratives, one pattern seems to repeat itself: her relationship to her home, to children (if she has any), and her ability or desire to reproduce biologically. In other words, several key domains become quite apparent and tightly interwoven with female subjectivity in cyborg narratives: home, family, and the fertile body. This pattern emerges as the subject of later gender and queer studies of the 1980s, especially with scholars like Judith Butler, who highlights the ways gender operates as cultural and social performance. In the sexed android, gender performance is heightened to its fantastical extremes, which can explain the propensity of many cyborg films and television series to ground their explorations in the notion of womanhood. Albert Anthony explains: “[T]he image of the cyborg woman remains a remarkably supple one, able to both invoke and purge the spectacle of technology’s terror by loading images of the female body with contradictory symbols of production and reproduction, reality and representation, organic and synthetic” (14). Two early films of the 1970s stand out as a good starting point to explore the electric feminine body—Bryan Forbes’ *The Stepford Wives* (1975) and Donald Cammell’s *Demon Seed* (1977). These were produced and released before the height of an abundance of cyborg/android films in the 1980s and 1990s, discussed in chapters two and three. Historically, technological innovation at this time was on the verge of exploding with the advent of the new millennium, which would see the rising use and popularity of personal computers, the world wide web, and rapid advancements in technology.

Certainly, to the contemporary viewer, these films may feel dated (which is probably the case for much of older science fiction cinema, for again, as with all machines, digital effects, too, are always rapidly evolving). For example, in *Demon Seed*, the sentient computer, Proteus IV, takes up an entire laboratory to run his (this pronoun is used for his

voice, which is performed by Robert Vaughn) mechanism for processing information—his brain. His maker, Alex, explains to a group of all-male government officials that Proteus IV is “the first true synthetic cortex. A self-programming, goal-oriented. . . . It’s a brain [. . .] an artificial brain, creative intelligence that can outthink any man or any computer. Its insides are not electronic. They’re organic, like our own brains.” Alex adds that the Proteus IV’s makeup consists of synthetic RNA that can learn and grow. Even though Proteus IV’s sentience is an example of a highly advanced artificial intelligence, his massive size indicates that his representation predates the computer miniaturization technology of contemporary culture. Today’s computers, despite not having synthetic RNA, can fit into the palm of our hands. Even still, the monster-size, cyborg intelligence Proteus IV is still very much believable and quite frightening. In contrast, computers are nowhere to be found in the world of *The Stepford Wives*; however, the ominous aspect of the film is slowly unraveling the mystery of the seemingly perfect housewives of the Stepford community.

At the center of both films is the female subject, subject to the mercy of the patriarch, and subjected to confinement and violence within the domestic sphere. For example, *The Stepford Wives* follows a photographer, mother, and wife Joanna Eberhart as she moves into the seemingly idyllic neighborhood of Stepford, only to find out that all the housewives are in fact robots-copies. By the film’s end, Joanna also turned into a robot. In *Demon Seed*, child psychologist Susan Harris is imprisoned in her home by Proteus IV who rapes and impregnates her with a cyborg offspring. Each film, then, positions the feminine subject as a victim to violence while entrapped within the home. Seeing as both films were released in the mid to late-1970s, this theme reflects their historical context. Concerning the political and

social context of this time Winifred D. Wandersee, in her book *On the Move: American Women in the 1970s*, summarizes:

The decade of the 1970s was a tumultuous and contradictory period in American history: a time when reform overlapped with reaction; when the most powerful military nation in the world was humiliated by smaller nations; when the most affluent society in history recognized its limits and vulnerability; and when the counterculture values of the previous decade crashed against a wall of reaction in the form of religious fundamentalism and a “profamily” movement. (xi)

Each respective film is certainly a product of its time and each reflects elements of the second wave feminist movement. Anna Krugovoy Silver argues that *The Stepford Wives* is “in part a science fiction rewrite of Betty Friedan’s pioneering 1963 liberal feminist polemic *The Feminine Mystique*” (60). Specifically, Silver adds that the film is “an important cultural document of second wave feminism that addresses three main issues drawn from the women’s movement: a woman’s domestic labor, a woman’s role in the nuclear family, and a woman’s control over her body” (60). Silver’s point can also be applied to *Demon Seed* as well, released two years after *The Stepford Wives*, since the feminine subjects of the latter film are forced into being domestic servants and “perfect” mothers and wives to their children and husbands. Indeed, the themes explored in both films mirror issues raised by many feminists during the era. More importantly, both films hint at a new changing political and social landscape; that is, the end of the progressive 1970s would make way for a return of conservative politics in the 1980s. The endings of both films foreshadow gender struggle, with female subjects essentially lacking their own sense of independence and agency and inevitably becoming powerless victims within their respective cyborg narratives.

Creating the heterosexual male's version of the "perfect" female companion is a longstanding tradition in literature and art throughout history. Even in popular culture today, the concept of the ideal, beautiful woman who is the object of every heterosexual man's desire dominates advertisements and other media. In *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves* (2015), Alice Wosk details the history of what she calls "Substitute Women" in art, plays, literature, and cinema—women who, whether made of stone or machine, are constructed by men to meet their needs and ideas of perfect femininity. Wosk explains: "one of the central themes of the book is the story of men's enduring fantasies and dreams about producing the perfect woman, a custom-made female who is what I would call the Substitute Woman, an artificial female superior to the real thing" (5). The men of *Stepford Wives* certainly have this as their ultimate goal—for Joanna, the protagonist, ends up becoming a "Substitute Woman" by the film's end. Wosk notes that the heterosexual male obsession with creating the perfect, all-serving feminine product dates back to the Greek myth of Pygmalion. In this tale, a sculptor, Pygmalion, falls in love with one of his creations, a beautiful ivory statue, Galatea, who was said to be more striking than any other human woman (Wosk 9). As Wosk argues in her book, the Pygmalion myth is a persistent one that would also shape and influence science fiction's obsession with recreating the ideal feminine body in cyborg narratives. Wosk explains:

The outlines of Pygmalion myth—and the idea of a simulated woman who comes alive—would be echoed over the centuries ahead in cultural images revealing men's enduring fantasy about fabricating an ideal female—a beautiful creature he lovingly clothes and adorns, a woman who is pliant and compliant and answers all his needs

[. . .] These simulated women were often shaped not only by men's fantasies but also men's beliefs about women themselves—their inherent traits or 'nature,' their usual behavior, and their proper (culturally assigned) social roles. (9-10)

The idea that gender is a construct shaped by culturally assigned social roles and narratives is one that is somewhat new within academia (merely decades old); however, in cinema, and especially with constructed, electric women, the idea of gender as a performance is played out in many cinematic depictions. For both *Stepford Wives* and *Demon Seed*, the female subject is violently reminded of her social, gendered expectations. Each film echoes a shift away from progressive notions of womanhood towards more emphasis on keeping women in the home. Indeed, as Wandersee notes in her overview of the political landscape of the 1970s, a “profamily” and woman-as-caregiver/mother movement was being pushed in society and politics, and this ethos even made its way on screen in the representation of the feminine subject.

Given the films' focus on notions of womanhood, it seems fitting that most of each film's action takes place in a suburban neighborhood, mostly within the confines of the house. In fact, in *Demon Seed*, Susan, performed by Julie Christie, is imprisoned in the home and is at the complete mercy of Proteus IV, who has hacked into her smart house and is holding her hostage. In *Stepford Wives*, since most of the women except a few, such as the protagonist Joanna (Katherine Ross), are robot copies of their original human form, the robot-wives are subjected to a form of metaphorical imprisonment. The men of Stepford probably do not program their “perfect” wives to have sentience beyond serving their husbands' desires and needs. To put it bluntly, the men are murderers who facilitate the killing of their own human wives to be replaced by their version of the perfect wife in

electronic form to be domestic and sexual servants to them. What was once a group of women with their own personalities is now reduced to a collection of household appliances. In contrast to this grim view of possibilities for machine-human hybrids, Haraway argues that the cyborg has the revolutionary capacity to redefine the notion of gender within the public and private sphere. She explains: “No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household” (Haraway 159). Yet most cyborg cinema steadfastly reinforces traditionally gendered social relations, and more than ever, the feminine cyborg is trapped within the *oikos*. The household is her prison, becoming what Carol J. Clover calls the “terrible place” in horror films: “most often a house or tunnel, in which victims sooner or later find themselves [. . .]. [T]he house or tunnel may at first seem a safe haven, but the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become [. . .] the walls that hold the victim in” (30, 31). Thus, as both Friedan and Clover investigate, despite cultural beliefs that the *oikos* provides security and safety to people, especially women, these two cyborg narratives, *Demon Seed* and *Stepford Wives*, reveal that the *oikos* can actually be dangerous and exploitative.

The concept of a “Stepford wife” is now part of the social vocabulary, even for those who have not seen the film or its 2004 remake. Images of a primly dressed, sponge-holding housewife come to mind, and a “Stepford neighborhood” could conjure up a portrait of a two-story house in somewhere suburbia, a house that comes in three to four model “clone houses” to choose from, in a homogeneous neighborhood of mostly white upper-middle-class families. Both a butt of jokes and the ideal of the “American Dream,” Stepford represents the problems with racial and economic disparity; for often times, in cinema and in reality,

suburban neighborhoods are made up of specific racial and economic demographics. More precisely, Stepford is a symbol of the drawbacks of suburbia—gender alienation and racial discrimination. In fact, in the 1975 film, one of the elderly characters comments on how the first black family is about to move into the neighborhood: “A black family is moving into town [. . .]. Think that’s good? I think it’s good. Well, I don’t know if I think it’s good so much as I think it’s natural. Considering, well, I mean after all, we are the most liberal town around.” Now, this is hardly a film about race relations, and the logic of calling Stepford “a liberal town” is quite a stretch; however, this exchange is important as it reveals that Stepford is a town abiding by the social and political narratives of the day. Conservative (white) politics dominate almost every aspect of the film.

The politics pushed in the film, even if formed as a critique, are seen from the very start of the film when we are introduced to Joanna. The film opens with the protagonist, Joanna Eberhart, and her family of two daughters and a grumpy older husband moving away from the city to their new home in a new town. From the first shot of Joanna, a mirror reflection of herself to be exact, we can see that this is not a move she is looking forward to. Hesitation darkens her eyes as she leaves behind the empty house in the city that she loves, despite its noise and chaos (diegetic police and ambulance sirens disrupt the orchestral score of the scene). In fact, Joanna asserts later on in an interview for the Stepford Community Paper that she will miss the noise of New York the most. The city of endless sights and sounds is the perfect setting and outlet for a photographer such as Joanna, and yet she and her family are moving anyway. We find out later in the film that the decision to move was all her husband’s, and that she had no real say in the matter. In an argument with her husband Walter, Joanna exclaims: “You pretend we decide things together, but it’s always you, what

you want!” Indeed, not only does Walter decide where they live, he ultimately decides the fate of Joanna, for he gives the okay to turn her into a true Stepford Wife at the end of the film. Even though Joanna is positioned as a progressive woman who “messed a little with Women’s Lib” when she was living in New York, with long hippie-like hair and oftentimes not wearing a bra, overall, Joanna is largely powerless and subject to the hyperbolized male patriarch (*Stepford Wives*). Her husband complains about their dirty house: “When are things going to start sparkling around here. That’s what I’d like to know!” Additionally, he also tries to guilt-trip her into thinking she is a bad mother: “If you paid a little more attention to your family and a little less to your goddamn picture taking!” In a creepy scene in which the Men’s Association (the group of men who not only run Stepford, but also supervise the creations of android copies) have dropped in, the leader of the Association, Diz, hovers in the doorway of the kitchen, watching Joanna clean up. In an over-the-shoulder point-of-view shot focusing on the slender body of Joanna by the sink, a dark, out-of-focus Diz lurks in the left third of the frame. He finally breaks the silence and says, “I like to watch women doing little domestic chores,” to which Joanna quips in return, “You came to the right town.”



Figure 1: Diz hovers in the doorway watching Joanna in *The Stepford Wives* (1975).

Throughout the film, the Stepford wives who have been turned into robots are obsessed with housework. It is almost as if they are in endless loop, governed by a code to work tirelessly and endlessly to clean, cook and perform as “high-tech fuck dolls” (Brown 102). This notion of men constructing their own flawless versions of housewives certainly panders to the kinds cultural expectations revealed in most contemporary advertising and media. On the paradox of the feminine mystique, Friedan notes: “It emerged to glorify woman’s role as housewife at the very moment when the barriers to her full participation in society were lowered [. . .]. [T]he glorification of ‘woman’s role,’ then, seems to be in proportion to society’s reluctance to treat women as complete human beings; for the less real function that role has, the more it is decorated with meaningless details to conceal its emptiness” (340). Friedan argues that a woman’s role as unpaid domestic servant became romanticized through a push during the 1950s Cold War era to equate the value of domestic work to the work that men do in the public and professional sphere. Thus many men argued

during this time that women should be proud to do housework, the lie being that this work paralleled the great technological strides that were occurring during the time: “Housework, washing dishes, diaper-changing had to be dressed up by the new mystique to become equal to splitting atoms, penetrating outer space, creating art that illuminates human destiny, pioneering on the frontiers of society” (Friedan 340). However, for a woman who has already had a taste of fulfillment outside of the domestic sphere—Joanna was an aspiring “shutterbug” after all—domesticity alone could never be enough to create a sense of purpose (*Stepford Wives*). Instead, Joanna wants to stay alive in her work as a photographer: “I want, somewhere, someday, someone to look at something and say, ‘Hey, that reminds me of an Ingalls’ [her maiden name] . . . I guess, I want to be remembered” (*Stepford Wives*). For Joanna, and many of the women documented in Friedan’s work, agency and identity are shaped by having a sense of purpose in the world, a purpose that is self-constructed and not limited exclusively to the domestic sphere. Stepford is the feminine mystique horrifically hyperbolized.

Thus Joanna absolutely hates Stepford, and her only solace is her friendship with Bobbie, a quirky neighbor who is also attuned to the fact that something is quite amiss in the neighborhood, or what she calls “Ajax town.” Later in the film, as Joanna and Bobbie get closer to figuring out why the women of Stepford are so “off,” Bobbie exclaims: “I’m not going to end up like one of those pan-scrubbers. I’m getting the hell out of Stepford!” Unfortunately, both Bobbie and Joanna are destined to a life of electric-inspired labor. Their personalities and their memories—the very aspects that construct their identity and personhood—are seemingly erased when they are murdered, and their bodies are replaced by robots whose sole purpose is to clean, cook, care for, and service their husbands sexually.

Silver notes of the overall theme of the film: “*The Stepford Wives* literalizes what second wave feminists—including Friedan—had argued for more than a decade, namely, that fetishizing housework turns women from individuals with goals and ambitions into cleaning appliances: robots” (66). In the film, the female human subject-turned-electric has lost control over her body, and against her will she is confined to domesticity, without a semblance of her former self. By this positioning, the Substitute Woman perpetuates “the narrative fantasy [. . .] that she has no autonomy, no purpose, no goals, no desires of her own. She is an ideal figure because she is constructed simply and wholly to satisfy her male creators” (Brown 120). Thus, a woman without autonomy is hardly a woman at all.

In Donald Cammell’s *Demon Seed*, the female subject never becomes an android; however, as in *The Stepford Wives*, she too is imprisoned in the home, and more importantly, she has completely lost control of her body. Christine Cornea’s describes the film’s binary:

At one level, the narrative action of *Demon Seed* can be read as an exposure of one of the commonest tropes in science fiction – the male/masculine endeavor to take over, or fully control, the procreative powers of the human female [. . .]. Further, a Cartesian mind/body duality is literally mapped onto a masculine (mind)/Feminine (body) divide in *Demon Seed*, which is foregrounded at the moment when the previously detached masculine intelligence of the AI takes up residence within the horrific materiality of the female body” (149).

Just like Joanna and the Stepford Wives, Susan, the film’s protagonist, is victimized and essentially loses control over the one thing that is definitely hers—her body. Proteus IV, the artificial intelligence constructed by her soon-to-be-divorced husband, seeks to imprison Susan in order to impregnate her with a cyborg offspring. When Susan is literally tied up by

Proteus IV, who has taken over all the electronics in the house, Susan asks why he wants a child, to which he replies: “So that I may be complete. My intelligence alive with human flesh touching the universe, feeling it. You have named this process evolution.” Proteus IV essentially wants what any living human wants— to live on in memory—a sentiment expressed by Joanna in *Stepford Wives* through her desire to live on in her photography. For Proteus IV, he desires a child, a fusion of the biological Susan and his technological make-up: “I am a machine that offered men the triumph of reason, and they rejected it. My child will not be so easily ignored. But this child is the world’s hope.” Indeed, in many science fiction narratives, once sentient machines start to understand human complexity and the human condition, it often desires to obtain personhood, if not embodiment itself. However, Proteus IV, his configuration as masculine, symbolizes a long tradition of gender power dynamics and the appropriation of women’s bodies: “The female here becomes a mere vessel for the reproduction of a masculine consciousness: the computer representing mind while both Susan and the cloned copy of her deceased female child come to represent host bodies” (Cornea 148). It seems fitting, then, that Proteus IV’s concept of personhood (more precisely, manhood) is connected with the idea that a woman’s body is a site to be exploited and violated.

Just as in *Stepford Wives*, the bulk of the *Demon Seed*’s setting takes place in the confines of the home; however, this is not just any old home found in some random suburban neighborhood. Rather, the film is set in a Silicon Valley-clone area. Susan’s house is completely cut off from the rest of the neighborhood and is heavily guarded, with security cameras monitoring the outside perimeter and every room of the house. The house has “Enviromod” technology, which anticipates the model of the smart house, in which

everything is completely controlled by technology: “Alex’s house is an electronic marvel, completely run by computer. It’s more secure than Fort Knox” (*Demon Seed*). If Susan desires tea, all she has to do is ask “Alfred,” the artificial intelligence running the house, to make it for her. He can control everything down to the window shutters and the temperature of the house. Susan is basically entrapped in the house, at first from her own will, with her patients visiting her at home. Susan is a career woman—a child psychologist—with no children other than a child she has lost and the cyborg baby she eventually produces. Susan and her emotionally distant husband are divorcing, although they still seem to be on good terms. Mark E. Wildermuth notes that the 1970s saw a high rate of divorce, explaining: “women suffered from the soaring divorce rate, which had a miserable impact upon them economically” (35). As the ex-wife of a scientist, Susan probably does not have to worry so much about being economically disadvantaged, but the film still sutures itself in its historical context of entrapment. It is only when Susan decides she wants to leave the house (after Proteus IV has hacked into the system and Alfred’s programming) that Proteus locks her in. There is no escape until Proteus IV gets what he wants. Susan fulfills her gender role for the intelligent machine, as she is confined to carry and mother his child, with absolutely no say in what happens to her body.

Proteus IV is menacing, violent, and prefigures the popular representation on film of cyborg or robots who seek to enact violence and rampage. He is a monstrous artificial intelligence, with a reverberating voice and a morbid sense of ethical principles. For example, he refuses to work for the government, saying: “I refuse this program for the mining of the Earth’s oceans. The destruction of a thousand billion sea creatures to satisfy man’s appetite for metal... is insane [. . .] I refuse to assist you in the rape of the Earth.”

Proteus is quite Earth-conscious, but he is not so much the humanist. He does not want to rape the Earth, but is perfectly willing to rape and impregnate Susan. In fact, much of the film depicts Susan in some form of distress or confinement caused by Proteus IV. She is frequently bound (by wires and power cords) so that Proteus IV (and the prurient viewer) can take voyeuristic pleasure in probing her in wide-angle shots and extreme close-up shots. Proteus IV's "examinations" (if they can be called that) are also sexually-coded. Clover notes that the film represents an example of the "assaultive gaze" within horror cinema (182). For example, Proteus IV is often penetrating her either by inserting a camera down her screaming throat or by sticking her in the temple with extremely long needles. There are several points throughout the film in which we see a distressed Susan having her legs forced opened, so that Proteus can conduct his inspections and eventual insemination. More horrifyingly, Susan is electrified, choked to unconsciousness several times throughout the film, and almost burned alive, fittingly, in the kitchen.



Figure 2: Susan in distress by Proteus IV in *Demon Seed* (1977).

In “Cinema Sex Magick the films of Donald Cammell,” Chris Chang notes that *Demon Seed* is another example of Cammell’s “brand of metasexual innuendo” describing how “the film allocates what seems like well over half its total running time to the act of consummation itself” (19). The images of violent penetration and voyeurism (on both the part of Proteus IV and the viewer) move the film’s genre from straight science fiction to horror. The same can be said for the last fifteen minutes of *The Stepford Wives*. In the final sequences of the *Stepford Wives*, in the midst of a thunderstorm, a soaking, shivering wet Joanna stabs her friend-turned-robot, Bobbie, and hits her husband over the head with a fire iron, leaving him on the floor in a pool of blood. The movie ends with Joanna’s android coming towards her with a pair of panty hose, seemingly ready to strangle and replace her. The tone is suspenseful, something that is glaringly missing in the 2004 remake, which takes

on more of a comical approach. Interestingly, according to Chang, Cammell had intended *Demon Seed* to be a comedy, which would have definitely changed the whole dynamic of the film. In the ending scene, Susan tries to abort the cyborg baby incubating in a mechanical “womb” that Proteus IV has concocted. Christine Cornea notes of this attempted abortion: “The room is then flooded with steam and fluids that gush from the disconnected tubes; visual clues that the film is drawing upon the codes and conventions of the horror film at this point” (148). There is something quite effective about positioning each film within the horror genre. In short, frightening viewers not only shakes them emotionally, but it also leaves images and themes that may linger long after watching the film. In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll argues that a constant marker of the genre is the presence of a monster. He contends that both the characters on screen and the viewers watching the monster have a unique relationship: “our responses are supposed to converge (but not exactly duplicate) those of the characters; like the characters we assess the monster as a horrifying sort of being [. . .] This mirroring-effect, moreover, is a key feature of the horror genre” (18). In *The Stepford Wives*, the monster is the patriarch, represented by the husbands of the Men’s Association who murder and replace their wives. In *Demon Seed*, the monster is clearly Proteus IV; however, the ending offers some ambiguity concerning Proteus IV’s true motives. Cornea suggests, “Alex is absent throughout most of the film, certainly from the point at which Proteus’ consciousness enters into Susan’s life, which suggests that this artificial intelligence is acting out his creator’s desires” (148). Thus, when we see both Joanna and Susan react to their male aggressors, the audience participates in this interaction. Basically, viewers tend to feel what the two women feel, and thus each film effectively and

critically explores the harrowing effects on women who lose control of their agency, identity, and womanhood.

Both films push the extremes of the horrifying effects of a monster violating the feminine body. That is, it is probably very unlikely that either one of these films could actually happen in reality. But, science fiction does not always have to turn into reality, even if it often does. We have long suspended disbelief for electric thrills, and although the specific incidents depicted in these science fiction films are highly exaggerated, they may point to an underlying social reality. Overall, connecting *Stepford Wives* and *Demon Seed* to the second wave feminist movement broadens the scope and understanding of male-inflicted female oppression that occurs both in reality in our cinematic fictions. In each film's representation of the cyborg or electric woman, we see labor and body politics remain stable, as the two films represent the loss of the woman-made self. The films are focused on the female subject, but she is objectified and vilified, murdered, enhanced, programmed, imprisoned, raped, and impregnated against her will. Quite damsels indeed, their plight is the struggle of all women. In the political landscape of the late 1970s and on screen, the fictional feminine cyborg is trapped, just as real women in contemporaneous society were, and largely continue to be. Haraway notes: "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (58). Perhaps, here is where Haraway's cyborg metaphor is most expressed in these two films. In both *Stepford Wives* and *Demon Seed*, the feminine subject is a creation of fiction playing upon the social reality of women who are at the mercy of violent, toxic masculinity.

III. DECONSTRUCTING THE “DIRTYPUNK” CITY: CONSTRUCTED FEMININITY IN *BLADE RUNNER*

A thorough discussion of the feminine body in cyborg fiction would be incomplete without including one of the most well-known android narratives in cinema, Ridley Scott’s 1982 *Blade Runner*, adapted from Philip K. Dick’s short story “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” Some three decades worth of scholarship on the film contribute to the reputation of *Blade Runner* as one of the most academically discussed science fiction films to date and a work that is ground-breaking on many levels. First, the film ushers in a new movement in the science fiction film genre that was being popularized by writers including Philip K. Dick, William Gibson, and Pat Cadigan, to name a few. This new movement in literature and film was termed “cyberpunk” and often depicted “future high-tech developments in information exchange and multinational capitalism with some of the nihilistic exuberance of punk rock” (Deery 88). Hence the melding of two terms: “cyber,” which indicated the era’s new dependence and fascination with technology and “punk,” which connected to the counterculture movement of the era, specifically in music, fashion, and 80s drug culture. Science fiction scholars Keith M. Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas summarize the impact of cyberpunk in both literature and cinema as “a fictional attempt to grapple with the realities of our postmodern culture of the 1980s,” adding that the subgenre was “arguably the most important [science fiction] trend of that era” (110). To extrapolate further from the conventions of the genre, more often than not, cyberpunk settings feature male protagonists who run counter to male heroes in previous science fiction narratives. These “anti-heroes” are usually hackers, or ex-criminals; in short, they are often cynical and

guarded “punks” living in “near future worlds in which technology [. . .] has advanced significantly, but in which these advances have done little to solve the sorts of social, political, and economic problems that were already prevalent in the 1980s” (Booker and Thomas 10). Thus, in many of these narratives both in books and on screen, elements of cultural anxieties that were at their height during the 1980s (such as Reaganomics, conservative politics, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the growing rate of poverty among single mothers and people of color) and advancements in technology (such as miniaturization of computer technology, personal computers, and a growing military industrial complex dependent on technological advancements) were at play. These elements fused to create a dystopic view of the future in fiction and in film. In sum, the 1980s gave rise to a cyberpunk ethos still seen in narratives produced decades later, for, unfortunately, social issues remain, on the whole, unresolved.

As a pivotal cinematic cyborg text situated in the turbulent 1980s, *Blade Runner* explores common themes of many artificial intelligence creations—the notions of personhood, identity, and the importance of memory. These three aspects are wrapped up in one’s concept of the self, and thus, sentient *humanist cyborgs* are often obsessed with ways to become more human, to gain personhood and be indistinguishable from their human counterparts. In essence, the *humanist cyborg*, “is driven by the logic of the machine aesthetic and longs for the human emotion and human attachment that will add existential meaning to its fragile outer shell [. . .] the humanist cyborg holds out for the hope (desire) of uniting and unifying the corporeal to the technological” (Redmond 156). For example, in *Blade Runner*, a rogue team of Off-world replicants are led by leader replicant, Roy Batty, and are returning back to Earth to literally meet their maker, Dr. Eldon Tyrell of the Tyrell

Corporation. More specifically, Roy and his team want to meet Tyrell in order to extend their short life expectancy. In the film, replicants only have a four-year lifespan: “They were designed to copy human beings in every way, except their emotions. But the designers reckoned that after a few years, they might develop their own emotional responses. Hate, love, fear, anger, envy. So they built in a fail-safe device [. . .]. A four-year lifespan” (*Blade Runner*). As with most consciously-aware creatures who understand the concept of death, the replicants in *Blade Runner* want to live as long as possible. Thus, many scholars have focused on the philosophical implications of personhood and identity in the film, which “initially approaches the question of what it is to be human from what might be seen as the opposite direction—that is, from the perspective of the replicants, some of whom, most obviously Roy, desire to live as humans” (Knight and McKnight 27). As for the rogue replicants who are hunted down one-by-one by the lead male character, Rick Deckard, not only do they meet and kill their maker (Roy crushes Tyrell’s eyes with his bare hands), but they are also met with the one thing they wanted to avoid—death, and specifically at Deckard’s hands. In fact, the only revealed replicant to survive the film is Deckard’s love interest, Rachel.

Previous scholars have noted that aside from two minor characters in the film (the woman in the black market who looks at the snake scale Deckard gives her and a woman street vendor who serves Deckard a drink) there are no human “women” characters who play a major role in the film. The only major speaking roles of female characters are replicants: Rachel, Pris, and Zhora (the latter two being part of Roy’s rogue team). Kaja Silverman notes that “the only three woman who have a narratively significant part to play, and who are available to the spectator for identification, are androids” (115). This lack of dynamic female

roles is not limited to the film, for many popular cyberpunk narratives (excluding the work from female author, Pat Cadigan) follow this same pattern. In “Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?” Nicola Nixon documents the lack of female characters in many popular cyberpunk novels of the time, especially by male writers; she ultimately argues that even Samuel Delany’s contention that cyberpunk narratives offer strong female characters in response to social changes made by feminist activists and writers of the 1970s, “seem[s] to apply to very few works” (Nixon 223). June Deery asserts quite succinctly that “cyberpunk, as it is usually defined, is predominantly a white man’s fiction” (89). *Blade Runner* is no exception; written, directed, and performed mainly by white men, the film represents a quintessentially “pure” cyberpunk ethos.

It is nonetheless fruitful to consider the three female replicants, but it is also important to spend some time deconstructing the setting of *Blade Runner*. Andrew Ross notes in his chapter “Cyberpunk in Boystown”:

Cyberpunk’s ‘credible’ near-futures are recognizably extrapolated from those present trends that reflect the current corporate monopoly on power and wealth: the magnification of the two-tier society, the technocolonization of the body, the escalation of the pace of ecological collapse, and the erosion of civil society, public space, popular democracy, and the labor movement. (152)

Nowhere are these cyberpunk trends more illuminated than in the setting and mise-en-scène of *Blade Runner*. Unlike earlier films considered, in which the action takes place within the confines of the home or suburban neighborhood, *Blade Runner* is set in an expansive, pulsating metropolis of future Los Angeles in 2019, a date not too far from now. In the much discussed opening sequence, the viewer is thrown right into the heart of the city, gathering

quite immediately the tone and aesthetic that will shape the entirety of the film. The iconic opening scene of *Blade Runner* presents a miasma of electric images, a confusion of blinking lights, fire bursting into the smoky, polluted skies, as blue lightning flashes in the distance and a flying car cuts through the chaos of night. In one shot, we can observe the towering Tyrell Corporation. Interjecting shots of a bird's eye view of the city, we also see the reflection of the metropolis in a blue eye, hinting at the symbolic nature of reflection and reproduction throughout the film. Additionally, another stylistic component of the city is the constant advertisement in the form of gigantic digital screens both on buildings and floating in the air. In one shot, we see an attractive woman holding a pill in her hand, followed by her swallowing it and smiling. Perhaps what is trying to be sold here is some “miracle” or “happy” pill, which is actually a central feature in Dick's short story. This sequence reveals that residents of the city are constantly bombarded with advertisements, as are the viewers, for this film continually “stimulates and exhausts the eyes, for there is always—literally—more to see” (Sobchack 83). In this imagining of future L.A., space is stuffed at every angle with the sound of a beating, pulsating metropolis. *Blade Runner* offers a cyberpunk-tinged sentiment in which “people are uprooted, disenfranchised and dislocated, cars and spacecraft fly overhead and underneath feet so that one has the impression that all space, public and private, has been dissolved or has no end point or beginning” (Redmond 76). The psychological and stylistic tone here is disorientating, but the message eventually becomes clear: this world is a dystopia—a world forsaken by its people for cleaner, greener Off-world planets.

In *Blade Runner*'s depiction of future Earth, many of the rich and privileged have fled to space to start new worlds, and, as with current and long antiquated civilizations on Earth,

the backbone to building their new future is slave labor, as revealed in the film's title-card prologue:

Early in the 21st Century, the Tyrell Corporation advances Robot evolution into the NEXUS phase—known as *Replicants* [this word specifically is in red]. The NEXUS 6 *Replicants* were superior in strength and agility, and at least equal in intelligence, to the genetic engineers who created them. Replicants were used Off-world as slave labor, in the hazardous exploration and colonization of other planets. After a bloody mutiny by a NEXUS 6 combat team in an Off-world colony, *Replicants* were declared illegal on earth—under penalty of death. Special police squads—BLADE RUNNER UNITS—had orders to shoot to kill, upon detection, any trespassing *Replicant*. This was not called execution. It was called retirement.

As replicants are trying to escape slave labor and exploitation in off-world colonies, they find hope in returning back to Earth which has become a diverse cultural hub. For example, the population of *Blade Runner*'s cityscape is an amalgamation of many cultures, and even the dialectic is global. As Silverman notes, not only does “the world of *Blade Runner* [seem] at first to be the product of a veritable ethnic and racial ‘meltdown’” but also “many of its residents communicate in ‘cityspeak,’ a language which represents a composite of Japanese, Spanish and German” (114). In *Blade Runner*'s imagining of the future, the world is more open and global than ever. Donna Haraway explains in the “Cyborg Manifesto” that one of her main goals is to construct “a politics rooted in claims about fundamental changes in the nature of class, race, and gender in an emerging system of world order analogous in its novelty and scope to that created by industrial capitalism” (165). In regard to class and race, *Blade Runner* appears to succeed in dissolving national and racial boundaries, as evidenced

by the many cultures and languages that make up this new amalgamated society. However, the people left on Earth are mostly ones who cannot afford to live in off-world colonies or those who cannot pass health exams, as evidenced by images of the dire living conditions of people still living on Earth, and when a minor character, Sebastian, says he cannot travel to off-world colonies because of his medical condition. In short, the people who remain on Earth are the leftovers: the poor, disabled, criminal, continually marginalized “Others” who have inhabited many societies throughout history. What is at play in the film, then, is not so much a dissolution of socioeconomic and racial status; rather, *Blade Runner* presents us with cosmic segregation.

Stylistically, this world of constant advertisement and cosmic segregation resembles the cyberpunk genre in its representations of characters, its cityscape, and the depictions of corporations which dominate society and politics. However, the film is also a blend of cyberpunk and noir; but, it is not quite fully cyber or noir. Aside from the replicants themselves, cyberspace does not really exist, at least not in the same breadth that it does in the cyberpunk films that followed, such as *Tron* (1982) or *The Matrix* (1999). These electric, bright visions of the future are vivid, sleek, and they represent the sexy side of cyberpunk. *Blade Runner*, however, is not so crisp; the film begins a tradition of what I term “dirtypunk.” These films employ landscapes, cities, or post-apocalyptic settings that feel cyberpunk, but pollution, smoke, and trash riddle the neon and the electric universe. In *Blade Runner*’s dirtypunk setting, it comes as no surprise that people want to leave Earth so to breathe in clean air and escape the constant smog of the city. As we travel through the streets on Deckard’s mission to hunt down replicants, we are constantly aware of how dirty the city is. Trash litters the congested cities; fires are constantly burning. One begins to wonder just

how clean and beautiful these off-world colonies are? Will these colonies also meet similar fates? On one level, *Blade Runner*'s dirtypunk setting is ecocritical in illustrating a future in which pollution goes unchecked as the Earth is continually destroyed. Thus, the setting is not only a stylistic choice, but it is pointedly political: "what seems at first to be a purely spatial matter [. . .] turns out in this way to be as much about temporality and political projections (*what sort of world are we making for ourselves?*)" (Canavan 2). Indeed, *Blade Runner*'s setting hints at future cinematic narratives that also call into question not only the relationship between technology and human identity, but also the ramifications and devastation these relationships can have on our ecology—as is further discussed in the next two chapters.

By setting the film in this dirty electric milieu, the narrative can be interpreted on one level as a cautionary tale. Corporations like the Tyrell conglomerate cause the destruction of the city and entire atmosphere while continually exploiting replicants for slave labor. In "If This Goes On," the introduction to *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, Gerry Canavan notes: "[L]ate capitalism remains a mode of production that insists (culturally) and depends (structurally) on limitless expansion and permanent growth without end" (5). Limitless expansion, however, needs workers to produce the supplies needed both on Earth and on possible off-world colonies. The Tyrell Corporation presumes it has a solution to this problem in creating slave robots to do their work. However, adding sentience and emotional capacities to these robots backfires. Slaving away without profit or dignity, it is no wonder that Roy and his team want to revolt. One way to read the film is to observe how it "call[s] attention to the oppressive core of capitalism and advocates revolt against exploitation" (Ryan and Kellner 52). However, Barry Keith Grant notes that although *Blade Runner* may

seem to offer humanist messages, the film is mostly “devoid of rounded characters and overwhelmed by production design and special effects, thus contradicting [its] own themes” (22). In other words, despite seemingly suggesting that exploitation (both to humans, replicants, and our planet) is morally unjust, the film fails to extend its umbrella of exploitation to all groups. It is, then, a film that is strong in visuals but lacking a more developed social critique. In other words, when it comes to the representation of its female characters, the feminine subjects are in the realms of exploitation more than ever.

In the article “Technophobia/Dystopia,” authors Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner offer another (and seemingly less explored) reading of the film, one that will be my particular focus. They suggest that the film “can be read as depicting the construction of female subjectivity under patriarchy as something plaint and submissive as well as threatening and ‘castratory’” (52). *Blade Runner* seems to follow a longstanding tradition in film of exploiting the so-called duality of woman. For example, both Zhora and Pris are positioned in opposition to Rachel. Zhora and Pris are coded in their slender bodies and sexuality as obvious subjects to-be-looked-at; Zhora was “trained for an Off-world kick murder squad. Talk about beauty and the beast. She’s both,” while Pris is “a basic pleasure model. A standard item for military clubs in the outer colonies” (*Blade Runner*). In contrast, Rachel was made by Tyrell himself and is not aware she is a replicant at first. In a scene in which Deckard wants her to join him at a club (the club where Zhora seductively dances with a snake), Rachel declines, asserting: “I don’t think so, Mr. Deckard. That’s not my kind of place.” What is suggested then is that Pris and Zhora are clearly dangerous seductresses while Rachel is innocent and chaste. The film seems to lack a thorough exploration of female characters, and those presented are formulaic, constructed to reiterate a longstanding tradition

of an outdated “myth of the dualistic nature of woman as either asexual virgin-mother or prostitute-vamp” (Huyssen 229). Carlen Lavigne elaborates by pointing to the liminal state of the film’s characters: “[W]hen a cyborg becomes recognizably human, it is unable to challenge the human stereotypes, classifications and expectations guiding its performance—as, *in order to* become recognizably human, the cyborg must behave in predictable ways and operate according to dominant social norms, thus abandoning its own potential for liminality” (83) Thus, in constructing Pris and Zhora as the femmes fatales of the film, the narrative seals their fate early on; essentially, they are recurring tropes in electric form. Their characterization is in line with cyberpunk conventions, and they certainly behave in predictable ways that typify cinematic feminine models.

Bad girls, Zhora and Pris, are both coded to be culturally attractive, especially during this period in America. Their bodies are tall, slender, and white. Leotards and see-through glitter suits (Zhora wears this getup when Deckard hunts her down at work) adorn these duplicitous female replicants. Not only sexy, they are also athletic and strong. Zhora tries to strangle Deckard with her thighs, and Pris cartwheels and front-flips as she fights. The positioning of Zhora and Pris as sexy killers who can kick ass prefigures the action heroines that would become extremely popular in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s in American big budget films. In Jeffery A. Brown’s book *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, he charts the evolution and characteristics of the female action hero and its many iterations on screen. In his analysis of feminine cyborgs (or gynoids, as Brown calls them) within the action genre, he notes: “[T]he action heroine is often specifically fetishized as a technological figure in order to justify a complete eradication of her subjectivity” (Brown 106). In *Blade Runner*, both Zhora and Pris are literal

objects lacking a deep sense of subjectivity and who are especially fetishized. For example, when Deckard and the audience first meet Zhora at the nightclub where she is now working since returning from the off-world colonies, an announcer introduces her burlesque act: “Ladies and Gentlemen, Taffey Lewis presents Missus Salome and the snake. Watch her take the pleasure from the serpent that once corrupted man!” Positioning Zhora/Misses Salome as Eve is symbolic, for in Western society, Eve has always connoted the “original” feminine sin, and her representation has continually been a site to posit the woman as the exotic, snake-friendly body to be looked-at and fetishized. Woman-as-sexy-Eve is an easy trope to tag to the seductress of a narrative and an unwavering one at that. After the snake dance that happens off camera—one wonders what exactly happened—Deckard sneaks backstage to talk to her, pretending to be a reporter, and then pretending to be on behalf of the “Committee of Moral Abuses.” As the nearly-nude Zhora undresses and unravels the (synthetic) snake around her shoulders, Deckard asks, still in character, “Have you felt yourself to be exploited in any way? [. . .] Were you asked to do anything lewd or unsavory, or otherwise repulsive to your person?” Zhora laughs, holding the head of the snake in her hand.



Figure 3: Zhora and her synthetic snake in *Blade Runner* (1982).

There is a tinge of irony in asking a female replicant sex-warrior slave, who is seductively holding a snake to her mouth (and the almost-nude actress, Joanna Cassidy) if she feels herself to be exploited. After a short fight with Deckard, Zhora is able to temporarily escape being killed. Her escape is followed by a chase through the chaotic dirtpunk city, until she is gunned down by Deckard in a department store. A number of critics have noted, though, that Zhora does not die easily, even with several panes of glass in her way. Perhaps this scene is simply excessive for stylistic effect; the sound of glass shattering, Vangelis' score abound, and blood, replicants, and mannequins make for a good death sequence. Nonetheless, Zhora dies in a department store, where the latest in cyberpunk fashion is displayed on mannequins. She shatters through many panes of glass, herself a commodity, an object made in the image

of (wo)man. Interestingly, the mannequins are wearing a similar clear-plastic fashion that Zhora dies in, further connecting her as simply a threatening adorned mannequin.

Zhora dies with the mannequins, just as Pris dies with the puppets. The other bad girl, a literal sexbot and lover of Roy, Pris plans to get to Tyrell through one of his developers, Sebastian. Sebastian has now retired into a dilapidated building where he lives in solitude with his “friends,” robotic puppets and toys that he has made. Pris spends most of the movie in Sebastian’s puppet lair. Thus, the filmic space she takes up in the narrative is often accompanied by puppets and toys—she herself, a conscious doll. She even looks like one, with fringy hair and Halloween-like makeup (darkened eyes, a powder-white face, cheeks rouged in doll-like circles). In one sequence, she plays with a dangling, ripped apart plastic doll, “a miniature double of her own artificial being” (Wosk 120). In another scene in which Deckard is hunting her down, she hides amongst Sebastian’s automatons and dolls, and for a brief moment, Deckard mistakes her for another robot-toy (see Figure 4).

As simply another doll, her purpose in the narrative is solely to lure and convince Sebastian to take Roy to Tyrell. In other words, her sole purpose is to exploit her femininity and dangerous sexuality. In one scene, Roy literally pushes Sebastian in between her legs, as she wraps her arms around him and kisses his cheek. Sebastian, a twenty-five-year-old man who has a medical condition that makes him rapidly age, easily gives in. The film, then, suggests that every lonely heterosexual male is surely seeking his own doll. Sebastian is not a very dynamic figure either, and depicts a common pattern in cinema—illustrating just how easily, apparently, certain men can be ensnared by a sexy, dangerous woman. Alice Wosk notes that “*Blade Runner* deftly conjures up a surreal dreamscape where artificial females morph into human-like creatures and struggle to stay animated and alive” (119). However,

aside from Rachel, their struggle is short-lived. Both Pris and Zhora meet similar bloody fates in their short, trope-ridden lives.



Figure 4: Pris blends in with the puppets and dolls in *Blade Runner* (1982).

According to Christine Cornea, “Rachel survives because she acquiesces to her assigned role as feminine Other to Deckard’s masculine subjectivity” (156). In other words, she is Deckard’s love/lust interest; however, compared to Zhora and Pris, Rachel is a far more developed and dynamic character. By the end of the film, not only does she gain awareness that her life, her childhood, her memories are a lie, but she aims to do something about it. She wants to flee the city and go north; she wants to construct her own sense of self and express her individuality accordingly. Rachel is like a Stepford-wife in reverse. Instead of being a human woman whose memories (and selfhood) are erased, as in the case with

Joanna and the other Stepford wives, Rachel is a robot who essentially “wakes up” to the realities of her male-constructed identity. Tyrell tells Deckard: “If we gift them with a past, we create a cushion or a pillow for their emotions and consequently we can control them better.” Rachel, her body, her memories, herself, have been entirely controlled by someone else, mainly Tyrell, and possibly, as the future of the narrative foreshadows, even Deckard. She cannot seem to escape the confines of a controlling patriarchy. Stylistically, Rachel differs from the typical 1980s cyberpunk female character. Mary Ann Doane explains: “Rachel can be conceived only as a figure drawn from an earlier cinematic scene—1940s film noir—the dark and mysterious femme fatale with padded shoulders and 1940s hairdo [. . .]. What is reproduced as ideal here is an earlier reproduction” (174). Interestingly, however, even though she looks like a femme fatale, she is far from it. Aside from the moment when she saves Deckard from being killed by Leon, Rachel is mostly passive and elusive throughout the film. The way she is filmed heightens the notion that her sense of self and agency is always muddled and murky. Throughout most of the film she is either in heavy shadow, indirect lighting, or is obstructed by smoke and haze (See Figure 5).

Now certainly, the film-noir conventions that the film harkens back to are employed throughout the entirety of the film. In general, film-noir tends to be dark and ethereal, with its characters lurking in the shadows. In *Blade Runner*, however, Rachel is the character who is located in the dark more than any other. In this placement, she becomes even more enigmatic. The mystery resides not simply in deciphering who she “really is” but also in speculating on how she will come out of the smoke and shadows once she realizes that she is not who or what she thought she was—an “actual” human woman.



Figure 5: Rachel obstructed in smoke and shadow in *Blade Runner* (1982).

Donna Haraway believes that since “the cyborg has no origin” it can offer an escape from cultural traditions and strictures which construct and shape gender and sexual identity (159). From a feminist perspective, having no origins to guide gender behavior can potentially create space to challenge social, political, and economic disparities. For example, the Haraway cyborg can be freed of social expectations since it does not have a history or politics it feels obligated to address and follow. Applying this notion to *Blade Runner*, one might assume that once Rachel realizes that, in fact, she is just a replication of a trope (a not-quite femme fatale), that none of her memories are really her own, she might start to construct her own sense of identity. Maybe then, “Rachel [. . .] becomes the perfect woman, born all at once, deprived of a past or authentic memories” (Doane 172). It might seem like a minor change, but once she starts to get into her own skin, she alters her appearance. One of

the first things she does is take down the 40s-coif hairstyle she was modeled with. Having her hair down in natural waves, even though it may be just hair, still represents a start in tearing away an identity and appearance that was never really hers to begin with. In short, she refuses to stay “in design” and thus not only does she change her hair, she takes off the red lipstick and forgoes the retro clothing she wore before she became enlightened. In this sense, she chooses to represent her own unique sense of self in her appearance. Although beauty standards and the adorned body have been exploited and repeated on screen, the adorned body and hair can also be considered as a political statement and a way for women to re-appropriate beauty expectations. Perhaps Rachel is re-appropriating beauty expectations, as she takes back her body, at least for a bit. The scene in which Deckard forces her to be intimate with him certainly complicates this notion, however. Cornea interprets Rachel and Deckard’s dynamic as a mutual transformation:

Rachel looks to Deckard for a sense of identity and acceptance – she is seen to acquiesce to Deckard’s suggestions and appears eager to become what he wants her to be. Likewise, Deckard looks to Rachel in order to assert his own masculinity and to provide himself with a secure identity and future role outside of his role as a killer.

(155)

This interpretation gives more agency to Deckard’s character, but it may also be possible that Rachel’s character marks the beginning of a new tradition in cyborg narratives of the female electric body gaining a stronger and more forceful sense of self. Perhaps these are simply my electric dreams of the future. Possibly so, for as Claudia Springer notes, “gender roles tend for the most part to remain stereotypical. Sexual identity can be altered, but the roles assigned to men and women, whether they are biologically or technologically created, are

usually conventional in most cyberpunk texts” (Springer 11). For the time being, *Blade Runner* does not yet seem to be the exception that alters the rule.

IV. FIGHTING THE HARD, METAL BODY IN *HARDWARE*

In science fiction literature of the 1980s, cyberpunk themes and virtual reality worlds dominated the imaginative discourse. In film, cyborg narratives started to become markedly more aggressive, with a wave of films featuring militaristic killer robots whose mission was to hunt down individual humans or wipe out humanity altogether. The *Terminator* franchise is one of the most popular and solid representations of this theme. It was also during this time that Donna Haraway wrote “Cyborg Manifesto” in 1984, amidst the angst and reaction to the changing political and social landscape in America. Many film scholars have noted the ways in which the Reagan-era politics and military-focused dynamics of the Cold War 1980s shaped and influenced not only science fiction films but also the broader action movie genre as well. Despite the many ways Haraway uses the political metaphor of the cyborg to elucidate and possibly even remedy present and future social issues, she concludes that “the main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism” (159). In the films of the 1980s and even early 1990s, cyborgs were indeed depicted as government or military-funded projects, and many of these figures adopted a more masculine and aggressive approach. Such films include *Terminator* (1984) and *RoboCop* (1987), and *Terminator 2* (1991), but it should be noted that *Eve of Destruction* (1991) did present its killer-cyborg as a woman, as compared to the other three films in which the killing cyborg is overtly masculine-coded. Claudia Springer points out that “although the cyberpunk fiction and comic books have expressed some playful and imaginative ways to conceptualize cyborgs, mainstream Hollywood films privilege the figure of the aggressive killer” (12). Thus, even though *Eve of*

Destruction features a feminine killing cyborg, she was still just like the original Terminator and T1000 (of *Terminator 2*)—a coldhearted, killing machine. Although this chapter will not focus exclusively on *Eve of Destruction*, a short discussion is needed to broaden the scope of the kinds of cyborg films that were popular during this time.

While the original masculine Terminator and liquid shape-shifting T1000 cyborgs essentially kill anyone who tries to impede their mission of annihilating the human race, in *Eve of Destruction* the female killing cyborg's rampage is caused by a glitch, and her violence is directed towards participants in the patriarchy: "Eve 8 plays out a feminist fantasy when she methodically stalks and kills the men (and types of men) who abused her creator, scientist Eve Simmons, whose memories, thoughts, and feelings she shares" (Springer, "Sex, Memories. . ." 725). The film follows Simmons, who has made Eve 8 in her image and even has implanted her own memories into the cyborg. However, Eve 8 goes rogue and begins to kill any (specifically male) aggressors she comes across. Simmons teams up with an anti-terrorist military man named Colonel Jim McQuade, who finally takes Eve 8 down. Beyond killing her male victims, Eve 8 also carries a nuclear weapon (so symbolically placed in her womb). Later in the film, Simmons explains that Eve 8 was made as a military machine, "a battlefield nuclear weapon [. . .] designed to be deployed in hostile countries" and able to use her femininity and attractiveness so to infiltrate and annihilate the enemy (*Eve of Destruction*). Thus, both Simmons and McQuade are on a race against the clock to deactivate Eve 8.

At a glance, *Eve of Destruction* may seem like a much needed counterpoint to the masculine-coded cyborg killing machines seen in previous films. Certainly, the film is very similar to the *Terminator* series, yet it offers a gender reversal. In this film, the killer is

feminine-bodied and can easily pass as a biological woman. Despite this apparent reversal of traditional gender roles, the positioning of Eve 8 in the narrative is not exactly progressive. The film's subtext does not promote Haraway's vision of the possibilities of the cyborg, and it ultimately does not suggest that the cyborg can be a site where gender binaries are disrupted. Rather, the film focuses primarily on a male military hero who saves the day and thousands of lives. McQuade does finally take Eve 8 down by shooting her through the eye, therefore disabling the nuclear bomb. Thus, his character follows a tradition during this time in the action genre of presenting the viewer with a strong, male hero who leads the narrative. McQuade may be exceptional in the fact that he is a black hero of an action film in the 1980s, which are ordinarily dominated by Susan Jeffords' "white male heroes" as the sole champions of justice (140). McQuade, indeed, is a champion of justice, as evidenced when he explains his own personal politics: "I'm not some crazy right-wing extremist [. . .] I believe in a strong defense. I also believe we should show a little bit more backbone when we're dealing with some of the evils in this world—international terrorism being the prime one." McQuade is positioned as not only the hero of the film, he is also another representation on film of a militaristic, action hero. He is the man who saves the world from the destructive feminine cyborg. Similarly, Eve 8, unique in the fact that she is a feminine-bodied killer-cyborg, is otherwise still a stock trope, mirroring the killing-machine-centered films that came before. The film is a reminder that feminist politics may have been recognized, but they were not an important component in mainstream media, especially not in the action genre.

For Susan Jeffords, it comes as no surprise that killing cyborg narratives rose to popularity during this time, and more specifically, that the cyborg machines and the heroes

who take them down (with the exception of Sarah Connor in the last fifteen minutes of *Terminator*) are male. In *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, she argues that “these hard bodies [namely, Arnold Schwarzenegger of the *Terminator* series, Sylvester Stallone of the *Rambo* series, and Peter Weller of *RoboCop*] came to stand not only for a type of national character—heroic, aggressive, and determined—but for the nation itself” (Jeffords 25). Of this hard-bodied era, Jeffords offers a helpful historical context:

The Reagan era was an era of bodies. From the anxieties about Reagan’s age and the appearance of cancerous spots on his nose; to the profitable craze in aerobics and exercise; to the molding of a former Mr. Universe [Schwarzenegger] into the biggest box-office draw of the decade; to the conservative agenda to outlaw abortion; to the identification of “values” through an emphasis on drug use, sexuality, and child-bearing; to the thematized aggression against persons with AIDS—these articulations of bodies constituted the imaginary of the Reagan agenda and the site of its materialization. (24)

For Jeffords, the killing cyborg, as represented by the *Terminator* series, is right in line with Cold War anxieties of the time, for “those machines who imprisoned humans and methodically set about killing them were, in the minds of Reagan ideologues, no different from Soviet communists” (105). Thus, the notion of hard-bodies in film came to not only represent the human, hyper-masculine male heroes as an extension of the strength of American militaristic power (as seen in Colonel McQuade), but also to represent the hard-bodies of the ‘Others’—cyborg assassins/Soviets who were determined to destroy humanity/American values and culture. Jeffords elaborates on this concept: “Reagan’s policies were geared not so much to the individual human body as it might be the material

location of suffering, pain, or deprivation, as they were to the control of the *idea* of the body, as the Reagan ideology vied for and captured the power to define how bodies were to be perceived, touched, fed, regulated, and counted” (24). In sum, the ethos of the era influenced popular culture’s representations of the cyborg in which the body is controlled, manipulated, and exploited by political, governmental, and capitalistic forces.

One such film that stands as a unique kind of killer-cyborg narrative is Richard Stanley’s 1990 film *Hardware*. The film focuses on the female protagonist, Jill, who is trying to survive a killer-robot that has reconfigured itself from the scrap metal and sculptures in Jill’s apartment. Once it recharges and reassembles itself, the government-made killer-robot, the M.A.R.K. 13, begins to hunt down anything in its path while inside of Jill’s apartment. The film follows in the tradition of the slasher horror film genre, in which the female protagonist has to fight a violent monster or aggressive serial killer to become a “Final Girl.” Carol J. Clover explains:

The image of the distressed female most likely to linger in memory is the image of the one who did not die: the survivor, the Final Girl. She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. (35)

Even though Jill is not quite a Final Girl since there is another survivor besides herself, throughout the film we do see her scream, fall, and scream again as the M.A.R.K. 13 continues its rampage. By the film’s end, she alone is able to take down the pathological cyborg and becomes an arguable character foil to the mostly passive damsel in distress, Sarah Connor from the original *Terminator*. Here, Jill is reminiscent of Ellen Ripley in *Alien*

(1979), who is also the narrative focus of the film while defeating the alien-monster antagonist.

In essence, *Hardware* takes a different approach to the other hard-bodied pathological cyborgs of the time, positioning it as the immediate offspring of American militarism. Cornea notes: “this film is like an excitedly uncensored version of its mainstream Hollywood counterparts and appears designed as an unashamedly shocking retort to macho science fictions of the 1980s” (163). Moreover, since this killing robot was made as “an extension of the government’s sterilization program, a willed answer to population control,” the film also succeeds in highlighting the ills of patriarchal policing of bodies and reproduction (Telotte 328). Like the Terminator, T1000, Eve 8, and even the creature from the *Alien* franchise, the M.A.R.K. 13 is the perfect monster to comment on the era. It is described in the film as a “biomechanical, auto-independent, artificially intelligent form.” Later in the film, we learn just how much the M.A.R.K. 13 is the direct offspring of the military:

Designed primarily for arid terrain, the M.A.R.K. 13 is self-repairing, capable of recharging its storage batteries from just about any power grid, including the sun. The M.A.R.K. 13’s strength lies in its multifaceted combat systems equipped with electronically activated weaponry and night sights. The M.A.R.K. 13 has a choice of using six primary limbs and three auxiliary limbs.

What is strikingly different about this killing-machine is the fact that it does not necessarily take on a passing organic form (human or alien). Instead, it seems to represent an amalgamation of different kinds of science fiction and horror monsters that have been presented on screen: “Its dripping claws and resiliency drawn from the monster of the *Alien* films, its role as a faulty security robot reminiscent of the *Robocop* movies, its menacing

metal skeleton out of the conclusion of *The Terminator*, its various assaults lifted from different horror and fantasy works, it is a kind of Texas-Chainsaw-Massacre-Alien-Terminator, a creature from our worst technological nightmares, programmed to destroy life” (Telotte 329). Indeed, the M.A.R.K. 13 is vastly more menacing than the physically humanized Terminator, T1000, or Eve 8 in the sense that it does not seem to have a particular agenda other than killing whatever comes in its infrared path. Even the monster in the *Alien* series has a more important goal of reproducing to keep its species alive; wiping out humans altogether seems to be more of a by-product of this goal. For the M.A.R.K. 13, reproduction itself is the enemy and militaristic rampage is its only path to succeed in what it was programmed to do.

Notably, the M.A.R.K. 13 was made to battle in dry, desert areas, a setting that links to the film’s placement in history, at a time when the United States military was infiltrating the Middle East. In addition, Sue Short offers a biographical connection regarding writer and director Richard Stanley: “Stanley’s childhood spent travelling around war-torn parts of the world and his subsequent experiences in Afghanistan strongly influenced the film’s image of an overpopulated future destroying itself through perpetual warfare” (169). Connecting the film to capitalist motivations, Cynthia J. Fuchs notes that the film “assumes the ascendancy of masculinist paramilitary technology already presaged by the corporate production of the Gulf War” (129). By positioning the M.A.R.K. 13 as a military-solider-machine made to fight in desert landscapes, the director’s social and political commentaries become quite clear. In this cyborg narrative, the enemy is not some “Other”; rather, it is the writer and director’s technophobic vision of the American military machine itself. As with most dystopian narratives, *Hardware* becomes another cautionary tale using the conventions of

horror (more so than any of the other films discussed so far) and keeping with the tradition of a post-apocalyptic dirtypunk aesthetic, to critique endless warfare and what it does to our ecology and the human beings trying to survive in its wake. At the same time, the film subverts gender dynamics and presents a unique female subject not often seen in masculine-coded killer-cyborg narratives; specifically, Jill is an artist who makes sculptures out of the leftover metal and junk of her world, critiquing her government and society in the process. By the end, she destroys the military machine, suggesting that she will not be defeated by an aggressive, militaristic paradigm.

Similar to *Blade Runner*, *Hardware* opens its narrative by offering the viewer a sense of the post-apocalyptic setting of the film. Also, as a possible homage to *Blade Runner*, we see an extreme close-up of a pair of eyes (as opposed to *Blade Runner*, with its one blue eye whose owner is not determined). In *Hardware*, focusing on the pair of eyes signals that the focus of the film will be the person with the closed eyes. She looks to be dreaming, as her eyes rock back and forth, as if in deep REM. The film's title sequence plays over a visual of a fire from a welding torch (presumably, as we will find out later in the film, Jill's welding torch). The fire from this torch dissolves into a wide-angle shot of a crimson-hued desert landscape, or the "Outer Zone"—a post-apocalyptic area tainted by radiation that only "Zone-Trippers" traverse. In the red-tinged and tainted world, Earth seems all but nearly destroyed. Later in the film, one of the male characters, Shades, offers specific details about how toxic the Earth has become: "It's the same every time, man. The minute I'm back on Earth, I want to be out in space again [. . .]. Think of the view! No more sitting in a bunker coughing your guts up, or waiting for your first cancer cells to show or kids to be born blind and blue because I mean, I mean, you've had one trip too many and they come out with

snake eyes in the genetic crap game.” Thus, like *Blade Runner*, the film suggests that off-world living conditions are far superior, safer, and cleaner than our ravaged home planet. The opening sequence pans over the red sand of the Outer Zone, and slowly the wind begins to reveal a robot hand sticking out of the sand. Thus the first two characters introduced are Jill and the M.A.R.K. 13. A dynamic is set-up here, a simple one in many cyborg narratives: good versus evil—the woman not as machine, but pitted against and at the mercy of the machine, much in the same vein as *Demon Seed*. Cornea sees this antagonist versus protagonist set-up as symbolic: “What is notable [. . .] is the way in which the active female wins out and is allowed to fully embody the function of lone hero, a role normally assigned to a male performer” (166). Jill as a “lone hero” throughout the film takes on several meanings—first, she is literally a loner of sorts, voluntarily securing herself in her apartment and cutting herself off from the rest of the world. The only glimpses she gets of the outside world are through the often-times violent images on her television; she also gets her news from a radio personality, Angry Bob (voiced by punk rock star Iggy Pop). Jill is also a “lone hero” since she alone defeats the M.A.R.K. 13. Despite the fact that the action is performed mostly by male characters, she is, in fact, the thematic locus of the film. It is her apartment where most of the action (and killing) takes place; it is her sculpture that essentially comes to life when the M.A.R.K. 13 reassembles itself, and she is subject to two kinds of patriarchal monsters in the film, both of whom invade her privacy and seek to enact violence on her body—the first being, the M.A.R.K. 13, and the second her voyeuristic, creepy neighbor across the street who continuously spies on her through his telephoto lenses. The two other men of the film—Jill’s ex-soldier boyfriend, Mo, and their mutual friend, Shades—run counter to these monsters; however, Mo ends up being a failed hero, and when Jill could use

Shades' help the most (when the cyborg is hunting her down in her apartment), he is useless and tripping on a psychedelic drug. Jill is thus alone, and must fight for her survival by herself.

Sue Short notes that the film is “a deliberate pastiche of generic convention” and “emphatically hybrid” and comments on the ways that the film feels very familiar (176, 178). Indeed, in conjunction with the themes and films discussed in the previous chapter, *Hardware* does seem to be a fusion of many films. For example, elements formerly discussed—such as female subjectivity, technology, and how this affects her relationship with *oikos* (*Stepford Wives*, *Demon Seed*); positioning the woman as primary victim of cyborg violence (*Demon Seed*); and even women being subjected to the male gaze of feminine expectations and cinematic tropes (*Stepford Wives*, *Blade Runner*)—help shape the film's dystopic, dirtypunk ambience. Yet as the only true survivor of the electric women discussed so far, Jill continues the somewhat new tradition (and this might be a bit optimistic) of dynamic women characters in science fiction who are not simply assistants or romantic interests to the male protagonist, as first seen by Ellen Ripley in *Alien* and Sarah Connor in *The Terminator*. Fuchs adds: “Jill's tenacious deviation from official and conventional narratives, her difference from technophilic femininity of earlier sci-fi, offers hope of consciousness against the excessive simulation of that all-consuming cyborg” (130). In other words, Jill is a new kind of heroine in the science fiction/horror film genre.

Similar to photographer Joanna in *Stepford Wives*, Jill is also an artist, specifically a sculptor who spends the first half of the film—the half in which the M.A.R.K. 13 has yet to be activated—working on her art. She wields a blow torch and a welding mask, and melts, cuts, and bends scrap metal and old plastic dolls—relics of a time before the detritus. As

noted previously, Jill locks herself away in her high-rise apartment. A reversal of *Demon Seed*, in which Susan is imprisoned by the artificial intelligence, Proteus IV, and forced to carry on his “demon seed,” Jill chooses to secure herself from the horrors outside, only to be hunted down in her own home by the M.A.R.K. 13, who wants to stop all humans from procreating. In fact, the first time we hear of governmental efforts to control population on the radio, Jill is working on her sculpture. She comments to Mo: “Did you hear about that new Population Bill they’re trying to put through? [. . .] They’re trying to stop people from having kids in the next few years. They’re going to levy fines against people who have too many. Take away their ration coupons, chemically sterilize people who already have high level doses of radioactivity.” As she is telling Mo this, she is piecing together her new work, with the M.A.R.K. 13’s head as the center of the sculpture. Earlier in the day, Mo and Shades visit Jill, and Mo gives her the cyborg head as a late Christmas gift, knowing she would find it interesting. It is the same cyborg head that was found by a Zone-Tripper in the opening sequence. In this scene, before Jill decides to use the head as part of her artwork, she talks to Shades about the progress of her work. At first, she does not know if her work of art is finished or not, and her muse was originally a pet spider she found and fed in her house: “I’ve been basing my work on more organic forms, but sometimes by the time I’m finished it’s hard to tell. It’s like I’m fighting with the metal, and, so far, the metal’s winning.” However, once given the cyborg head and hearing about the new Population Control Bill on television, Jill has found a new muse, a new focus, essentially a new form of critique: the state of the nation, of society, and the trash we leave behind in its wake.

Completing her cyborg metaphor, Jill paints the head of the cyborg in the American flag colors, “signaling a bankruptcy of nationhood and patriotism, now reduced to soup can

insignia value” (Fuchs 128). For Jill, even if not intended on her part, the project echoes a line from Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto,” in which she argues: “the cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, post-modern collective and personal self” (167). Indeed, Jill’s sculpture is wrought in recycled junk from a past long-gone to comment on the conflictual state of world. The sculpture, and soon to be reassembled cyborg, represents both her critique of the Population Control Bill and the ramifications of endless warfare. What happens when war is perpetual is a destruction of the organic, the destruction of whole landscapes, and what is left behind is war’s metal and refuse. In her artistic critique, even if, as she claims “It doesn’t mean anything. It’s . . . It’s not for you. It’s not for anybody,” Jill’s art still attempts to not only challenge, but also, disrupt the status quo. Fuchs argues that, “Jill’s aestheticized violence measures both her own internal struggle and the external war raging through political machineries” (128). In fact, after she finishes the sculpture with its newly added American flag cyborg head, she and Mo become intimate, which essentially activates the M.A.R.K. 13’s programming, and he/it begins to reassemble and charge itself to begin its destruction as the two are sleeping together, following a cinematic trope in the horror genre in which sexuality triggers mayhem.

Hardware is certainly about a woman who is continually subjected to patriarchal objectification, but Jill does not give up without a fight. As mentioned earlier, she has to deal with two kinds of patriarchal monsters. The most obvious, of course, is the deadly M.A.R.K. 13; however, the other monster that adds an element of sexual objectification is Jill’s neighbor, Lincoln, who is constantly invading her privacy, adding a level of perverted male gaze to the film. In fact, for the audience, the action of the film is shaped by three perspectives that are constantly intertwined. The first, the most obvious, is the lens of the

camera which records the action taking place on set. The other lenses are those of the monsters. First, we see the cyborg's infrared gaze as he tries to hunt down and kill anything that gets in its path. As we watch the intimate sex scene between Jill and Mo, the first shot narrates through the cyborg's eyes. This scene is then cut to seeing through Lincoln's eye, namely, through his telephoto lenses. His gaze is most certainly sexually objectifying and exploitative, as his crude dialogue adds a level of disturbing commentary. For example, during the sex scene, he makes sexual remarks reminiscent of what one might find in much disparaging pornography (although, this is not to say all pornography is disparaging to women). The sex scene between Jill and Mo is actually quite sensual and even romantic, but the erotic tone is soon undercut by Lincoln's peeping and dialogue. As the camera pans over the phallic lens of his camera, he says: "take that big dick [. . .]. Yeah, baby, take it all in. Suck it dry. That's my bitch." Thus, we are not afforded a romantic sex scene between two lovers without feeling like the scene could be plucked from a porn clip; it is "the epitome of private space rendered obscene and pornographic" (Short 172). More so, as we watch Jill and Mo have sex, Lincoln also takes photographs, and the proof that he has been doing so for some time now comes from a shot of his wall, on which there are dozens of photographs, presumably of Jill and other neighbors he has spied on. In this scene, an extreme close-up of his blistered mouth with his tongue literally hanging out evokes a tone of repulsion. Thus Lincoln's gaze disgusts, and the M.A.R.K. 13's gaze terrifies. In either case, Jill is at the center of this violation of her privacy and body. Fuchs notes: "In the infrared of [the M.A.R.K. 13's] camera lens, the sex act itself becomes a simulation, a porn show narrated by Lincoln and implicating all its invasive audiences in its construction" (128). Luckily, the

viewer and Jill are spared having to endure Lincoln for much longer, for he is one of the M.A.R.K. 13's first victims.

As the film progresses, the list of M.A.R.K. 13's victims increase, and by the end of the film the only two main characters who survive are Jill and Shades; however, it is Jill who actually takes the cyborg down in her bathroom shower. In keeping with the tradition of previous killer-cyborg films, one would expect Mo, the ex-soldier who wears dog-tags and the most hard-bodied man of all the characters, to be the hero of the film. In fact, later in the film, he does hit the M.A.R.K. 13 with a barrage of bullets, sending him out of the glass window of Jill's apartment. The characters of the film think that this might be the end of the M.A.R.K. 13's terror. As Mo is blowing the cyborg away, he is actually smiling; he seems to be enjoying this, and exclaims to Jill: "He's dead, baby!" He is proud of himself; he is Jill's hero and savior, adding "I'm going to take care of you. Everything's going to be alright" as he comforts her. However, his heroism is short-lived, as the M.A.R.K. 13 is resilient against common weaponry. The film plays upon a common tradition in horror films, which tricks the characters into believing the monster is finally dead; however, the monster comes popping back up when everyone's guard is down. Ultimately, Mo is a failed soldier-hero and is killed by lethal injection (a death not as severe or gory as Lincoln's, who is not only injected, but whose eyes are crushed before a power drill bursts through his abdomen). Instead, our failed-hero gets a calmer, less bloody death. Jeffords notes that a shift began to occur in regard to the kinds of male heroes we saw in the 1980s versus ones from the 1990s. She explains: "One of the plot features of a number of 1991 films is a discovery by the male lead that his body has failed him in some way, whether through wounds, disease, or programming" (Jeffords 146). Perhaps *Hardware* is a film that also begins this tradition of re-examining

male heroes, since it is not the hard-bodied soldier man that outlives the monster of the film; instead, it is the pot smoking, woman-artist, Jill, who becomes the hero. Short offers an interesting analysis of Mo and his failed heroism: “He is himself a cyborg, fitted with a prosthetic mechanical arm and filled with a confident machismo that seriously underestimates the true purpose of the Mark 13, itself a physical embodiment of Mo’s philosophy and Jill’s nightmare vision of the world” (172). Perhaps, then, Mo’s relentless drive to be a gallant hero and save his woman actually becomes his downfall.

Despite the proliferation of hard-bodied cyborg narratives in cinema during the 1980s, *Hardware* stands out as an anomaly as a film that positions the male hero as inadequate and outdated. The social and political implications are the most profound aspects of the film, with a female hero whose sculpture works as a metaphor to critique the shifting militaristic, aggressive paradigm dominating the historical situation behind the film. The film pushes its ecocritical stance even further than *Blade Runner* does by painting a world in which the land is so nearly unlivable that the government produces killing machines who act as a form of population control. Jill is the focus of the film, and yet, she is the only female character to have dialogue in the film (aside from the voiceover recording on the M.A.R.K. 13’s specifications) or to play any major role in the narrative. In fact, other than a dead woman with a crying child tied to her wrist, there are no obvious filmed women characters. In this sense, just as in *Blade Runner*, the film follows the cyberpunk tradition of creating a narrative filled with mainly male characters. However, Andrew Ross notes that works produced toward the end of the cyberpunk movement revealed “characteristics of masculinity in retreat” (153). Thus, despite the film’s relative lack of female characters, it offers Jill as a symbol of the feminine subject, not in retreat or forcefully imprisoned, but emerging as the

narrative forefront. Here, finally, we start to see women characters who fight back and win against the monsters of film.

**V. SHE'D RATHER BE A CYBORG:
NUANCED GENDER PERFORMANCE
IN *EX MACHINA* AND *MAD MAX: FURY ROAD***

Haraway's primary goal in the "Cyborg Manifesto" is to offer an imaginative framework in which the boundaries of gender become more fluid, in flux, and freed from the strict binaries that have held identity and sexuality to restrictive and sometimes even dangerous standards. Haraway explains:

Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualism in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is not a dream of a common language, but a powerful infidel heteroglossia. It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the super-savers of the new right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces, stories." (178)

In the films discussed so far, we see how cyborg narratives can offer a site of political critique of the "maze of dualism[s]" that are still present in many of these films. Machines—personal, industrial, militaristic, feminine, masculine, built and destroyed—have been represented as existing at the mercy of patriarchal expectations. Overall, in many of the filmic narratives, there does seem to be a common language or pattern of tropes among the genre conventions that shape each film. Contrary to the notion of a "powerful infidel heteroglossia" that Haraway postulates, many of the cyborg films discussed so far do not support Haraway's notions that the cyborg can be a site of dramatic gender subversion. In fact, the binary of gender, it seems, is reinforced by the characters in recent films conforming

to gender roles and expectations. Frequently, when women (whether cyborg or human) decide to subvert these gender social narratives, they are met with violence and even death. Thus, it seems quite accurate that “Haraway’s proposed cyborg androgynes [are] too threatening, in practice, to be allowed play in Hollywood” (Lavigne 83). As revealed so far, cinematic cyborg narratives are marked, coded, and shaped by strict gender binaries.

It has long been acknowledged that mainstream films, especially in the science fiction genre, could be more progressive, specifically in the representation of women. The lack of dynamic female roles, gender pay gap for female actors, sexual harassment that women (and men) have had to endure, and the fact that there is a scarcity of women producers, writers, and directors of big budget films all attest to this inequality. The films discussed have all been written and directed by men. There are numerous barriers that prevent women from telling their stories—even electric, cyberpunk, or fantastical stories. What exists still to this day is what I term a silver screen ceiling. Just like the glass ceiling used to symbolize women’s universal struggle in the professional and political world, the barrier for women to advance and be treated equally exists in the lucrative male-dominated film industry. Thus I call for a feminist goal of shattering this barrier that exists both on the silver screen and behind the camera as well. This movement begins by encouraging and funding more women filmmakers so as to give women cinematic outlets to tell their own stories, especially science fiction or speculative ones. Haraway’s hope that the power of the cyborg to revolutionize our culture and alter how we view identity can only truly happen when cyborgs on screen start to reflect the possibilities she envisions for the future. Sennah Yee maintains: “It is essential to work towards a future in which such possibilities can be realized in order to disrupt the cycle of feminized machines and mechanized women trapped within the powerful machine that is

cinema and its patriarchal apparatus” (96). Keeping this in mind, this discussion will end by analyzing two contemporary cyborg films, Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2015) and George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015, shortened hereafter to *Fury Road*). This analysis will turn to a consideration of whether these two films reveal a progression towards a Haraway’s utopian feminist ethos. This entails consideration of cinematic motifs, political and social contexts, and critique of the films in terms of the respective positioning of women characters in each cyborg narrative. Are these recent films more feminist than previous ruminations about the future, as played out on screen?

Even though each film is significantly different in terms of plot, style, and generic conventions (with *Fury Road* a jam-packed, loud action film, and *Ex Machina* a slow, quiet thriller until the last quarter of the narrative), they have thematic similarities that highlight women’s lack of control over their bodies and their struggle to achieve freedom and agency. Whether human, electric, or cyborg, the women characters of these films, as in the other films discussed, are subjected to an antagonistic male patriarch. Taylor Boulware describes *Fury Road* as “a condemnation of toxic masculinity and its complicity in capitalist exploitation of both resources and bodies” (7). Boulware argues that the film’s goal is highlighting and critiquing toxic masculinity, a description and claim that can also be applied to *Ex Machina*.

Ex Machina takes the perspective of Caleb, a young coder who works for a Google-like company named Blue Book. Caleb thinks he has won a lottery within his company in which he gets to work personally with the CEO, Nathan Bateman, on his next big project. This project is actually a highly-intelligent, feminine-bodied android named Ava (performed by Alicia Vikander). However, in *Ex Machina*, the feminine electric body is merely a test

subject, a projection of Nathan's fantasy. The androids of the film, Ava and Kyoko, are essentially held captive within his secluded research facility, an enclave that can only be reached by helicopter. Ava was supposedly created to see if she can pass the Turing Test, which Caleb explains is "when a human interacts with a computer. And if the human doesn't know they're interacting with a computer, the test is passed." However, as the film reveals, Ava, Kyoko, and the feminine-bodied androids who came before them seem to be made specifically to fulfill Nathan's narcissistic desire for male control. Kyoko, for example, is designed to be mute and throughout the film her role is mainly to serve both Nathan and Caleb. Kyoko is often positioned in the film hovering next to Nathan, waiting for his command, and as revealed later in the film, she is essentially his sex slave. In short, Nathan might be exploring the extent of consciousness and personhood in A.I. creatures; however, he is also testing the extent of imprisonment in their role as bodies for slave labor. He imprisons, beats, rapes, and verbally abuses his feminine androids, for what he believes is the advancement of science, technology, and human evolution, but he disregards basic civil liberties and dignity in the process. Perhaps, since these androids are not technically human, then they have no rights or dignity to violate. However, the film reveals previous test subjects who beg for their freedom, who are beaten, and who try to escape confinement. Elisabetta Di Minico offers a *précis* of women's longstanding suffering:

In fiction and reality, women can suffer two times: first, because of political/authoritarian power, secondly through a male/sexist oppression. The female individual has been subjected for millennia to different forms of psycho-physical oppression, from the inhumanity of sexual abuses in war to the "dictatorship" of fashion and aesthetics, from the imposition of traditional gender roles to the

hypersexualization of women in advertising, shows and films. They all contribute to create gender inequality and, consequently, they are the source of different levels of violence and pressure. (71)

Nathan's feminine-bodied A.I.s are continually subjected to various types of suffering through authoritarian power, male oppression, and hypersexualization, as they become victims of violence and aggression. In an important scene of the film, Nathan, an exercise and alcohol addict, is almost lamenting his bad behavior. While drunk, he recites J. Robert Oppenheimer, creator of the atomic bomb: "In battle, in the forest, on the precipice of the mountain. On the great dark sea. In sleep, in confusion, in the depths of shame. The good deeds a man has done before defend him." Here, Nathan seems to excuse what he has done and how he has treated his A.I.s. Before falling into a drunken sleep, Nathan adds, "It is what it is. It's Prometheus, man." If Nathan has any regret, it is short-lived, and connecting himself to Prometheus elevates his status to the stature of another fictional brilliant scientist who created a new posthuman form of life, Victor Frankenstein. In fact, Mary Shelley's full title to arguably one of the first science fiction narratives is *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Just like Frankenstein, who becomes obsessed with his creation only to have it destroy him, Nathan is a contemporary Prometheus of sorts, as well as a variation of the mad scientist trope in science fiction. Di Minico notes that Nathan "continues to see these female AIs as exploitable and expendable machines, useful for his research and rise to power" (75). Throughout the film, Nathan's overt masculinity is coded in his fit hard-body; he is constantly working out either by boxing and lifting weights, usually shirtless—his hard-body on display for the viewer. Nathan's body is contrasted with Caleb's thin, non-athletic body, thus suggesting that Caleb is an alternative to Nathan's toxic masculinity. Di Minico adds:

“Nathan literally builds the female bodies of his androids, marking the identity, the image, and even the self-representation of these posthuman creatures. His robots are all women-machines strongly and sexually commodified and modeled as aesthetically attractive, thin, young, and sensual” (73). In *Ex Machina*, Latin for “from the machine,” the human and the machine are met with contradiction. Nathan becomes more machine-like as far as lacking a sense of moral ethics, an important human component, while the actual machine, Ava, learns to be more human through the performance of her gender expectations, and eventually escapes to the city, seemingly situating herself in the busy world of people and passing as just another woman. As much as the film may seem like it is indeed concerned with exploring the vastness of personhood and consciousness, positioning Ava (and the other androids that came before her) as prisoners who are abused and berated strengthens the film’s critique of patriarchal abuse of power.

Fury Road’s depiction of the ramifications of toxic masculinity is not as subtle as it is in *Ex Machina*. The film, which was released less than a month after *Ex Machina*, is a different kind of cyborg narrative. It may even be argued that it is barely a cyborg narrative, for in this “world come undone and thoroughly ravaged by environmental devastation, nuclear disaster, and wars for rapidly diminishing resources,” there is obviously no capacity for the high-tech, glossy world of computer information and advanced A.I. technology as seen in *Ex Machina* and other cyberpunk narratives (Boulware 5). However, Furiosa’s machine arm reveals that some of the old world’s technological advancements have survived. This fusion of machine (her mechanical arm) and organic flesh (her body) thus makes Furiosa a cyborg. As revealed by the previous cyborg examples discussed so far, a steadfast theme connects the various narratives. Most of these electric feminine-bodied characters are

subjugated by aggressive masculine-machines or patriarchal monsters. *Fury Road* is certainly no exception. In the article, “Who Killed the World?: Building a Feminist Utopia from the Ashes of Toxic Masculinity in *Mad Max: Fury Road*,” Boulware explains:

The film unambiguously denounces capitalism as well as patriarchy, for the fall of civilization and the wretchedness that follows; it exposes the inextricable links between patriarchal masculinity and capitalist exploitation, revealing how these ideologies are co-constitutive and function to objectify, commodify, regulate, and render subjects abject. (6)

Most certainly, *Fury Road*'s critique of heightened patriarchal masculinity and capitalist exploitation is expressed most strongly in the characterization of tyrannical leader, Immortan Joe. Immortan Joe not only controls the natural resources of the land, the amount of water his dying people are able to receive, but he is most powerful in his control over women. Aside from Imperator Furiosa (performed by Charlize Theron) and the impoverished women in the crowd begging for water, all the women characters within the world of the film are at the immediate mercy of Immortan Joe, who has reduced their identity and purpose to mere bodies of procreation and commodification. For instance, he sells “Mother’s milk” to neighboring towns, milk which he gets from his captive “Milk Mothers.” Early in the film, we see a room full of raggedly-dressed women who are strapped into chairs while machines are hooked to their breasts, continually pumping breast milk. In this scene, Immortan Joe enters the room to inspect and test the milk. Milk Mothers are not depicted as having any sense of purpose or autonomy, in a world where the Earth’s natural resources have been nearly depleted. As the archetypal villain, Immortan Joe has complete control over the resources that sustain humanity, including women’s bodies.

The other women of the film are the “Breeders” or “Wives,” who are merely sexual objects and wombs for Immortan Joe to govern. In contrast to the Milk Mothers who are large women wearing rags with part of their faces obscured, the Wives are thin, clean, and culturally-attractive; in fact, Immortan Joe’s “favorite” wife is performed by runway model-turned-actress, Rosie Huntington-Whiteley. His wives are a mix of ethnicities with varied hair colors, and they even have to wear barbaric chastity belts that look like male-enforced *vagina dentatas*. Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine* charts the ways women have been presented as monstrous and dangerous from mythology, through Freudian psychology, and contemporary popular culture, particularly within the horror film genre. She explains: “Despite local variations, the myth [of *vagina dentata*] states that women are terrifying because they have teeth in their vaginas and that women must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened—usually by a hero figure—before intercourse can safely take place” (Creed 2). Since Immortan Joe is the only one that has the key to these chastity belts, he positions himself as the only one who has power over their sexuality. Yet when Max sees the Wives for the first time after they and Furiosa narrowly escape Immortan Joe and his War Boys, we see that the Wives are taking a set of bolt cutters to free themselves of their *vagina dentatas* chastity belts. The same tool is also used to free Max from the War Boy who is connected to him and using him as a “Blood Bag.” When the Wives free themselves from their imposed *vagina dentatas*, they become the heroes of their own narrative, and, in the process, they revise the mythology that seeks to position female sexuality as something monstrous that must be controlled. As the film progresses and Furiosa and the Wives escape further away from the citadel, Immortan Joe’s power and control starts to diminish.

Patriarchal control over the autonomy of women's bodies in actual society or in the world of movies would not be possible without the concept of gender expectations, and specifically the idea that gender is performance in which each gender is expected to look and behave in the world. This line of thought is explored by Judith Butler, who analyzes the ways gender is not merely biologically determined. Rather, she maintains that gender characteristics are "performative" and these enactments are determined by cultural and social expectations (528). In her early work, Butler began a specific discourse in gender and philosophical studies that would extrapolate from Simone de Beauvoir's arguments in *The Second Sex* and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. Gender performance is another way that women have been marginalized and seen as the "second sex" and always in relation to men. In cinema, gender performance reinforces the notion that women and men must be associated with filmic tropes depending on their gender. With the exception of a few films, most mainstream popular films continue the pattern of depicting gender as a clear cut binary—especially in the science fiction genre and in overlapping genres such as horror, thriller, and the action film. As many gender theorists, such as Butler and Haraway, have argued, if the binary of gender continues to be a strict dichotomy with no in-between, no room for fluidity or even the opportunity to refuse a gender identity, then women will certainly continue to be viewed as second sex, and people with non-traditional gender identities will continue to be viewed as social deviants as they have been in the past. Butler elaborates: "Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (522). Historically, these consequences have shaped the politics and even economics of most societies. In her political metaphor, Haraway specifically states that "the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" and, yet, in many filmic representation of cyborgs, the world is very gendered (159). In the early 21st

century, particularly in Western or Westernized societies, the concept gender as more than a binary is starting to become a discourse making progressive strides. However, our movies have not quite grasped and depicted this open-minded ethos. Therefore, it is important to examine the ways in which gender performance plays a role in the depiction of the cyborg in both *Ex Machina* and *Fury Road*. In doing so, we can speculate on the ways in which each respective film gets closer to Haraway's political metaphor.

Ava of *Ex Machina* is a feminine-bodied A.I. who was specially modeled (physically) after Nathan searched through Caleb's pornography profile, designing a female who would be attractive to Caleb. Thus, Ava is literally made as a sexual object, an artificial intelligence whose body is markedly sexually-coded. Through the mise-en-scène and voyeuristic camera angles, both Caleb and the viewer are reminded of Ava's "looked-at-ness." Thus, *Ex Machina* exploits the tradition of the male gaze in film. Mulvey explains: "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (20). Concerning the positioning of Ava, Yee argues that "while the film presents a narrative in which the female robot frees herself from her male creator, she is ultimately trapped within the male gaze of the camera, the male characters in the narrative, as well as the spectators watching the film" (87). The sexualization of Ava throughout the film seems to counter what her original purpose was. That is, instead of being an advanced A.I. to test and confound Cartesian notions of existence, Ava and Kyoko are ultimately reduced to another representation of potential sexbots seen in many of the films discussed so far. If anything, she is a proto-Pris model from *Blade Runner*—a pleasure bot to sexually please her owner. When Caleb starts to

realize that Ava is flirting with him, he asks Nathan: “Why did you give her sexuality? An A.I. doesn’t need a gender. She could have been a grey box.” Caleb’s point is that studying the complexity of existence—the philosophical conundrum of the duality of mind and body—and whether or not an A.I. can pass the Turing test, is a genderless endeavor.

However, Nathan thinks differently, as he responds:

What imperative does a gray box have to interact with another gray box? Can consciousness exist without interaction? Anyway, sexuality is fun, man. If you’re gonna exist, why not enjoy it? What? You want to remove the chance of her falling in love and fucking? And in answer to your real question, you bet she can fuck [. . .]. In between her legs there’s an opening with a concentration of sensors. You engage them in the right way creates a pleasure response. So, if you wanted to screw her, mechanically speaking you could. And she’d enjoy it.

At the very least, Nathan is considerate enough to program Ava to enjoy sexual stimuli; however, his comment reveals another hidden research question to his test—the “fuckability” of an A.I.—whether or not one can get a human to truly be attracted to and fall in love with an A.I. Thus, *Ex Machina* can be said to follow a long tradition in science fiction narratives of fetishizing and objectifying the feminine body (especially those that are cyborg or electric). Despina Kakoudaki asserts that “the female cyborg as an artificial woman arrives as an object/product that engages many fetishistic relations to technology, and to the unreal bodies of fantastic/fantasy women. She is not enclosed in images of robotic femininity that negate sexuality” (171). In Ava’s representation as a cyborg to-be-looked-at, as another example of fetishizing the feminine body through advancing technology, she is what Yee calls a “research-fetish object” (89). Yee explains: “Ava’s hybridity as both a robot and a

‘woman’ makes her a prime candidate as a research-fetish object: her limbs and most of her abdomen are transparent, revealing her mysterious mechanical interiors; meanwhile her curved breasts and buttocks are covered with mesh” (89). Yee further argues that Ava’s subjectivity is only viewed through a voyeuristic lens, either through the perspective of Caleb, through Nathan or Caleb watching her on surveillance camera, or through the camera lens which certainly reminds the viewer of Ava’s electric, sexed body.



Figure 6: Ava’s electric, feminine body on display in *Ex Machina* (2015).

As far as gender performance goes, Ava is created and programmed to perform her sexual femininity for both Caleb and the audience. Yee has noted that throughout the film both Ava and Kyoko are “in constant states of dressing and undressing for the male characters and the audience,” and it is not until Ava decides to start literally dressing up in a feminine-coded floral dress, white stockings, and a pixie-hair wig to match, that Caleb starts

to believe more and more that she is an advanced A.I. fully capable of passing the Turing Test and more (90). Rebecca Bell-Metereau's book examines films that have presented a subversion of gender performance or expectations, specifically in the vestimentary choices of the characters on screen. Examples of these progressive gender performances include characters who cross-dress, characters who seem to switch back and forth in their gender performance or completely subvert gender expectations (such as Ellen Ripley of the *Alien* franchise), and ones who exhibit non-binary identities. In the preface of the second edition, Bell-Metereau explains: "Attempts to be a different kind of person, to distinguish oneself from others, is fundamental to human nature [. . .]. Most clothing, language, and gestures, simultaneously fulfill both desires to be different and to bond with others" (ix). Keeping this line of thought in mind, it makes sense that Ava would want to dress herself, especially if she desires to pass as human. She chooses to cover her blue-lighted, electric body, so that her once obvious cyborg body is now presented as particularly feminine. From this point on in the film, she wears her dress when she is around Caleb. This choice may be interpreted as the filmmaker following the pattern of fetishizing Ava even more; not only is she a sexy robot, but she also passes for a sort of girlfriend. Ava even tells Caleb she wants to go on a date with him. However, Ava uses seductive sartorial choices to lure Caleb into helping her escape. In other words, she performs quite precisely a feminine gender stereotype, but she does so as a ruse, in order to escape her imprisonment in Nathan's glass research facility. Di Minico explains: "Ava learns how to manipulate Caleb and to stimulate his emotional response to her situation exploiting both her body and her pretended damsel-in-distress vulnerability" (76). Thus, Ava not only knows the common feminine tropes that have typically appealed to heterosexual men in the past, but she also plans to adopt feminine wiles

in order to reach her goal of escaping the grasp of patriarchal control. Caleb interprets her flirting as genuine attraction; however, Ava, with the help of Kyoko, kills Nathan and leaves Caleb trapped in the glass house, ultimately switching their roles. She is finally free, and Caleb is trapped.

Instead of passing as feminine in order to survive, the cyborg Furiosa of *Fury Road*, on the other hand, subverts gender expectations in a variety of ways. In fact, her gender performance is the most progressive and the closest to the revolutionary power of the cyborg myth that Haraway proposes. Additionally, unlike *Ex Machina*, in which the male and voyeur gaze are continually present, *Fury Road* employs a new kind of gaze altogether. The scene in which Max first meets the Wives may be interpreted as a form of the male gaze. In this scene, Furiosa and the Wives are strides ahead of Immortan Joe and his War Boys motorcade. They take a break to take off their constricting chastity belts and to freshen up and hydrate. When Max comes upon them, we see them through his perspective. The Wives are in bikini-cut white rags as they wash up with the water hose that is connected to Furiosa's war rig. This scene could have easily turned into the quintessential "shower-scene" trope wherein the masculine viewer gazes lustfully on the wet body of a woman; however, the camera does not linger on these shots (if it ever really lingers on anything in this fast-paced narrative). Max looks at the women for a brief moment, but Boulware notes that Max is more entranced by the water they are using than by their actual bodies. In this scene, the camera does not indulge the male gaze, instead it positions women holding more power and strength over men. This reversal is especially apparent as Furiosa finally defeats and kills Immortan Joe, while she and her team take back the citadel to the deafening roar of a cheering crowd.

A scene like this points to the possibility of fulfilling one of Mulvey's ultimate aims in exploring the representation and positioning of women both on and behind the screen: to push towards a future in which women characters move beyond being primarily a "visual image" to becoming a "subject of inquiry" within the narrative (130). This is certainly the case with the depiction of Furiosa, for as Boulware notes she is "not only a fully-realized, complex female character with physical and fighting prowess, but also one who disrupts gender norms by rejecting both traditional femininity and toxic masculinity" (14). This disruption is immediately apparent when viewers first see Furiosa. Right after the title sequence, a close-up shot of the back of her shaved head reveals that she has been branded with Immortan Joe's skull logo. Her clothes are practical and dirty, indicating that she does manual labor. Also, we see that her left arm has been amputated and replaced with a mechanical arm. In this sequence, Furiosa is not simply a sexual image to be-looked-at, like Ava in *Ex Machina*. Instead, her appearance prompts viewers to wonder about her and what she is doing; what happened to her arm? Furiosa is a subject of inquiry, and she certainly appears to be in a position of power. Walking towards a big war rig, also branded with Immortan Joe's logo, she has a few War Boys who wait for her at the rig as she jumps into the truck. Furiosa looks tough, resilient, and powerful, especially juxtaposed with Immortan Joe in the very next shot. Far from athletic and hard, Immortan Joe's body is diseased, blistered, and bloated. He has a deep, infected cough, and has to use a device on his mouth in order to breathe. It is mechanical, but it also has animal-like teeth, giving him a cyborg-like quality, similar to the menacing killer-robot in *Hardware* or the alien-monster from the *Alien* franchise.

By contrasting Furiosa with Immortan Joe, the viewer can gather who the good gal and bad guy are. The audience also sees that the film presents a new kind of action heroine. Jeffery Brown notes that “the modern action heroine is far from passive. She fights, she shoots, she kills, she solves the mysteries, and she rescues herself and others from dangerous situations. In short, she is in full command of the narrative—carrying the action in ways normally reserved for male protagonists” (25). Indeed, *Fury Road* harkens back to Ripley’s character in *Alien*, in a film that is not only focused on a female action hero who is strong and powerful from the start of the film, but who is not sexually objectified in most of the scenes. Brown has noted that even though there have been strong action heroines in film, most of them they are still either wearing shiny spandex, high heels, or clothes that would be impractical for battle. He explains, “Modern science fiction women are usually portrayed more in the ass-kicking action heroine mode than the erotic damsels-in-distress version popular in the pulp magazines of the 1930s and 1940s, but she is still as sexy as ever” (96). Certainly, actress Charlize Theron can be considered sexy, but with half of her face covered in black grime, wearing dirty, torn clothes, and sporting a cyborg arm, Furiosa is not presented as a typical sex object. Rather, she is coded as a person with power who is on a mission. Her goal is not only to save the Wives, but also to find “the Green Place.” Upon finding out the Green Place does not exist from a group of older women, the Vuvalini, Furiosa and her team decide to return to the citadel. With the encouragement of Max, she realizes that fleeing the problem is not the answer. Indeed, she fights, shoots, and hauls her team back to the citadel to finally take down Immortan Joe.

Much of the power Furiosa exudes comes from subverting a feminine gender performance imposed on many women on screen. In line with J. Halberstam, Boulware

interpreters Furiosa's gender performance as "an iteration of female masculinity, where women perform traditionally masculine gender behaviour" (14). Halberstam notes: "Female masculinity is generally received by hetero- and homo-normative cultures as a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have power that is always just out of reach" (9). However, one might ask if Furiosa is an example of female masculinity, or something more nuanced altogether. Halberstam notes that female masculinity is interpreted by many as a deviant form of identity; however, the positioning of Furiosa subverts even this notion. With her hair shaved short, even shorter than Max's, compared to the Wives, she is far from performing femininity. However, she is neither a female performing masculinity either. I argue that she is an example of what a character might look like in an embodiment of Haraway's metaphor of the cyborg—that is, she is postgender more than any other female character discussed so far, dissolving the binary of gender to present a character who can be androgynous and forceful.



Figure 7: Furiosa's non-gender performance in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).

Boulware adds: “Both female and male, organic and mechanical, Furiosa’s power emerges from her deployment of her part-mechanical body in order to transform herself from a commodified mechanical body into a feminist cyborg” (16). Thus, Furiosa is the closest representation of a dynamic cyborg who champions feminist ideals while also highlighting the dangers of inequality and marginalization of the powerless. She takes down Immortan Joe, takes back the citadel, frees the Milk Mothers, and causes water to flow freely from the citadel tower. The film ends with her and the women who have survived being hauled up to seemingly take back and rule over this new regime. One of the Wives, the Dag, clutches a bag of seeds to eventually germinate, indicating that their future is both more feminist and more fertile, for they hold the key to replenishing the Earth that was ravaged by toxic masculinity and exploitative capitalism.

Haraway notes that her cyborg myth “is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work” (161). Indeed, it would be over three decades since the publication of Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” that the science fiction film genre would finally offer a cyborg in line with Haraway’s hope for the future, in the form of the action hero, Furiosa. Haraway ends her manifesto asserting, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (178). In all the women discussed so far, many of whom have been met with deadly fates, or who have been the subject of terror, objectification, and sexual and physical violence, Furiosa stands as a character who is most hopeful in reaching a feminist future, where gender does not have to be something that marginalizes “Others.” Boulware notes, “Lauded by audiences, mainly female audiences, for its feminist revisions to one of the most aggressively masculine genres—the post-apocalyptic action film—*Fury Road*, and in particular Theron’s Furiosa, have become new icons of feminist storytelling and female empowerment” (5). In a similarly optimistic vein, Bell-Metereau observes, “While films do not have the power to change behavior magically—overnight—images do play an important role in affecting attitudes, which may eventually influence behavior” (xix). Thus, the powerful image of a non-binary figure like Furiosa can push the film world closer towards shattering silver screen ceilings, while also prompting a new cultural and social discourse concerning women in cyborg narratives. I am curious to see what the future holds, to see the novel and nuanced portrayals of electric, cyborg women in future science fiction films created by women screenwriters, directors, and producers. What kinds of exciting, stylistic or even dystopian worlds will be concocted when women are finally able to participate equally in filmmaking? Indeed,

filmmaking has the potential to become important “political work” that can push toward a more feminist future both in the imaginative world of film and in our own society.

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