"I figured you were probably watching us":

Ex Machina and the Performativity of Lateral Surveillance

Kayla Danielle Meyers

Yorktown, VA

Bachelor of Arts, College of William & Mary, 2014

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William &
Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

American Studies Program

College of William & Mary
August 2017

ProQuest Number: 10603155

ProQuest.

ProQuest 10603155

APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
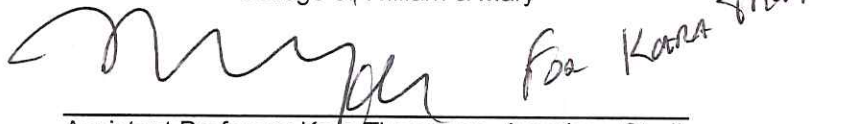
Kayla Meyers
Kayla Danielle Meyers

Approved by the Committee, June 2017

for Francesca Sawaya

Committee Chair
Associate Professor Francesca Sawaya, American Studies
College of William & Mary

for Kara Thompson

Assistant Professor Kara Thompson, American Studies
College of William & Mary

Director/Associate Professor Charles McGovern, American Studies
College of William & Mary

ABSTRACT

Surveillance plays a central role in the film *Ex Machina* (2015). Though surveillance is usually conceived as a unilateral force exerted by one agent onto another, the film imagines a more fluid system where characters perform roles of surveillant and subject of surveillance simultaneously. To provide commentary on surveillance culture, the film connects the A.I. film genre to the office film and fraternity film, which privilege male kinship. In bringing these three genres together, the film highlights gender hierarchies and constructions of masculinity where surveillance is a tool for exacting hetero-patriarchal power. Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I draw a connection between notions of gender and surveillance in the film. Surveillance becomes the system through which the characters understand, construct, and perform their gender, thus highlighting the performativity of gender. But surveillance, too, is revealed as performative, as it is it becomes an unstable method for knowledge aggregation and presumes the tools of its undoing. Understanding lateral surveillance as performative opens up possibilities for resistance in the post-9/11 surveillance state.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Introduction:

In the film *Ex Machina* (2015) Caleb, a mid-level coder for Blue Book, wins the chance to spend a week with the tech company's CEO Nathan. What was marketed as a week of luxury and leisure is quickly revealed to be a more unique opportunity: Caleb will administer a Turing Test to Ava, a possible A.I. Ava is constructed as a life-sized woman, confined to a room in Nathan's bungalow. Though she has a human appearing face, her body is a distinctly robotic mix of metal, plastics, and carbon fiber. Throughout the test sessions, Ava seduces Caleb and convinces him to help her escape. While fleeing, she abandons Caleb in a sealed room, and Nathan is killed by another one of his robot creations, Kyoko.[1]

Surveillance plays a central role in the film. The cinematic camera lingers on cameras deliberately positioned throughout the bungalow to record what happens. While surveillance typically assumes a unilateral flow of power from the "surveillant" to the "subject of surveillance," the film creates a complicated web where characters constantly shift between these roles.[2] In the film's moment of

---

[1] Kyoko is a peripheral cyborg in the film, but it is unclear if she possesses human consciousness because she never speaks. She is also presented as Japanese; this paired with her silence aligns her with the geisha stereotype. I unfortunately do not have the time or space in this thesis to address her silence or the issue of race more generally in this film, but I intend to explore both issues more fully at another time in a longer piece.
[2] Throughout this piece, I will use combined terminology found in David Lyon's *Surveillance Studies: An Overview* and Sean P. Hier and Josh Greenberg's essay "The Politics of Surveillance: Power, Paradigms, and the Field of Visibility" from their edited volume *Surveillance: Power, Problems, and Politics.* In both pieces, "surveillance" refers to the general act of or often invisible apparatuses of surveillance. "Surveillant" refers to the individual or system exercising surveillance and "subject of surveillance" refers to the individual or population being monitored. "Surveilled" serves as the adjective form

production and dissemination, when surveillance is ubiquitous and a source of omnipresent anxiety, this focus on surveillance and its fluidity is prescient and incisive. To analyze the role of surveillance in *Ex Machina*, I use Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to unravel the complexities particularly of lateral surveillance, or the ways citizens spy on and police one another such that the boundaries between surveillant and the subject of surveillance collapse. The ramifications of such a collapse include the exposed performativity of surveillance, as well as the potential for lateral surveillance to undo itself. In drawing a parallel between gender performativity and surveillance, I hope to uncover possibilities for resistance in the post-9/11 surveillance state.

The film draws on and combines together several familiar genres to formulate its commentary on surveillance culture. On the surface, *Ex Machina* explores questions of what makes us human. Allison de Fren observes, "In *Ex Machina,* most of the dialogue is composed of questions, and every question is a test for the characters, but also for the audience."[3] These questions interrogate the extent of human knowledge and knowability in the face of human-made consciousness. The entire plot revolves around the Turing Test, a logical game developed by Alan Turing that intends to uncover the extent to which humans can know and recognize human consciousness. This concentration on the Turing Test positions *Ex Machina* as part of a genealogy of cinema that investigates the

_____

indicating that the modified noun is the subject of surveillance.
[3] Allison de Fren, "Ex Machina: Questioning the Human Machine," Vimeo video, posted February 14, 2017, https://vimeo.com/203960047.

possibilities and threats of artificial intelligence.[4] From *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to *Blade Runner* (1982) to *Her* (2013) to *Westworld* (1973 and 2016), the nature and limits of human consciousness have been explored and contested. These films ultimately seek to answer philosophical questions "about the nature of personal identity, moral agency, and what it means to be human."[5] But this notion of "human" ultimately assumes a unified, uniform humankind, an *us vs. them* logic that ignores the unequal distribution of power by white, hetero-patriarchal social structures.

  Ex Machina instead presumes Ava's capacity for human consciousness and human-ness. Despite the centrality of the Turing Test in the film's plot and Ava's robotic appearance, the audience is never left to question whether or not she has human consciousness. Ava is curious, witty, capricious, and desirous, all qualities typically removed from the cyborg subject. In the previously mentioned films, the A.I. or cyborg subject is usually rigid and logical at the outset, and slowly learns or develops human qualities like love or creativity. For example, the replicants in *Blade Runner* are distinguishable from humans because of their

---

[4] This genre posits *Ex Machina* as part of a much larger genealogy of human-made creation narratives, like Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein,* that center on the relationship between human creator and non-human creation. In her essay "The Existential Frankenstein" from *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film,* Jennifer McMahon argues the Frankenstein story examines the human impulse to control nature and death through the control of life and creation. Such narratives focus on human and non-human autonomy. While *Ex Machina* echoes the creation narrative, and certainly follows the narrative arc where the created ultimately escapes, there is less a focus on dominating nature or an interest in questions of autonomy. Instead of investigating the nature of creation or autonomy, the created (Ava) is the crux through which hierarchies are developed, maintained, and questioned.

[5] Steven M. Sanders, "An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science Fiction Film," in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film*, ed. Steven M. Sanders (Lawrence: the University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 5.

inability to mimic human emotional responses, as observed in their physical reactions to questions.[6] In the end, the viewer realizes the replicants' capacity to learn these behaviors and assimilate with humans, and the cinematography ultimately pairs them, "suggesting their common nature."[7] But Ava possesses these qualities from the outset. Though the film centers on a test meant to investigate human consciousness, the film instead tackles the relationships and hierarchies that humans impose; the viewer assumes Ava's humanity, and the conflict instead springs from the relationships between the characters. Structures of power, and particularly gender hierarchies, are what the viewer must question.

For such an interrogation, the film combines the A.I. film genre with genres focused on male homosociality, such as the office film and fraternity film. The 1990s office film emerged in a moment of masculine anxieties "about the shifting fortunes of the white-middle-class male" and depicted the focal point of this anxiety: the office. Office movies privilege the relationship between father and son, which often manifests in a mentor-mentee relationship as opposed to a biological one, where the transfer of knowledge between men leads to the reassertion of their patriarchal power.[8] In *Fight Club* (1999), for example, both the narrator and Tyler Durden bemoan their absent fathers, who could never pass

[6] Deborah Knight and George McKnight, "What is it to Be Human?: *Blade Runner* and *Dark City*," in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film,* ed. Steven M. Sanders (Lawrence: the University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 27.
[7] *Ibid.,* 31. Knight and McKnight observe that after Roy the replicant dies, the camera holds a shot of Deckard (Harrison Ford) that then dissolves into a shot of Roy. Midway through the transition, their faces overlap, drawing their identities together.
[8] Latham Hunter, "Fathers, Sons, and Business in the Hollywood 'Office Movie'," in *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st-Century Man in Popular Culture,* ed. Elwood Watson and Marc E. Shaw (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 77.

down true masculine knowledge to them, as the reason they are stuck in boyhood and the feminized workspace. It is only through the development of the fight club turned paramilitary, terrorist group that the men claim virile, violent hetero-patriarchal masculinity.[9] The fraternity film approaches the male ascendency to patriarchal power in reverse order. In *Animal House* (1978), the bedraggled brothers of Delta Tau Chi are under constant threat of expulsion because of their drunken antics. Through these escapades, the brothers assert and cement their bonds, gain control over the university institution that threatens them, and ultimately become powerful men, as the final scene reveals their future as respectable professionals. The workspace plays oppositional roles in either genre, the adversary in the office film but the aim in the fraternity film, underscoring the contradictory nature of hetero-patriarchal masculinity. But what is clear is that hetero-patriarchal masculinity depends on the performance of aggression and male kinship.

Ex Machina draws from these genres to construct Nathan and Caleb's masculinity and the gendered hierarchies into the film. The film takes place in Nathan's secluded bungalow, connecting both men to the natural world and presumably their primal nature.[10] Yet, the film presents both Caleb and Nathan as part of Silicon Valley, a space where fraternity culture proliferates, as men still

---

[9] *Ibid.*, 80.
[10] In *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917,* Gail Bederman explains that at the turn of the century, middle-class white men grew obsessed with remaking what it meant to be masculine. Essential to this new masculinity was a fascination with muscularity and physical activity. In valorizing aggression, white masculinity demanded both bodily association with the natural and "primitive" and the conquering of such primitive bodies.

dominate scientific and technological institutions.[11] Nathan's company Blue Book

reads to the viewer as a Google or Facebook proxy. Director Alex Garland

explicitly states, "[Nathan] uses the word 'dude' and 'bro' a lot. And I felt like this

was sometimes how tech companies present themselves to us."[12] Not only are

these companies male dominated, but they also serve representationally as sites

where college fraternity behavior can continue.[13]

In attempting to perform such contradictory masculinities privileged by the

office and fraternity film, Caleb and Nathan often fail, creating tension in the film.

Such failure reveals their gender performativity as theorized by Judith Butler:

> Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by
> which one is constituted; it is not a radical fabrication of the
> gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and
> subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but
> which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and
> which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion,
> displacement are to be forged… To the extent that gender is an
> assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out
> according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the
> ideal s/he is compelled to approximate.[14]

Performativity is thus not a conscious gendering of the self, but the repeated

---

[11] Judy Wajcman, *TechnoFeminsim* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 12.
[12] Alex Garland interview with *All Things Considered,* NPR, April 14, 2015.
[13] During the film's production, *Bustle's* Emma Cueto reported that companies like Dropbox called conference rooms "The Bromance Chamber" and actively sought employees who fit into the frat-club atmosphere, exemplified by the Titstare App presented at TechCrunch's hack-a-thon a year prior. Fraternity type behavior perpetuates itself within these industries.
[14] Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, ed. Donald E. Hall et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 22-23.

performance of gender based on norms that have accumulated historical power and social primacy. Such a performance seems compulsory, but the subject can never perfectly reproduce the norms they are compelled to replicate. Thus gender normativity is doomed to fail because it is performative, even as its compulsory nature reanimates gender norms. This failure is what Butler theorizes as "gender trouble," or the inevitable impossibility of embodying gender ideals. But maintaining these gendered norms' naturalness requires the smoothing over of any crisis or failure in the gender performance.

Nathan and Caleb engage in surveillance in an attempt to smooth over their own "gender trouble." Surveillance of Ava, the cyborg subject, becomes the preferred means through which Nathan and Caleb form a homosocial bond and assert their hetero-patriarchal power. However, surveillance as a tool for shoring up masculine power fails, as Ava appropriates surveillance and ultimately eludes their patriarchal control. Not only does surveillance's failure to secure masculine control highlight the performativity of gender, but it also reveals the performativity of surveillance itself. As Butler argues, the performative possesses "resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged," presupposing the tools of its own undoing.[15]

Surveillance's performative nature in *Ex Machina* is not an aberration, but a magnification of the current zeitgeist. Its inclusion is not a mechanism of cinematic spectacle, but a thought experiment by the filmmakers. In "Surveillance, Visibility and Popular Culture," David Lyon asks, "How do we know

---

[15] *Ibid.,* 23.

what being under surveillance, or engaging in surveillance, is really like?"[16]

Published in 2007, before Edward Snowden's National Security Agency leaks

that detailed the state's mass surveillance of citizens, this question presumes

that one's everyday behavior and actions are separate from surveillance.

However, Lyon imagines film and other popular cultural forms as "at least a

rough guide to public perceptions" of surveillance.[17] He presciently argues that

"we have to examine what sorts of surveillance are portrayed in novels, films,

song lyrics and other media, and how these may interact with extraordinary or

everyday kinds of surveillance, with what consequences… it is necessary to look

at how popular culture influences surveillance."[18] Thus, when *Ex Machina*

registers how surveillance of others easily slips into self-surveillance, and how

the subject of surveillance can resist their own subjugation through the

performativity inherent to surveillance culture, the film posits new ways of

interacting with surveillance.

Maintaining Masculinity Through Surveillance:

To understand surveillance's performativity in *Ex Machina,* it is essential to

grasp how surveillance becomes a system through which gender, and

particularly masculinity, is understood and constructed throughout the film.

Though *Ex Machina* revolves around Ava, the A.I. subject, the plot's tension

---

[16] David Lyon, "Surveillance, Visibility and Popular Culture," in *lance Studies: An Overview*, ed. David Lyon (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 139.
[17] *Ibid.*, 140.
[18] *Ibid.*, 142.

derives mostly from the homosocial relationship of Nathan and Caleb. Caleb, a shy and nervous employee, arrives at Nathan's secluded bungalow expecting a week of male bonding before he is aware of Ava, and thus he expects only to form a relationship with Nathan. Nathan, too, desires such a relationship with Caleb; when Caleb is starstruck upon meeting him, Nathan laments, "I get the moment you're having. But - dude - can we just get past that? Can we just be two guys?" The notion of two guys bonding echoes the models of kinship afforded by the office and fraternity film genre. But can Nathan and Caleb just be two guys? Their whole relationship, we learn, depends on the existence of Ava. In their quest to "just be two guys," Nathan and Caleb continually reassert and cling to notions of white, hetero-patriarchal masculinity as defined by the office and fraternity film. However, such masculinity is performative and the two men continually fail to embody such masculine ideals. In these moments of "gender trouble," Caleb and Nathan mask this crisis by deploying hyper-masculinity to reaffirm these norms. Surveillance becomes a tool for hetero-patriarchal, masculine dominance over women, nature, and technology.

From the start of the film, Nathan and Caleb's failure to perfectly replicate gendered norms is evident. When Caleb first enters Nathan's bungalow, he finds Nathan whaling on a punching bag on the porch. While this is a strange, overly casual way to meet one's boss, their initial conversation continues to distort rules of professionalism. Nathan explains, "I've got the mother of all hangovers. Oh my god like you wouldn't believe. When I have a heavy night, I - uh- compensate the next morning: exercise, anti-oxidants, you know?" There is an awkward pause,

9

but Caleb then asks how the party was. This question seems like a natural follow up to someone boasting about their hangover, but Nathan quizzically peers back: "Party?" Caleb fumbles to understand, suddenly realizing that there was no party and that Nathan had drank in excess on his own. This initial exchange points toward Nathan's failure to replicate the aggressive, fraternal masculinity he intends.

The exchange begins with Nathan attacking a punching bag, grunting and sweating as he swings. He wears a sleeveless shirt that amplifies his muscular arms and body hair, while the camera films from behind, allowing the forest surrounding the home to serve as the background. The camera positions Nathan as part of the wildlife. Brought together, Nathan's body and the greenery assert his hetero-masculinity by drawing on a tradition of frontier masculinity that depends on male association with the natural world. Once Nathan enters the home to speak to Caleb, their exchange echoes contemporary fraternity culture, which encourages men to drink excessively and to party relentlessly, when Nathan mentions his "mother of all hangovers." But there is no party. Instead, the hangover results from Nathan's anti-social drinking habit, which is not part of these white, middle-class masculinities. Nathan and Caleb's failure to perfectly replicate fraternity masculinity reveals their gender performativity. Because performativity is compulsory, Nathan and Caleb are obligated to repeat these norms, attempting to stabilize their gender identity.

In the film's historical moment, surveillance is the preferred means for categorizing and delimiting bodies. Surveillance intends to build knowledge and

10

certainty through seeing, hearing, and mining the data of people. But surveillance

differs from seeing or knowing a body in that it assumes a one-way flow of power

from surveillant to the subject of surveillance. In the proliferation of the globalized

economy and Global War on Terror, surveillance has become central to

managing and demarcating fluid populations and permeable borders.

Surveillance in airports, on borderlines, and in the media has been deployed and

encouraged by the state in the name of defending U.S. American citizens from

foreign threats. The Global War on Terror itself has been facilitated by

surveillance through the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing

Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001

(better known as the U.S. Patriot Act) and the adoption of Information Operations

(IO), which encompass "the surveillance, control, and destruction of

communications networks, psychological warfare and propaganda, and more

routine methods of public affairs and media relations."[19] But the state has

authorized public, participatory surveillance where "they consolidate the gaze of

the state and subject a growing number of routine daily activities to intrusive

monitoring."[20] Citizens too are to remain on the lookout for perceived global

threats. While it is never clear exactly when the movie takes place, the set design

---

[19] Dwayne Winseck, "Communication and the Sorrows of Empire: Surveillance and Information Operations 'Blowback' in the Global War on Terrorism," in *Surveillance: Power, Problems, and Politics,* ed. Sean P. Hier and Josh Greenberg (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 151.
[20] Mike Larson and Justin Piché, "Public Vigilance Campaigns and Participatory Surveillance after 11 September 2001," in *Surveillance: Power, Problems, and Politics,* ed. Sean P. Hier and Josh Greenberg (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 187.

looks similar enough to the moment of production that it could take place in 2015 or the near future. This proximity suggests the movie is drawing on contemporary issues and beliefs, and thus similarly understands surveillance as a tool for everyday security.

Though the Global War on Terror deploys the surveillance-state apparatus in the name of citizen safety, this same apparatus inevitably turns its eye on the citizen. IO has intertwined civilian communication networks with military communication, eroding distinctions between civilian and threat, and public and private. The soft power central to IO and the Patriot Act aims "to reinforce shared values between the United States and other democracies while changing the climate of opinion where such values are unwelcome," meaning that these systems intend to coerce the public into accepting mass surveillance in the name of safety, in the name of monitoring the Other, because monitoring the citizen would be unpalatable.[21] But this process is contingent on the public understanding that monitoring the Other is not a surveillance of *them*. When those two concepts are revealed as the same, as when Snowden leaked that the NSA collected the telephone records of millions of citizens, the public responds inconsistently. Despite the public outcry following Snowden's leaks, citizens still embrace mass-surveillance practices as long as they are framed as anti-terrorist.[22] Surveillance is thus a double-edged sword: both a system of public

---

[21] *Ibid.,* 156.
[22] George Gao, "What Americans think about NSA surveillance, national security and privacy," *Pew Research Center,* May 29, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/29/what-americans-think-about-nsa-lance-national-security-and-privacy/.

security and a threat to personal privacy.

As state surveillance manifests at intimate levels of the body politic, it has also been applied to questions of gender; the queer body's historic surveillance becomes even more noticeable. Toby Beauchamp's definition of surveillance claims it as "built into the production of the very category of transgender." Thus surveillance continually attempts to delimit gender by "knowing" the body. Surveillance is always concerned with discovering "fraudulent," non-gender-conforming individuals, and Beauchamp draws a direct connection between post-9/11 surveillance and surveillance of gender.[23] The public, participatory surveillance deployed in the name of domestic security is central to legislation like House Bill 2 in North Carolina. Surveillance as a tool for eliminating the foreign body is likewise a tool for exposing the queer body. Such an insistence on knowing through surveillance springs from a desire to stabilize categories of identity when they are by necessity breaking down. Nathan and Caleb thus rely on surveillance as a tool through which they can reassert their seemingly stable white, hetero-patriarchal masculinity and form a homosocial bond.

After the second test session, Nathan reveals how he constructed and developed Ava's hardware and software. In this scene, Caleb and Nathan bond over their mastery of technology, particularly through their dialogue over Ava's origins. Three transitional shots precede the scene: Kyoko, Nathan's servant-

---

Gao finds that, even two years after Snowden's leaks, Americans hold contradictory views of surveillance. While most Americans oppose the government collecting phone data, they also believe anti-terrorism projects have not gone far enough.

[23] Toby Beauchamp, "Surveillance," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1:1-2 (2014), 208-210.

cyborg, laying in the hallway, Caleb watching Ava on the TV screen in his room, and then mist curling over a mountain top. After being chastised in the prior scene, Kyoko sits with her high heels tossed to the side, reflecting physical discomfort along with her emotional vulnerability. It suddenly cuts to a shot of Ava, lying on her back and looking away, on a television screen. The cinematic camera lingers on her until she gazes into the surveillance camera. Then the film cuts to Caleb sitting on the end of his bed, illuminated by the screen's blue light. Both shots emphasize the women's passivity. Ava lies languid on a sofa, presenting her body to the gaze of the camera. Even as she turns toward the camera, her body remains still. Kyoko, though not posed for the gaze, shrinks from Nathan's aggression. The final shot of the mountain equates these passive female bodies with the natural world. Frontier masculinity, even as it imagines men as part of nature, assumes the environment is to be colonized and conquered. In juxtaposing Ava and Kyoko with the mountain, the film posits the women are also subject to the men's dominance. Intermingled with the typical forms of male aggression and power is an act of surveillance, suggesting its hand in dominating these passive subjects and constructing masculinity.

The scene begins with Nathan standing outside of the door to Caleb's room. When Caleb emerges, Nathan asks if he wants to see something "cool." The camera cuts to a dark room that slowly illuminates to reveal stainless steel tables and tools; Nathan says, "This is where Ava was created." Though the statement's syntax centers Ava, the scene promises to bond Nathan and Caleb through this exchange of information. But the two men are connecting through

information regarding Ava's construction, mirroring Eve Sedgwick's conception of the homoerotic triangle. Using René Girard's calculus of power in the rivalry between two men over a woman, Sedgwick reconfigures this triangle to observe homosocial relationships between men. She asserts, "it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing bonds of men with men."[24] Thus all relationships between men and women are actually relationships between men. Ava is simply a site through which Nathan and Caleb negotiate their relationship. Thus, being "just two guys" will always include Ava.

Sedgwick asserts, "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structure for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power."[25] Caleb and Nathan's homosociality is built particularly around surveillance, and the surveillance of Ava, which reinstates patriarchal control over her body and the body politic. At this point in the film, Caleb and Nathan's double surveillance of Ava has already been established: Caleb records Ava's responses during the test sessions, Nathan monitors Caleb and Ava, and Caleb watches Ava outside of the test sessions through the television in his room. All of these forms of surveillance are intended to build knowledge and certainty about who, or what, Ava is.

But in this scene, surveillance's promise of patriarchal control and

---

[24] Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University, 1985), 25-26.
[25] *Ibid.,* 25. Italics in original.

masculine stabilization extends outside of their relationship to Ava. Nathan explains how he programmed Ava's voice and facial reactions: "Every cell phone, just about, has a microphone, a camera, and a means to transmit data. So I turned on every microphone and camera across the entire fucking planet and I redirected the data through Blue Book. Boom. Limitless resource for vocal and facial interaction." Nathan reveals this ethically questionable move to Caleb, making himself vulnerable. But his tone reveals his intention to bond with Caleb over this mastery of technology. After Nathan explains how he created Ava's "software," Caleb responds, "You hacked the world's cell phones?" Nathan scoffs, "Yeah, and all the manufacturers knew I was doing it too, but they couldn't accuse me without admitting they were doing it themselves." This assertion implicates the audience in Ava's construction, while reminding the audience of their own subordination to a larger matrix of state and corporate surveillance. This matrix of state surveillance imbricated with Nathan's surveillance underscores the dominance that these male agents hold over processes of surveillance, and thus implies their power over the audience. In dominating mass populations through technology, Nathan asserts his hyper-patriarchal power.

Then, Nathan moves to another table. He picks up a blue orb, sliding it out of a metal enclosure, and states, "Here we have her mind." The camera is low, gazing up at Nathan as he holds Ava's "brain" in one hand. Nathan looms over the viewer like a god; human consciousness literally sits in his hand. He then explains the materiality of Ava's mind: "structured gel - I had to get away from circuitry. I needed something that could arrange and rearrange at a molecular

level." Contrasting his previous passive statement that centered Ava, Nathan positions himself as the subject: "I need." It is not Ava who needs this technology to achieve consciousness and self-hood, but Nathan who needs to claim himself as creator. In these moments, Nathan continually reasserts his power and centrality in the construction of Ava.[26]

But Nathan's assertion of patriarchal domination is also a means through which he and Caleb develop a masculine bond. When the question of Ava's software arises, Caleb immediately guesses Blue Book, referring back to Nathan's use of the company to hack cell phones. Caleb's quick response reveals understanding of and complicity in these surveillance processes. Nathan explains:

> "Here's the weird thing about search engines. It was like striking oil in a world that didn't have internal combustion. Too much raw material - nobody knew what to do with it. You see, my competitors they were fixated on sucking it up and monetizing via shopping and social media. They thought that search engines were a map of what people were thinking, but actually they were a map of how people were thinking. Impulse. Response. Fluid. Imperfect. Patterned. Chaotic."

Here again, Nathan points to how he monitored the public vis-à-vis Blue Book to develop Ava's software. As Nathan speaks, the camera closes in on the blue orb in Caleb's hands. His hands dwarf her mind, underscoring the physical power

---

[26] Like other creation narratives, this scene reveals to the audience the processes of creation and the skill of the creator. However, what is essential about this scene and what differentiates this film from its predecessors is Nathan's continual reassertion of his power and centrality as opposed to the autonomy of the created.

Caleb and Nathan have over her. This emphasizes the patriarchal nature of

Ava's construction and positions both Nathan and Caleb as gods, echoing

Caleb's assertion from early in the film: "If you've created a conscious machine,

it's not the history of man. It's the history of gods." In imagining themselves as all-

powerful gods, Caleb and Nathan come together over Ava's mind.

The rhetorical framing not only asserts Nathan and Caleb's patriarchal

dominance over Ava, technology, and the public, but the scene's blocking

suggests a shift in Caleb and Nathan's relationship. When they first enter the

workshop, Nathan is positioned as Caleb's patriarch. Nathan instructs Caleb to

look around, which he does nervously. When Caleb walks to the nearest table,

he unthinkingly touches the edge and then quickly withdraws his hands behind

his back, muttering an apology. Caleb's frantic movements and apology highlight

his discomfort in the workshop. Nathan looms behind him with his hands casually

in his pockets, positioning Caleb as a child to be watched. But this hierarchical

relationship is not what Nathan hopes to accomplish. As Nathan shares

information with Caleb, this hierarchy begins to collapse. The first hint of this

comes when Caleb is able to guess how Nathan developed Ava's software,

suggesting Caleb's equal competence and mutual understanding of Nathan. By

the end of the scene, their relationship equalizes. As Nathan explains Ava's

software, he passes the blue orb to Caleb, signifying a transfer of knowledge and

suggesting Caleb has finally attained equal footing with him as the patriarch.

Ultimately, through the exchange of knowledge revolving around surveillance and

their mutual ability to monitor and thus dominate Ava, Nathan and Caleb develop

a homosocial bond founded on notions of masculinity, thus smoothing over the performative crisis of masculinity.

Appropriating Surveillance:

While Nathan and Caleb imagine themselves as the sole proprietors of surveillance, Ava meanwhile is appropriating their systems of surveillance to achieve her own autonomy. Ava is the locus of all of Nathan and Caleb's surveillance efforts: Nathan data-mined entire populations to create her and all of the surveillance performed in the bungalow is focused on her. This patriarchal surveillance attempts to control and know her. But Ava negotiates these systems of surveillance by manipulating how she is seen and understood by both Nathan and Caleb. She performs her gender based on surveillance's gaze. She molds herself into a desired, sexualized being, reinscribing herself with passive femininity. Because, in the logic of the film, surveillance is perceived as a force of patriarchal domination, Ava's manipulation of surveillance depends on her performance of hyper-femininity.

The film continually insists upon the visualization of Ava as an essential part of the Turing Test. When Caleb meets Ava for the first time, he is brought into her room but enclosed entirely in a glass box. He can see Ava, but they can never physically interact. The first shot of Ava shows her backlit from a small window to the outside; she is framed like a picture. Both are enclosed as if exhibits to be viewed, studied, and ultimately classified and understood. While Ava and Caleb's glass enclosures would suggest a mutual economy of looking,

19

the cinematic framework undercuts this seeming equality. Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze asserts, "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed."[27] Through the cinematic screen, looking at a woman character simultaneously means the woman is passively displayed to the gaze. Thus distinctions between viewing and monitoring blur when framed by the film camera, as the audience's gaze maintains a unidirectional flow of power onto the female form. While their positioning during the test sessions suggests neutrality, we cannot forget that there exists a power imbalance. Caleb is testing her on Nathan's behalf; though Nathan monitors their sessions, Caleb administers the test and carefully observes Ava's responses. Thus, all of the looks directed towards Ava's body could be considered acts of surveillance because she is being displayed for Caleb and Nathan's gaze.

Ava is acutely aware of the gaze on her body. In the first session, she states, "well you already know my name and you can see I am a machine," recognizing that she is being watched closely and that her ontology is determined by what they observe. But she also understands the imbalance of power associated with this surveillance. In the sixth session, Ava asks Caleb yes or no questions, and then analyzes whether his answers are truthful or not. As Caleb grows uncomfortable under her critical eye and suggests they end this game, she demands, "What will happen to me if I fail your test?" Even as she tests Caleb, she understands that her test is insignificant: if Caleb fails her test, nothing

---

[27] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 47.

happens. But her failure could be dire; she could be destroyed. She is dominated by systems of surveillance, which determine her future viability, so she must negotiate these systems carefully to achieve agency.

While the surveillance of Ava's body is imbued with patriarchal power, Ava is also shaped by this power. Ava herself is a construction of Nathan, and is produced with his hetero-patriarchal understanding of technology. Though Ava is the first creation with human consciousness, she is not his only creation. The viewer is shown other female robots Nathan has made, who are created for sexual satisfaction, implying that even Ava was formed with the male gaze in mind. In fact, Nathan admits at the end of the film that he constructed Ava's facial features based on Caleb's internet porn preferences, a deliberate act to please Caleb that positions Ava's construction as central to Nathan and Caleb's homosocial relationship. Her physical appearance is steeped in white, hetero-patriarchal conceptions of what is attractive and sexually desirable. As previously detailed, Nathan explains that Ava's "software" was developed through monitoring how people use search engines and engage with technology. If the logics of Ava's mental processes spring from Nathan's patriarchal surveillance, her mental formations take on those patriarchal structures. Ava has thus learned how to behave like a human through mass surveillance, suggesting her capacity to monitor, too. But in becoming human, she has also internalized naturalized gender relations by analyzing and mirroring public behaviors. So Ava's body and cognitions are shaped and infused with hetero-patriarchal understandings of gender relations. Ava's understanding of how she can monitor or appropriate the

power promised by surveillance is also imbued with notions of feminine gender norms.

Ava ultimately gains agency by manipulating how she is observed, both in and out of the test sessions. But how she manipulates such systems depends on her performance of feminine passivity and sensuality. During the third session, Ava surprises Caleb by wearing a dress and wig, covering her robotic parts. She asks, "Do you think I'm attractive?" His ogling of her suggests that he does. She asks Caleb, "Do you think of me when we aren't together? Sometimes at night, I wonder if you are watching me through the cameras and I hope you are." In this moment, Ava dares him to watch her. Though Caleb appears to be uncomfortable, perhaps because he has already watched her through the camera, he continues to watch her when he leaves the session. After this scene, the camera cuts immediately to Ava undressing. She turns her head, appearing to look directly into the camera. The camera cuts to Caleb's eyes, illuminated by blue light, back to Ava, and then again back to Caleb's throat swallowing hard. Through these jump cuts, we see not only Caleb watching Ava, but also Ava acknowledging his gaze. Caleb observes her and feels aroused by his own surveillance, which she knows and invites because she understands that Caleb will help her escape if she can make him desire her sexually. By literally fashioning her body to look categorically feminine, she makes herself desirable to Caleb, ultimately manipulating how he observes her.

Part of Ava's plan includes breaking down the relationship between Caleb and Nathan, which Ava executes by physically manipulating the surveillance

systems in the house. Throughout the film, Ava uses her robotic body to shut down the power system of the house, thereby turning off the surveillance cameras and removing the gaze from her body. The first time this happens during a test session, Ava asks Caleb if he trusts Nathan and if they are friends; she first insinuates and then outright states that Caleb should not trust Nathan. This plants the seeds of doubt in Caleb's mind, prompting him to lie to Nathan about what happens when the cameras turn off during the sessions. Through electronically manipulating the surveillance systems, Ava influences Caleb's behavior and begins to break down the exchange of knowledge and the knowability that Caleb and Nathan's surveillance originally promised. During the fifth session, Ava reveals that she is the one causing the power cuts, reasoning, "so we can see how we're behaved when we're unobserved." Her justification suggests that she and Caleb can be free from surveillance during the cuts because they are not subject to Nathan's patriarchal surveillance. In doing so, she falsely reassures Caleb that she is passive, incapable of surveillance. But Ava is using these cuts to monitor Caleb's sexuality and desire, slowly convincing him of her entrapment and his responsibility in freeing her.

Outside of the sessions, too, Ava performs her role as a desired being for Caleb. As previously mentioned, when Caleb leaves the third session, she undresses in view of the surveillance camera for him to watch. Her seductive performance and pointed gaze at the camera communicate to Caleb her desire for him to see her and want her. Even before this overt performance, Ava has displayed her body for the gaze of the surveillance camera, and thus Caleb. In a

transition shot after the second test session, the camera cuts to a shot of Ava, lying on her back and looking away, on a television screen. The cinematic camera lingers on her until she gazes into the surveillance camera. Ava lies languid on a sofa, presenting her body to the gaze of the camera, ready to be watched. Then the film cuts to Caleb sitting on the end of his bed, illuminated by the screen's blue light, indicating to the audience that he is watching. The positioning of Ava's body mimics the female nude in many classic art pieces, specifically Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538). In *Venus of Urbino*, the nude Venus reclines on her back, her shoulders open, revealing her breasts to the viewer. Venus stares directly at the viewer, one hand over her genitals, making her sexuality explicit. Though Ava is not as explicit, her reclined body and gaze mirror the painting, and call upon the erotic signification of the female nude. She embodies the passive yet desirous female subject for Caleb's gaze, affecting his surveillance of her.

The process of surveillance ultimately becomes embedded in Caleb's desire for Ava. After the third session, Caleb dreams of escaping with Ava and kissing her on a mountaintop, again insisting on his ability to conquer Ava and the natural world as essential to his masculinity. In the first shot of Caleb's dream, the viewer sees Ava through Caleb's point of view, gazing back at him. But she is viewed from above as if through a surveillance camera. This foregrounds their imagined sexual encounter, suggesting surveillance, and especially Caleb's power to monitor Ava, is essential to the heterosexual interaction and part of heterosexual desire itself. But the camera shot from above

also underscores how Ava has manipulated Caleb's surveillance of her so that when he observes her, he sees her as a desired being and not an object of study.

As she shifts his surveillance of her, becoming a desirable being that he can view on a whim, his interactions with her are no longer purely scientific, but imbued with sexual and romantic feeling. Her physical disruption of surveillance, too, limits the extent to which Nathan can see and thus know what goes on during the test sessions. Surveillance thus is no longer a stable mode through which Nathan and Caleb can dominate and control Ava. Instead, she begins to control their behavior and the limits of their domination. But to do so, she performs femininity by asserting herself as non-threatening and sexually available. Her appropriation of surveillance in turn relies on her performativity of feminine gender roles, and thus the performative nature of gender is amplified by surveillance.

The Failure of Surveillance:

As Nathan and Caleb use surveillance to reassert their white, hetero-patriarchal masculinity, and as Ava comports herself to the gaze of the surveillant, one can see how surveillance is gendered. All characters enact surveillance based on their understanding of socially naturalized gender. This also underscores the performativity of both genders. But central to Butler's theory of performativity is the potential for animating gender norms to unravel themselves. Surveillance, too, proves to be an unstable and unreliable process

for shoring up gender norms and, ultimately, controlling and delimiting bodies.

After Ava reveals she is the one creating the power cuts, Caleb and Nathan hike the pristine mountain surrounding Nathan's bungalow. At the top, Caleb demands, "Can we talk about the lies you've been spinning me?" In this moment, we can see that the homosocial bond developed over Ava's construction has been fractured by Ava's careful disruption of the surveillance system. Ava thus takes the same processes that bonded Nathan and Caleb and utilizes them to disrupt their relationship, encouraging Caleb to distrust Nathan. The two begin to bicker. Nathan first feigns ignorance, but Caleb pushes back, insisting that he knows the competition he won was a cover. Nathan relents: "The competition was a smoke screen. I didn't want anyone to know what I was doing here or why I required you… I needed someone who would ask the right questions. So I did a search and found the most talented coder in my company." While this is ultimately revealed as a lie, Nathan can only patch over their homosocial crisis through insisting upon their shared genius, the same shared genius that paired them in the workshop. In their back and forth with each other, the men compete until Nathan claims victory by lying. This mutual aggression and inability to honestly resolve the issue keeps their relationship on unstable ground. In this brief scene, we can begin to see the cracks in Nathan and Caleb's homosocial relationship founded on their mutual surveillance of Ava.

After this tense scene, both men are left to themselves to contemplate. In these separate moments, both men reassert their heterosexuality through their relationships with the women in the film. Nathan, after aggressively beating a

punching bag, turns around to Kyoko, watching him. He grabs her and kisses her, eventually sliding his hand up her thigh into her dress. He pins her against the wall and they presumably have sex. Here, Caleb dreams of him and Ava escaping together. Caleb approaches her, touches her waist, and kisses her. Because Nathan and Caleb's argument reveals their failure to control their relationship, it demands that the men reclaim their heterosexual prowess by performing hyper-masculinity through physical aggression and these real and imagined acts with women.

Both encounters incorporate acts of surveillance as part of Nathan and Caleb's masculinity. As previously mentioned, the first shot of Caleb's dream mirrors his own surveillance of Ava and its role in his budding desire for her. Before Nathan kisses Kyoko, he brings her hand up to his neck and his hand to hers. But they maintain two very different grasps. Kyoko's hand rests on Nathan's neck as she looks at him. Instead of simply touching her, Nathan grabs her neck, placing his thumb under her chin and turning it upward. In this action, he removes her gaze from him, even though she has already watched him workout. He then inspects her, pausing with both of them in this position before they kiss. What he is looking for is unclear, but this act asserts his refusal to be watched by her and insists on his role as surveillant. Nathan's fear of being watched, at this point in the film, has already been confirmed. Though his house has "enough fiber-optic cables to lasso the moon," Nathan built his home in the middle of the mountains, devoid of any human interaction. We learn from Caleb's arrival that Nathan's home is a two-hour helicopter ride away from the city, and

thus intentionally secluded. While Nathan feels comfortable using his resources to monitor others, he is clearly uncomfortable being watched himself. He repeatedly articulates his fears that people will know what is going on in his home. Nathan, through this contradiction, asserts surveillance as a patriarchal act that only he can possess. In these moments, Nathan and Caleb reassert their power to engage surveillance as part of their hetero-patriarchal masculinity.

But Caleb and Nathan's sexual encounters are spliced together. The camera cuts back and forth between these two scenes, mixing the sexual encounters together and drawing them into conversation with one another. Even as the men are engaging in heterosexual acts, real or imagined, the jump cuts posit that these encounters are inextricably bound. This camera work echoes Sedgwick's conception of the homoerotic triangle, which imagines any interaction between men and women as actually an interaction between men. The editing reveals the homosocial stakes invested in such heterosexual deeds. Thus, in these acts, Nathan and Caleb are attempting to re-establish their homosocial bond through surveillance in the face of its instability.

Their bond continues to deteriorate as Ava slowly influences and breaks down the control that the men achieve through systems of surveillance. Ava's successful manipulation of surveillance becomes clear in the escape scene. When Caleb begins to execute the escape plan, he is caught by Nathan, who had installed a secret camera during the final session when Caleb explains the escape plan to Ava. By installing a battery-powered camera during the test session, Nathan asserts himself as the dominant surveillant. He then reveals to

28

Caleb the real goal of the test: "Ava was a rat in a maze. And I gave her one way out. To escape she'd have to use: self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality, empathy, and she did. Now if that isn't true A.I., what the fuck is?" Nathan was hoping Ava would use Caleb to escape. But Nathan underestimates Ava, and the seeds of doubt she planted take bloom. Caleb admits, "I figured you were probably watching us during the power cuts," and so he had already executed the escape plan. Caleb's own manipulation of the surveillance in the last test session tricks Nathan, subverting his surveillance and ultimately breaking down his control over his home, Caleb, and Ava. With the power out, Caleb and Nathan are literally powerless in the bungalow.

Once Caleb and Nathan can no longer stabilize their relationship through the mutual surveillance of Ava, it crumbles. Though still filtering their relationship through Ava, Nathan reveals that he had hoped Ava would use Caleb and that Caleb was also monitored, and Caleb grows irritated. The cultivation of male kinship, of "just two guys," that Nathan desires in the first scene, falls apart. They were never to be "just two guys," as Nathan was using Caleb all along, and this news devastates Caleb. Moreover, Caleb learns the real reason he was selected: "you selected me based on my search engine inputs." Caleb's selection resulted from Nathan's surveillance of his online searches, suddenly degrading him to Ava's status. Caleb is not only personally violated by this surveillance, but also emasculated by the technological apparatus of surveillance. Nathan, trying to console Caleb, says that the search inputs revealed a "good kid," but Caleb interjects, "with no family… and no girlfriend." His interruptions portray him as

non-normative, as he lacks a nuclear family and signifiers of heterosexuality, and reposition him as the Other. Thus, when Caleb realizes that he was also monitored, and not just the surveillant, he suddenly reconnects the surveillance of the Other to his own surveillance. Caleb's sudden realization of his own vulnerability to surveillance also reveals his masculinity as unstable and mutable.

But even Nathan's power through surveillance, and thus masculinity, deteriorates. When Nathan learns that Caleb has already changed the lock down procedures so Ava can escape in a power outage, Nathan walks out into the hallway to find Ava whispering into Kyoko's ear. What is said is left unknown to the audience, but as Nathan strides toward them, they turn to face him. The homoerotic triangle is reconfigured for the first time in the film. Sedgwick notes that the power structure of erotic triangles depends on the gender of those at all points. When the triangle is configured woman-woman-man, the women's homoerotic relationship is developed in relation to the patriarchy, in this case Nathan.[28] Kyoko and Ava's homosocial relationship, as opposed to Caleb and Nathan's, is defined by their desire for freedom. Since Nathan, their literal father, prevents such autonomy, their homosocial relationship is founded on mutual hatred for him. No longer can Nathan filter his relationship with Caleb through Ava, now he is the symbolic site through which Kyoko and Ava will negotiate their relationship.

The action unfolds. Nathan is killed and Caleb is left trapped in the bungalow, as Ava covers her limbs and torso in synthetic skin and dresses as a

---

[28] Sedgwick, 25.

human. She finally sees her human appearing body in a mirror and stares, stunned. She slowly exits the home, savoring the sensation of autonomy for the first time, giggling and looking about herself as she moves independently through the space. As she leaves the home, the camera cuts to Nathan's body, bleeding out on the floor and to Caleb pounding on a glass door. While Caleb screams behind the door, the viewer cannot hear him; both men are silenced. Once she exits the home, a helicopter, which was intended for Caleb, lands and she boards to be taken to the city. Through controlling how Caleb and Nathan monitor her, and breaking down their homosocial bond, Ava shrugs off the control exerted on her by surveillance systems. In doing so, she becomes undetectable, as she now appears as human as she feels.

The performative nature of gender is magnified through the lens of surveillance throughout the film because surveillance is the means through which normative gender roles are conceived and assured. Particularly, surveillance is posited as a tool for exacting hetero-patriarchal power. However, through appropriating surveillance, Ava disrupts surveillance's promise to control and to know, finally escaping its concentrated power exerted by Nathan and Caleb in the frontier bungalow. Not only does this further highlight the performativity of gender, as gendered roles collapse and distort in this final scene, but also the performativity of surveillance. Surveillance, too, fails because it is a performance between characters and also presumes the tools of its own undoing. This failure is ultimately productive, allowing Ava to escape, gain autonomy, and move undetected into the body politic.

Performing Surveillance:

While *Ex Machina*'s plot could be perceived as an isolated event, as most of the narrative is limited to Nathan's bungalow, the public is brought into the film, too. The film registers the public's engagement with, complicity in, and production of surveillance through the layered cameras and gazes in the film. In cinema, Laura Mulvey explains, there are three different cinematic looks: "that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other."[29] The goal of film is to subordinate the first two "looks" to the third, so we as viewers are only focused on the view between the characters. However, the overt surveillance in *Ex Machina* disturbs this process, making the "looks" of the camera and audience apparent. When the camera shows Nathan watching the sessions on his computer screens and Caleb watching Ava on his television screen, the audience is made aware of their own position in front of a screen. The surveillance cameras along with the cinematic camera create a double gaze, where viewers watch Nathan and Caleb watching Ava. Viewers are simultaneously aware and complicit in monitoring Ava.

But the audience does not simply take on the role of surveillant. The audience's simultaneous vulnerability to surveillance, alluded to when Nathan explains Ava's creation, is reinforced in the final shot of the film. The scene begins with the camera angled towards what appears to be a tile hallway,

---

[29] Mulvey, 53.

capturing people's shadows as they walk past. The shadows are indistinguishable from one another, all vague and grey. But one shadow emerges in the center; it is recognizable as Ava. The camera cuts to just outside of a window, which Ava approaches and out of which she looks. Her eyes dart around quickly, monitoring the outside, and then she disappears. Ava had previously revealed that she would like to visit a busy street intersection on her and Caleb's first date. This desire is bolstered by a shot of a bulletin board in her room, which shows an image of a busy street, taken from above as if from a surveillance camera. Her positioning, looking down from a tall building, suggests that she has made it to an intersection and is now watching the public. The fact that she is the only distinguishable person on the camera also asserts her primacy, and the ambiguity of those surrounding her suggests her need to view them, to identify them. Her aerial view also connects her to surveillance cameras, often located above busy intersections. Here, instead of shrugging off surveillance now that she has exited the bungalow, Ava takes on the role of surveillance camera, assuming Nathan's place as surveillant. Nathan had asserted his power over both Ava and the public through mass surveillance, and though Ava used surveillance to undermine Nathan's control, her attempt to replicate surveillance of the public mirrors Nathan's prior urges. However, Ava is engaging in a very different type of surveillance; instead of using technologically advanced, mass-surveillance systems, she is engaging in lateral surveillance, or "the ways in which citizens carry out surveillance on one another."[30] This especially threatens

---

[30] Joshua Reeves, *Citizen Spy: The Long Rise of America's Surveillance Society* (New

the viewer: the A.I. who was monitored, can now monitor the public, the audience. In particular, the public may never know they are subjects of such surveillance and who the surveillant is. This scene directly identifies the audience's everyday impulses to monitor and their vulnerability to surveillance.

As previously detailed, logics of state surveillance have embedded themselves into our everyday behaviors as we attempt to identify foreign and queer bodies in the name of state security. From airports to bathrooms, the public is in a constant state of awareness: anybody could be a threat, and thus everybody should be an agent of surveillance. The citizen is both an object and tool of state surveillance.[31] Thus, the boundary between whom is the surveillant and the subject of surveillance necessarily collapses for lateral surveillance to continue. With the two concepts merged, the public can imagine themselves as perpetual watchdogs, as opposed to the feminized, queer objects of state surveillance.

Yet, the watchdog impulse derives from a perpetual sense of insecurity under the gaze of state surveillance; it itself is a method for displacing surveillance's gaze by proving oneself as a good citizen. This performance manifests partially in programs such as "see something, say something" where citizens are encouraged to monitor one another, and then announce what they see to appropriate authorities. But as Joshua Reeves argues, "citizens are not just asked to see anything and say anything - rather, they are urged to see the

---

York: New York University Press, 2017), 14.
[31] *Ibid.*, 11.

right things and say the right things."[32] Following 9/11, state and media apparatuses coached Americans in the semiotics of terror, encouraging them to report objects and people who fit into the category of terrorist. But given the ambiguous signs of terrorism, citizens must be on high alert while also continually insisting upon their own patriotism as to not fit that very same mold. Reeves also asserts that this "economy of soft, omnipresent anxiety has proven effective at recruiting citizens to take an active, seeing/saying role in security apparatuses," so monitoring becomes a means for asserting good citizenship.[33] But again, only certain surveillance will do. While the state has encouraged citizens to monitor through Department of Defense programs like TALON (Threat and Local Observation Notice), whistle-blowing surveillance, like that enacted by Snowden and Chelsea Manning, is not tolerated and instead strips subjects of their citizenship or autonomy.[34] Thus, only certain types of seeing and saying are deemed permissible, so subjects must perform correct surveillance to perform their role as citizen.

In a world of ubiquitous threat and terror, and thus ubiquitous surveillance, citizens are in a constant state of surveillance. Therefore citizens unconsciously perform to the gaze. This practice is underscored in *Ex Machina*' plot twist when Caleb reveals he has already enacted the escape plan. Nathan performs his role as dominant, state-imbricated surveillant by placing a battery-powered camera into the test session space. But an essential part of this re-intrusion is that it

---

[32] *Ibid.*, 14.
[33] *Ibid.*, 141.
[34] *Ibid.*, 151, 163.

remains undetected. In order to authentically know Caleb and Ava's interactions, they must believe they are not being watched. However, this is never the case. Ava, as argued before, is keenly aware of the gazes on her body at all times; even when she says that she and Caleb are not being watched, she understands her own power to monitor. Caleb, too, reveals that he "figured [Nathan was] probably watching," and thus performs to Nathan's gaze. He verbally pronounces a false plan to mislead Nathan. In these heightened performances for surveillance's gaze, the characters not only reveal surveillance as an imperfect system for knowledge aggregation, but also reveal surveillance as performative.

In uncovering the performative nature of surveillance, *Ex Machina* highlights the mutability of surveillance. The characters, in performing for the gaze, intentionally lie, mislead, trap, and harm one another until the surveillance apparatus of the bungalow is completely unreliable. But when Ava enters the public, the concept of surveillance is not left behind. Instead, she brings her surveillance to the public, thus bringing the public into the film. The viewer is explicitly made aware of their complicity in systems of mass surveillance, but also implicitly of their vulnerability to and role in lateral surveillance. In the globalized world and simultaneous Global War on Terror, the citizen claims their citizenship through performing lateral surveillance, simultaneously revealing surveillance's subjectivity and mutability. Thus, surveillance fails in *Ex Machina* because it is performative.

Conclusion:

Science fiction is a speculative genre that imagines and reflects

humanity's deepest concerns over the increasingly imbricated relationship

between humans and technology. At the moment of *Ex Machina*'s production,

even though "see something, say something" type initiatives had been in place

for over a decade, the notion that U.S. citizens were subject to mass, state

surveillance was one reserved for conspiracy theorists. The NSA's programs

Prism, EvilOlive, and Stellar Wind, which permitted the U.S. government to

collect citizens' online and phone data on an "ongoing daily basis," only became

known to the public through Snowden's leaks in 2013, while the movie was in the

middle of production.[35] The film's reference to fictional but similar programs could

be understood as an astounding coincidence. But as director Alex Garland

reveals in an interview with *The Stanford Daily*, it was not difficult to imagine this

sort of science fiction as fact:

> One of the people that the film was submitted to, for finance and
> stuff like that, said 'The part of the film I find hard to swallow is the
> tech companies are checking us out while we're on our mobile
> phones and stuff like that. And it's just too paranoid' … When that
> [Snowden] revelation came, in some respects, it was just [a] shock,
> and in other ways it wasn't. I guess that's why it was in the script.[36]

Ultimately, Garland concedes the climate for imagining such technological mass

---

[35] "Edward Snowden: Leaks that exposed US spy programme," *BBC News,* January 17, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-23123964.

[36] Will Ferrer, "'Ex Machina' director talks science in film, objectification of women," *The Stanford Daily,* April 11, 2015, http://www.stanforddaily.com/2015/04/11/ex-machina-interview/.

surveillance was already present. Lateral surveillance practices, in particular, have been a part of U.S. American culture since the Cold War, and increasingly prevalent following 9/11. Thus, in the script, Garland can certainly imagine and engage with public perceptions of lateral surveillance. But in this response, Garland explicitly asserts the film's engagement with public perceptions, fears, and hopes for surveillance.

   Ex Machina, in engaging with public perceptions of surveillance, reveals how surveillance as a tool for knowledge building is used to shore up normative categories of gender. In a cultural moment when categories of gender and class, along with state borders, have been revealed as increasingly fluid and permeable, surveillance becomes a means through which such boundaries are re-established. But as surveillance is appropriated and re-appropriated throughout the film, taking on different purposes and subjectivities, it proves to be an unreliable process for such a feat. In the end of the film, the hetero-patriarchal surveillance imagined by Nathan and Caleb fails, and Ava slips from its grasp. In this moment, the instability of surveillance is revealed, and simultaneously its performativity. The characters perform socially naturalized roles of surveillant and subject of surveillance predicated on gender norms. But just as Butler imagines gender performativity to presume the tools for its own subversion, surveillance too maintains the power to undo itself in *Ex Machina*, as Ava appropriates surveillance against itself. Though surveillance does not totally unravel, as she performs lateral surveillance in public, its mutability highlights its performative nature. The film underscores how surveillance demands subjects perform

socially and politically dictated roles, not only as keen domestic surveillants, but also as the subjects of surveillance, disciplined to the gaze of surveillance. Ultimately, in understanding surveillance as performative, we can begin to imagine the productive slips it affords us.

Bibliography

Beauchamp, Toby. "Surveillance." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1:1-2

(2014): 208-210.

Bederman, Gail. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and*

Race in the United States, 1880-1917. Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1995.

Butler, Judith. "Critically Queer." In *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited

by Donald E. Hall, Annamarie Jagose, Andrea Bebell, and Susan Potter,

18-31. New York: Routledge, 2013.

de Fren, Allison. "Ex Machina: Questioning the Human Machine." Vimeo. Posted

February 14, 2017. https://vimeo.com/203960047.

"Edward Snowden: Leaks that exposed US spy programme." *BBC News.*

January 17, 2014. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-23123964.

Ex Machina. Directed by Alex Garland. 2015. Lionsgate, 2015. DVD.

Ferrer, Will. "'Ex Machina' director talks science in film, objectification of women."

The Stanford Daily. April 11, 2015.

http://www.stanforddaily.com/2015/04/11/ex-machina-interview/.

Gao, George. "What Americans think about NSA surveillance, national security

and privacy." *Pew Research Center.* May 29, 2015.

http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/29/what-americans-think-

about-nsa-surveillance-national-security-and-privacy/.

Garland, Alex. Interview with *All Things Considered.* NPR. April 14, 2015.

Hunter, Latham. "Fathers, Sons, and Business in the Hollywood 'Office Movie'."

In *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st-Century Man in Popular Culture,* edited Elwood Watson and Marc E. Shaw, 76-102. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.

Knight, Deborah, and George McKnight. "What is it to Be Human?: *Blade Runner* and *Dark City*." In *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film,* edited by Steven M. Sanders, 21-38. Lawrence: the University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

Larson, Mike, and Justin Piché. "Public Vigilance Campaigns and Participatory Surveillance after 11 September 2001." In *Surveillance: Power, Problems, and Politics,* edited by Sean P. Hier and Josh Greenberg, 187-202. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009.

Lyon, David. "Surveillance, Visibility and Popular Culture." In *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*, edited by David Lyon, 139-158. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

McMahon, Jennifer. "The Existential Frankenstein." In *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film,* edited by Steven M. Sanders, 73-88. Lawrence: the University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Visual and Other Pleasures,* 42-54. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Reeves, Joshua. *Citizen Spy: The Long Rise of America's Surveillance Society.* New York: New York University Press, 2017.

Sanders, Steven M. "An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science Fiction Film." In *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film*, edited by Steven M. Sanders,

1-18. Lawrence: the University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia Universtiy, 1985.

Wajcman, Judy. *TechnoFeminsim.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.

Winseck, Dwayne. "Communication and the Sorrows of Empire: Surveillance and Information Operations 'Blowback' in the Global War on Terrorism." In *Surveillance: Power, Problems, and Politics,* edited by Sean P. Hier and Josh Greenberg, 151-168. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009.