The Construction of Masculinity in Ex Machina

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There has been a shift in the science fiction films of the present decade, with the constructed nature of gender being centralized in modern cinematic narratives featuring cyborg characters. An emerging theme in these narratives is the tendency to apply stereotypical gendered attributes to the cyborg characters which serve to contrast with the more complex human characters. This paper focuses on one textual example of this shift in terms of masculinity: Ex Machina (2015), directed by Alex Garland. By contrasting the two examples of masculinity present in Ex Machina, I will argue that a crisis in masculinity is addressed. This crisis of masculinity responds to modern discourses on changing gender identities and the anxiety surrounding this threat to hegemonic normatives. The two male characters are consistently juxtaposed with each other and also with the female cyborg characters to highlight the complexity in the construction of gender identity. The entire narrative of Ex Machina serves as an allegorical tale of the seductiveness of technology and the danger it poses to humanity, most specifically in this narrative the threat it poses to gender identity. Through rigorous textual analysis, the construction of masculinity within Ex Machina, considering wider cinematic discourses on the representation of masculinity in film, is examined in this essay.

Ex Machina is the story of a computer genius Nathan (Oscar Isaac), who is attempting to make the world's first successful AI. He is the CEO of Bluebook, a large scale tech company, who, tricks Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), a programmer at his company, into believing that he has won a competition to visit his private retreat for a weekend. In fact Nathan has been gathering Caleb's internet search history data for months, using it to create Ava (Alicia Vikander), the latest iteration of his AI creations. Utilising everything from Caleb's porn search history, Nathan created Ava to ensure that Caleb would be attracted to her. Nathan believes the ultimate test of consciousness is to determine if Ava is capable of manipulating Caleb into helping her escape from the high tech, high security facility. Ultimately Nathan loses control over his experiment, and Caleb indeed helps Ava escape believing that she loves him. Eventually Ava murders Nathan and locks Caleb into the house making her escape into the world alone.

Throughout the narrative Nathan is toying with Caleb. It is never explicitly clear whether the image he portrays of himself as hypermasculine is a reality or a carefully constructed ruse, created to make Caleb suspicious of him and fall for Ava's damsel in distress routine. There are four main characters in the film: Nathan, Caleb, Ava and Kyoko, Nathan's housemaid and silent servant, who is eventually revealed to be an android. The idea of gender identity as a construct is clear throughout the narrative with the film hinting at this constantly both through the juxtaposition of the two male characters and the comparisons of the human/non-human characters. The essay will now expand on this concept.

As mentioned previously a marked shift has occurred within contemporary cyborg cinema over the past decade. The cyborg character is prolific in contemporary science fiction cinema. Some notable examples of the last decade include: *Elysium* (Blomkamp), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon), *Justice League* (Snyder), *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve), and *Alita: Battle Angel* (Rodriguez). A new trend has emerged through the representation of these

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cyborg characters: stereotypical gendered attributes are applied to their representations which contrast with their more complex human counterparts. This juxtaposition addresses a crisis occurring around gender identity. This stereotypical gendering of cyborg characters works to appease perceived threats to the hegemonic order by sustaining representations of highly gendered stereotypical males/females. It also serves, paradoxically, to highlight how gender is indeed a social construct, a performative act by enforcing these characteristics on synthesised beings.

The technological fetishisation of cyborgs has been documented by various theorists. Soukup argues that the semiotic codes of technology and female empowerment create an interesting contradiction with the female hero, one where she represents both passivity and activity concurrently (30). Soukup's theory considers this "techno-scopophilia" as having its roots in capitalism and advertising (19). In the same vein as Soukup, Brown examines the combination of imagery of female action heroes with imagery of powerful machinery (100). Brown sees the proliferation of phallic imagery in narratives featuring female action heroes, mainly through the use of machinery: heavy guns, motorbikes etc (101). Where science fiction films centring around cyborg characters have changed is that they are not merely fetishized on screen, though this still is a frequent occurrence (*Lucy* (Besson), *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders) and *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve), but their representations have become more complex as they work in a representational system that usually supports notions of traditionally gendered binary representation.

The narratives present in science fiction cinema have typically bolstered the idea that there exists an essential masculinity and femininity which occurs naturally and cannot be synthetically fabricated. The cyborg narratives of the most recent decade, however, feature various narratives that highlight the performative nature of masculinity and femininity and often feature cyborg characters that possess more humanity than their human counterparts. The next section of the essay will focus specifically on the male characters within *Ex Machina* and analyse how masculinity is portrayed in this textual example.

In *Ex Machina*, the two male characters, Nathan and Caleb, are consistently juxtaposed on screen throughout the narrative. Nathan's masculinity is portrayed in a more traditional manner, suggesting, at first, that his masculinity is natural and inherent to his personality. This representation clashes with the representation of Caleb who is more uncomfortable throughout the film, and shown to be in touch with his more stereotypical feminine attributes. Caleb is consistently more empathetic and sensitive than Nathan who is often depicted as blunt, angry and harsh.

The idea of Nathan's masculinity as naturally occurring is reinforced through the mise-énscene of the film. Nathan lives on a vast estate complete with forests, waterfalls, an ice covered mountain and various wild, rugged scenery. One of the opening sequences features Caleb flying over Nathan's estate, the camera panning over the harsh, rough terrain. The pilot comments on how they have been flying over Nathan's estate for "the past two hours", highlighting his financial success and wealth. The natural imagery suggests the notion of an essential masculinity, with Nathan living in the middle of the untamed wilderness. His house is built into a rockface surrounded by dense forest and natural materials, mostly stone and glass, feature in almost every area of his house. This evokes the sense that Nathan himself is wild and stereotypically masculine by nature and underpins the idea of his character as hypermasculine. The exposed concrete and hard edges of the architectural design throughout the house also underpin this notion of a harsh masculinity.

The idea of an "essential" masculinity featuring in cyborg narratives was discussed by Holland (157) and fits into discourses on masculinity within film studies also (Neale 1983; Springer 1996). Holland argued that the cyborg film in the 1990s revealed a crisis in the construction of masculinity (165). She identified this crisis as created by a threat of the "onslaught of femininity" to the patriarchal order. Where Holland's thesis has changed in the last decade is that the threat no longer necessarily comes from an "onslaught of femininity" but from changing social and cultural expectations around gender and identity more broadly (165). Holland argued that the threat to the patriarchal order was appeased by the notion that there exists an essential masculinity that transcends the male body, reinforcing traditional philosophical dualisms: "Asserting an essential masculinity simultaneously with an essential humanity seems imperative- providing a transcendental masculinity- ensure(s) that even with no biological gender the hegemony of masculinity can be sustained" (167).

Nathan's hypermasculinity as performative is displayed through his cinematic representation. He is consistently shot in an empowering manner, usually positioned in frame above Caleb, suggesting dominance. His body language throughout the film implies that he is comfortable and relaxed, he often sprawls his body out in plain coloured lounge wear, in comparison to Caleb who is usually dressed in formal shirts with more complicated patterns and located in more awkward positions. The first time Nathan is introduced as a character the camera moves through the house following Caleb to an outdoor wooden porch area. The porch is positioned above a river with the forest surrounding the house where Nathan is boxing. This scene both evokes the idea of an essential, natural masculinity while promoting the idea of Nathan as a successful hypermasculine man. By utilising the camera to follow Caleb it also privileges his point of view and displays how intimidating Nathan's character is to Caleb. Relaxed in his surroundings Nathan is engaging in a traditionally masculine sport, physically hitting a punching bag, again underpinning his representation as hypermasculine.

This theme regarding Nathan's character as hypermasculine continues throughout the narrative, where he is often displayed lifting weights and working out. Nathan puts very little effort into his physical appearance, he has a shaved head and a full beard which contrasts directly with Caleb's carefully gelled hair and shaved face. The camera positions Caleb's toiletry bag in a close up shot while Caleb wears a towel around his waist, highlighting his grooming regime and the effort that he puts into his appearance. In contrast we never see Nathan grooming or even looking into a mirror. From the moment Caleb enters Nathan's world he is uncomfortable, he is displayed in a suit attempting to make his way through the dense forest with a wheelie bag which emphasises his awkwardness in Nathan's self-assured masculine world.

While Caleb is consistently awkward navigating Nathan's environment, he is often presented in the same frame as Nathan struggling in some manner. One key scene where the characters embark on a hike features Nathan standing proudly above Caleb staring over the landscape while Caleb struggles to pull his body up to Nathan's level. The shot composition and the framing of this scene again positions Nathan physically above Caleb, hinting at Nathan's superiority and suggesting that Caleb lacks the essential masculinity that Nathan possesses.

This juxtaposition of the two male characters continues in their treatment of their female counterparts. A key sequence intercuts Caleb's fantasies of Ava with Nathan's actual experience with Kyoko. While Caleb fantasises about a tender moment kissing Ava outdoors in the forest, Nathan roughly grabs Kyoko towards him for his sexual gratification. This

sequence reinforces Kyoko's character as a mere object for Nathan's pleasure. When discussing the female sex robot character, Dery argues: "the female sex machine serves not only as a surface on which male visions of femininity may be etched but as a mirror whose reflection reinforces the masculine sense of self" (195). This insight by Dery shows how forcing himself on Kyoko works to reinforce Nathan's sense of masculinity and manhood (195). When juxtaposed with Caleb's innocent fantasy it displays how tender and sensitive Caleb is in comparison to Nathan.

Ex Machina sets up traditional dualisms regarding masculinity/femininity in order to tear them down and create disorder. By contrasting the two examples of men and emphasising the performative nature of the hypermasculine male Ex Machina highlights the complicated and troubled state of gender identity and the anxiety surrounding the contemporary social shifting of these categories. The comparative analysis performed in this section has highlighted and underpinned the manner in which the two male characters and their differing representations work to represent two very different examples of men, emphasising the superiority of the hypermasculine male in contrast to the inferior, sensitive male. In this manner it is positioning stereotypical masculine traits as having dominance over feminine traits. The next section will examine and analyse the way in which the film comments on and reinforces the performative nature of hypermasculinity.

The previous section mentioned the contrast between Nathan and Caleb in terms of appearance, in particular grooming. While superficially this appears as though Nathan is more casual and relaxed about his appearance, on closer inspection the artifice of his appearance, and thus his identity, is revealed. While he is never explicitly shown grooming himself, the effort of keeping his head so closely shaved and his beard styled is made clear. When considering the grooming regime that must be undertaken in order to maintain his look it highlights the artifice of Nathan's masculinity.

The mid-point of the film features a key scene that underpins and directly comments on the superficiality present in Nathan's character. This key scene marks a turning point in the text where the naturalistic themes are replaced by artifice. Caleb attempts to confront a drunken Nathan about his abusive behaviour towards Ava. Nathan flicks a switch on the wall and the room suddenly explodes with disco music while the natural cool lighting is replaced by an intense, harsh red light. Kyoko, activated by the musical cue, moves to the front of the room and begins a synchronised dance routine. Caleb asks Nathan what he was doing with Ava and Nathan ignores him and tells him to dance with Kyoko to "unwind". While Caleb tries to persist in confronting a belligerent Nathan: "You tore up her picture"; Nathan continues his indifference to Caleb by again ignoring him to say: "I'm going to tear up the dance floor". Nathan joins in with Kyoko and perfectly in sync they perform the dance together. The shots of Nathan and Kyoko dancing are medium close ups intercut with a shot of Caleb's face, indicating his discomfort and confusion in contrast with their seemingly flawless natural ability to randomly perform synchronised dance routines together.

This key sequence has a double effect. It simultaneously works to highlight the contrast between the two male characters, which has become a central theme at this point in the film, while also emphasising the performative nature of such a dance routine by Nathan. In this manner the sequence reveals that Nathan's hypermasculinity is indeed a facade, a masquerade. This scene is cognisant of Butler's work on gender as a construct and a performative act: "the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts" (521). Similarly to the artifice of his appearance, while on the

surface he seems relaxed and in control, on deeper reflection the effort and practice that went into perfecting a dance routine is made obvious. The absurdity and theatrical nature of this scene within the text, which has to this point been naturalistic in style, is highlighted in this key sequence. Before this sequence the soundtrack featured minimalist, simplistic music which is now interrupted by loud harsh pop music. The lighting, to this point, has reflected natural light with the camera shots seamlessly transitioning between indoors and outdoors. The sudden inclusion of severe red lighting emphasises the performance and superficiality of the sequence and the artificiality of the masculinity on display. Also the manner in which Caleb is suddenly thrust into such a bizarre and surreal moment underpins how out of his depth and comfort zone the character actually is, working to reinforce the contrasting male characters.

The crisis in masculinity and identity climaxes when Caleb discovers Kyoko's real identity as a cyborg. In a disturbing sequence she peels off layers of her skin to reveal to Caleb her true cyborg identity. The music becomes heightened and frantic reflecting Caleb's inner turmoil and this scene takes place in Nathan's bedroom in front of his multiple mirrors. Mirrors, screens and reflections are used throughout the text to underpin the idea of multiple identities or fractured identities, reinforcing the crisis in gender identity as a central theme. Caleb retreats to his room in this key sequence ande begins to pull at his face in front of the mirror, eventually slicing into his arm with a razor blade and digging around with his fingers in the fear that he will discover that he is also a cyborg. Caleb is in a state of crisis regarding his identity here, this feeds into theories on cyborg films as directly addressing ideological questions of identity: "These films foreground questions of dualism and personal identity especially clearly, and highlight contemporary concerns about the effects of technology on the human 'self'" (Holland 157). The sustained exposure to Nathan's surreal world and the cyborg characters have resulted in an existential crisis of identity for Caleb. This existential crisis is furthered when he discovers that Nathan intends to create a new iteration of AI which would mean the destruction of Ava, who, technically, is a machine. Typical philosophical questions are raised in this way, regarding identity and consciousness, particularly socially and culturally relevant in this era as technology advances. The two characters are once again contrasted in their beliefs: Nathan is indifferent to dismantling multiple iterations of AI, while Caleb believes Ava will die and is more than merely a machine.

The film also addresses contemporary concerns about technology and social media. The characters are all in a constant state of being watched and watching each other. There are cameras all over the high tech facility and when Caleb first switches on the television in his room he discovers he has a direct channel to Ava's room. Each character is aware that they are being watched and this adds an extra layer of performance, they are compelled to present a performance or a constructed identity of what they expect the viewers to desire. This is evident in various scenes but particularly relevant in two key scenes: Ava strips her human clothing while looking seductively at the camera in her room aware that Caleb is watching her and in another scene Nathan taunts Ava in her room, ripping up her artwork in an effort to antagonise Caleb. These key sequences and the various screens and masks on the walls around the facility are suggestive of the performative nature of social media and the superficiality of online personas. Discourses on the link between social media and toxic masculinity highlight a crisis online relating to misogyny, hypermasculinity and its changing parameters: "Originally coined in psychology to describe overly exaggerated masculine traits and patterns, hypermasculinity has recently been expanded to include more social beliefs and expectations... From the original definition, the focus on reinforcement of existing gendered binaries and rejection of the feminine or ambiguity were retained" (Blodgett & Salter 136).

We see this misogynistic hypermasculinity clearly present in Nathan's character who dismisses the female characters as objects for his use and pleasure (he has gone as far as to build Ava with "pleasure sensors" in her genitals) and often utilises bullying tactics with Caleb who he mocks and toys with throughout the film, in this manner rejecting Caleb for his more feminine traits.

Regarding social media anxieties and concerns, science fiction as a genre commonly speaks to contemporary social and cultural anxieties. This is a theory expanded on by various film theorists: Kuhn (1990), Springer (1996) and Holland (1995) for example. Kuhn labelled this tendency to reflect contemporaneous concerns as science fiction's "cultural instrumentality" (1). In *Ex Machina*, the entire narrative serves as an allegorical tale of the seductiveness of technology and the danger that it poses to humanity, most specifically the threat that technology poses to gender identity. The response to the threat of technological advancements within cyborg cinema is expanded on by Redmond: "The cyborg articulates the terror of letting too much technology into everyday life" (157). This is evident in *Ex Machina* as order descends into chaos and murder, with the hypermasculine male overpowered and rendered obsolete by the cyborg female.

This rendering of the hypermasculine male character as powerless deviates from historical representations of masculinity within science fiction cinema in previous decades. Film studies typically focused on the hypermasculinity present in male driven action films of the 1990's: some popular science fiction examples from this period include *The Terminator* (Cameron), Predator (McTiernan), and Robocop (Verhoeven). Ex Machina reflects a slight shift in this trend, not only by acknowledging the complexities of gender identities and the performative nature of these identities, but also by featuring a hypermasculine male who is not omnipotent. Neale discussed this omnipotence in terms of powerful male characters in action films of earlier decades: "the male hero is powerful and omnipotent to an extraordinary degree...power and omnipotence are tested and qualified" (12). This differs in Ex Machina as the climactic final sequence reveals Nathan's fragile mortality. He is outsmarted by the other three characters who conspire to release Ava from imprisonment. Ava stabs Nathan in the abdomen with an empty expression on her face while he appears genuinely shocked at his imminent demise. Having been convinced of his omnipotence and power as a hypermasculine male Nathan is suddenly faced with his mortality and impotence after being penetrated by a kitchen knife, a phallic symbol indicating that Ava has gained control over Nathan.

While this shift in the representation of masculinity is somewhat progressive for science fiction cinema, *Ex Machina* ultimately regresses to traditional historical dualisms regarding its representation of gender. By consistently contrasting the two male characters and reinforcing the superiority of Nathan's masculine traits to Caleb's more stereotypical feminine traits, *Ex Machina* offers a representation of an "ideal" masculinity and reinforces this through shot composition and mise-én-scene, particularly the shots of the rough terrain as a metaphor for an essential powerful masculinity. *Ex Machina* further regresses to binary oppositional dualisms in the representation of femininity through the female characters. although Ava ultimately murders her creator and gains her freedom, she does so in the vein of archetypal characters of the past, specifically the femme fatale. She utilises her sexuality and charm to disarm Caleb and manipulate him into assisting her and murders Nathan in vengeance. This regression with regard to stereotypical representations is sustained when considering Kyoko, the second female character in the text. She is incapable of speech, that ability having been removed by Nathan, which works to objectify her character further. She appears as a sexual object in multiple scenes, and is shown to respond to touch by instantly

undressing. She was created by Nathan to serve his domestic and sexual needs. By regressing to these stereotypically gendered traits, even while insisting that they are constructed, *Ex Machina* tends to support and bolster such regressive representation.

This essay has argued that while some progression has been made in terms of the representation of masculinity within Ex Machina, it also works to reinforce traditional binary oppositions with regard to gender. It is clear that a definite shift has occurred in relation to the representation of masculinity with Ex Machina displaying a clear self-awareness regarding the performative nature of hypermasculinity and the constructed nature of gender. However, the consistent reliance upon the juxtaposition of masculine/feminine and human/machine as conflicting categories suggest a tendency to lean towards an idea of essential established gendered characteristics. This type of representation is troubling when considering the larger body of science fiction films that tend to also rely on stereotypical gendered representations. Over the last decade some textual examples featuring hypermasculine males include: Jupiter Ascending (Wachowskis), Passengers (Tydum), Oblivion (Kosinski), the ever expanding superhero genre featuring a large majority of male protagonists (to date only two superhero films of the last decade have featured female protagonists, a phenomenon that needs to be expanded on but is beyond the scope of this paper) and new iterations of historical science fiction franchises featuring hypermasculine males include: Terminator Genisys (Taylor), Predators (Antal) and Dredd (Travis). When the consistent body of work represents this type of masculinity as a normative collective it becomes an issue that affects social meaning.

Stuart Hall emphasised the importance of representation in creating and driving social meaning: "Our 'circuit of culture' suggest that...meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices. Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we belong" (3). As discussed here the overwhelmingly common representations of masculinity within the science fiction cinematic genre are troublesome and thus assist in projecting and circulating damaging images of men as hypermasculine and privileging this version of masculinity. Furthermore, the cultural influence and worldwide popularity of science fiction films cannot be denied. Eight out of the top ten highest grossing films of all time, worldwide, are science fiction films: Avatar (Cameron), Star Wars: The Force Awakens (Abrams), Jurassic World (Trevorrow), Marvel's the Avengers (Whedon), Avengers: Age of Ultron (Whedon), Avengers: Infinity War (Russo Brothers), Avengers Endgame (Russo Brothers) and Black Panther (Coogler). Thus eighty percent of the top grossing films of all time worldwide can be categorised as science fiction films, a significant figure. All of these texts feature hypermasculine protagonists, with unrealistic male bodies that are objectified consistently on screen. Clearly this demonstrates the dominant representations of men being created and circulated by cinema as hypermasculine.

Although as was discussed above, *Ex Machina* sets up the binary dualisms in order to tear them down and create disorder, the reliance on these dualisms for the majority of the film cannot be ignored. By depending on the stereotypical gendered attributes to highlight the constructed nature of gender, any attempts to do so are somewhat undermined. Furthermore, the climax of the film is somewhat troublesome. After Ava murders Nathan she selects a new appearance for her adventure into the world. She chooses body parts from Nathan's wardrobe along with clothes. This scene is intimate, emphasised by the soft lighting and delicate music. Ava tries on a wig and despite not being able to feel anything, and having never been made aware of fashion, relishes pushing it over her shoulder and staring at her reflection. She chooses a feminine white dress embroidered with flowers and high heels. This scene suggests

that an essential femininity exists and that Ava is only free when she is able to express her inner femaleness. This is similar to the manner in which the text has hinted at an essential masculinity within Nathan's character and undermines any attempt it may have made to dismantle this notion.

Ex Machina consistently objectifies its female cyborg characters while attempting, somewhat superficially, to create more complex representations of masculinity. However, considering how Ava and Kyoko are two new iterations in what is revealed to be a long line of trials (all of which were female cyborgs created by Nathan) Soukup's theories on the cyborg film become more relevant: 'By semiotically merging technological commodities with human characteristics, these films represent characters as dehumanized/fetishized machines and represent consumer technology as erotic/glamorous' (32). Furthermore the demise of the hypermasculine male at the agency of the female cyborg character can be read as more of a perceived threat of technology to humanity than shifting gender identities. This is clear when considering how Caleb's character is also rendered helpless and trapped in the house having been successfully manipulated by Ava.

While this essay has shown that representations of gender have shifted somewhat in contemporary cyborg cinema, it has also proven that there are still sustained stereotypical representations prolific in the genre. In order to create meaningful change and break free from traditional dualisms with regard to gender more effort needs to be made to advance from the reliance on binary dualisms. The manner in which *Ex Machina* relies on these stereotypical gendered representations is symptomatic of the sustained patriarchal nature of cinema. *Ex Machina* utilizes these stereotypical representations to support notions of the essential gendering of its characters and thus appeasing any perceived threat to the patriarchy.

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