Bluebeardean Futures in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015)

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Abstract:
Utilising a feminist psychoanalytical approach to Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015), this article explores contemporary forms of female entrapment – particularly the sexual exploitation of women and the gendered influence of pornography on sexual identities. Garland's critique of technological patriarchy manifests itself through his reworking of the Bluebeard narrative; however, the film also conforms to typified heteronormative representations of women through its reproduction of familiar cinematic tropes and norms. Moreover, the climactic escape of the central female character combines ambivalence towards technological advancement with dread of female sexuality in a way that problematises feminist interpretations, despite its emancipatory suggestions. This paper examines *Ex Machina* as part of a feminist Bluebeard tradition that acts as a critique of current cultural norms that shape and control heteronormative desire, *and* a male gothic tradition that reflects fears regarding female-ness, abjection and the maternal.

1 A potential figure for the deconstruction of raced and gendered sexual identities, the cyborg body also acts as a site where technological patriarchy manifests itself and "conventional understandings of the feminine" are fortified (Doane 110). The male-created feminised cyborg thus serves as a reflection of fantasy. However, artificial intelligence (AI) complicates this understanding as the consciousness of the fembot develops in ways that are uncontrollable by her designer. The feminine AI thereby combines the fear of new technology – represented in films like *The Matrix* (1999) or *iRobot* (2004) – with ambivalence towards women's emancipation and the dismantling of imperialist heteronormative patriarchal values. In this way, the AI gynoid may serve as a means through which to explore female ontological concerns and the effects of male fantasy on women's bodies. In Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015), the representation of technology, surveillance and power reproduces many of the thematic elements of his earlier films and novels as well as science-fiction more generally. However, the inclusion of a series of raced and feminised AI cyborgs establishes the film as part of a SF sub-genre that combines the fascination and fear of technology with anxieties regarding the 'unruly' woman and autonomous female desire. In *Ex Machina*, the central gynoid figure is a 'white' model named Ava (Alicia Vikander). Ava's consciousness is highly regulated by spatial boundaries: she is mostly confined to a secure room without windows and kept behind a glass divider, which allows the two male characters to view and question her. This said, *Ex Machina* is more accurately described as an arthouse film that strategically employs generic conventions – fairy tale, SF, horror – in order to unsettle and manipulate audience response.

2 The film also contains a number of dissonant strands which have ignited debates as to whether it can be viewed as a feminist work. On the one hand, as numerous critics have pointed out, it fails The Bechdel Test[1] and contains repeated and unjustified full-frontal female nudity, whereas the men remain fully-clothed (Watercutter; Rose); on the other, the emancipation of a woman objectified and confined by her position between men drives the narrative. Additionally, while the film contains scenes of nudity and victimisation that conform to the conventions of exploitation cinema, the narrative also works as a critique of such trends. Moreover, Laura Mulvey's seminal analysis of fetishized feminine aesthetics in film, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema", exerts a significant influence on *Ex Machina*, and while Garland is reluctant to state that he actively made use of this theoretical framework, he acknowledges that Mulvey's thesis may inform the film (Wiliens). Garland describes *Ex Machina* as "a prison break movie" (qtd. in Emblidge), and Ava eventually does escape her cell; however, her identity as an emancipated subject is left unimagined and the film's suitability as a method of critique for addressing women's objectification and disposability under patriarchy remains questionable. This article examines the aesthetics of entrapment in *Ex Machina*, in particular the film's intertextual use of the Bluebeard plot, which multiple critics have noted (Robinson; Perry), and Garland himself references in an interview (Opam). Specifically, I trace the components of *Ex Machina* that present a complex allegorical critique of mainstream porn-culture and female entrapment in the feminine sexual identities constructed in the image of hetero male fantasy. It is important to note that, while I read Garland's critique of the widespread objectification of women under patriarchy as referring to pornography and analyse scenes with the aim of teasing out this particular thread, this is just one aspect of a multi-faceted narrative. *Ex Machina* does not overtly criticise, condemn or condone pornography, but Garland describes his film as partly "about the objectification of women" (qtd. in Lewis), and therefore the references to pornography are relevant inasmuch as they chime with debates regarding the objectification of women in the media (Walter; Gill).

Ex Machina and Bluebeard

3 A generically gothic trope, confinement is intensified and domesticated in Bluebeard narratives in which "things-within-caskets-within-castles heighten the gothic structures of containment" (Barzilau 96). Above all, of course, it is women whom the tale – and the gothic

[1] A film passes the Bechdel test if it has two or more female characters who are shown having a conversation that is not about men.

more generally – seek to objectify and contain. In some ways a folk reformulation of Eve's non-compliance, the curious heroine of the Bluebeard tale transgresses her new husband's orders and enters a forbidden room, discovering the dead (often dismembered) bodies of her husband's former wives. In his analysis, Bruno Bettleheim focuses on the magic key that becomes permanently bloodstained when the heroine drops it upon sight of the dead bodies, reading this trope as a metaphor for the wife's infidelity, bringing the sexual dynamics of the tale, in particular male control over women's sexuality, to the fore. In *Ex Machina*, Garland reformulates the Bluebeard plot with a significant alteration: the usual role of the young bride is replaced by a young, male software engineer named Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), invited to his employer's secluded home-cum-research facility in order to perform the Turing Test[2] on the cyborg Ava. Her creator, Nathan Bateman (Oscar Isaac), performs the Bluebeard role and his association with combat sports, as well as his beard, visually indicate his hegemonic male-ness, while his surname connotes a murderous style of masculinity.[3] In contrast, Caleb's youth, inexperience and the limitations placed on him by Nathan – for instance, he only has access to certain rooms, and Nathan is secretive regarding his techniques for creating AI – infantilise him, positioning him as less masculine/feminised.

4 Garland modernises the principle motifs of Bluebeard gothic such as the ancient castle, relocating the action to a high-security, subterranean research facility/apartment, located in an overgrown wilderness – a perverse Eden. Anne Williams emphasizes the significance of Bluebeard's castle, arguing that it not only reflects the patriarch's psyche, it constitutes "a complex metaphor for the structures of cultural power" and for the gender arrangements they "both found and mirror" (47). In Bluebeard's castle, "'woman' equals 'the material'" (43) – a sentiment literalised in *Ex Machina*. By murdering his disobedient wives, Bluebeard returns them to their patriarchally defined status as lifeless matter, meant only to reflect his masculinity and power back at him, either through their obedience, which constitutes symbolic death, or literal death. In Garland's film, the research facility and the position of the gendered and raced subjects within perform the same task as, for Nathan, Ava functions as an embodiment of *his* intelligence and inventiveness. In Bluebeard narratives, the old gothic castle denotes history and patrilineage, highlighting the structure's genealogy *as part of* culture, disturbing the notion that the hidden secret exists as a perversity divorced from patriarchy. While the setting in *Ex Machina* is ultra-modern, the first names of the

[2]A test to decipher if a computer can 'pass' as human.

[3] Bateman is the surname of the titular psycho in Bret Easton-Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), and 'Bateman' is also a mutation of 'Bates,' the surname of the voyeuristic antagonist of Robert Bloch's *Psycho* (1959) and Alfred Hitchcock's film of the same name (1960).

principle characters create ties to Judaeo-Christian traditions. The well-known connotations between Ava/Eve and curiosity/disobedience relate both to the Bluebeard narrative *and* to Nathan's 'god-like' creation, while Caleb's name may refer to the biblical character sent by Moses to spy on the inhabitants of Canaan, establishing his association with the gaze within the film. As well as this, Nathan's musical and artistic tastes (Mozart, Jackson Pollock) establish the pseudo-womb prison/research facility as an extension of patriarchal space, particularly as Caleb likens him to Mozart, stating their shared genius, thus carving out Nathan's position in a masculinist genealogy of creators. Nathan affirms his mastery over the space when he gives Caleb an electronic pass that opens some doors, but not those deemed off-limits. By forbidding entry to one room, and thereby limiting his wife's freedom, Bluebeard – like Nathan – accentuates his hegemonic masculinity and authority. In *Ex Machina*, the bloody chamber that customarily conceals the murdered wives exists in two realms: camera footage of Nathan creating, interviewing, and dismembering an array of former models, and a room containing their bodies. The surveillance footage shows Nathan dragging the lifeless bodies of previous models across the floor and, as the legs of the cyborg disappear from the shot, the scene is more reminiscent of a murderer with his victim, rather than a scientist with a robot. The assembling process and creation of the fembots also literalises the influence of male fantasy on the female body, and the objectification of women.

Bluebeard's Chamber and Pornography

5 Numerous writers and critics have drawn parallels between the Bluebeard narrative and porn; for instance, Anne Williams compares the nameless heroine with other female protagonists of male gothic, concluding that, like pornography, conventions of the genre "express the 'abject,' the otherness of the *mater*/mother who threatens to swallow or engulf the speaking subject" (106). In Bluebeard narratives, the abject "gruesome materiality of Male Gothic" (106) is most apparent in the room containing the dismembered bodies, echoing filmic techniques that 'dismember' or fragment the body, close-ups, for example. However, various feminist authors, critics and directors have re-interpreted the tale, focusing on the murderous style of masculinity that Bluebeard represents and the concealed murder of women symbolically encoded within the patriarchal structure. In feminist adaptations such as Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" (1979), Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) and Catherine Breillat's *Bluebeard* (2009), the narrative is reworked so that the negative connotations of the heroine's curiosity transform into a sign of her intellect and/or autonomous desire. In this way, later characterisations of the wife's

disobedience/curiosity come to represent a commitment to feminist ideals and an unwillingness to conform to traditional gender roles or be dominated by a husband. Carter specifically utilises pornography as a theme and references Félicien Rops' erotic art, thus taking "the latent content" of the traditional story, which is "violently sexual" (Carter qtd. in Simpson ix), and bringing it to the fore. Just as *Ex Machina* displays conventions of male gothic as outlined above, it also explores the feminist concerns displayed by Carter's short story.

6 As Caleb Sivyer points out, the gaze of Carter's Bluebeard figure, the Marquis, "is not tied to him as an individual but is rather an abstract position of power that is assumed by him" (13). Furthermore, by renaming her villain the Marquis, Carter also alludes to the aesthetics of sadomasochism found in works by the Marquis de Sade, i.e. that of the "sexual education of one person in the fantasy of another" (L. Williams 224). In "The Bloody Chamber" Carter invokes Sade's *Justine* (1791) through her masochistic heroine, and, as Robin Ann Sheets observes, the Marquis's resemblance to the Comte de Gernande, the aristocrat in Sade's novel. "The Bloody Chamber" explicitly demonstrates the impact of male fantasy on feminine sexuality during the heroine's sexual initiation with her husband, during which the Marquis positions his new bride to resemble a pornographic etching. The narrator notices herself in the mirror and sees that she is the "living image of an etching by Rops", the one depicting "the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty; and the old, monocled lecher who examined her" (12). The pornographic etching, created by a male artist and purchased by the Marquis, signifies a male economy of desire, as well as containing an explicit portrayal of male fantasy within the piece itself through the figure of the lecher. The viewer/object dynamic displayed in the etching, mirrors the husband's influence on the construction and shaping of the heroine's sexual identity.

7 Carter and Garland's versions of the Bluebeard fairy-tale share a number of common themes,[4] and the imagery employed in *Ex Machina* conjures strikingly similar associations as those utilised by Carter. For example, in *Ex Machina,* Nathan's authority is intrinsically bound up with the gaze through his access to surveillance footage of the premises and the knowledge available to him through his position as CEO of a search engine. In contrast, like the previous models of feminised AIs, Ava appears behind a glass screen, highlighting her function as connotative of to-be-looked-at-ness within the viewer/object dyad. However,

[4] Poet and online blogger, Helen Heath, also notices this similarity, except she reads Caleb as a stand-in for the extra-marital love-interest of Carer's short story, rather than the heroine.

while Carter brings her tyrant out of his medieval setting and associates him with nineteenth- and twentieth-century arts, literature and pornography, Garland reimagines Bluebeard as a derivative of the Frankensteinian model of male scientist. In *The Sadeian Woman* (1978), Carter states that the libertine of Sade's fictions feels "a helpless rage at the organs of generation that bore us into a world of pain" (135). Robin Ann Sheets cites precisely this point and relates it to "The Bloody Chamber," noting that the immolation of "the woman upon [the Marquis's] ancestral bed becomes an act of protest against his mother" (648). In this vein, Sheets's connection between "The Bloody Chamber" and what Carter sees as rage against the mother/the life-producing vagina in Sade's pornography is relevant to *Ex Machina*. Like Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, Nathan attempts to usurp the mother's place through his creation of 'life,' and redesigns woman without her generative capabilities, depriving women of one of the scant sources of their power historically, namely motherhood, suggesting a rage similar to Carter's Marquis through the desire to eradicate the maternal function. Furthermore, Nathan's design and construction of his AIs, along with his exploitative sexual use of the fembot Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), whom he has reprogrammed to be a silent puppet to his will, mirrors Carter's illustration of the stifling effect of male fantasy on female sexual expression and identities. Indeed, both of the male characters are computer programmers, while all the female characters are computers. The appearance of the AIs also reflects the influence of fantasy, as their bodies are sexed, and possess highly cultivated pubic hair. Additionally, like Carter who refers to pornographic etchings, Garland also references pornography. While Nathan contrives that Caleb has been randomly selected to perform the Turing Test on Ava, it later transpires that Caleb's selection is not accidental; rather Nathan selects Caleb because the latter is lonely, longing for a heterosexual relationship and consolidation of his masculinity. In one of the final scenes, Nathan explains the real test: "Ava was a rat in a maze... To escape she'd have to use self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality and empathy" (Garland, *EM*). During this scene, Caleb asks whether Nathan designed Ava's face based on his pornography preferences, which Nathan has access to through his search engine company, explicitly linking the identity of the AIs to porn. While this constitutes the only overt reference to pornography in *Ex Machina*, its significance for the pornographic subtext that pervades the film is difficult to overstate.

8 After his first meeting with Ava, Caleb, unable to sleep, switches on the television in his bedroom and finds that it is linked to the security cameras fixed on Ava. He creeps out of bed and approaches the television. Transfixed by the screen, he stands there watching her. The cinematography reinforces the impression of transgression that this act signifies as, while

the cameras are always there, the location and temporal setting (Caleb's bedroom at night) imply the voyeurism associated with watching pornography. Additionally, though, Caleb's viewing constitutes part of his task to ascertain whether Ava passes as human, chiming somewhat with Mulvey's words regarding the avenues available to the male unconscious to escape the castration anxiety that the woman signifies, namely "investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery" (840). In tandem with Caleb, whose gaze fluctuates between voyeuristic and scopophilic[5] while he performs the Turing test and develops an attraction to Ava, the audience also attempts to decipher whether Ava constitutes a threat. This scene may attest to anxieties regarding our relationship to technology – particularly as Caleb seems almost hypnotised by the screen, which rather than just a medium or tool, almost becomes an extension of his gaze.[6] In the direction for this scene, Garland specifies that Caleb is mesmerized by "the imagery…The curve of the breasts on her synthetic torso" (Garland, "Ex Machina Clean Shooting Script"), confirming the sexual connotations of his looking. The POV shots as Caleb watches a television screen aligns his voyeurism with the audience's, suggesting that his gaze may be a surrogate for our own or, perhaps more accurately, the heterosexual white male viewer. At this moment Ava looks towards the surveillance camera and the television cuts out, signifying a power cut, which automatically triggers security lockdown causing an alarm to sound and a colour-palate change: the emergency lighting is red, which bathes the shot in the same colour. It is later revealed that Ava causes and controls these power cuts, thus framing them as her rebellion against the intrusive male gaze. The sudden departure from the blue glow and the quiet of Caleb's bedroom underpins the transgressive nature of his act, and the red lighting and alarm externalises the sense of panic and shame often associated with watching porn. However, this sudden transition, insofar as it interrupts both Caleb's *and* our voyeuristic pleasure, also constitutes a meta-narrational device. While Caleb's mesmerised state may engage with concerns regarding our vulnerability to technology, it simultaneously interrogates these debates, instead demonstrating our complicity with the darker, potentially violent side of technology. Caleb's unarticulated, conveniently supressed knowledge of Ava's entrapment is what affords him the pleasure of viewing her in this way, thus making him complicit, and as his gazing mirrors the audience's, we are also implicated.

[5] My distinction between 'voyeurism' and 'scopophilia' is in direct correlation with Mulvey's, i.e. the voyeur's "pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt", whereas the scopophilic gaze enjoys the over-valuation of the image of woman as "icon" (840).

[6] See Zabet Patterson's "Going On-Line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era" for a discussion of the representation of pornography viewing by mainstream media, particularly pages 104-108 where he discusses concerns of the blurring between human and machine and how the media represents this.

9 These ideas are more explicitly explored upon Caleb's entrance of the forbidden room, which creates associations between pornography, the abject, and murder. Caleb steals Nathan's key pass and hacks into camera footage of Nathan's interviews with previous models. In the interview scenes the AIs, who appear far more human than Ava as they have hair and skin, are entirely naked and, in contrast to Ava, do not have a silver-blue metallic body. Through POV shots, the audience's gaze is aligned with Caleb's as he watches the footage, containing the construction, interrogation and subsequent dismemberment of former models Jasmine, Katya, Jade, Lily and Amber. This episode is also visually linked to the scene described above, which takes place in Caleb's bedroom, through his transfixed facial expression and the blue colour palate, as well as the POV shots. The sense of transgression echoes the visual similarity between these two scenes (Caleb is hacking into Nathan's computer, whereas earlier he watches Ava unbeknownst to her). In this way, the content of what he watches is connected: in the first scene, he observes Ava in her room and becomes entranced at the sight of her; in the second, he is horrified at the explicit depictions of violent entrapment. Ava's imprisonment and Caleb's (and our) voyeurism and/or scopophilia become analogous to – or at least comparable with – the violence in the surveillance footage, and the introduction of a digital Bluebeard's chamber seems to affirm this reading as it links objectification through filmic practices to a form of death. Jade (Gana Bayarsaikhan) is seen behind a glass screen, sitting naked on a chair while Nathan questions her, repeating the Bluebeard trope of interrogation. In the footage, rather than obediently responding to Nathan, Jade merely repeats the same question: "Why won't you let me out?" (Garland, *EM*), before we see her in fast-time screaming and beating her fists against the glass until her arms splinter and break. This image of entrapment, accentuated by Jade's quasi-self-harm, constitutes yet more abject imagery through the willed destruction of body parts. The visual link between this and the bedroom scene suggests the similarities between Nathan's interrogation of his AIs, and Caleb's interviews and observation of Ava, reconstructing Caleb as a budding Bluebeard, rather than a benign figure.

10 After viewing these scenes, Caleb enters the forbidden room containing the bodies of former AI models. The *mise-en-scène* evokes an erotic scenario, and Kyoko is naked and lies on a bed, which is surrounded by mirrors. But these erotic associations jar with Caleb's discovery as he moves around the room opening the mirrored doors, revealing the bodies of the previous AIs, which are not intact. By displaying Kyoko's multiple reflections in the open doors among the lifeless, dismembered AIs, connections are drawn between symbolic death and Kyoko's highly regulated – indeed, programmed – sexuality. The mirrors around the

room and Kyoko's many reflections also resemble the Rops episode in Carter's short story, already described in brief. The primary difference is that Carter's scene takes place in the marital bedroom prior to the bride's gruesome discovery, not the forbidden chamber: "[the bed's] white gauze curtains billowing in the sea breeze. Our bed. And surrounded by so many mirrors! Mirrors on all the walls, in stately frames of contorted gold…[I] watched a dozen husbands approach me in a dozen mirrors" (14). Carter also invokes imagery that foreshadows the secret room: when the Marquis dresses her in a variety of costumes, he says "I have acquired a whole harem for myself" (14). Just as the young bride of Carter's story becomes "a multitude of girls" (14), so does Kyoko. This imposed de-individualisation, anonymity and interchangeability is reinforced by the series of sexualised AIs, as well as in one of the final scenes when Ava replaces her own damaged skin and body parts with those of her predecessors.

11 As discussed, entry into the secret chamber in Bluebeard gothic narratives has been compared to porn through abject displays of Otherness and 'un-wholeness,' such as disembodied limbs/body parts, which, conversely, may also connote castration. In *Ex Machina*, Kyoko approaches Caleb as he enters the forbidden room and peels back the skin on her midriff, revealing that she, too, is a robot, despite Nathan's earlier claim that she is an immigrant worker. The presentation of Kyoko in this scene (nude, in a bedroom) in conjunction with the film's pornographic subtext, allows for a reading of Kyoko's revelation as analogous to the separating of vaginal lips in porn: an act designed to allow the male viewer access to woman's 'mysterious' Otherness, as her naked body and the way she makes eye-contact with Caleb before she exposes her inner mechanisms seems to both unsettle and eroticise the episode. Annette Kuhn's observation that "in pornography it is the woman's sex that is constructed as the prime object of curiosity", an image which "addresses the spectator as desiring – desiring specifically to penetrate this mystery... – and says that knowledge is to be secured through looking" (40). Whereas pornographic scenes exhibit *female* 'Otherness,' 'open-ness,' and 'lack' (in relation to masculinist norms such as bodily unity), in *Ex Machina* Caleb 'penetrates' to the mystery of Kyoko and her silence when she reveals her robotic Otherness. However, the presentation of Kyoko as a sexualised subject in this scene creates a link between porn aesthetics and the film. Through this reading, the abjection of the murdered wives in the Bluebeard tale is connected to pornography, and these strands are connected to the symbolic death of women and feminine desire constrained by male fantasy. Clearly, there are differences in representations of genitalia and the robot interiority of fibres and wires, but Kyoko continues to peel off her skin in a way that creates both a striptease effect *and* a link

between the exposure of her interiority and castration anxiety. After removing a square of skin from her upper-midriff (notably leaving her breast intact for Caleb and the viewer's gaze), she proceeds to strip it from her face, leaving two bulging eyes – connotative of the Medusa's stare that Freud famously links to castration ("Medusa's Head"). Kyoko's initial reveal of her robot mechanisms first and foremost forces Caleb to confront her Otherness as a robot in a way that echoes the display of feminine 'lack' in porn, framing Kyoko's mechanical interiority as symbolic of the vagina. However, on a more basic level, the accusatory stare confronts Caleb – and the audience – with his complicity in her subjugation. For Linda Nead, while the fetishized feminine aesthetic subject seeks to contain and "seal-up" the female body, in many (straight) pornographic narratives woman's 'abject' female-ness "is examined and probed for its hidden secrets" (97). With this in mind, it could be said that in *Ex Machina* Ava functions as the fetishized 'whole' as she offers Caleb the scopophilic pleasure that dissipates castration anxiety (her metallic body, performed passivity, entrapment and idealisation attest to this), in contrast to the former AIs' abject 'open-ness' as displayed in the scenes described above. Although, paradoxically, Kyoko's revelation – read here in terms of 'lack' – also implies Ava's difference, framing them as distorted mirror-images of each other.

12 However, Ava's characterisation is ambiguous and, like Carter's heroine, who sees her ability to seduce her husband as a means of "changing his determination of her story" (Gamble 86), Ava performs patriarchally constructed femininity, *qua* vulnerability, masochism, and exhibitionism, in order to manipulate Caleb and facilitate her escape. One example of this is when she tells Caleb that "sometimes, at night, I wonder if you're watching me on the cameras and I hope you are" (Garland *EM*). Ava's comments raise questions regarding complicity, a theme often associated with feminist Bluebeard narratives. For example, in Karin Struck's *Blaubarts Schatten* [*Bluebeard's Shadow*] (1991), the heroine "is Bluebeard's partner in crime, a shadow who subordinates herself to the moves he has choreographed for her" (Tatar 129). As the title of Struck's text suggests and Tatar confirms, the identity of the Bluebeard figure relies on its Other, a victim to perform the masochistic and passive part in the gendered sadomasochistic roles that Bluebeard narratives – particularly Carter's – tend to portray. As a viewer, we cannot be sure whether Ava's remarks constitute a reflection of her programmed heteronormative femininity, or if the comment is part of her plan to seduce Caleb as a means to escape. Either way, Ava's performance corresponds with Catherine Mackinnon's deconstruction of heteronormative femininity: "each element of the female gender stereotype is revealed as, in fact, sexual. Vulnerability

means the appearance/reality of easy sexual access; passivity means receptivity and disabled resistance" (530). In this sense, Ava's physical entrapment, which fixes her and renders her accessible to Caleb via surveillance footage of her room, consolidates and combines with her performed femininity and appearance, while veiling her with the image of 'damsel in distress.' This reading chimes with Judith Butler's question as to "whether the category of woman is socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation" (523). Ava's somewhat infantilised position, with limited experience and knowledge, as well as her rosy-cheeked youthful appearance, also suggest her conformity to scripts of heteronormative femininity as outlined by MacKinnon, i.e. passive and receptive to the penetration of the male gaze and/or phallus. While conceptually youth and virginity are inapplicable to robotic bodies, Ava's presentation as young and trapped like the virginal princess of romance narratives, carries traces of this culturally constructed 'innocence.' Arguably, then, for Caleb Ava functions as a means for him to construct his masculine identity as, compared to his limited power in relation to Nathan, Ava's restricted position contrasts with his relatively greater power (of movement, of the gaze), thus mitigating his attenuated masculinity.

Between Men

13 The power dynamics made manifest by the relationship between object/viewer, passive/active offer a pertinent critique of gender roles, and also highlight the fantasies that regulate masculine heteronormative identities. As Helen Lewis points out in her review of *Ex Machina*, "Nathan imagines himself as a creator-God, and his AI's femininity reflects her presumed subservience. The naive Caleb, on the other hand, casts himself as a knight in shining armour, saving Ava from the clutches of her callous jailer". Lewis's term for Caleb – knight – calls to mind the medieval Romance, which is well-known for its love-triangle structure. This point raises questions regarding Garland's significant departure from the traditional Bluebeard schema. In this fairy tale and its revisions, concealed wife murder "is the foundation upon which patriarchal culture rests: control of the subversively curious 'female,' personified in his wives" (A. Williams 41). By inserting Caleb into the traditionally female role, a shift occurs whereby the relationship becomes triangular, and the rivalry/ power play between Nathan and Caleb overshadows the latter and Ava's developing romance.

14 The asymmetry engendered by the power imbalance of this love-triangle corresponds with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theorisation of homosocial bonding. Sedgwick analyses

examples of the male-male-female love triangle and frames it as a structure for building male bonding, in which the woman acts as a mediating figure to dispel fears of homosexuality in the service of compulsory heterosexuality. Sedgwick writes that "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, original emphasis). Sedgwick's thesis resonates with Luce Irigaray's Marxist analysis of the exchange of women, in which she states that man's "relationship to productive nature, an insurmountable one, has to be denied so that relations among men may prevail" (185). For Irigaray, the reduction of women to enveloped, veiled and fetishized commodities functions as part of this process of denial. In *Ex Machina*, Nathan's creation of 'life' reflects this sublimation, as does the explicit objectification of the feminised subjects. Nathan alludes to a form of exchange when he remarks that Ava has "a crush" on Caleb, whereas he is more "like her dad" (Garland *EM*), a comment that linguistically silences the maternal as, while Nathan's sex is male, his relation to Ava is not biological and therefore mother may be a more – or at least equally – apt term as it carries more explicit associations with the creation of life. However, his role as 'father' and Caleb's configuration as a suitor, also brings to mind the marital tradition of the father 'giving away' his daughter; though, conversely, at times Nathan seems to take on the role of a pimp when he boasts that he created Ava's body as penetrable, and on a separate occasion when he seems to offer Kyoko to Caleb, telling him to dance with her. These exchanges between Caleb and Nathan, centred on Ava, exemplify Sedgwick and Irigaray's critique. Ava features as a figure through whom Caleb and Nathan bond, primarily during conversations about her (while she is absent). They discuss her linguistic abilities, and Nathan hints at her potential as a sex object/slave as he takes on the role of mentor to Caleb. After his first meeting with Ava, Caleb drinks beer with Nathan and, as the conversation turns towards technical matters, Nathan says "[I just want] to have a beer and a conversation with you. Not a seminar… Just answer me this. What do you feel about her? Nothing analytical" (Garland *EM*). Caleb appears perturbed by this cue to adopt a less formal persona, but responds: "she's fucking amazing," to which Nathan replies "dude, cheers" (Garland *EM*) as their beers clink together, a modernised crossing of swords. These terms – "fucking amazing," "dude" – evoke a distinctly teenage masculinity. With this in mind, the film's utilisation of sci-fi conventions, a genre often (mistakenly) associated with boys and men, may be seen to invite men to come together, to bond, to identify with Caleb as Ava's knight, only to punish this identification at the film's climax.

15 While Garland is not the first to employ SF conventions to represent Bluebeard gothic, the genre creates connotations that correspond with this reading of the film, as SF is a traditionally white male genre, configured as such due to constructed "connections between science, rationality and masculinity" (Wimmler 1). Arguably, this deliberate generic shift frames the film as specifically addressing the white heterosexual male gaze. Thomas Waugh and Kat Banyard both highlight the role pornography plays as a facilitator of homosocial bonding. In this sense, one of the means for creating bonds between men is the exchange of images of women. Like in Carter's short story in which the exchange of fantasy between men (the Rops etching) is made into reality, the design of the AIs bodies, and the fantasies of the male characters regarding Ava's sexual potential would supposedly have been explored either by Nathan whose sexual enslavement of Kyoko shows us Ava's fate, or by Caleb if his rescue attempt had been successful. This evolution from fantasy to reality works to interrogate notions that the two are always entirely distinguishable as they overlap and bleed into each other.

Escaping Patriarchy?

16 While Ava outwardly performs a passive style of femininity, the film's climax and her control over the intermittent power-cuts that shield her from the male gaze contradict her characterisation in these terms. As mentioned, the fetishized feminine subject is, within the patriarchal matrix of representations, opposed to the corporeal abject, most readily associated with the feminine (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*). The red lighting that signals the power cuts carries associations with red-light districts, perhaps connoting the traffic of women in support of the suggestions I have already made. However, with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in mind, the red lighting may also connote blood. Indeed, the initial part of Ava's escape from pseudo-womb prison-house uses this colour palate, potentially suggesting a kind of (re)birth as she moves through the corridors towards her freedom. According to Kristeva, blood is connected to murder, as well as to the feminine through menstruation and fertility, indicating "the impure" and constituting "a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality all come together" (96). With this in mind, the blood-red lighting may act as a signifier for the unspoken, or taboo, feminine body – the body which is repressed and redesigned by Nathan, as we can be sure that, though "anatomically complete" (Garland *EM*), he did not design his gynoids to menstruate.

17 Ava's escape is also depicted with abject imagery, although it initially corresponds to generic horror/thriller conventions in which the persecuted (usually female) protagonist overcomes and escapes the threat of abject death/entrapment. According to Carol Clover's formulation of "the Final Girl" (201) in slasher/horror movies, the defeat of the (typically male) monster/murderer is readable in terms of overcoming the "disabling cathexis to one's parents that must be killed and rekilled in the service of sexual autonomy" (211). Clover also notes the way the viewer is first encouraged to identify with the (usually male) murderer's gaze, and then later with the lone survivor, or final girl, as she defeats the monster/murderer, which is usually depicted as an appropriation of phallic power combined with symbolic castration of her persecutor – gouged eyes, slashed belly, or severed hand, for instance. In *Ex Machina*, this formulation is employed as a tool that allows for the audience to celebrate Nathan's defeat, however because we are encouraged to identify with *Caleb* up to this point, this framework also (albeit very subtly) aligns *him* with the figure of the monster/serial killer/Bluebeard. As the viewer's identification shifts towards the film's climax, the audience is more closely aligned with Ava as she vanquishes Nathan with the help of Kyoko, and, like in the slasher movie, her emancipation is depicted as phallic: Kyoko stabs him in the back, before Ava takes the knife to Nathan's gut, holding the blade near to her waist and it seems to enter him slowly and silently. However, her defeat and escape from Caleb reinstates, as opposed to overcomes, the abject in that it delivers the threat of containment and engulfment that characterise abjection and by Ava's freedom carries the possibility of more victims. As Caleb is superficially presented as a somewhat benign, unwitting figure with his complicity and Bluebeardean potential never fully articulated, when Ava abandons him trapped, presumably to starve to death, the horror provoked may be doubly so for hetero male viewer. Caleb's 'affection' for and attraction to Ava, which is deeply entwined with her subjugation and objectification, is rewarded with immobilisation and entrapment as Ava abandons him in the pseudo-womb prison, which is bathed in red emergency lighting. As a figure representing the hetero male audience, Caleb's punishment implies the viewer's complicity, while also conforming to conventions of male Bluebeard gothic narratives that express the abjection associated with the mother and the need to regulate female curiosity.

18 In some feminist examples of Bluebeard – like Carter's and Campion's – the Oedipal model of development is challenged by refocusing on a mother/daughter relationship. The ending of *Ex Machina* is also readable in these terms, particularly during the final scenes of *Ex Machina* when Ava is freed and she encounters Kyoko. Presented with soft-focus lighting and close-ups of the women's hands gently touching, Ava leans-in to Kyoko's ear as if to

whisper something. The sensitivity evoked in this scene and the sympathy between the two brings to mind Irigaray's semiotic, a feminine space that constitutes a potential starting point for a feminine symbolic, engendering what Hélène Cixous calls *ecriture féminine*, or Irigaray refers to as *parler-femme*. As a reworking of the Bluebeard plot, this meeting between 'wives' constitutes a major difference whereby the two oppressed figures can commune, and this female bonding empowers them to finally vanquish Nathan. When Ava finally leaves the prison-house, the wild and brightly coloured jungle landscape contrasts with the clinical and technological apartment, and Ava's wonder and pleasure in experiencing the lush green forest and the blue sky may suggest a kind of escape, particularly given that Caleb connects a blue sky to his mother when describing his earliest, barely accessible memory, associating it with a lost/repressed Irigarayan feminine/maternal realm. Additionally, at the close of the film we see Ava's face as she observes a busy traffic intersection before she disappears into obscurity, potentially hinting that her emancipation cannot be represented because, for a film that involves the audience and critiques the viewer's gaze to the extent I have argued, liberation depends upon anonymity and is incompatible with the practices of film.

19 However, this liberatory reading is complicated by the continued references to patriarchal institutions and the ongoing effects of male fantasy. Before Ava abandons Caleb in the research facility, she puts on a white dress mirroring a Gustav Klimt's wedding portrait of Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein (1905), which is in the background of the shot, strongly connoting masculinist traditions of art and philosophy, though perhaps more obviously male visions of femininity and the exchange of women through patriarchal institutions. Furthermore, as she leaves the apartment, Mozart plays in the living room, acting as a potential metaphor for patriarchal language/culture, which she cannot escape. The preceding scenes support this reading. Once Nathan has been vanquished, Ava asks Caleb to wait for her as she enters the room containing the bodies of her predecessors. She replaces her damaged limbs, as well as her silver/blue body with the spare body parts available, until she appears as a nude young, white woman, an image of anthologised femininity. The audience sees her from behind as she looks in the mirror, allowing a view of her naked body from the front and back, and the edges of the mirror contain her, implying that, despite her physical escape, she remains entombed by the patriarchal symbolic as she embodies the fetishized feminine subject. Like Kyoko's framed reflection discussed earlier, Ava is also imprisoned by the body created by Nathan and the mirror's frame. As well as this, Caleb watches her on a monitor, again acting as voyeur, like the audience. This mirror scene encourages a distinctly Lacanian reading, particularly as it follows the (albeit technologized)

'birth' and female bonding scene already described. For Lacan, the mirror stage signals the child's entrance into the patriarchal symbolic, marking the painful severing of maternal dependence, which is substituted with, and/or repressed by, the pleasure of her/his independent image. Upon catching sight of her/his reflection, the child is forced to consider the disjointed experience of their uncoordinated form in comparison to an image of wholeness, thereby allowing the subject to "anticipate in a mirage the maturation of his power [which] is given to him only as *Gestalt,* that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted" (Lacan 503). This final point signals a paradoxical element of the mirror stage. While this process of separation from maternal authority signals a form of freedom, the child merely enters into a new form of subject-hood governed by a patriarchal Other, i.e. language. Nathan's search engine, Blue Book, which uses the same software as Ava's 'brain,' conspicuously refers to Ludwig Wittgenstein's notes, which hold obvious importance as a reference to linguistics and the philosophy of language. It also aligns Nathan with semantics, power over knowledge, language, and constructed norms, given that a search engine works by making (and creating) associations between words. Additionally, the name Blue Book also hints at Andrew Lang's "Blue Fairy Book" (1889), which contains the Bluebeard story. Moreover, the connotations of the colour blue (blue movies) encode the covert concerns of the film, namely pornography as a system for the regulation of (female) bodies and sexuality.

20 The role of language in regulating the feminine manifests itself in the terms used by Nathan when he discourses on his AIs. During one of their conversations about Ava, Caleb asks Nathan "why did you give her sexuality?" (Garland *EM*). After a short initial response, Nathan adds "And, yes. In answer to your real question: you bet she can fuck. I made her anatomically complete. […] She has an opening between her legs, with a concentration of sensors. Engage with them in the right way, and she'll get a pleasure response" (Garland *EM*). The lexicon utilised by Nathan combines the scientific and sexual/pornographic – "fuck", "pleasure response", "concentration of sensors", "opening" – and his phallocentric determination over the pleasure of the fembots is explicit as his words imply the subordination of non-penetrative sex. Moreover, this technological vocabulary is wholly inadequate for the human body, not merely because it simplifies and reduces us to mere function, but because it represents a failure. Rather than talking about the corporeal body, our physicality is fetishized in that we talk about mechanisms in order to *not speak* about our bodies. The body mechanised by language is sanitised and, while the AIs are not human, their feminised and objectified bodies act as a metaphor for the regulation of the female body,

particularly the suppression of the feminine 'abject,' namely the maternal body. Through the AI gynoids, the vagina is literally and linguistically reconstructed by Nathan as an "opening" – a hole for the sole purpose of receiving a penis – thus regulating the sexualised feminine body, configuring it as a purely sexual object in the image of male fantasy.

Bluebeardean Futures

21 As discussed, Caleb functions as something of a mediator or on-screen surrogate for the white, hetero male gaze and/or audience, whom Garland addresses through his employment of SF conventions. As well as this, Caleb is repeatedly shown looking at screens, and his interviews with Ava also allude to audience/viewer aesthetics, reaffirming his position as a representation of the viewer. While Caleb's entrance into the forbidden chamber frames him as the disobedient wife, his association with voyeurism suggests that he actually functions as a developing Bluebeardean patriarch, embodying a Bluebeardean future, rather than a 'white knight,' benevolent love-interest, or innocent victim. However, when Ava abandons Caleb, leaving him imprisoned in the womb-like research facility as she once was, she reconstructs him as a quasi-husband victim – while she, by implication, assumes the Bluebeard role. With this in mind, superficially Ava's escape seems to play on a kind of dread of female liberation, as she is constructed as a *femme fatale*, the woman who uses her sexuality against men, thereby obliquely reiterating the necessity to control the feminine. For some critics, the Bluebeard plot is a mode incompatible with a feminist epistemology because "for female gothic writers, escape is not possible from the fundamentally patriarchal nature of the gothic genre" (James). Ava's escape into the patriarchal symbolic may reflect this, but likewise so does the cinematography in *Ex Machina*, as (re)presenting women on-screen as disempowered, sexualised, fetishized objects between men cannot rupture the ubiquitous objectification of women in film, even though it may critique it. Ultimately, the portrayal of passive femininity, repeated scenes of female nudity and the exploitation cinema aesthetics of *Ex Machina* merely duplicate and consolidate the cinematic tropes of fetishized/abject femininities. These points frame the film, like Bluebeard tales, as unsuited for transgressing the margins that constrict and confine a potentially limitless space for new ways of being, becoming and desiring as a woman.

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