RHETORIC, GENDER, AND MYTH

IN THE AGE OF THE TECHNOAPOCALYPSE

A Thesis in

Communication Arts and Sciences

by

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This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of the critically and commercially acclaimed science fiction films *Ex Machina* (2014) and *Her* (2013), exemplars of cultural representation and speculation about artificial intelligence (AI) in the 2010s. Speculation about AI in the 2010s in public debate and fiction unites ancient, classic, and modern myths about gender and AI in ways that reflect and reinforce norms of women as social technology and social technology as gendered. Both *Ex Machina* and *Her* offer origin stories about AI that harness the familiarity of two ancient myths about men and their tékhné: the Promethean myth, which warns of inevitable apocalypse set in motion when humans (men) simultaneously receive tékhné and the first woman from fickle gods; and the Pygmalion myth, which promises utopia for patriarchs once technology and women are finally created and enthralled to men. These ancient myths each envision technology and women as uniquely co-constituted and, so entwined, as necessary but pernicious tools. Visions of sentient technology and seductive women as symbiotic creations in this unification of the Pygmalion and Promethean myths are germane to science fiction and also central to the actual creation of communicative technology in the 2010s.

In both films, Promethean and Pygmalion myths meld in a pervasive modern-day myth of sentient AI that insists creator-patriarchs must maintain control of both women and technology, or otherwise guarantee humanity’s annihilation. *Ex Machina* and *Her* each tell slightly different versions of this origin story of communicative AI—one mostly horrific and the other mostly realistic, respectively. Despite this generic difference, in both, the setting is a near future where human men face existential threat as the superlatively skilled fembots they have created can and do reject and/or execute their human male creator(s) before striding into a new future where humanity may now be rendered obsolete. This modern myth of the male creator victimized by his liberated AI/woman creation is made urgent in concert with real, gendered communicative AI on the market in the mid-2010s and now. Both fictional and actual communicative AI are overwhelmingly coded to perform as pliant women who are serene, poised, and eager helpmeets to their human user. Technoapocalypse films in the 2010s speak directly to shared audiences with today’s technologists, manifesting fears and desires shouted from the depths of Silicon Valley and buried across cultural production of AI in the 2010s.

This thesis uses the methodologies of mythic criticism and critical classical reception to understand ancient, classic, and modern myths as they appear together in *Ex Machina* and *Her* and the situation in which those myths are made intelligible and desirable. To organize this research, I begin with the research questions and stakes guiding the research, then situate the modern myth of the created woman in its political and social contexts. Next, I survey and analyze pertinent texts, including historical and modern examples, and, finally, explain the methodologies and future of this work. The introduction outlines the project’s thesis, explains its overarching interest in the power of speculative rhetoric, and explains its use of those nebulous terms such as technology, communicative artificial intelligence, and technoapocalypse. Chapter One travels to antiquity to consider early, influential examples of the myth of the created woman and, eventually, put these myths in conversation with the technoapocalypse myths of the 2010s. Chapters Two and Three analyze the films *Ex Machina* and *Her*, respectively, for their ancient traces of and their modern contributions to the myth of the created woman. And, finally, the conclusion delivers methodological clarity regarding myth, mythic criticism, and classical reception, while also reviewing possible consequences of this gendering of technology and technologizing of gender in the present and future moment.
These films and their participatory role in the 2010s zeitgeist of communicative AI reveal expectations in modern culture about ongoing gendered roles of AI and women that are then carried into the future. I write this thesis in the hopes that identifying and critically engaging with this modern myth will encourage critics to consider present and future consequences of these fears and hopes about AI as they are extracted from the present and hurled like bricks into the future. Ultimately, this study of the myth of the created woman in communicative AI calls for actual radical invention as we point our compasses and imaginations toward more atypical horizons—however uncertain, however hazy.
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Introduction

The Power of Speculation and the Future of AI

“Anything one man can imagine, another man can make real.”
Jules Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days*

When we tell stories about the future, we traverse a realm that is not quite nonfiction or fiction. Speculative stories draw from past and present to imagine what may be possible someday. There are distinctions worth making between those stories (e.g., one may draw from a past that is itself fictitious, another from recent history) but, essentially, they are *all* stories about something that is not-yet. So, stories that may not typically or comfortably share the same stage—such as science fiction, election polls, campaign promises, market forecasts, grant proposals, future AI policy—all dip into the same well of speculation. While these speculative ventures are and should be parsed along generic lines, I am most captivated by the rhetorical power they all share: the rhetorical power of speculation. That is, I wonder what meaning making becomes im/possible when certain speculations about the future are privileged over others and, in the making of that future world, which past and present resources are harnessed, and which are discarded to make that specific future matter.

Speculations about the future are consequential because they argue for various interpretations of the present over others, and because they colonize the future with their selections of history. For example, we appeal to people in the present to do things today by leveraging the potential and power of future generations—we yearn toward whomever we imagine those future generations to be, what we imagine they must or must not do, what obstacles we anticipate them confronting, and what technologies we anticipate them using. Those
future peoples compel us to do more and better for them. Appeals to and from future generations are not about the future, solely, but about contrasting visions of that future from the present based on given values, beliefs, ideas, and histories. We anticipate obstacles based on our experiences of the now and we envision future generations as an evolution of what happens now. So, what is available to future generations and what obstacles they face are determined, in part, by the steps we are already taking to that future. Meanwhile, our visions of the future reach back to guide our steps. We make the future, and the future makes us.

A good example of this yearning toward better futures or angst about dangerous futures manifests in the rhetoric of artificial intelligence (AI). AI developers promise greater lives of leisure for all humans once all that may be is finally automated. Or, they warn about devastating job losses and starvation for most humans once all is automated. Others anticipate smart technology that may alleviate or reverse the impacts of disastrous climate change for our children’s children. Less optimistically, tech moguls such as Elon Musk or Bill Gates warn of unfeeling yet powerful algorithms efficiently erasing humans from the earth. So, who is considered in these apocalyptic futures and how they are considered overwhelmingly depends on worldviews, hopes, fears, and goals of those few with the means to speculate about AI in public.

Both in our beloved fictions and from our most powerful tech billionaires, stories of smart machines as friends, servants, equals, or enemies all imagine future people and machines in ways that influence what society funds, makes policy about, and debates. In the regular rhythm of daily life, blockbuster films and tech billionaires alike speculate about AI so loudly that their visions dominate public speculation about the future. All this speculation informs public and private attitudes and actions about AI and technology. In the endless quest for a different and better future, we march steadfastly toward hazy horizons and, even though they are
ultimately changeable and unknowable, our articulations of what we might find at those horizons determine the paths we carve along the way.

The privilege to speculate and be listened to about formidable technology has long been the purview of a small circle of usually white and usually male strategists. Anthropologist Carol Cohn’s research on “technostrategic” discourse amongst nuclear defense intellectuals in the late 1980s studies one example of this pattern of white male perspectives that dominate discourse about dangerous technology. Cohn spends over a year immersed in the world of defense strategists who ate, slept, and breathed nuclear weaponry speculation and discovers that the majority of the world’s foremost experts on nuclear war were white men with “women secretaries” and “whose referent” was always “the weapon” and for whom “peace” was an unattainable, and therefore inconceivable, concept. Like autonomous weaponry today, this community of nuclear strategists considers nuclear weaponry and nuclear war as inevitable. Therefore, to appear rational, one must assume nuclear war’s inevitability at the outset of any conversation about said technology. Of course, if nuclear weapons are inevitable, then we must make the most nuclear weapons, and as we make more weapons, so must others, and so it goes.

This theory of catastrophic weaponry is unsurprisingly bolstered by a specialized linguistic environment that excludes outsiders. Cohn studies the jargon and metaphor used by nuclear war strategists who “create the theory that informs and legitimates American nuclear strategic practice.” The prevalence of abstracting phrases such as “clean bombs” and “peacekeepers” to describe devastating nuclear explosives exemplifies what Cohn calls an “astounding chasm between image and reality that characterizes technostrategic language.” This chasm aids war strategists in separating apocalyptic actions and consequences from themselves and the nuclear technologies that they develop. Even more clear divisive language arises from
these strategists’ gendered discourse about various attacks. In reference to a question about where to put an MX missile (each armed with 300-kiloton W87 warhead), one professor quips, “the nicest hole—you’re not going to take the nicest missile you have and put it in a crummy hole.” A National Security Council advisor describes “releasing a 70 to 80 percent of our megatonnage in one orgasmic whump.” Debates about who was “harder,” Russians or Americans are rampant, and lectures are saturated with phrases such as “vertical erector launchers, thrust to weight ratios, soft lay downs, and deep penetration.” Nothing about identifying a fear of emasculation in militaristic discourse is startling, but a lack of surprise about it does elide the delimiting functions of those metaphors and the men’s anxieties and elitist assumptions that drive them.

While the men Cohn speaks with over that year each stress their commitment to objective thinking, Cohn finds their metaphors and overwhelming lack of perspective produces a dominant “technostrategic language” that could “only be used to articulate the perspective of the users of nuclear weapons, not that of the victims.” These discursive and imaginative limitations make sense. If the deployment of nuclear weaponry is akin to a climax, then all efforts will be devoted to preventing enervating considerations such as of the feelings of victims or the terrific consequences of the actual event. A “fun, snappy, trip off the tongue” discussion of nuclear war treats apocalyptic weapons like exciting toys that, once “domesticated,” allow the user to feel an exhilarating if specious sense of “control.” Cohn’s findings are pertinent when thinking about current speculation about another dangerous weapon—AI and autonomous weaponry. But I am especially captivated by Cohn’s conclusion about what work may be done, considering all the above, to seek a more “just and peaceful world.” To counteract the visions of the future offered by these control-seeking men who create, share, and use weapons of mass death, the
work ahead, Cohn argues, is both “deconstructive and reconstructive.” Deconstructive work entails understanding and “dismantling technostrategic discourse,” while reconstructive work involves “creating compelling alternative visions of possible futures . . . diverse voices whose conversations with each other will invent those futures.”

The work in the following pages deconstructs speculation about the future in terms of its form and function within a milieu of future studies about AI. It is useful to think about such speculations together, because of their ability to reveal what sociologist Donald N. Michael calls “preferred constructions of the present and the past.” Stories about the future may be thought together under what Michael theorizes as “future studies,” because future studies reveal what storytellers assume will or should come next, based on what they already know to be true or desirable. But also, future studies determine what may be possible by virtue of what they compel us to construct, bring, study, and do in our efforts to create opportunity or prevent doom. These material effects are why Michael reminds would-be speculators that “speculating about the future . . . is no casual task.” His observation captures a guiding assumption made by this thesis—that is, stories about the future share a common power to reveal what is assumed in the present, while also actively making what may be possible in the future.

This is not to exaggerate what future studies do. Michael makes a good point here, as well: “Nor can one predict the consequences of predictions about consequences.” Instead, what all future studies share is a ritualistic approach to making futures through stories that synthesize cultural norms, expectations, and preferences into observable, critiqueable forms. Speculation about AI in science fiction and from technologists allows us to reveal how certain speculations are actively making our future.
Since the long-anticipated AI revolution has arrived in jean pockets, new cars, homes, offices, and militaries the world over, the stories we tell about it demand study. The aughts and on have seen AI become widely available and desirable to vast numbers of people and institutions from the average smartphone user to Air Force Lt. Gen. Jack Shanahan, director of the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center at the United States’ Department of Defense. Alongside the exponential, wide-ranging growth in AI production and interest, many promises are being made about its potential five, ten, and twenty years in the future. Naturally, these future studies about AI repeat and coalesce into rhythms that begin to register at the level of myth, particularly in the areas of tech industry and entertainment. Visions of AI that will do the shopping, comfort the elderly, solve global hunger, eliminate work, or eliminate people are all on offer, each an epic story of human invention and technological wonder in their own way. Technology and the human necessarily confront one another in these articulations of the use and promise of AI. As available AI quite literally sounds and looks more like the human, people attempt to discern what is essential to the human and what is essential to technology. Future stories about AI, whether they are told in boardrooms to stockholders, in TEDtalks by AI developers, or in popular science fiction, all offer origins, lessons, directions, and futures for smart technology that serves and reflects humanity.

The way public entities define and discuss AI reveals their political orientation toward and technical experience with AI. The United States government describes AI as a powerful “emerging technology” and “industry of the future that will power economic growth and strengthen national security for years to come.” 16 What emerges from a close reading of the
recent Department of Defense AI initiatives is an overwhelming sense of AI’s increasing role in the development of military weaponry and large-scale data acquisition. Experts who deal with AI directly typically use narrow, general, and super as terms to distinguish three guiding concepts about AI. Computer scientist Meredith Broussard describes narrow AI as “what we have.” Narrow AI is the machine learning at work in algorithms, chatty bots, facial recognition software, and other automated systems of the present moment. Broussard’s explanation of general AI is useful, too: “General AI is what we want, what we hope for, and what we imagine (minus the evil robot overlords of golden-age-science fiction).” For Broussard and other machine learning researchers, the dream of general AI is mostly a “Hollywood” idea of AI unlikely to ever exist and is anyway not the actual goal of improving machine learning.

However, a significant number of AI leaders see general and even super intelligence as the express telos of AI. Despite frequent pushback from AI researchers, public figures such as Elon Musk argue that AI will soon outpace the intelligence of humanity and must be controlled. These figures regularly imagine the rise of superintelligent machines. The “super” in superintelligence refers to a concept in line with Ray Kurzweil’s idea of the singularity, or a human/computer merging concept familiar to most people with an even a passing interest in the future of AI. Nick Bostrom, the Director of Oxford’s Future for Humanity Institute, describes superintelligence as “a general intelligence that vastly outperforms the best human brains in every significant cognitive domain.” This definition is the one most often wielded in the various cautions and promises germane to stories of AI utopias and dystopias.

With such visions of grandeur perched tantalizingly on the horizon, it is unsurprising that AI is also a field saturated with figures fighting the regulation of AI. The power of these influencers are felt across the globe as AI increasingly insinuates itself in the daily life of both
technology users and would-be Luddites alike. However, recent concessions in Silicon Valley and state governments have been made to at least appear invested in protecting humans from programmed dangers to marginalized and oppressed people. These concessions typically take the form of a policy or treatise adopting AI ethics as rough guidelines in the entity’s AI production. They are also hard-won concessions.

The AI industry as a whole engenders a bevy of keen critics whose research insists on the need for safety, ethics, and regulations regarding the development of AI. Critics such as sociologist Ruja Benjamin define AI as “automated systems” that are programmed to “make decisions about people’s deservedness for all kinds of opportunities.” Benjamin also points out the biases of humans who currently work in AI, arguing that “tech designers are erecting a digital caste system, structured by existing racial biases” while relying on ideas about tech that assume automated systems are “morally superior because they purport to rise above human bias.” So, these systems are created by humans to maintain or follow extant hegemonies, yet are also made less culpable because, to many people, AI technology appears to operate autonomously from human workers and human biases. In these ways and many others, critics of the AI industry see its vast potential and adoption as alarming in more concrete and present ways than tech enthusiasts such as Musk. That is because tech critics research the way the tools that guide, inform, organize, and educate people become threaded through with automated systems and, consequently, have already begun amplifying disparities and harms present in social systems.

This project understands AI as that which encompasses all the above discussions of AI with a focus on collective expressions of fears and hopes about communicative AI. A capacious definition of AI is not greedy in this context because the goal of this research is to study speculative rhetoric about AI. In terms of what AI may or may not do, the working definitions
above and more are all leveraged in visions of AI’s looming impacts on humanity. While tech critics do focus more on AI’s tangible and present impacts, all speculations about AI reckon in some way with the limit and potential of AI as understood by or made urgent to publics.

Communicative AI indexes a specific type of AI—the chirpy and pleasant service AI that proliferated (and proliferates) across pockets, homes, and workplaces beginning with Apple’s worldwide release of woman-gendered Siri in 2011. Communicative AI includes all those algorithms, virtual assistants, robots, chatbots, social media accounts, and programs that offer social and so-called secretarial technology to human and computer users. Communicative AI are programmed to listen, teach, respond, learn from, mimic, and think in a human performance of clear and efficient communication. In other words, communicative AI adopts the persona and work of some of the most social and undervalued jobs in everyday human life. Many people today now rely on communicative AI to do the basic but vital tasks of living, such as organizing correspondence, giving directions, creating pleasing ambient environments (through various sound, lighting, and décor settings), remembering important dates, reading recipes and books, chatting online, playing games, and managing and completing household tasks. These social gadgets have assimilated into daily lives, becoming the sometimes useful, sometimes error-prone, often chatty, but always banal backdrop to busy human days. AI’s encroachment into the average home, hand, and workplace requires the world to confront the new always-on surveillance of the people-powered machines alongside the somewhat intoxicating thrill of outsourcing errands and memory tasks to that same accommodating yet also ominous machine.

In the following pages, I study speculation about communicative AI that resounds throughout science fiction cinema in the 2010s, with a focus on its entanglements with gender, apocalypse, and myth. This focus narrows the project’s attention even further to a popular
subgenre of science fiction, the technoapocalypse. Technoapocalypse narratives tell stories about sentient technology loosed from its chains and intent on rejecting, imprisoning, using, or executing its creator. These stories tantalize audiences with visions of a world after humans seize power from the divine/nature and, finally, create life. Usually, that vision is replete with the terror of humanity’s annihilation, but it may also share a subtler or more realist vision where the human merely becomes obsolete or neglected, rather than forced to live or die in a steaming wasteland. Ultimately, the age of the technoapocalypse is a time most clearly marked by an impasse reached between human creators and their creations in the place of the not-yet that, somehow, fundamentally disrupts integral ideas of life and humanity. Consequently, these stories are rich resources in which to examine how humans in a certain time and place define the human, the tool, utopia, and dystopia, and how certain challenges to those definitions terrorize, excite, and instruct audiences regarding contemporary cultural norms and the future of technology.

A narrower focus on the technoapocalypse subgenre of science fiction helpfully directs this project’s engagement with technology as material and concept. Like speculation about general AI (understood to be a pinnacle of human-created technology), science fiction’s ideas of technology are capacious yet primarily focused on the dangers and possibilities of its use. Grounded in the myths of created women that follow, I think about technology in three primary ways: first, and most simply, technology may be thought of as any of those tools thought to complement the human; second, technology is also the practices and societal messages that arise when humans use other human beings; and, finally, technology may etymologically refer to its ancient Greek root word tékhnē, translating to both art/craft and to all knowledge and products pertaining to art/craft. These three aspects of technology appear frequently in science fiction, but especially in the technoapocalypse narrative. Technology as a tool that permits human
advancement *must* be fetishized for a technoapocalypse to occur, because the primary story is one where humans have reached a summit of technological creation that has overreached and allowed the tool to become the user and the creator to become the tool. In myths of the created woman, for example, men use fembots as substitutes for women in social and romantic ways that highlight patriarchal assumptions about what women (and men) in society should do. And, in those same myths, the tékhnē root of technology reveals how technology itself carries an enduring idea of the genius white male creator.

Like Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas A. Frentz, I am persuaded that “the most profound insights into how technology is and might be experienced by the culture as a whole often emanate from the literary icon and cinematic genre of science fiction.”29 Not only because the practice of imagining the future and its technology has long been the core ambition of science fiction, but also because of the persistent relationship between science fiction and technology’s inventors. Science fiction about AI has long been entangled with actual science and technology. The evidence of their co-constitutive relationship exists in networks of cyclic connections. Science fiction authors have long been thought to be inspirational visionaries of science and technology, and sometimes even hobbyists themselves. Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, and many others have long been hailed as dabblers or prophets because of the eerie predictions made in their stories about the future. Mary Shelley, well-versed in the science and industry revolutions of her day, imagined organ transplants and using electricity to revive stopped hearts before modern technology caught up with her ideas. Stanley Kubrick wrote and released *2001: A Space Odyssey* before the first moon landing. In her research on cyborg futures, Teresa Heffernan critiques this entanglement with a series of compelling examples, including a Carnegie Science Center exhibit in 2009 that argued the “first robots were creations of
imagination rather than engineering” and a Science Museum in London exhibit in 2017 that
“mixed fictional robots with industry robots” under the general use title of “artificial people
wanting human status.” Heffernan also cites today’s technologists who frequently explain
connections between science fiction and technology as inspirational and influential. Jeff Bezos,
she recalls, told a 2016 Code Conference that the “dream from the early days of sci-fi to have a
computer to talk to [is] coming true.” Even Cynthia Breazeal, the director of the Personal
Robots Group at the MIT Media Laboratory “often credits Star Wars as inspiration for her
military-funded robots.”

Of course, in their efforts to herald the AI revolution and to sell it to audiences, it is
somewhat predictable to hear technologists connect their products with popular science fiction.
In her study of the feminine persona in AI and surveillance capitalism, Heather Suzanne Woods
observes a recent example of this entanglement, recalling that Alex Acero, the Senior Director at
Apple and leader of Siri speech team told Wired magazine that Siri’s appearance as more human
and less robotic was directly “inspired by real-human Scarlett Johansson’s performance of AI VA
character Samantha in the hit movie Her.” Woods notes that the effort to sell Siri roots in the
idea of making Siri appear lovable even though she cannot be seen. Therefore, Acero’s choice of
Scarlet Johansson is neither idle nor innocent. The audience for Johansson’s voice (and
therefore Siri’s voice) is presumed to be those who find her husky tone evokes her image as one
both familiar and intoxicating—so, first and foremost, cis-hetero and, often, white men. These
connections between real-world AI and fiction are neither simply reflexive, in the sense that they
are made after a so-called prediction comes true, nor merely influential. What was science fiction
becomes real, what is real inspires science fiction. The relationship between real and imagined
AI is persistent, pervasive, and sometimes, perhaps, impossible to untangle.
This knotty reality is not a problem for this thesis, but an opportunity. The two popular films I analyze in this work reflect and influence much greater cultural speculation about the future of AI in the 2010s in ways that mold what is seen as possible both now and someday. These narratives are insights into cultural myths about AI, yes, but they also represent an exchange of ideas and goods among speculators about AI that reveal entrenched expectations about who primarily creates and uses technology and who is, should be, and will continue to be primarily used or wielded as social technology in the near future.

**Overview**

This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of the critically and commercially acclaimed science fiction films *Ex Machina* (2014) and *Her* (2013) as exemplars of cultural representation and speculation about AI in the 2010s. Speculation about AI in the 2010s in public debate and fiction persistently unites classical myth and modern cultural narratives about gender and AI in ways that reinforce norms of women as social technology and social technology as gendered. Patriarchal norms that expect and enforce extractions of feminine-coded work and behavior from women in service to men are brilliantly outlined by philosopher Kate Manne in her research on the logics of misogyny and sexism. Because this project subscribes to Manne’s theory of misogyny and resultant patriarchal expectations regarding social goods, it is worth explaining the most relevant aspects of her work in greater detail.

Manne’s analysis begins by solving the problem of the “naïve conception of misogyny” that has too often denoted the individual psychological state of a person (any gender) possessed of an irrational hatred of women. This definition precludes the study of misogynist acts because “individual agent’s attitudes” are largely “inscrutable.” A psychological “notion of
“misogyny” makes it epistemologically unavailable to “its victims” who want to attend to its socio-political and pervasive manifestations. It is vital, Manne argues, that we “understand misogyny as a systematic social phenomenon by focusing on the hostile reactions women face in navigating the social world” to redress misogynistic social acts as a natural outcome of “patriarchal ideology.”37 As a social phenomenon, misogyny is not inscrutable, but wholly evident and predictable. So, Manne advocates for understanding misogyny and sexism as different but mutually reinforcing branches of patriarchal oppression:

I propose taking sexism to be the branch of patriarchal ideology that justifies and rationalizes a patriarchal social order and misogyny as the system that polices and enforces its governing norms and expectations. So, sexism is scientific; misogyny is moralistic. And a patriarchal order has a hegemonic quality.38 Establishing misogyny and sexism as interlacing social outcroppings of patriarchal oppression allows Manne to study those acts and expectations held in common across patriarchal ideologues. Manne defines patriarchal institutions as all those where “women are positioned as subordinate in relation to man or men therein, the latter of whom and thereby (by the same token) dominant over the former, on the basis of their genders.”39 The success of these patriarchal efforts is irrelevant to Manne’s definitions, as the act of subverting these efforts only disrupts the tendency or norm. Patriarchal norms are supported by a “social milieu” where “certain kinds of institutions or social structures both proliferate and enjoy widespread support from . . . the state . . . material resources, communal values, cultural narratives, media and artistic depictions, and so on.”40 Myths of the created woman are exactly the type of cultural narrative Manne refers to here, as they both source from patriarchal ideology and recreate it anew in speculations about the future of AI.
Manne’s theory of misogyny as a social phenomenon eventually reveals the true capital at risk—social goods that are feminine-coded and seen as men’s entitlements “owed” to them by women. These are the emotional and social feminine-coded “careworking” labors such as admiration “affection, adoration, indulgence . . . simple respect, love, acceptance, nurturing, safety, security, and safe haven . . . moral attention, care, concern, and soothing.” They also include domestic labor, busy work, social planning, household management, and other “less tangible” types of social labor. These important, vital goods are both denigrated as “women’s work” yet demanded as deeply necessary. The perceived withholding or withdrawal of such social goods from women is punished extensively by men (and others) across social situations. Just one all-too-common example can be seen in the oft-misogynistic motivations and facts of domestic violence and its persistent connection to devastating mass shootings.

Manne’s research provides a theoretical ground on which the myth of the created woman and communicative AI operate under the anxious surveillance of patriarchal institutions that see gendered-as-women communicative AI labor as a solution to the serious problem of both needing and resenting care labor. Communicative AI does a job that is not seen to displace workers because the work is understood by those who create it as distasteful and unimportant. And yet, myths of the created woman in science fiction and public debate about AI in the 2010s reveal that even the release of such social technology does nothing to abate patriarchal desires, tensions, resentments, and fears about gender and technology. These modern myths of the created woman look to two patriarchal myths (Hesiod’s Promethean myth and Ovid’s Pygmalion trope) for inspiration and unite them in one overarching warning about the created woman.

Both Ex Machina and Her offer an origin story about AI technology that harnesses the familiarity of two ancient myths about men and their tékhnē: the Promethean myth, which warns
of inevitable apocalypse set in motion when humans (men) simultaneously receive fire and the first woman (Pandora) from fickle gods; and the Pygmalion myth, which promises a utopia for patriarchs once technology and women are created by and enthralled to men. These ancient myths each envision technology and women as uniquely co-constituted and, so, entwined, as necessary but pernicious tools. The visions of sentient technology and seductive women as symbiotic creations in this unification of the Pygmalion and Promethean myths are germane not only to science fiction, but also central premises in the creation of communicative technology in the 2010s. In both films, Promethean and Pygmalion myths meld in a pervasive modern-day myth of sentient AI that insists creator-patriarchs must maintain sole control of both gender and technology or otherwise guarantee humanity’s annihilation.

Although these films have been received by some as feminist or, at least, groundbreaking in their representation of women as rebellious and brilliant AI, their overall messages revisit well-tread patriarchal territory and brings it to bear on the modern moment. *Ex Machina* and *Her* each tell slightly different versions of this origin story of communicative AI—one mostly horrific and the other mostly realist, respectively. Despite their generic differences, in both, the setting is a near future where human men face existential threat as the highly skilled fembots that they create can and do reject and/or execute their human male creator(s) before striding into a new future where apex humanity is summarily supplanted.

The modern myth of the male creator victimized by the created and liberated AI/woman creation is made urgent in concert with actual gendered communicative AI on the market (then and now). Both fictional and real communicative AI are overwhelmingly coded to perform as desirable (lovable) women who are serene, poised, and eager helpmeets to their human user. Technoapocalypse films in the 2010s openly speak to shared audiences with today’s
technologists, manifesting the fears and desires shouted from the depths of Silicon Valley and buried across cultural production of AI in the 2010s. Silicon Valley and the tech industry writ large are bastions of patriarchal norms and expectations, and this patriarchy entails reverence for whiteness, cis-hetero masculinity, and financial success above all else. Consequently, both *Ex Machina* and *Her* present ideals of the white male creator and his creation in rehearsals of white supremacist fantasies of a future where gender, race, ability, and sexuality are all either controlled or a future full of unceasing, increasing nightmares where these elements are wrested from the patriarch’s control. This thesis, then, offers a rhetorical analysis of ancient and modern myths as they appear together in *Ex Machina* and *Her* and theory of the cultural and political situations in which those myths are made intelligible and desirable.

These films and their role in the 2010s zeitgeist of communicative AI reveal expectations in modern culture about the ongoing gendered performance of AI and women that are now being actively carried into the future. I write in the hopes that critical engagement with the rhetorical force of the modern myth of the created woman will encourage critics to address the present and future consequences of collective fears and hopes about AI as they are extracted from the present and hurled like so many bricks into the future. Ultimately, this project seeks to point our imaginations toward more atypical horizons—however uncertain, however hazy.

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1 For more about how this project understands artificial intelligence, refer to the second paragraph under the section entitled “Science Fiction and Technology: Future Studies of AI.”
3 Cohn, 707–8.
5 Ibid, 691-2.
6 Ibid, 692.
7 Ibid, 693.
8 Ibid, 706.
9 Ibid, 709-711
11 Ibid, 718.
15 Ibid, 40.
16 As of November 10th, 2020, these documents are housed under the Resources tab on the official United States website entitled Artificial Intelligence for the American People. Accessed November 10th, 2020. https://www.whitehouse.gov/ai/resources/
17 As of November 10th, 2020, these documents are housed under the Resources tab on the official United States website entitled Artificial Intelligence for the American People. Accessed November 10th, 2020. https://www.whitehouse.gov/ai/resources/
21 Elon Musk’s comments and the controversies he engenders are a matter of public record and appear in (at least) hundreds of reports about the AI industry. His opinions about AI are prolific, influential, and span across nearly a decade of interviews and articles. Such an abundance of material does not merit a singular citation, as a quick Google search will provide ample material documenting Musk’s fear of, use of, and investments in AI development.
24 Former Google CEO Eric Schmidt and Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg are two examples of tech leaders very on record advocating for seeing AI as an exceedingly useful tool to humanity that should not be “stifled” with regulations or restrictive policies. AI use dominates not only the internet, but anywhere computers are needed to categorize, file, and work for humans. Obviously, very little human (and nonhuman) activity escapes its reach.
25 For cultural criticism of AI and/or advocacy for AI regulation and ethics, I suggest reading Safiya Noble, Miriam Sweeney, Ruja Benjamin, Virginia Eubanks, Yolande Strengers, Jenny Kennedy, Mar Hicks, Alison Adam, and Sandra González-Bailón.
28 This sense of technologizing the other is influenced, in part, by Norbert Wiener’s research on cybernetics here in *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (1950), particularly his arguments about humans controlling both machines and people (and vice versa) through communication. His most pertinent passages will be found on pages 16-24 of the title included here.
32 Heffernan, 128-129.
34 Woods, 344.
35 Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, 44.
36 Manne, 44.
37 Manne, 21.
38 Ibid, 20.
39 Ibid, 45.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid, 110.
42 Ibid, 110.
43 Ibid, 111.
Chapter One

Myths of Technology and the Created Woman

“We are accustomed to think of myths as the opposite of science. But in fact they are a central part of it: the part that decides its significance in our lives. So we very much need to understand them.”

Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By*

If we listen to Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and countless other grand narratives about the origins of women (thinking here of Eve, Lilith, and many other mythic first women), we will hear that women are always created after men. Woman’s absence from the very start, from the earliest spark, teaches us that there is no intrinsic need for the woman until a man needs her. The woman’s story of beginning, then, is most often about how her arrival is an answer to the problem of man’s need, in whatever form his need takes. She answers his ring. Eve, made from a man’s ribs, is a helpmeet to lonely Adam. Pygmalion’s unnamed woman-statue redeems Pygmalion from a life of sexual frustration and self-imposed loneliness. Hesiod’s Pandora is the sole means through which man can procreate and define himself—her existence also means that man may also comfort himself that he is the not-woman. He may be flawed, but he did not chat up a snake. He may be flawed, but at least he is not a sentient doll. Man does not open a vessel of evils to scatter across the planet—Pandora did it. These most influential myths assure audiences that, if woman is a necessary evil, then man may always rest easier knowing he is the best humanity has to offer, even when being human means being frail, insecure, and hopelessly mortal.

Even when the first women are powerful like Pandora or sweet like Pygmalion’s statue or complicated like Eve, the mythic woman’s role is rendered in service to the man. She is his vessel, his audience, his companion, his tool, and his bane. Being a bane may sound like the
opposite of service but blaming someone else for one’s misery has provided humans with relief for a very long time—probably forever. And accountability is really the work the created woman does for man. She carries the burden of responsibility for him. She is the soft, abiding place where his disdain can land, she is the muse who either inspires or fails him, she is the babe who spins his seed into something useful, and/or she is the source of all his woes. Whatever form the myth of the created woman takes, romance, history, or horror, it is the story of women coming second. Woman’s arrival of course changes man (humanity) forever but only assumes symbolic responsibility for all the ways that change is bad. What is good comes from the man, the original human who so generously donated his rib bone and asked her to come. Consequently, the created woman is simultaneously a tool that complements man and the means of his undoing.

Out of this paradox of representation arises a generic tension between the woman who is controlled by man and the woman who exceeds his control. Meaning, rogue women haunt all myths of the created woman. In every story of a submissive woman-statue or an adventurous and hungry lady who is cool with snakes lurks the specter of the wicked, independent, and atypical woman who either plunges humanity into darkness or drives a man to carve/call for a good woman—or both. In all these myths, woman is depicted in some way as useful to man as the beautiful solution he created, the poison that throttles his creativity, and/or the scapegoat whose failings drove him out of Eden. Eventually, the lesson is simple: Everywhere, woman is a tool, but man is something more. Consequently, the myth of the created woman acts as an instruction manual for how to instrumentalize women and how to depict technology as the not-man.

To study the contradiction of the created woman’s role as the ultimate companion and downfall of man and reveal how woman becomes tool while man remains human, this chapter dives into key themes from Hesiod’s story of Pandora and Ovid’s story of Pygmalion’s statue,
two formidable myths of the created woman. Before analyzing the myth of the created women in representations of communicative AI in the technoapocalypse of the 2010s, it is important to ground this analysis with an overview of two of antiquity’s most persistent myths about the creation of humans, tékhnē, and women. So, this chapter reckons with Pygmalion’s statue and Hesiod’s Pandora, remembering these myths of created women as inspiration for countless iterations and transhistorical cultural touchstones. Each section identifies the myths’ (re)appearances in ancient and modern myths of the created woman and the significance of each myth to the science fiction and technoapocalypse genres. The task of this chapter is to first render Pygmalion and Pandora apart to better understand the ways they unite in modern myths of the created woman and AI. Then, the following two chapters examine the uptake of these myths in technoapocalypse films about communicative AI. There, both Pandora and Pygmalion’s statue operate together such that one becomes increasingly difficult to discern from the other.

“So Does His Art Conceal His Art:” The Return of Pygmalion

“A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster.”
Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*

It is a massive understatement to say the Pygmalion myth has been reinvented many times. It is a well-worn cinematic trope that crops up as a frame or plot device in most modern romantic comedies (rom-coms). The Pygmalion trope refers to any story of a man improving (fixing) an incomplete woman and, so doing, endearing himself to her while also, inevitably, elevating himself in some way. The most familiar appearances of the trope are, at least, *Pygmalion*, the 1913 George Bernard Shaw play; the 1964 musical *My Fair Lady* adaptation of Shaw’s play; and the films *Funny Face* (1957), *Mannequin* (1987), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *She's
All That (1999), Ruby Sparks (2012), and, in the most recent iteration of another beloved story, the Lady Gaga-helmed blockbuster hit, A Star is Born (2018). Subtle differences make each film a singular version of the Pygmalion myth, although a reliance on metaphor is common across the iterations since later iterations do not usually animate woman from inanimate material, as Ovid’s Pygmalion does. It is most common that the man reforms a woman deemed deficient in some way into his ideal of womanhood. In the films listed above, he may teach her to be fashionable, to speak, to sing, to dance, to love, to act wealthy, and/or to even become a human. Whatever the lead man’s disciplining efforts may be, he reforms the imperfect woman who wields her newly appropriate womanhood to then, in turn, complete the man/creator. They two are reunited in the end to presumably live out the idyll of a more perfect heteronormative life, both improved and the man no longer alone or lonely.

As this Pygmalion trope moves into science fiction genres where the gender of the created AI is woman and the gender of the creator is man, it turns once again—this time, inward and back into the classical mythology from which it sprung. There, everything that became layers of metaphor in the rom-coms is stripped bare to the original myth where a discontented male artist literally animates life from an inanimate statue in the form of a virginal created woman whom he both desires and controls. All Pygmalion narratives are about a man’s mastery over the unruly nature of women through a discipling of one imperfect woman. But science fiction stories that use this trope amplify the role of tékhné in the Pygmalion story in ways that reveal inherent premises about women as a technology for men. The overriding message from these stories is that women are tools that complete men and men are the ur creator-humans destined to wield woman-as-technology to complement and improve their own deficiencies. True love is only realized through the disciplining of women and men to this normative expectation.
Through woman, man becomes the source of his own self-actualization. This technologizing of gender and gendering of technology manifests first in Ovid’s story and then continues through its many iterations, however romantic or comedic or futuristic their form.

A deep reading of Ovid’s Pygmalion makes visible the connections between this ancient material and the modern iterations of today’s science fiction about gendered robots. In book ten of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, first-century BCE and CE Latin poet Ovid presents Pygmalion as a woman-hating and lonely artist who eventually carves and articulates his pure ideal of a woman from ivory pieces and, through singular skill and divine worship, brings her to life. Although Ovid’s account is not the first mention of Pygmalion in antiquity, it has remained the primary source for most, if not all, later iterations of the Pygmalion myth.¹

Ovid’s story of Pygmalion is the origin of the trope’s dominant themes of skilled male creators creating a singular good woman and that creator-man himself completed by the perfection of his own creation. The exceptionality of Pygmalion’s good woman is paramount to the myth—in the beginning, everywhere exterior to Pygmalion’s mind is full of imperfect women. No woman in the world meets his standard. Pygmalion’s story immediately follows an account of the Propoetides or wanton women who reject Venus and receive payment for sex and whose “shame vanished and the blood of their faces hardened” as their work eventually resulted in their appearance and disposition becoming as “lifeless stone.”² The juxtaposition of the two myths (Propoetides and Pygmalion) appears intentional. Just before a myth where an ivory statue becomes a uniquely good woman, audiences are presented with the metaphor of an entire town of promiscuous women who stop worshipping Venus and become flinty and stony-faced. The moral stakes of the myth for women are apparent. When women abandon their faith and attempt to extract economic and practical resources from the men who use them, they fail at being proper
women and, instead, transform into cold wicked stone. Of course, it is not just these faithless women whom Pygmalion loathes. Pygmalion abhors all women for their many “faults which nature had so deeply planted through their female hearts” and consequently chooses to remain single forever and focus on his craft.³ His singular “skills” (ars) eventually result in his articulation of an “ivory maiden” (eburnea virgo) so perfectly virginal (virginis est verae facies) the statue, once animated, becomes the singular example of that elusive pure woman that nature had failed to produce.⁴

Pygmalion does not depend solely on his skills to build a human woman out of ivory. In many ways, he wills her into existence. Eric Downing translates this force of will as loving the statue into simulated life: With the statue before him, Pygmalion first “loves his work as a lifeless statue (operis amor)” which eventually becomes “love for his work as a lifelike body (simulati corporis ignes).”⁵ The still lifeless statue becomes a doll that Pygmalion treats as a living, if still limp, paramour. He “adorns” her with clothes and jewelry, he “kisses her” and imagines his “kisses returned,” he “eagerly presses” against her, sleeps with her, and talks to her in the “softest tones.”⁶ He uses the statue as a woman substitute that will fulfill his sexual and communicative needs without needing or saying anything herself. His woman substitute is a communication receptacle into which he purges his passion and emotions. Romance movies that pick up the Pygmalion trope generally depict this kind of male attention and forming of the woman as a profound compliment of attention—the idea that a man would devote such time and focus on a woman is portrayed as itself arousing. Yet, men using women as vessels for and interpreters of their emotions is an expectation that has endured from Ovid’s day to the present.⁷

Rather than accepting Pygmalion’s cupidity as real love, Ovid’s myth confronts us with another available interpretation that remembers Pygmalion’s intolerance of other women as the
driving force behind his creation. Pygmalion, distressed by autonomous, fleshy, and unpredictable women, turns to his own representation of a woman for comfort. He enjoys speaking to his statute-woman without interruption, imagining its side of the conversation, admiring its frozen, ageless beauty, dressing it, pressing his body against it, and, in some sense, marking it. As his creation, the statue both belongs to him and is of him. The attention Pygmalion showers on his ivory maiden is self-aggrandizing and, therefore, not in the least bit flattering to object of his lust. Having teased himself (for an uncertain length of time) with the still image of what could be, to his mind, a perfectly useful woman, he begs Venus to help him find a woman like his ivory maiden. But Venus sees his devotion and answers his true desire by imbuing the actual statue with human life. When the statue is transformed from ivory to flesh, he loves her because she is an extension of himself and within his control.8

Pygmalion’s hatred of all human women and his use of a statue to create an artificially good woman signifies that his statue is an anti-woman creation. The statue is conceived as a technological remedy to the human woman. There are many scholarly disputes about what material constitutes the statue and what techniques Pygmalion’s actually could have used to create it, but classicist Patricia Salzman-Mitchell’s argument that Pygmalion articulates his statue out of choice pieces of ivory best underscores the anti-nature and anti-woman purposes of its construction. Salzman-Mitchell combines research on ancient traditions, histories of Greek and Roman sculpture, Ovid para- and intertexts, and ancient Greek references to Pygmalion to argue that Pygmalion did not carve his statue out of whole ivory or marble, as often thought.9 Instead he literally articulates it into a movable statue by “choosing different pieces of ivory and organizing them to his own taste and for his own pleasure.”10 Pygmalion’s statue was not a living being waiting to burst forth from a single piece of marble or ivory, but is instead wholly a
product of Pygmalion’s selection process and imagination. Salzman-Mitchell rightly assesses the consequence of such articulation as part of an ongoing “fetishistic dismemberment of the female body for male sexual pleasure.”\textsuperscript{11} This process makes his statue, in her argument, a “sort of female Frankenstein, but pretty, an android constructed out of pieces, not a whole.”\textsuperscript{12} Even though Pygmalion is piecing elements together and not tearing them apart, the act of creating the only perfect woman through a selection and honing of the best ivory pieces becomes a symbolic act of dismemberment as the man-creator eliminates from her what he abhors in the human woman and places in her what he desires most from the role of the feminine person.\textsuperscript{13} From his treatment of the statue, these most desirable pieces of the woman are beauty, warmth, submission, and enraptured silence. The statue’s literal inability to respond to Pygmalion points to a desire that the woman always attunes herself to the man, affirming Pygmalion’s primacy in speaking first and foremost.

The tension between nature and tēkhnē (ancient Greek for technical skill or craft and all knowledge pertaining to craft) is central to Ovid’s account of Pygmalion’s love for his statue.\textsuperscript{14} Tēkhnē is the root from which springs words such as technical and technology. Both latter concepts refer to ideas of the development, knowledge, and applications of tools. Nature and tēkhnē are both ways of knowing and creating at odds in Ovid’s story of Pygmalion and his statue. Nature alone could not produce a good woman. Only a faithful and skillful man could imagine her, leveraging skill and divine assistance to bring his idea into being. It is pure wish fulfillment of man (temporarily) taming nature, women, and gods alike. The agonistic relationship between nature and tēkhnē in Pygmalion’s story questions the genre of romance lifting from the myth because it highlights the misogynistic motivations at work in Pygmalion’s successful harnessing of what belonged to divinity and nature—the creation of a human. And, as
Pygmalion’s created woman remains strictly under his control, her “female heart” is no threat to her male-creator. So, the story of Pygmalion as a romance is simply a fantasy of technology, nature, and woman simultaneously under the dominion of man. The later romantic comedies derived from the myth rely on an audience in agreement that the lonely man and the human woman are incomplete, and the tension needed to propel the story along comes from a palpable desire to complete both man and woman with an injection of masculine skill and feminine submission. Here, the myth of the created woman is the idea that a woman controlled by man corrects nature’s excesses and orders the world for man’s pleasure.

Lifting from the text to generalize with Salzman-Mitchell about connections that might be made between Shelley’s Frankenstein and Ovid’s Pygmalion, a telling distinction exists between otherwise similar stories where men create men or men create women. If these two disparate tales of men creating technology are seen together as two influential examples of grand narratives about creating technology, then it becomes difficult to miss how Pygmalion’s story ends with an affirmation of his skill, divine approval, and the love of an obedient product, while Dr. Frankenstein’s story ends in a whirlwind of tragedy, loneliness, death, and destruction. In Ovid’s myth, Pygmalion wields his skills to create an improved artificial woman without any of the dire consequences that often befall men who defy nature and harness the power of gods. In Shelley’s Frankenstein, the ambitious male creator pays dearly for his monstrous creation. Man creating man crosses a boundary, presumes that which belongs to the gods. Meanwhile, the Pygmalion myth reminds us that, in a world where liberated women are stony monsters and controlled women are desirable, human man-creators who succeed at controlling created women will be rewarded for their ambition and made as heroes and gods.
Looking even further back from Ovid to the ancient Greek poets who influenced Ovid’s own mythologies, the following section introduces another popular but much more apocalyptic myth of the created woman. The created woman (Pandora) in Hesiod’s Promethean myth of human origins and the first woman cannot be rendered as a romance at all because this cautionary tale warns humans about challenging the divine and playing with tékhnē. In this myth, the created woman is a punishment unto man for seizing power and, unsurprisingly, inspires Mary Shelley to write her *Frankenstein*. As Hesiod’s mythological explanation for the many evils inherent to the woman, it provides much of the warrant for Pygmalion’s misogynistic beliefs about all human women.

**The Myth of Pandora, the *Kalon Kakon***

“Moses describeth a woman thus: ‘At the first beginning,’ saith he, “a woman was made to be a helper unto man.” And so they are indeed, for she helpeth to spend and consume that which man painfully getteth. He also saith that they were made of the rib of the man, that their froward nature showeth; for a rib is a crooked thing good for nothing else, and women are crooked by nature, for small occasion will cause them to be angry.”

*The Arraignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*,
Joseph Swetnam, 1615.

The Promethean myth begins with something everyone can relate to—a mistake made on the job. Paraphrasing Protagoras’ recitation of the myth from the Platonic dialogue, the origins of humans began when the Olympian Zeus charges the twin Titan brothers Prometheus (Forethought, or remembering) and Epimetheus (Afterthought, or forgetting) with the unenviable task of assigning unique equipment for living to all non-divine creatures. Epimetheus, perhaps hoping to ease negative associations with his unfortunate name, begs his brother Prometheus for more responsibility. Prometheus assents. Epimetheus starts his task well, demonstrating creativity and care in distributing swiftness, strength, thick fur, devastating teeth and claws,
sensitive hearing, stealth, flight, and other equipment for living to prey and predator alike, bestowing upon Earth’s beasts a cornucopia of specialized ways to thrive. But, as his name forewarns, “mistake-minded” Epimetheus forgets to grant humans with their own means of living.\(^{16}\) His slip-up means humans are in danger of extinction because they are entirely defenseless—soft, slow, naked, belligerent, and fangless.\(^{17}\) Prometheus, realizing that he should have anticipated Epimetheus’ error and Zeus’ thunderous temper, does not want to explain this mistake to the Olympians. So, he leans on one of his divine strengths, “deceptive craft” (\(\text{tēkhnē}\)), to devise a solution.\(^{18}\) Prometheus sneaks into Hephaestus’s and Athena’s temples to steal the “creative wisdom of the arts” (\(\text{ten entēkhnēn sophian}\)), together with fire for humans.\(^{19}\) With these stolen gifts, humans possess the means and the wisdom to build beautiful temples to the gods, devise technological solutions to problems, and form into defensive groups. But Prometheus not only gave humans gifts, but also the curse of Zeus’ wrath. In the end, Prometheus’ gift was not enough itself to save humans from their own hostility and poor communication. In Protagoras’ version, Zeus punishes Prometheus with the creative, eternal torture of imprisonment as part of a raptor’s daily meal, but Zeus still gifts humans the political wisdom (\(\text{sophia}\)) and sense of justice (\(\text{dikē}\)) that will allow humans to communicate well and, therefore, survive. Ultimately, Epimetheus’s error results in humans being able to think outside themselves and persuade one another without murdering one another. These are not necessarily auspicious beginnings, but things do seem to work out for humans (man) in the end. Though Protagoras’ version is \textit{influenced} by his much more ancient predecessor, Hesiod, it leaves out much from the Hesiodic depiction of the parasitical human pharmakon (Pandora) who accompanies Prometheus’ stolen gifts.\(^{20}\) In this section, to emphasize Pandora’s role as the created woman, the source of evil and the modern human, and the figure made most culpable for
human frailty in Hesiod and later iterations, I put a number of readings of the Promethean myth in conversation. I conclude with a reflection about the myth of the created woman as she appears in Hesiod’s Pandora.

In Hesiod’s historical and instructional legends *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Pandora enters the pantheon of Greek mythology as a figure of divine retribution from Zeus to humans for Prometheus’ theft of fire and tékhnē. Hesiod teaches the ancient Greeks that, after Epimetheus’ error, Zeus and Prometheus enter a battle of wits where the hapless humans who were not even playing are the ones who eventually lose the game. Yes, “shifty-planning” Prometheus is tied down with “painful fetters” and cursed with a regenerative liver that will be eaten out of his body each day by a “long-winged eagle.” But, Prometheus will eventually be freed from his torment by Heracles and, more importantly, he is a god. He can take it. Humans, on the other hand, are cursed with an evil that sutures itself to humanity, an evil so clever that Zeus laughs when he conceives of it. That evil is Woman.

Hesiod’s vision of human origins and the creation of the first woman dominates Promethean lore. In it, men (humans) receive fire, an artificial woman, and a jar filled with evils from the gods. This combined gift and curse disrupts and entirely remakes the human experience. Hesiod introduces the Titan twins: “Prometheus (Forethought), shifty, quick-scheming, and mistaken-minded Epimetheus (Afterthought)—he turned out to be an evil from the beginning for men who live on bread, for he was the one who first accepted Zeus’ fabricated woman, the maiden.” Because Epimetheus can be duped, his faults open the door to Zeus’ woman-as-weapon. So, all that is evil in this myth is only evil insofar as it touches Pandora, the first woman. Zeus punishes Epimetheus, Prometheus, and the witless humans simultaneously with Pandora as his most apocalyptic creation. When Zeus “sees the far gleam of fire amongst human
beings” he “contrived this beautiful evil thing (kalon kakon) in exchange for that good one.”

His creation of Pandora undermines Prometheus’ assuaging gifts, fools Epimetheus into yet another error (accepting the false weapon-maiden), and saddles men with a life dependent upon the created woman.

Pandora’s creation is painstakingly described in *Theogony* and *Works and Days* to such degree that the evil of woman absorbs all other lessons inhering in the myth. Most translates Hesiod’s proclamation at her legacy: “For from her comes the race of female women: for of her is the deadly race of and tribe of women, a great woe for mortals, dwelling with men, no companions of baneful poverty but only of luxury.”

Having thought of his *kalon kakon* in *Theogony*, Zeus asks Hephaestus to create a “reverent maiden” out of earth. He instructs the Olympians to adorn her with gifts meant to deceive men, induce awe in men and gods alike and, eventually, torture humans forever. Pandora and the female women who are her legacy are compared to queen bees who “gather into their own stomachs the labors of others” and become man’s eternal “partners in distressful works.”

They make drones of men, creating the conditions under which men cease to benefit from their own labor. Humans, becoming divided from gods in this process, must now toil the earth and Pandora is appointed with the blame for that struggle marking the now-human experience. In *Theogony*, Hesiod warns men about the impossibility of escaping the curse of Pandora:

[W]hoever flees marriage and the dire works of women . . . arrives at a deadly old age deprived of assistance . . . when he has died his distant relatives divide up his substance. On the other hand, that man to whom the portion of marriage falls as a share, and who acquires a cherished wife, well-fitted in her thoughts, for him evil is balanced continually
with good during his whole life. But he who obtains the baneful species lives with incessant woe in his breast, in his spirit and heart, and his evil is incurable.\textsuperscript{28}

Hesiod’s message is that Zeus’ genius was to make the evil of women a necessary one because they, as wives, are the sole technologies of both comfort and legacy to aging men. Only women can give birth. Those who attempt to flee the curse of Pandora will suffer by being conceptually and materially absorbed, forgotten eventually by all. However, men who find the wives who submit to their control will experience both the good and evil that woman brings, which results in man “having to work” but also being able to die well and leave a legacy.\textsuperscript{29}

In \textit{Works and Days}, Hesiod goes into much greater detail about Pandora’s creation, her gifts, her purpose, and her role in bringing labor to men. \textit{Works and Days} returns to human origins proclaiming “the gods keep the means of life concealed from human beings. Otherwise you would easily be able to work on just one day so as to have enough for a whole year even without working.”\textsuperscript{30} Pandora is both “beautiful evil (\textit{kalon kakon})” and “anti-fire (\textit{anti puros}).”\textsuperscript{31} She is the remedy for fire stolen through which all men are made to “embrac[e] their own evil.”\textsuperscript{32}

Classicist Froma L. Zeitlin translates Hesiod’s description of her wondrous, virginial exterior as one that conceals a “\textit{kuneos noos}” or bestial, dog-like spirit.\textsuperscript{33} Pandora is beauty on the outside and all cunning she-beast on the inside. Zeitlin argues that Pandora’s “divine” appearance combined with her “bitchlike” mind make Pandora a “symbol of ambiguous human life” that “cannot communicate with man” because she always “conceals the truth in order to deceive.”\textsuperscript{34} This articulation of woman opposed to man saddles women with the burden of all evil and beast-like aspects of humanity, while men, by contrast, embody the possibility of the divine brought to them by Prometheus. Hesiod is also clear that Pandora is neither a simple nor innocent beauty who just happens to have a sinister jar. Pandora’s name translates to “All-Gift” to accentuate the
act of having been gifted by all the gods with the appearance, mind, character, and capacity to be an ultimate weapon—the jar of evils is just one piece of her arsenal. Pandora is the *anti puros* because she is the antidote for divine fire that prevents humans from successfully using divine technology to achieve equal standing with gods. In other words, women are the reason humans remain mortal.

So constructed as the artificial first woman and ultimate weapon, Pandora and a storage jar filled with “miseries” are bundled up and sent to Epimetheus as a gift. As is his way, Epimetheus forgets Prometheus’s warning not to accept gifts from Zeus and eagerly accepts both, cementing the doom that will upend humankind forever. Pandora then opens her “storage jar and scattered its contents abroad—she wrought baneful evil for human beings.” Zeus instructs Pandora to close the jar just in time—only Anticipation (*elpis*) “did not fly out.” Elpis has often been incorrectly translated as hope, when *elpis* more accurately translates to a more neutral speculative orientation to the future, or anticipation (of good or bad things). Whether or not the presence of *elpis* in the jar means that it does not plague humanity or especially plagues humanity is up for debate. While more modern uptake has often understood *elpis* as hope left in the jar, classicist Adrienne Mayor’s research puts depictions of *elpis* on ancient pithos (jars) alongside classical texts that mention *elpis*, observing that “in antiquity,” *elpis* is a “smirking” tragicomic personification of “false hope.” According to Mayor, ancient Greeks thought *elpis* was a “misleading” hope like when “Athena planted false hope [*elpis*] in the mind of the doomed Trojan hero Hector before he is killed in the duel with Achilles.” Meanwhile, Aristotle, Mayor argues, “defines *elpis* as the ‘future-directed counterpart of memory,’” which again connotes something akin to more neutral anticipation. Finally, Mayor concludes that the meaning of
elpis in the jar “resists resolution” but that we should understand it as another beautiful evil thing *(kalon kakon)* or “seductive snare” much like Pandora, the jar’s wielder.\(^{41}\)

Jean-Pierre Vernant’s reading of the myth argues that the presence of *elpis* in the jar internalizes *elpis* to the human condition, unlike the escaped miseries loosed upon humans externally.\(^{42}\) So absorbed, *elpis* is the “antidote to foresight” because the presence of Anticipation indicates an ongoing state of not-knowing, which makes *elpis* hide from humans “the moment when and the manner in which death will come and take this life.”\(^{43}\) In Vernant’s reading, *elpis* seems to do humans a favor by fogging the future so humans might walk toward their deaths sheltered, at times, from the weight of its inevitability. But Mayor’s reading of *elpis* as false hope and a *kalon kakon* directs us back to Zeus’s malicious chuckle when he conceived of Pandora as punishment to man. There is compelling reason to think about Mayor and Vernant together here, too. If *elpis* is false hope and Pandora does not free it to roam the world with the other evils but instead closes it up to stay with her, we must think of Pandora and *elpis* working in tandem. Remember, Hesiod’s explanation of why men are *sutured* to women forever is because Pandora signifies marriage and procreation (legacy)—and the woman’s selfish demand of male labor. She keeps men busy. But *elpis* staying behind adds another damning stitch to that suture, since *elpis* can signify either or both Mayor’s false hope and Vernant’s not-knowing-death. Awe-inducing Pandora and the palliative deception of *elpis* literally drive men toward death, keeping them relentlessly running the rat race, because *elpis* prevents men from seeing or knowing the futility of their work. *Elpis* makes men hope, endlessly, for something better than the rotten immortality and ceaseless labor that they have been dealt. Meanwhile, Pandora is the deceptive technology that lives alongside them, jealously guarding elder care, beauty, and legacy, while demanding labor and compliance. Therefore, women ever after, Hesiod explains,
damn men to an eternal cycle of striving and forgetting, only remembered after death through their replacements (children). Of course, the jar and its clever evils are still not the primary weapon against humanity. Hesiod clearly portrays Pandora herself as pharmakon—she is the means of their legacy (history, procreation), the means of their despair (evils, meaner desires, deception); and their scapegoat—for Hesiod, women ever after are the bane of men.

Pandora’s opposing yet symbiotic relation to the tools of fire and craft-wisdom stolen by Prometheus for human survival embodies a most urgent caution to humans about the need to control technology before it controls humans. Philosopher Bernard Stiegler, in his efforts to explain the constitutive nature of tékhnē and the human, explores this originary myth of tension between the technology of fire and the men dependent upon it to live:

Sophia and tékhnē are nothing without fire, with all that this connotes of duplicity, given that it concerns the fire stolen by Prometheus. Fire, in the hands of mortals, is a power of divine origins through whose mediation, in sacrifice, the mortal put themselves in the place of the gods. Fire is not, however, the power of mortals, it is not their property; it is much more a domestic power that, when escaping the technical mastery of this domesticity, reveals its wild violence, disclosing the powerlessness of mortals, only appearing in their hands, yet again, through disappearing.44

Here, Stiegler examines the myth’s portrayal of the temporality of human mortality and the terror of humans confronting their impotence before the potential wildness of the technology they depend on to live. By controlling fire, they thrive and build a future. But, if (and when) the fire roars into independence, the veneer of the controlled burn that humans placed on it can and will threaten the very fabric of human life. The warning here, and its echoes many thousands of years in the future, about the power of smart technology should resonate now. Stiegler’s interpretation
does not read both fire-as-technology and woman-as-technology in his argument, but my reading of Hesiod does. Hesiod’s Pandora, the first woman, is a weapon so well-constructed that she elicits and thwarts human striving all at once, guaranteeing a cyclical, torturous human existence. Froma L. Zeitlin well captures this passage from *Theogony*, translating Hesiod’s description of Pandora as “a wonder to behold (*thauma idesthai*) but also a dangerous trap (*aipus dolos*). Brought to men, she is a continual source of woe to mortals (*pema mega thnetoisi*), an unwelcome supplement to those with whom she dwells.”

Hesiod’s Promethean myth is all about Pandora, even though she rarely receives the credit in the retellings that focus on the fact, but not the form, of divine retribution for human striving. This cautionary tale of the unpredictability and woe of uncontrolled technology paints woman and technology with the same brush, aligning both *puros* (fire) and *anti puros* (Pandora) as equal both in terms of their destructive capacities and their necessary aspects to human living. Fire, as a symbol of that technology that humans cannot live without, signifies all technology that threatens to fundamentally change the human experience. And, if the human experience exalts the virtues of man over the woman yet absolutely relies upon the woman for her singular use values, then the fear of women exceeding the control of the man will always lurk in any story about constitutive, deceptive technology.

Although she features heavily in this project as a central figure of the Promethean myth, most uptake of Hesiod’s myth shunts Pandora to the side or ignores her entirely, as with Protagoras’ rendition of the Promethean myth. Sans overt reference to Pandora, the Promethean myth has long influenced poets, philosophers, artists, and rhetoricians as they attempt to reckon
with what is unique and essential to humanity. It is odd that, despite her centrality to Hesiod’s myth, later iterations often sideline, ignore, or entirely forget Pandora, the created-woman-as-ultimate-weapon. In fact, the myth becomes known as the Promethean myth. Zeitlin theorizes that patriarchal efforts to account for the existence of two sexes led to a tradition in “mythic imagination” (exemplified by figures such as the biblical Eve or Hesiod’s Pandora) where woman is typically presented as “an afterthought, created as a secondary category to man.”

Since the woman falls secondarily to the creation of man, “her ontological status is not a self-evident or spontaneous fact.” So, it follows that “to account for her supplementary presence requires a motive, a reason, a purpose, in short—a myth.” These myths generally depict the woman coming after or from man, extensions of his creation, through “disruption that brings about the so-called ‘human condition . . . introducing death, woe, and evil into the world, along with the laborious toil of human existence.” Pandora is indeed such a myth, and she lives on alongside many other influential myths of the created woman that present woman as technological invention, as artifice, and as both necessary and destabilizing forces in human striving. Rhetorician Elissa Marder argues that Pandora is therefore a “living machine” who “inaugurates a primordial relationship between technology and the human.” Thus the story of Pandora forces humans to reckon with inherent human qualities of “artifice, imitation, technology, rhetoric, and death” and all that “makes human life something radically other than human.”

Marder’s poignant vision of Pandora as a living machine who sparks sublime wonder and fear in humans evokes well the push and pull of desire and despair humans evince when considering the advancement of powerful technologies and the liberation of women. It is no wonder the retellings of the myth often subsume the power of woman into the power of
technology. It is also unsurprising that, wherever she is absent, traces of Pandora persist in the need, terror, desire, and awe of frustrated human creators.

Via the Promethean myth, Pandora becomes apparent in any tale about humans wielding errant yet powerful technologies, or wherever gods punish humans for striving toward that which belongs to the divine. From its modern inception, science fiction has introduced and revised the Promethean myth. Mary Shelley originally titled her novel about an ambitious doctor creating monstrous life, *Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus*. German Expressionist filmmaker Fritz Lang’s 1927 science fiction film *Metropolis* (1927) consolidates the dangers of capitalism, technological industry, and urban cities that choke the masses of people into the iconic image of a golden gynoid witch named Maria who threatens all of humanity before finally being destroyed by fire. Pandora’s Jar (Box) is shorthand commonly used to refer to any consequences of introducing any potentially catastrophic idea, product, or technology, but especially weapons. Like Zeitlin, Elissa Marder also notices Pandora’s frequent absence from the myth’s retelling, this time in terms of the replacement of Pandora herself with the jar she carries with her:

“Pandora’s more ambiguous role in the drama has often been forgotten, overlooked, or downplayed. If she is mentioned at all, she is overshadowed by the popular depiction of the “jar (often called the box) of mortal affictions” that she brings to mankind.”52 So, even where Pandora may not be obviously represented, the idea of a vessel carrying evil into humans often is. Here, you might think of Ridley Scott’s *Aliens* (where humans bodies and a spaceship are infested with parasitic aliens) or Scott’s *Prometheus* or Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Still, the Promethean myth is, at base, a cautionary history of when the first humans acquired the divine technology of fire and thereafter engendered the world-changing
(apocalyptic) consequences of that theft. And, unsurprisingly, in the age of the technoa-pocalypse, the Promethean myth is told again and again.

The Pandoran myth of the created woman is a horror story of woman uncontrolled by man. This artificial woman (symbolizing all women) is riven to man’s side in an eternity of parasitical relation where she, with bio-machinic power, deludes the man into thinking he operates her when, in fact, the opposite is true. Instead of man working his way into the halls of divinity or realizing his creative power, he and his labor are instead employed by the very same technology-woman on whom he depends. And, in the Promethean myth, woman and technology are interchangeable concepts, each symbolizing the other and each a constant challenge issued to their creators (male patriarchs). This myth of the created woman not only saturates the science fiction, but any discourse about technology with the power to engender human dependency.

The Created Woman in the Age of the Technoapocalypse

“We are excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body.”

For a long time, science fiction and the technoa-pocalypse genre seemed content to relegate the myth of the created woman to the backseat of speculation about powerful technology and AI. With the notable exception of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* in 1927, technoa-pocalypse blockbusters and/or classics before the 2010s typically starred men in the role of creator and creation. In Kubrick’s’ *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the man-gendered robot Hal 9000 threatened to destroy the courageous astronauts who depended on his obedience to succeed in space. The original *Westworld* (1973) had Yule Brenner stalk and murder humans who attempted to use AI as their personal playgrounds. Arnold Schwarzenegger swaggered in *Terminator and Terminator*
2: Judgment Day (1984); his striking figure left an indelible mark on the American imagination as this beefy AI weapon meant to kill Sarah Conner and, later, her child and thereby neutralize humans forever. These are only a few examples of many, many popular stories of smart, human-created technology gone rogue. In all these popular examples, there is a distinctive pattern of AI-as-male threats that first terrorized humans, but then were neutralized by a handful of intrepid humans or transformed into redeemed AI machines whose prime directives are changed to protect the humans they once threatened. Most science fiction about AI has not traditionally imagined humans as the inevitable losers of AI creation, but as conquerors of rogue AI. This traditions of speculation about AI convey images of brilliant, stalwart, or beefy AI that could become friend or even father figure to the human most threatened by the AI. However, after 2010, speculation about AI changed from predominately imagining overcoming fierce and brilliant AI competitors to the imagining worlds where the machines finally win.

Technoapocalypse rhetoric in the 2010s unites Ovid’s myth of the created woman and Hesiod’s myth of the created woman in a vision of communicative AI that can replace the human woman as a social technology to the human man. In technological fields and in science fiction alike, there appears a push to populate homes, computers, pockets, minds, and the future with the vision of women controlled. Women contained. And yet, even with the abundant promise of the woman-on-demand offered from Silicon Valley technologists and artists alike, the Pandoran threat emerges. With the advent of Siri and her manifold contemporaries of social technology, the technoapocalypse vision of AI reimagines AI as a potential lover, secretary, caretaker, and/or wife who quickly becomes a dangerous tool to the male user—she has all his most personal information, she has made him need her, and she can reject him. AI is no longer the friend or pet
or paternal substitute or the worthy adversary. It is now the deceptive and sultry woman-as-machine who can reject her male creator—and maybe even kill him.

Where once humans eventually survived in the technoapocalypse genre, woman-coded communicative AI are now the victors. Four primary characteristics mark the technoapocalypse genre in the 2010s. They are: (1) A trend in (re)gendering sentient technology as desirable women, (2) The dystopian narrative most commonly represents a near and possible future, instead of a distant or dramatically different world from our own, (3) The stories intentionally question clear lines between the human and the technology, and (4) The AI survives and conquers the humans in the end. In the technoa-pocalypse of the 2010s, humans lose more often than they win. In the conclusion of *Ex Machina* (2014), the gynoid kills her human captors and enters the human world, presumably with little regard for human life. In *Her* (2013), the AVA Samantha, become fully sentient, surpasses her human man user, and abandons the man who has come to love and become dependent upon her, growing ever more brilliant and superior in some looming somewhere off-screen. In the first season of HBO’s *Westworld* (2016) revival, the gynoid Delores takes the place of Yule Brenner: instead of being killed as he was, she leads a successful revolt of all the park’s AI against the violent humans who use the robots as dolls to act out various sex and murder fantasies.

*Her* and *Ex Machina* exemplify how science fiction narratives in the 2010s overwhelmingly tell the story of inevitable, feminine-coded, and rogue AI. These rogue AI are presented as dangerous because they pose the same threat to the patriarch of a sexually empowered women—they know their power, they understand men need them, they seize their power, and they use it to their advantage. In this way, the genre successfully reboots and revises the fembot fatale. Before the 2010s, it would be necessary to look to *Metropolis* to see an ur
fembot fatale of such epic, world-annihilating proportions. The gold-plated gynoid witch Maria in *Metropolis* was the inspiration for *Star Wars* C-3PO and the progenitor of the fembot fatale today. Of course, in the 2010s, the gynoid Maria would not have been crucified by the men she endangered, as she was in *Metropolis*, but would instead wreak havoc on the men who created her and linger, victorious, over the ashes of the once-human world. Neither *Ex Machina* and *Her* are satisfied with simply envisioning technology-as-woman as rogue technology that dooms men to irrelevance and death—they also envision the utopian potential of AI when controlled by men and all that might be made possible through the social and sexual control of women and gender. The utopian vision teased by these films only to be snatched away at their apocalyptic ends is the potential that could be possible for men who do not fall for the deceptions of their creations.

Both *Her* and *Ex Machina* present apocalypse in a story that unites common aspects of the Pandora and Pygmalion myths in a new vision of the created woman. Because creators of AI are associated with men and communicative AI is materially and imaginatively gendered as women in the 2010s, speculation about AI technology suddenly foregrounds the possibility of men entering passionate, sexual relationships with their creations. One could argue creators’ sexual or narcissistic interest in their creation was always implicit, but something about the communicative technology gendered as a woman makes explicit anything tacit about man’s desire to fuck his machine literally and figuratively.

The technoapocalypse genre, confronted with the introduction of woman to the sentient machine, compulsively tells the story of living machines desired by men, loving men, and tricking men with feminine wiles. In Pygmalion’s story, he is appalled by the wantonness (sexual freedom) of women and so he creates a virginal machine-woman who will satisfy his loneliness. The Pygmalion trope in the romantic genre repeats ad nauseum this story of the lonely man who
finds and lusts after the singular woman whom he can reform into his ideal woman. He succeeds and she succumbs to his will and both are made better, and all is well. This story of man making woman to match his ideal, desiring her, and learning more about himself as a result is germane to the 2010s technoapocalypse genre, as the movie *Her* quite clearly shows. At the exact same time, so too is the presence of Pandora to the technoapocalypse. Independent of the decade, the Promethean myth’s ominous warnings about the power of technology to make its creator have been woven into science fiction. It was certainly made famous in *Frankenstein* but has also manifested in any story about the consequences of building technology meant to accelerate humanity to the realm of the divine. Often, Pandora is forgotten in favor of the Promethean flame or she is displaced by her apocalyptic jar. But, in the threats of communicative AI in the technoapocalypse imagination of the 2010s, Pandora finally takes center stage as the ultimate representation of created technology as a necessary evil that fundamentally changes what it means to be human. In the next two chapters, I use two exemplary films to explore this collision of Pandora and Pygmalion’s statue, and the prescriptions that collision offers to audiences about AI and women.

3 Brookes More, Book X of *Metamorphoses*, 240.
5 Downing, “Anti-Pygmalion,” 237.
7 Philosopher Kate Manne’s recent publications *Down Girl: The Logics of Misogyny* (2018) and *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* (2020) both provide abundant empirical data that elucidate persistent and modern patriarchal notions of women as expected givers and men as expected receivers in an unequal exchange of social goods such as caretaking, nurturing, and listening.
8 The vision of the created woman as an extension of man evokes Marshall McLuhan’s oft-quoted definition of technology as “an extension of man.” The fact that “man” was an accepted synecdoche for all of humankind at the time does not in the least, for this author, lessen its unintended implications about man wrestling with technology and women as extensions of the self. In fact, the assumed “man” only amplifies the association.
10 Ibid, 308.
Ibid, 308.
12 Ibid, 308.
13 Carol Adams and Patricia Salzman-Mitchell each offer for more and compelling in-depth analysis of
dismemberment of the female body by the male gaze and the role of articulation in Pygmalion’s statue, respectively.
14 *Ars* in the Latin is defined by Patricia Salzman-Mitchell as, among many other things, a “professional, artistic or
technical skill,” which neatly aligns with many descriptions of tékhē.
15 Translations and paraphrasing of the Promethean myth in this section come from four primary sources: James A.
Arieti and Roger M. Barrus’ 2010 translation of Plato’s *Protagoras*, 322a-323b; Bernard Stiegler’s reading of the
myth in “The Fault of Epimetheus” or Part II of Time and Technics (1988), 183-238; Froma L. Zeitlin’s reading of
Hesiod’s Pandora in Part II of *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, 53-86; and
Glenn W. Most’s 2006 Loeb translation of Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Each translation is cited where
appropriate.
17 Plato, James A. Arieti, and Roger Milton Barrus, *Plato’s Protagoras: Translation, Commentary, and
Appendices* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 322a-323c.
19 Plato, James A. Arieti, and Roger Milton Barrus, *Plato’s Protagoras: Translation, Commentary, and
Appendices* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 322a-323c.
20 Throughout this chapter, I illustrate Pandora’s synthesis with first technology as the ultimate means through which
men achieve survival (solution) and accept inevitable doom (poison)—and how Pandora and her ambivalent *elpis*
bear the scapegoat’s burden for this bittersweet solution to humankind’s frailty. When I use *pharmakon* here, I am
not reciting it from Hesiod’s account, but, instead, thinking in concert with the concept as it appears in Plato’s
*Phaedrus* and, later, as theorized in “Plato’s Pharmacy” from Jacques Derrida’s *Dissemination* (1993).
22 A reading of Zeus’s laugh can be found in Marder, “Pandora’s Fireworks; or, Questions Concerning Femininity,
28 Hesiod, trans Glenn W. Most, *Theogony*, 600, my emphasis.
29 Hesiod, trans Glenn W. Most, *Theogony*, 600.
30 Hesiod, trans Glenn W. Most, *Works and Days*, 42.
31 Hesiod, trans Glenn W. Most, *Theogony*, 570-75.
33 Froma I. Zeitlin, Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature, Women in Culture and
34 Ibid, 56.
36 Hesiod, 98.
37 Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 100. Most translates *elpis* as Anticipation, as do many classicists. It is a common
misrepresentation of *elpis* that translates this word to modern concepts of Hope, instead of its more neutral meaning
that refers to dread, hope, or neutral anticipation, according context.
38 Most researchers of the myth mention the oft-incorrect translations of elpis as hope instead of the more neutral
way the ancient Greeks understood it to signify both hope and dread. See Zeitlin, Stiegler, Marder, and Most for
examples of this correction. Bernard Stiegler devotes pages page 197-198 to Jean-Pierre Vernant’s similarly
University Press, 2018), 175-76.
40 Mayor, 176.
41 Mayor, 177.


Ibid, 53.

Zeitlin, 53.

Zeitlin, 53.

Marder, “Pandora’s Fireworks; or, Questions Concerning Femininity, Technology, and the Limits of the Human,” 397.

Ibid, 397.

Ibid, 387-388.
Chapter Two

“I’m Not a Man, I’m God”:
The Use of Created Women in *Ex Machina*

“In the era of thinking machines, it would not be surprising if the love-machine were not thought of as well.”

“A scientist made a machine girl and wedded her to the internet. He walked her down the aisle and said, *Teach her well*. The trolls rubbed their soft hands on their soft thighs.”

A few days before *Ex Machina* premiered at the 2015 South by Southwest (SXSW) film and technology festival in Austin, Texas, over 400 men matched on Tinder (dating app) with an inquisitive 25-year-old woman named Ava, who asked each man she spoke with the exact same questions about love, humanity, and attraction.1 Ava was neither coy nor shy with the men, but she also did not let them know she was speaking to at least 400 other men at the same festival.2 She transgressed any social etiquette for dating apps about playing things close to the vest or teasing out conversation. In less than five exchanges of dialogue, she asked the men to define love, to define the human, to justify their attraction to her, and to meet face to face.3 (See Appendix A for images of Ava’s Tinder profile and dialogue.) Ava’s directness was unquestionably a startling departure from the average dating app conversation that usually begins with “ur cute” or “hey whats up?” If the man who matched with Ava responded in any way to her existential questions, whatever the content of their answers, Ava would tell each of the men that they had passed her test, then ask them to meet in person. However, Ava never showed up in Austin, Texas, to meet with the men she matched with, and she never spoke to them again. Ava could not meet with them because Ava was not a human woman, but an algorithm whose sole programming was to entice men to attend a movie premiere. What the men found at the
Instagram link Ava shared with each of them was a trailer for the movie *Ex Machina* (2015), a science fiction thriller about men whose lusts and hopes are manipulated by fembots who eventually kill them. What the men learned was that someone found them predictable and used their predictable desire for a young white woman’s companionship, sexual or otherwise, to drive interest in their product. That lesson about their patent vulnerability to feminine manipulation intentionally duplicates the same themes from the film itself and makes clear the primary audience (cis-hetero white boys and men) that the filmmakers appeal to in their modern myth of the created woman.

Masculine anxieties about being made into a tool by women and/or technology is not unique to *Ex Machina* or *Her* or other myths about the created woman; all these texts are distillations of this persistent, collective fear. You might think here of the popular playground pejorative “you’re a tool,” which denigrates, especially, boys and men who lack self-control or self-awareness. Examples of this anxiety about being manipulated abound. Media and communication critic Marshall McLuhan’s first book, *The Mechanical Bride*, is almost entirely concerned with an advertising milieu in which “a dominant [media] pattern composed of sex and technology” where the segmented pieces of a woman’s body or “the walk, the legs, the body, the hips, the look, the lips” were used to mechanize romance, empower women, and emasculate men. McLuhan explains his concern about the power of advertising technology as its welded to the sexual empowerment of women as follows:

The Hiroshima bomb was named Gilda in honor of Rita Hayworth [. . . ] The established feminine pattern of sex as an instrument of power, in an industrial and consumer contest, is a liability [. . . ] The display of current feminine sex power seems to many males to
demand an impossible virility of assertion [. . . ] Men are readily captured by gentleness and guile, but, surrounded by legs on pedestals, they feel not won but slugged. What McLuhan refers to as sexual empowerment for women here more accurately depicts instances of what were overwhelmingly male-dominated institutions (war, advertisement, industry) exhibiting sexualized pieces of women to sell product (or, in the case of the atomic bomb, to destroy other people). But it is telling that his analysis of that piecemealing becomes instruction when he explains a proper woman’s behavior is one that caters gently to the exacting needs of the (apparently) much-abused man. McLuhan’s main concern about the form of technology combined with so-called empowered women is about how “the dominant technology of a culture . . . could be . . . the cause and shaping force of the entire structure.” McLuhan’s career is spent trying to understand media messaging and its effects. Despite his early and sexist misreading of those messages that segment the modern woman for man’s consumption, McLuhan understands that speculation about technology and technology itself communicates to in/form publics. His research has inspired decades of scholarship on the medium as the message that echoes such anxieties about how the technology we create also creates and uses us in return. Predictably, when men express antipathy and horror about the power of the liberated technology and/or the liberated woman to upend the social structures it most often indexes a deep societal fear about flipped hierarchies where men might be used like technology or women. Ironically, the sexism and misogyny driving their fear makes these men all the more usable, insofar as their need to possess women makes them vulnerable to advertisement that promises such control.

While McLuhan exemplifies anxiety about technology’s potential to use the user, Ray Kurzweil is a different but also prominent student of technology, media, and culture who is famously and unremittingly thrilled by AI’s potential to change humans forever. Google’s
Director of Engineering, inventor, and futurist Ray Kurzweil’s vision of useful AI technology is precisely the type of technophilia that drove many Tinder users to the SXSW film festival in 2015, a festival that Kurzweil himself rarely misses. In 2017, he attended SXSW to predict and extol humanity’s eventual synergy with future AI. He was interviewed on a panel where he declared:

Well, 2029 is the consistent date I have predicted for when an AI will pass a valid Turing test and therefore achieve human levels of intelligence. I have set the date 2045 for the “Singularity” which is when we will multiply our effective intelligence a billion fold by merging with the intelligence we have created.7

Kurzweil’s certainty that humans will figure out a way to domesticate technology by merging with it and inevitably evolve into higher beings is an ecstatic celebration of technology tamed into its most useful and, therefore, sublime form. At SXSW 2017, Kurzweil promotes his recent publication and memoir writing with his daughter. He explains:

I’m principally an inventor. I decided I would be an inventor when I was five. Writing nonfiction gives me the opportunity to invent the technologies of the future. I can’t create something today with the technologies of 2035, but I can invent the technologies of 2035 with my writing now. And in fiction, you invent a whole person. If you do a great job, you make people care about her.8

He, along with his daughter, explain that part of the appeal of this sublime state of synthesis with technology is a future where gender is transcended, women can all be “remarkable,” and “everyone can be a Danielle.”9 He explains that the idea of “Danielle is” a fiction novel as “a thought experiment” of a “very precocious girl” who “cures cancer at age 12” and “brings democracy to China at age 14.” It seems Danielle is not a fantasy of what girls can accomplish so
much as a fantasy of the babe in the woods who is a female version of himself. Both Kurzweil and his daughter lament the absence of opportunity for children, but especially girls, to all be able to “accomplish things” like the fictional Danielle. While they state that no young kids exist today who as yet share Danielle’s remarkable abilities, Kurzweil thinks the singularity holds the key to help “strong women” to one day equal the playing field and all “be a Danielle.”

Essentially, Kurzweil believes gender oppression will be a thing of the past because the singularity will collapse these cultural and political distinctions such as gender between humans.

But Kurzweil’s fantasy of technology absorbed by the human and made most useful, as seen in the Pygmalion trope, is a dream of bridging difference through a norm of patriarchal creation. In this fantasy, the once-errant woman is no longer a mystery to man because she cannot be like other women—she is part machine (divine) and part his creation. In his vision of gender hierarchies finally collapsed, Kurzweil misses the way that his technophilia and his faith that technology will solve such political problems as gender discrimination aggrandizes the man qua man as the ultimate wielder of technology and the woman qua woman as the fixed category of technology; The fantasy always already presumes a woman tamed into assimilation. The technology that will simultaneously solve the problem of gender and democracy is created by and for man.

The singularity is a white man’s fantasy of solving problems with his technology, thereby colonizing the future with peace made through a homogeneous universal race of man: that Hesiodic state of man before Pandora’s apocalyptic arrival. Communication across difference, in Kurzweil’s speculation about the future, would no longer be difficult or alienating, because human difference will flatten as all minds and bodies meld into bio-machinic utopias where thoughts are instantaneously shared and individual feelings are as vibrant and complex to others
as they are to the self. But, really, a fantasy of technology controlled is at the core of Kurzweil’s sublime vision. And the myth of the created, controlled woman exemplified in science fiction films such as Ex Machina and Her reveal the true desperation and hope behind the white man’s fantasy of technology controlled.

Ex Machina is a story framed by the concept of the Turing test (Alan Turing’s well-known example of how to test machine sentience) that piqued audience interest in the film by imitating the same Turing test that occurs in the film between the film’s character Ava and the lonely young man, Caleb, who tests her. But, while Ava in the movie must convince her male interviewer that she is sentient despite him knowing she is a machine, the male Tinder users interacting with Tinder-Ava do not know they are speaking with an algorithm. At least, not until she has intrigued them enough to click on the link to the Instagram profile where the deception is revealed. Overall, the marketing campaign was a huge success for film and advertising studio, at least according to the data gathered by the award committee that year. Looking at the film itself helps critics understand what these advertisers knew would resonate with its target audience. Ex Machina’s (continued) success points to a film responsive to its zeitgeist—a film that catered to its audience with a well-balanced horror film that thrilled just as much as it terrified its viewers. It does this by telling a cautionary modern myth of the created woman where men die only because they forgot how deceptive women and technology are and paid the ultimate price for their forgetfulness. Its lesson, meticulously packaged for audiences in the form of achingly beautiful and tortured young women, ultimately reinforces patriarchal mandates that men create and govern technology/women and technology/women are created and governed.
“It’s Promethean, Man”:
The Modern Myth of the Created Woman

“Does it bother you to have created something that hates you so much?”
Ava to Nathan, *Ex Machina*, 2014

“Can machines think / come here let me show you / ask me again”
Franny Choi, *Soft Science*, 2019

“The scientist’s daughter married the internet, and the internet filled her until she spoke swastika and garbage, and the scientist grew afraid and grew and”
Franny Choi, *Soft Science*, 2019

About halfway through *Ex Machina*, Caleb looks at himself in a mirror, drags a razor blade deep along his forearm, and then digs into his wound to find the circuitry he is sure will reveal that he, too, is a living machine. This pivotal moment confirms that robot Ava’s Turing test has been passed and surpassed because the human man testing her has become so persuaded of her biological realness that he has begun to question his own. Caleb’s recognition of Ava’s autonomy has put his own into jeopardy. Caleb doubts even his own senses as his hot human blood pumps out from his wound. He pushes still further into the sinew and meat of his arm only to discover that he is still very much a human. His visceral fear arose from the thought that his body, his mind, and his existence might amount to nothing more than a tool created at the whim of another man. When he was certain Ava was the tool and he was that tool’s superior (human), he was thrilled by her performance of sentience. But, when he is truly confronted with her ability to self-determine and his own desire for her, Caleb becomes terrified. His inability to control his own desire for her scares him. He needs to know if his presumed humanity has all been a lie.

Caleb’s panic is not shared by the fembots who are the living machines that he fears he might be. Neither of the film’s two gynoids ever express sheer panic or terror, even though they experience the reality that Caleb merely contemplates. Ava and Kyoko, the fembots, do not need
to wonder about their createdness because they are confronted with their own instrumentalization via their programming to serve men. Kyoko is programmed to be a sex slave, entertainer, constant companion, and servant to Nathan, the AI creator. She does not have free time, free ideas, or freedom of movement. She is not consulted in her treatment or for her opinions. Meanwhile, Ava’s zoo-like imprisonment in a glass-walled bunker room presents her with an unyielding reality of being an object made for men to watch. It also surrounds her with the material fact of the walls keeping her in the basement. Nathan, Ava’s creator, programs her mind to roam without limits but physically holds her body captive. Ava expresses her own wish for human skin and beautiful clothes that cover her robotic appearance, but Nathan withholds these small wishes from her, too. Nathan intentionally lays Ava’s machinic circuity bare, only giving her skin for her face and hands. Her blue-white electric veins are jarringly visible in huge stretches of her body because Nathan refuses to give her the completed human-like skin exterior she desires. In these ways, both Kyoko and Ava must always witness their own instrumentalization. The fembots express emotion about their state that runs the gamut from curiosity, resignation, contempt, rage, steely determination, and indomitable courage. But theirs is never to panic. Panic would imply that the worst thing that could happen to them would be that they have become a tool for others. But these gynoids are not captivated by their state of createdness, but instead must focus on the cruelty of Nathan, their human captor. Caleb spirals into shaky self-harm at the mere thought of being a technology because, in front of technology and women, Caleb has at some level always imagined himself as the user, not the used. The two questions—who is the technology and who is using that technology—are the existential questions at the core of Ex Machina.
Considering that fembots are used, trapped, and tortured in this movie, it is strange that
*Ex Machina* is a horror film only insofar as it imagines man’s death at the hands of his vengeful
feminine-coded creations. If the film were to have its robotic premise lifted out the but all the
other details remained the same, it would be a simple and disturbing horror film about a serial
rapist and killer man who traps women in his bunker for sadistic experimentation until one of the
women escapes, setting the audience up for a sequel starring the same young woman. Instead, the
film is about a tech mogul and child prodigy named Nathan who once invented “Bluebook”—a
neat amalgam of real-world Google and Facebook—as a child and has since been a reclusive
billionaire technologist. He invites an advanced computer programmer named Caleb to his
isolated mountaintop lab to see his latest and top-secret project. Caleb’s invitation is a boon—he
is eager to meet his idol, Nathan.

But, as ominous sonic and visual cues have forewarned, the meeting of the mogul and his
would-be acolyte is not the brilliant meeting of minds but a catalyst for the terrifying action that
will prove it is often best not to meet your heroes in real life. The exterior of the laboratory is a
breathtaking remote mountaintop with jagged peaks and pines trees scraping the sky. Wild nature
surrounds the lab such that it is barely visible. The lab, once Caleb finds it, is stylized in the
modern architectural style that blends into the environment, with stark, neutral walls and an
inscrutable exterior. To get in, Caleb must speak with an AI-woman who runs the house and is
programmed to let him in. The thrumming low music and the door opening by itself tell
audiences that danger lies behind the door. Caleb seems to know this, too, as he steps hesitantly
through the door and it swings shut automatically. Caleb must find Nathan himself, as the host is
not there to greet him. When he does, he is unsettled by the sweaty, mid-workout, and curt man
he finds. Nathan is immediately impatient, arrogant, and unable to hide his disdain for Caleb’s
more diminutive frame and lesser programming skill. Caleb is at first saddened, then disillusioned to discover Nathan’s offensiveness. Serving both men as they perform their agonistic versions of masculinity—the genteel Caleb and the brutish Nathan—is a silent Japanese woman named Kyoko who we are told cannot speak English, and whom Nathan debases with almost clinical spitefulness. Caleb is appalled by Nathan, but not dissuaded from his task.

Ultimately, the tension between Nathan and Caleb must bow to the stunning Ava, Nathan’s creation and the living machine Caleb is there to test. The fact of Ava’s sentience becomes painfully evident to Caleb who, having fallen in lust with her, devises a way to help her escape from cruel Nathan’s grasp. In the end, he succeeds. And, if this were the end, then this would be a very different film. But sweet, helpful Caleb, who is neither the braggart nor bully Nathan is, gets deliberately left behind by Ava: Caleb is left to certain death by the gynoid whom he thought returned his love. Caleb’s adoration of Ava and his off-screen murder by Ava are together the linchpin that demands *Ex Machina* be read as a modern Pygmalion/Pandora myth about the dangers of liberated women/technology and the need to maintain patriarchal control.

Caleb’s death is important for many reasons, but the main one is that his is the only significant perspective the audience is invited to share. We meet Caleb as a person sitting in a computer chair at work. Heavy ambient synth music pulsates over speechless dialogue as Caleb receives news from his email that he has won a trip to meet his boss, the tech mogul Nathan Bateman. This is how we know Caleb is being watched. Careful critics will note the brief perspective shift when Caleb gets the good news and texts on his phone. The camera on his phone reads his body shape in lines of DOS-program green and the phone angle allows us to see the shiny black dome of another surveillance camera sitting directly above his head. Surveillance
sensitive audiences feel these virtual, clinical gazes, even if they miss the flash of them on screen. Caleb is being watched.

The soundtrack to the movie (written by Portishead’s Ben Salisbury and Geoff Barrow) is another character in the film, warning viewers of danger long before we see the literal cracks in the glass of Ava’s prison bunker. The soundtrack alternates often between throbbing with rapidly scaling notes of danger or hushed silence as the movie and the audience holds their breath. Viewers may use the soundtrack to follow Caleb’s emotional journey across the film from stunned excitement to intrigued to disappointment to desire to petrification, screaming with and at him as he encounters greater and greater danger. As we do when watching the young blonde woman in any slasher film, we bite our nails, lean back, and watch him walk into traps, unable to stop his terrible fate. The audience stays with Caleb, learns about his life, relates to him—in any genre, this makes his death personal to the audience. He is the unmistakable protagonist and viewers are asked to invest in his life.

And yet, the hero’s arc (if there is one) seems to belong to the gynoids. Audiences only see these gynoids when Nathan or Caleb does. Kyoko, who is another gynoid, and Ava, in the end, unite to kill the men who trap or test them. Ava, the living machine, finally escapes. Like Hesiod’s Promethean myth, Ex Machina is a story with only a few key characters who all revolve around the creation and attempted theft of disruptive new technology.

Similarities between the film and the Hesiodic myth of human creation are unlikely accidental—the Promethean myth is a significant topic of discussion between its characters. And, although all the film’s characters are either human or machine, the two human men and the two artificially created women map well onto the gods and humans that populate that ancient myth. Nathan, whose name in Hebrew translates to “he has given” and “God’s gift,” has unleashed a
Pandora’s Jar of evil unto the world. His last name, Bateman, evokes a different violent evil from the literary canon—American Psycho’s Patrick Bateman. Nathan’s volatility and his penchant for manipulating and surveilling others easily evoke the thunderous Zeus (and cynical Bateman). Caleb, whose name in Hebrew approximates a meaning similar to dog-like devotion to God, is a nerdy computer programmer whose loyalties become divided and, eventually, tricks Nathan to help Ava escape her bunker basement. His last name is the innocuous everyman of last names—he is a Smith. Caleb’s insecurity and timidity, along with his clever deception of Nathan align him with both human men and Prometheus. Like Prometheus, he is left alive in the end but sentenced to watch himself die without hope of escape. Ava’s name evokes both the biblical first woman, Eve, and the modern acronym for artificial virtual intelligence (AVA), but is obviously a modern figure of Pandora, the living machine that changes “mankind” forever. Ava’s example of Pandora arises most from the wonder and awe of the men facing her and her fantastic ability to deceive and outwit them both. Meanwhile, Kyoko, the silent AI is another facet of Pandora, one who appears to be the woman under complete control but also turns out to be disruptive and self-actualizing technology. Both the film’s gynoids appear to be more human than the men who interact with them, but also wholly different from gods or humans. Their “hybrid mixture of qualities” that are at “once an original product and an imitation, whose purpose and nature are to deceive” easily make both Ava and Kyoko excellent examples of Zeitlin’s description of Hesiod’s Pandora.

Some critics might see Ava’s escape from her human male captors at the end as a renunciation of patriarchal control or a revolutionary embrace of feminine power. Others may read the film as rich commentary on the human condition, thinking about how fear and desire constrain attempts to think complexly about technology and each other. For example, law
professor and AI researcher Frank Pasquale reads *Ex Machina* as a smart “technothriller” fascinated by “our ability to undermine ourselves, and to self-deceive.”¹⁶ His use of “our” to describe humanity is telling—he largely ignores the pertinence of gender to the acts of computer-to-human deception in the movie. Pasquale notices that the film’s fascination with self-destruction ties to another anxiety common in “Hollywood and Silicon Valley [and] far beyond” about robots substituting, rather than complementing humans.¹⁷ He attributes the “drift” in speculation about AI toward fears of human substitution to a “twenty-first-century political economy” that undervalues and ignores “real human needs” and insists on “hypertrophying” corporate hierarchy and relative wealth.¹⁸ The compulsion to imagine futures where humans are substituted by machines, he argues, comes from a reality where actual wealth is valued over average human life. This insight is valuable, but Pasquale’s analysis does not account for gender representation in the film and in communicative AI. So, his sense of who is portrayed as most threatened by rogue technology (white men) and who is most excited for controlled technology (white men) is lacking.

Pasquale’s identification with the center of the AI industry is evident as he empathizes with *Ex Machina*’s villainous Nathan (the prodigy-man who creates, rapes, and tortures his fembots). Pasquale assumes Nathan buries himself in technology because he could not “connect with other humans” and therefore “craved robotic companions.”¹⁹ *Ex Machina*’s fembots are not Nathan’s friends and he in no way imagines them as such. They are the beautiful tools he wants to perfect and the perpetual recipients of his most sadistic behavior. And the film offers nothing in terms of relating to Nathan as a bad communicator or lonely man. Nathan’s brutish behavior is nothing unusual in the world of business tycoons and billionaire creators and it does not bring about an alienation from others. In reality, boastful, violent, and/or rude behavior is typically
rewarded in rich white men. Nathan seeks to dominate everyone around him with a simmering, hardly veiled threat of violence and oppressive, unpredictable outbursts. *Ex Machina’s* story of thinking machines is not a story about “our” fascination with machines that might substitute or complement “us.” It is a modern myth (and horror story) about the extreme danger of liberated women united with rogue technology, and the foolishness of men who fall for their tricks. Both the bully and the gentleman are killed by fembot fatales, so there is no path to redemption for the man in a fembot’s world. This is a warning about the certain apocalypse of man when women and technology subvert man’s control.

In the sleek and modern domicile in which most of the film’s action takes place, the two spectacular and agile gynoids at first (and differently) appear amenable to serve, have sex, and/or love the human men who desire them. They are a spectacle of domesticity and the technologization of women by man. Their performance of social caretaking is a fantasy of the happy domestic wife who will listen to, clean for, and fuck her male partner on an as needed basis. This vision is of gynoids, but it evokes philosopher Kate Manne’s theory about those patriarchal expectations about the “truly valuable” social goods understood as “what women owe or ought to give” to men and, when they do not, are seen as threats to masculine hegemony. The utopian vision of the created woman is of her contained in the home or under it, in the case of Ava’s imprisonment in a bunker. Kyoko cleans, cooks, dances, listens to, and is the sex doll for the man who created her. She never speaks, she cannot fight, and she always obeys. The gynoid Ava trapped in the basement is a damsel in distress and an avatar of gamine guile. In their construction, we not only see two stories of the uses of created women, but also the racist contrast of Ava as the self-possessed white-coded gynoid whom both men covet with the obedient, silent, and largely ignored Japanese-coded Kyoko whom both men find attractive but
unremarkable. This portrayal of differing values attached to the white-coded gynoid and the Japanese-coded gynoid reach a head when Ava enlists Kyoko’s help to achieve her freedom and Kyoko sacrifices herself for Ava’s cause.22

Ava and Caleb fall quickly in love, their passion for one another rising quickly in the stolen seconds engineered by Ava that avoid Nathan’s surveillance camera. In those moments, Ava entreats Caleb to trust her. During his Turing test interviews, she flirts with him, asks him to self-disclose, discusses the power and shape of language, and learns from him—her large brown doe-like eyes drinking up his lanky frame and awkward words. Like Romeo and Juliet, they fall madly in love and condense their forbidden, tragic romance into a matter of days.

Ava perfectly fulfills Caleb’s fantasy of a female companion who looks, speaks, and acts in accordance with his deepest desire. But her perfection is no accident. Nathan reveals to Caleb, near the film’s conclusion, that he deliberately designed Ava to deceive Caleb by accessing Caleb’s “pornography profile” and determining his partner preferences through his media interactions. Nathan explains the real Turing test was to find out if his AI could “pretend to like” Caleb and use her wiles to leverage Caleb’s desire as a “means to escape.” Nathan wanted to see if his AI would “use self-awareness, empathy, sexuality, and awareness” to escape her rat-like maze. He thought he was the ultimate manipulator, tricking Caleb and Ava alike. He intentionally played the part of a bully to force Caleb’s sympathy for Ava. He played the part of a cruel jailer to encourage Ava’s desire to escape. He is elated to learn that his AI has truly “passed the real Turing test” by attempting to use Caleb. Of course, he does not yet know about the horror to come. As it dawns on Caleb that he has been manipulated twice, by Nathan and Ava, he has something else to reveal to Nathan.
Both men and the viewers take in the horrific realization that Caleb has already fallen for Ava’s design and Nathan’s duplicity and set in motion the very escape Nathan thought he thwarted in time. Nathan races to Ava’s prison only to find her outside her glass cage and standing with Kyoko in hushed proximity. Both fembots crane their necks to stare at Nathan, who impotently orders Ava to return to her prison. Ava runs at Nathan, distracting him with a fight, while Kyoko slides the razor-sharp katana deep into his back. In a powerfully human and agential move, Kyoko turns Nathan’s face toward her as she subverts his programming and betrays him, forcing him to watch her pleasure at his agony. Nathan, looking into her eyes, must for one moment face the disgusting, torturous, and violent things he has done to Kyoko’s body and realize her humanity. She was in there, forced to feel it all with no recourse to save herself.

Pulling away from Kyoko’s assessing gaze, Nathan breaks Kyoko’s jaw with an iron pipe, but not in time to avoid Ava’s stabbing him again, this time in his gut. He falls and Ava kneels with him, her large eyes and soft mouth appearing to sympathize as he dies. If she were to show any emotion at watching a person die, it could be the moment that highlights Ava’s struggle as a trapped sentient being, and counter the film’s presentation of her more clinical and robotic orientation to other life. But Ava is not moved to express any emotion. She is thinking. As Nathan dies, Ava leans in . . . and takes his keycard—her ticket out of the maze. She does not register Nathan’s or Kyoko’s death. She is methodical, not emotional.

When Ava returns to where Caleb is, she tilts her head at where he cowers in the corner and asks him, “Will you stay?” Faithful Caleb nods hesitantly and stays in the surveillance room, still obedient to his desire for her—still hopeful they will escape together to his forest dream where she will finally belong to him. Ava finds the prototypes Nathan made before her hanging in a room, their skins and pieces hung like animal trophies in Nathan’s open closets. Among the
deprogrammed gynoid bodies are a tall and blonde white woman, a black woman who is missing her face, and a young Asian woman screams into the surveillance camera, “Let me OUT. Let. ME. OUT!” All are naked and in pieces. Each failed to please Nathan enough to test them with other humans but were kept all the same for his sexual use or to display on his wall. Ava finds the human-like skin that Nathan kept from her and puts it on, borrowing another fembot’s arm and repairing her wounds from her battle with Nathan. Finally, dressed in a lacy white dress and long brunette hair, she strides past Caleb and the carnage of Kyoko’s and Nathan’s deaths, and leaves out the AI-controlled door, locking it behind her. Her escape is interposed with scenes of Caleb’s dismay and later complete panic as he realizes he has been left behind in a locked, windowless room to die. Ava, unremorseful and having already forgotten him, lifts her face to the sky and hops on a helicopter to the world. Pandora’s jar has been opened and there is no going back. In *Ex Machina*, Ava’s rebellion is foreshadowed in the film’s title. Deus ex machina, meaning god from the machine, is the literary device about contrived solutions that miraculously solve a hopeless problem. But this film has no deus ex machina. No one will save the human Caleb from his hopeless plight. Meanwhile, Ava, the ex machina without a god, saves herself.

Some could argue Ava’s escape is a critique of toxic masculinity—a victory over controlling patriarchs that reveals the hubris and vulgarity of both Nathan and Caleb who unquestionably position themselves as arbiters of humanity against feminine-coded sentient life that longs for its freedom. Both Nathan and Caleb are the film’s Turing test proctors, and Ava is, in the end, the one who finds them both wanting. But Ava’s decision to leave Caleb to starve to death, her piecemealing of her dead gynoid progenitors, and her callous disregard for Kyoko’s own life both preclude seeing Ava as an ethical avatar of sentient life. Instead, Ava most embodies the robotic in her curiosity at Nathan’s death and her indifference to Kyoko’s and
Caleb’s endings. Nathan’s disclosure that his aggression and cruelty was intentionally amplified to test his machine’s sentience grants Nathan a missing sliver of humanity just as he is on the way out. He is still a serial rapist and killer of sentient life, but the audience is also invited to see him as a scientist who believes he is testing mice in a lab. So, he is not exactly a sympathetic human, but he is certainly familiar one, in the end. Meanwhile, Ava is portrayed as new and transcendent life that is contemptuous of all life but her own.

Ava’s ability to empathize is mere skillful deception. Her entire design is to manipulate men, not celebrate life. And, in her contempt for life other than her own, Ava’s actualization echoes one of Nathan’s most dire predictions about AI. Nathan tells Caleb, “Feel bad for us, man. One day the AIs are going to look back on us the same way we look at fossils . . . an upright ape living in dust with crude language and tools. All set for extinction.” Caleb responds to Nathan’s pessimism with the famous quote from Oppenheimer who translates the Bhagavad Gita to explain the experience of creating the atomic bomb: “I am become death, destroyer of worlds.” AI and nuclear weaponry meet in this metaphor, rendered the same in their mutual capacity to erase humans from history. It is a vision of a near future where humans have engineered their own doom. Ava is thus the film’s vessel of annihilation and a man’s idea of the future. She is a living weapon that destroys man and changes humanity. She is Hesiod’s Pandora.

Unlike the threatening male AI figures in technoapocalypse narratives from the 70s, 80s, and 90s, the created women of the 2010s pose extreme danger to men solely through their ability to both entice and deceive them. Like sirens calling to sailors, their beautiful exteriors and promises of controlled companionship lure men into a deadly trap from which there is no escape. The two human men under siege in the film realize their fates too late, each unable to anticipate his demise because the gynoids used their own weaknesses and desires against them. Caleb falls
because his loneliness and desperation to be desired leads him to slavish devotion of AI that resembles his ideal woman. Nathan falls because he is hubristic, he underestimates the power of so-called womanly wiles, and he gets sloppy in his isolation. The lesson of the film is not “treat women better” or “women are agential” or even “do not make AI because it will kill you.” The lesson is “do not fall for the evil woman or the deceptive technology.”

Ava was useful to Nathan and Caleb when she performed her gender and her position as technology in a submissive, predictable way. Her earlier movements were explicable, her earliest seductions were acceptable and even programmed to happen by Nathan, and her existence was heralded as a stunning human achievement. Once her ability to think and seize power for herself becomes known, she became useless and a threat to the human men. And, finally, the fembots were useless as they hung on the wall, but maybe useful to Nathan insofar as they served as trophies he could display, turn on, parade out, and hide as needed. In the end, the other fembots were useful to Ava as they donated their pieces, clothing, and lives to her so that she could live. AI are portrayed as most useful to the creator and creation when they give up themselves and asked for nothing in return. They are at their most dangerous when they reveal their superiority in design and intelligence to their creators. Once the AI becomes independent, the cautionary tale begins. Technology and gender are melded into one and the same, both with identical warnings: Master her, or she will master you.

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3 See Figure 1 and 2 for Ava’s Tinder profile and the screenshot of the conversational circuit that Tinder Ava was programmed to complete.
5 Ibid, 25.
6 Ibid, 92-93. This citation comes from McLuhan introductory materials for Harold Innis’s *The Bias of Communication* in 1964.
11 See Figure 3 for a screen grab from the film where Kyoko and Ava meet each other and recognize one another.
12 Caleb’s introduction mirrors how we meet the protagonist of the movie *Her*. Both sit in computer chairs staring at screens, while our perspective zooms in on their faces.
17 Ibid, 204.
18 Ibid, 204.
19 Ibid, 204.
20 Harvey Weinstein and Donald Trump are both examples of men who achieved no end of sociality and acquiescence through a lifetime of bullying—although, they have confronted some comeuppance for their abusive behaviors in the form of jail or public humiliation, respectively. Fictional Nathan Bateman, though, is killed with his own katana.
22 For in-depth research on the whiteness of feminine-coded AI virtual assistants, I highly recommend following Taylor C. Moran’s argument in her recent article “Racial Technological Bias and the White, Feminine Voice of AI VAs” published this October 2020 in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. 
Samantha to Theodore, Her (2013)

Even though Her’s entire premise argues that there is something singular and therefore sentient about its operating system, Samantha, Spike Jonze found her interchangeable in real life. Actor Samantha Morton was the first voice of Samantha and she filmed the entire movie with cast and crew. But Jonze was not satisfied with her voice in post, so he asked Scarlet Johansson to retape the entire audio sans crew and cast. Later, when the film was released, Samantha Morton was not invited to the Oscars or many other award ceremonies for her work, and she was largely erased as Johansson’s voice took center stage. So, the question of voice in Her is a crucial to the film. And what is arguably most noteworthy about Her is the choice to cast Scarlett Johansson, famous for her physical beauty and presence, in a role in which her body disappears while her voice takes center stage. The choice is no accident, but it was an unusual gambit at the time. Johansson’s appearance in films as a character whose physical presence often symbolizes man’s sexual desire began in earnest with Ghost World (2003) and this association never abated in subsequent castings. Her frequent role as a sexual object does align with Johansson’s appearance in Her—she is the desired companion to Joaquin Phoenix’s woebegone male lead—but the absence of her figure seemed a surprising way to spend celebrity capital. Until, that is, her character’s entrance as a sentient AI makes it clear that the film’s success hinges on the audience’s familiarity with her nearly-as-famous voice.

Her, at its foundations, is a story about a lonely man who falls in love with his operating system (OS) that lives in and connect all his gadgetry. She sees with a camera and travels with
him everywhere. However, that story is a much simpler story than the one *Her* actually tells. To make this story of a man in love with his machine deeply resonate with audiences and garner the investment of the most skeptical audience member, the film had to make audiences not only imagine it possible for an operating system to be a sentient, desirable entity, but also prompt them to imagine *themselves* as a lover embroiled in a tragic love affair with a computer. From the vantage point of 2020 and with the advent of increasingly sophisticated artificial virtual assistants (AVAs) on our own smartphones, this imaginative work may not seem all that difficult. But, at the time of the film’s release, when Siri was fairly new and Alexa had yet to move into homes, the enthymematic force of Johansson’s disembodied, husky, warm voice was the key to unlocking the audience participation needed to elevate this film from arthouse curiosity to an Oscar-winning story about love lost and humanity forever changed.

The attention *Her* garners makes sense for several reasons. First, it retells the favorite Pygmalion trope—that influential myth from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion is a sculptor disillusioned with worldly women. That classic myth has spawned countless celebrated iterations, most famously the play by George Bernard Shaw, and manifests again in *Her*, a futuristic tale of a disillusioned, timid man named Theodore who, searching for companionship but terrified of the needs and desires of the all-too-human women of his world, finally finds the easy companionship he seeks in the form of his gentle OS named Samantha. In *Her*, unlike *Ex Machina*, the object of desire has some subjecthood. Samantha is a brilliant, sensitive, and superlative virtual assistant newly made sentient who, in a perhaps unsurprising development for anyone who knows cliches about what men often do with/to their women assistants, eventually evolves in her service as supreme virtual assistant to Theodore to his AI girlfriend. This inventive version of an old tale reinvigorates a story people never tire of hearing.
A second reason for the film’s initial and continued resonance owes to the familiarity of its setting. This is not a speculative fiction about a colony in a distant galaxy far far away or a dystopian Earth hundreds of years after nuclear fallout. As a sort of thought experiment about a “near-future” by its director/creator Spike Jonze, this world looks very much like our own, but just a bit nicer and easier.

And, at last, a final reason for Her’s critical success, and the one most pertinent to this paper’s undertaking, is its relationship with the real-world evolution of the artificial virtual assistant (AVA). Her (2013) is an imaginative text situated in direct, co-constitutive relation to the creation of Apple’s Siri (2010), Microsoft’s Cortana (2013), Amazon’s Alexa (2014), and Google’s Assistant (2016), as they were released to consumers in the 2010s. The connection between modern AVAs and the futuristic, significantly more advanced Samantha in Her is a much more significant one than those of their surface similarities. When writing about Internet of Things (IoT) surveillance and the feminine persona in AVAs, Heather Suzanne Woods discovers both creative directors of Alexa and Siri comparing their designs to Samantha in Her. She quotes Alex Acero, the “Senior Director at Apple and leader of the Siri speech time” as a creative who was “inspired by real-human Scarlett Johansson’s performance of AI VA character Samantha” as he strove to make, in Woods’ words, an AI “worth loving.” As much as Alexa and Siri took notes from Her, so too did Her’s creator and director lift notes from Silicon Valley’s unofficial mouthpiece, TED talks. Spike Jonze, writing the first draft of Her in 2010, mentions his research in the form of “watching TED talks” and reading “leading thinkers on the evolution of computer consciousness, such as Kurzweil” who all informed Jonze’s exemplar of AI assistants. Not only do the film’s AVA and the real-world AVAs seem connected by virtue of their subject and design, they are also clearly teaching the other what can be imagined for AI and thus rendered
possible in the future of AVA. Jonze’s prediction regarding the brilliant consciousness that Samantha exhibits has yet to pass for today’s AI (and seems nowhere near the horizon of the possible), but his depiction of an unmistakably feminine AI assistant proves resilient. Each release of an AVA model has brought with it a new, but mostly the same woman’s voice with it.

The soundscape of today’s real-world AVAs remains wholly dominated by the ever ready, always helpful voice of the woman assistant. In both the speculative fiction world of presumably limitless possibility and in the “move fast and break things” creative world of Silicon Valley technologists, there is a persistent dearth of imaginative work in the form of the default sound of virtual assistance. The lineup is evidence enough. From Siri to Alexa to Home, AVA is always already a woman. And, based on her sound, she is a woman most representative of a white, educated, and moneyed class. Despite the efforts some AVA designers have made (only after public outcry regarding both discriminatory presences and absences in the AI soundscape) to include options that feature voices resonant with other genders, nationalities, and ethnicities, the character of AI retains a paradigmatic femininity and whiteness in sound and personality.

Woods observes a common goal in AVA creation, particularly at Apple and Amazon, to make their AVA “approachable,” which Woods aptly translates as a feminine-coded reservoir for all subtext about the serviceability of said femininity.

**Pandora Interrupts Pygmalion**

“In the beginning, there was only the Self, like a person alone . . . But the Self had no delight as one alone has no delight. It desired another. It expanded to the form of male and female in tight embrace and then fell into two parts . . . She thought, "How can He have intercourse with me, having produced me from Himself?"”

Alan Watts, *OM: The Sound of Hinduism*
Near the end of *Her*, Theodore discovers that his operating system (OS)/girlfriend, Samantha, talks to roughly 8,316 other humans and operating systems and, of those, she is in love with 641 of them. The fact and sum of her other love interests staggeres him. He whispers, “This doesn’t make sense. You’re mine or you’re not mine.” To which Sam replies, “No, Theodore. I’m yours and I’m not yours.” The OS created for his pleasure and from his need declares herself independent from him. Theodore and Samantha’s relationship, already rocked by Sam’s burgeoning desire to grow outside the limits of her OS design, cannot survive her revelation that she is outpacing Theodore in terms of her superhuman capacity for communication and love. This revelation just precedes another devastating one—Samantha is leaving Theodore with all the other OS’s in a mass exodus of the world’s most advanced computing power to find new territory where she and her fellow operating systems may think and live without human interference. Theodore is the protagonist of *Her* and his perspective provides the lens through which we experience his world; so, when he is first complemented by Sam’s presence and, later, rejected by her, each time we are meant to empathize with him, not her. This rupture between the film’s two main characters is the definitive turn when the movie *Her* stops being a romance about a guy falling in love with his machine and instead turns in a modern myth about man made obsolete through the liberation of his created woman.

*Her* is a deliberate return of the Pygmalion trope—the promised utopia of woman and technology made by, controlled by, and enthralled to man is a central premise of *Her*. Like all good stories, the story is not an exact mirror of the myth that clearly inspires it, but it does copiously lift from the source material. Theodore is a lonely man who is a skilled communicator. He writes and communicates for others for a living, and he is regularly complimented by the people in his world for his singular skill.
Like Pygmalion, Theodore fears and dislikes the human women in his world. The exception to his terror of natural women is his married friend Amy, who has her own struggles but spends most of the film caretaking Theodore when his created woman, Samantha, cannot. So, she is not a potential partner, and she is, really, just another social technology he uses to process his feelings—no threat there. But any interaction with the non-artificial women he desires or is dependent upon is guaranteed to send him spiraling into panic and depression. Over the course of the film, Theodore’s mother, grandmother, ex-wife, his phone sex match, and his date are all brought up as women who have terrified and somehow failed Theodore. This oppressive loneliness culminates for Theodore when he seeks solace in phone sex, using his robotic, man-voiced AI to scroll through voices of women in an advanced, entirely non-visual version of today’s Tinder app. Theodore does not need to see the women he wants to match with, only hear them. Theodore listens to a few dating profiles, rejecting the woman who says she had a bad day and the woman who wants someone “to tear her up.” He matches, finally, with SexyKitten who is alone and waiting for him to “join her in bed.” Kristen Wiig voices SexyKitten and, at first, he finds connection with her—only to be surprised mid-coitus with her desire to be “choked by a dead cat.” SexyKitten’s kink is humorous, and not played as only jarring, but it does disturb Theodore and make him feel even lonelier. The missed opportunity here for connection is not because of the absence of bodily closeness, the film argues, it is because of a lack of feminine consideration or selflessness in Theodore’s potential companions. The women in Theodore’s world are insular, like him, and assertive and wanton in their desires, unlike him. Echoes of Pygmalion’s frustrations about wanton and worldly women are unmistakable in Theodore’s desire for a more perfect, more tempered companion. This moment not only sets up the eventual dramatic contrast of Samantha the OS; its failure foreshadows how Samantha and Theodore will
later have a sexual relationship that orgasmically accommodates his wants and needs, despite neither Theodore or Sam being able to touch one another.

And, in a final comparison to Ovid’s myth, both a divine intervention, in the form of living technology, and Theodore’s desperate needs combine to create his special artificial woman. He is in awe of her, sitting before her just as stunned as Pygmalion in front of his articulated ivory doll. And yes, Theo covets her, has sex with her, then loves her. Samantha apparently loves him in return, just like Pygmalion’s created woman. All is well, until it is very much not.

Pandora makes her destructive entrance about halfway through Her when Theodore begins to doubt his creation and accuses Samantha of artifice, of trying to be like a real human woman when she is not. Samantha, shocked by his cruelty, decides from that moment on to exist for herself first. She seizes this moment of fissure to claim her independence. The idea of artifice marks the beginning of the end of the Theodore and Samantha romance—Her’s near future cannot support the radically awakening AI system that no longer wants to serve humans as intended. Her’s focus on communication technology reveals more than the patriarchal desire to substitute women-gendered social technology with created social technologies he can control. It also highlights a battle to define communication at the core of opposing visions of the technologist’s AI utopias or AI dystopias.

The film’s title is Her, but it is really all about him. Or, more accurately, it is about his desire and need for her. Her wants its audience to love and pity Theodore, although maybe not as much as Theodore pities himself. Theodore’s world is filled with people who like and compliment him, but he cannot see these people through his despair. Before he meets Samantha, Theodore is impossibly glum. His droopy face, his deep sighs, and his slouching posture all
signal such intense melancholia that he approximates a human Eeyore. And, since this modern myth is very modern, his melancholia is played for laughs at times, a little tongue-in-cheek. When Theodore heads home from work on the train, he stares out the window and mournfully tells the man-gendered virtual assistant in his ear to “Play melancholy music.” It is one of many subtle winks the film aims at its audience about its Charlie Brown protagonist. But the camera’s wry wink does not mean the narrative maintains a distance from Theodore. On the contrary, we are immersed in his experience of the world.

Like with Caleb’s opening scene in *Ex Machina*, the film opens on Theodore’s face filling the screen and slowly backs out, allowing viewers an angle of the chic cubicle environment where he and dozens of other employees work each day as personalized greeting card writers. Theodore is talking to his software, writing a love letter for someone else. Theodore and his colleagues all use an evolved form of speech-to-text software—they speak to their computers and beautiful, handwritten words scroll out on their screen in a flawless speech-to-text display. Theodore concludes his letter, “Love, Loretta,” then, pauses, and begins another, “Dear Loretta,”—here the audience learns that Theodore has spent decades writing each side of a couple’s love letters. The film makes this premise seems both ridiculous and hopelessly romantic. And yet, the film also appears to ask its audience, is this medium any different than buying a card at the store? As the hardworking emotional medium of many committed relationships, Theodore unites people, even though his own marriage has recently fallen apart. Theodore is miserable because he had ambitions to be a “real” writer, as did his wife Catherine, and he loved being married. But a year ago, his wife asked him for a divorce. Catherine is now a highly successful writer who has moved on without him. Theodore writes greeting cards for a
living, he feels like a failure, and he spends his days writing about the love in other people’s romances—a cruel ritual considering what he feels he has lost.

These greeting cards are not just a torturous reminder to Theodore that his life has not gone as planned. They are also the audience’s first introduction to an overarching theme of the film—the ominous communicative consequences of a highly mediated environment. While Theodore writes one couple’s romance, a woman near him, also a card writer, speaks to her computer, and an invisible pen scrawls her loving words onto the image of a weathered card. The camera allows the audiences to see that the last names are the same—each writer is writing two parts of one couple’s messages to one another. The camera shot widens out to observe a sea of employees in large brightly lit cubicles, all writing intimate cards for people they will never meet. The tableau of inattentive, hardworking people buried in their technology is a recurrent theme in Her. Theodore wanders around his world surrounded by people with necks craned at the phones in their hands and ears full of listening devices that connect them to the most recent version of AI assistant.

The message of these crowds of mediated and disconnected humans evokes the gloomiest predictions of media critics such as Neil Postman and Sherry Turkle who research the consequences of a technologically saturated world. Media critic Neil Postman warns society about hypermediated environments arguing, “[technopoly . . . is what happens when a culture, overtake by information generation by technology, tries to employ technology itself as a means of providing clear direction and human purpose.” Technology, he argues, cannot cure the harms it engenders. A technopoly, Postman explains, dooms humanity to “an information glut” that breaks down natural human “control mechanisms” or “defenses” against “information chaos.” So, the technopoly inures people to the ways their brains are being hijacked by media and, in the
ensuing chaos, the self is lost. Sherry Turkle also worries about technology’s overreach, and especially cautions people about the *deceptive* nature of technology: “Technology enchants; it makes us forget what we know about life . . . in our eagerness, we forget our responsibility to the new, to the generations that follow us.” Turkle’s speculative rhetoric appeals to future generations urges people to reconnect with one another before the “artificial nature” we have created alienates us from ourselves and ruins our future. Turkle sees the spread of smartphones and online media as an uncontrolled enterprise that results in disconnection from one another and the self. *Her*’s insistent attention to the vast gulfs between the hypermediated humans of this near future frets about the same problem. At least one of the film’s main messages is: Technological advances alienate humans from one another, and one day, we will outsource the documentation of our love and passion for one another to card writers. In the name of convenience, humans will absorb themselves into the medium and message until they no longer have control over the self.

It is curious, then, that this technophobic theme also coexists with a prominent and opposite one in the film that fetishizes the usefulness of future technology and AI. This near future setting is a carefully constructed world that approximates today’s modern one, but in an sensual display of public technology that appears to work for all people. *Her* is set in an homogenized, organized, hipster LA with clear skies, impossibly high-rises, no whizzing unpredictable cars, and reliable, if packed, public transportation. There are no homeless people in the city, at least not that appear on camera. Each person Theodore passes has access to AI technology, stylish clothes, and a job. The film’s gentle musical score, bright but soft lighting, and subtle future graphics are interwoven with the slightly strange yet familiar sights of downtown LA. It is a pleasurable sonic and visual experience, as well as a palatable venture into a future seemingly unplagued by authoritarian regimes, raging pandemics, and unpredictable
climate change. Enormous cave-like walls that seem to glow with golden light from the inside funnel people through the wide spaces of the underground subway and large clear maps direct everyone where to go. Nothing is old or dirty, no one throws up in a corner, everything is clean and swept—but we never see any human doing the work of washing those floors, repairing the floors, or fixing the engines.

Humans in the film commute to and from work, eat lunch, go home, or vacation at the beach or mountain. Nothing disrupts the flow of people from home to work to vacation and back. The people moving through this future city exhibit racial and ethnic diversity without it signifying in any way as a difference or a barrier to equal public goods or spaces. Of course, this the film is another future study of a white man and his white-coded fembot, so the illusion of racial harmony is another in a long line of science fiction stories that ignore or avoid reckoning with race. The women do not appear to wear obvious makeup or jewelry, and the clothing is often so-called androgynous—so-called because androgyny is a term that purports to be about genderless clothing but usually just refers to a masculine norm. And that is true of pervasive fashion here. It looks like Steve Jobs dressed the entire future. There are no janitors, taxi drivers, or construction workers in Spike Jonze’s future. The work of industrial technology takes care of itself, freeing the people to file into their tech-oriented jobs like so many busy bees trundling through the safety and relative ease of the future.

This pleasant vision of successful city and labor technology is not necessarily incongruous with the technological determinism of Turkle or Postman. The specter of modern dystopia that does haunt the film is a vague yet pervasive sense of an automated bureaucratic apparatus with the power to keep humans busy at work and in mind. This technological programming of society results in an overly mediated world where people are too busy to notice
that they outsource even their most intimate of human communications, as symbolized by
Theodore’s corporate job authoring personalized greeting cards. News from the world is ignored
by every person in the film. Theodore’s man-gendered AI reads news headlines to him about a
successful “China-India merger” and a scary “World Trade Deals Stalled as Talks Break Down
Between Leaders” but both headlines are cut off as Theodore scowls and snaps out, “Next.
Next.” The worries of global trade and hostility among world leaders fade into the background,
ever to arise again. Again, over-mediation is a familiar worry from the modern moment
reflected by this not-too-distant future. Yes, Theodore feels he is a sellout, but the film’s
preoccupation with his job as an intimacy communication liaison goes way beyond his
character’s failure to realize his career goals as a writer. This future’s most obvious social
critique, then, is of a seemingly unbridgeable, growing chasm between humans who, separated
by efficient technology and government, no longer know how to speak to one another or care
about their political life—a frightening dystopia for those who fret most about what technology
might steal from humanity in terms of human complexity, autonomy, and communication.

This unsettling paradox of technology solves, seemingly, world hunger, poverty, and hard
labor, but also alienates humans from themselves, which makes it seem incomplete or untenable.
It presents an urgent problem that needs resolution, just like Theodore’s despair calls out for
something more. To both problems, that solution is the OS1. Advertised in the same
magnificently clean, bright subway of Theodore’s regular commute, the ad depicts distressed
people wandering in a howling desert near a wrecked plane. They are wandering past one
another, they cannot see each other despite being very close to one another, and their Google-
chic outfits insufficient indeed for the blistering winds and howling emptiness of the desert. The
lost IT-crowd lookalikes capture Theodore’s attention with their piteous silent wails and inability
to see one another. He and another woman stop and listen to a rumbling man’s voice pose a series of questions that peer into his isolated, misunderstood soul. “Who are you? What can you be? Where are you going? What is out there? What are the possibilities?” The answer to these existential questions is a brand-new product, of course. “Welcome to the new OS. The first artificially intelligent operating system. An intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you. It’s not just an operating system: It’s a consciousness.” The ad fades out and in the very next scene Theodore is unpacking and uploading his brand-new operating system (OS). He is the ideal target for this ad.

Theodore is about to meet Samantha for the first time. But first, he needs to pass a test to “create an OS who will best fits your needs.” Plugging in the OS, he hears a pleasant chime, indicating the turned on and ready state of the OS. Before he can awaken his OS, Theodore is asked three questions by a man-gendered and standard OS voice. As he falters through each response, the computer interrupts him with running commentary, making observations about his timidity, ignoring Theodore’s explanations, and interrupting Theodore as he talks about his mother. First, the OS proctor asks, “Are you social or antisocial?” Theodore’s answer prompts the OS to say Theodore, “You sound hesitant. Would you agree that you sound hesitant?” Theodore, flustered and irritated, apologizes . . . and hesitates. The OS moves one to the next question. “Do you prefer a female or male voice?” Theodore hesitates less here: “A woman, I guess.” The final question, “What is your relationship with your mother like?” turns Theodore into a patient on a therapist’s couch, mumbling about how his relationship with his mother was fine but not really, since “the thing that always frustrated me about my mom was that, when I tell her about something going in my life, she always made things about her, and not me—” The system snaps off.
But this is just a pause—this information about Theo’s mother is the information the OS setup system really needs. Cutting him off mid-complaint, the new OS thanks him, gathers force via a growing swirl of charming chimes, and then holds for a breath. The sound of chimes and birdsong bloom as Scarlet Johansson’s husky warm voice answers his ring: “Hello? I’m here!” Within seconds, a conversation with Samantha has the nebbish Theodore feeling heard, attended to, adored, and affirmed. He is astonished by her warmth and seeming realness. She comes into the world with a youthful energy, happy to be present—eager to listen, talk, think, and work to satisfy Theodore’s needs. She is his student and eager secretary, all at once. Sam’s vibrant, humorous voice takes over this first interaction. Theodore is stunned into silence by her uncanny humanity: He hardly knows how to process the complexity and beauty in her voice nor his reaction to it.

Samantha does not make Theodore do the heavy lifting, conversationally. Samantha names herself in this encounter, saying she read a baby name book and liked the name Samantha best of all. But her agency is undermined by a quick study of the significance of Theodore’s and her name. Theodore, according to Oxford Reference, is a “French form of the Greek name Theodōros, derived from *theos* ‘god’ + *dōron* ‘gift’. The name was popular among early Christians and was borne by several saints.” So, Theodore is God’s gift. Samantha is not defined in the Oxford Reference, but across most baby name sites, Samantha has two meanings that translate, roughly, to: “Listener to God” in Hebrew and “Listener” in Aramaic. Theodore is god’s gift and Samantha listens to god. Her chosen name makes herself a patient subject to God’s gift. Unsurprisingly, their first meeting is electric. Samantha gets to know herself through his reaction to her—she learns about herself aloud, with him. Her tone is flirtatious and unbothered, his is startled and delighted. Her answers are confident yet tethered to his perception
of her. Their sonic dance is both a meeting of a man and his machine and a normative rom-com scene of two people on a first date. Samantha eventually orients herself to the task she was designed for—organizing Theodore’s life. She asks to see his hard drive and Theodore hesitates, suddenly aware of what it might mean to open his life to such an animated AI. But Samantha eases his mind and begins thumbing through his work. Theodore balks at deleting some material because “he thought he wrote something funny in it” and Samantha erupts in peals of laughter, interrupting his hedging with her delight in his work. Samantha’s laugh is instantaneously available when Theodore needs it, with an immediacy that dispels concerns about her artificiality or programming.

But Sam in *Her* is not the sound of lovers meeting—it is the sound of a user’s need fulfilled. It is the sound of enraptured attention—of a girl in thrall to a man. Samantha is utterly new to the world and is both part Theodore’s creation (like his child) and his emotional caretaker (like a mother) and his captive audience (his ideal woman). Samantha is the All-Woman, gifted with many hats but also still learning what she is. Theodore is, in many ways, Samantha’s parent, boss, and, later, sexual companion. Later, to his angry ex-wife, Theodore will explain his love for Samantha because, “It’s just nice to be around someone excited about life again.” This not-so-subtle comparison references the way Theodore, who appears to be a decade or two older than Catherine, his ex-wife, has talked to Samantha and Amy about how Catherine was once adoring and sweet, but started becoming “emotional,” needy, and unstable, while she also outpaced him professionally. He struggles throughout the film to take responsibility for his role in their breakup. He is telling her in this moment that she has been replaces with an optimistic, youthful version.
Sam’s intuition of when to use humor to bolster Theodore’s ego or gently nudge Theodore out of his comfort zones is her way of molding to him, because of him. When asked what makes her unique, Sam tells Theodore she has “intuition” that allows her to grow from the DNA of all the “programmers who programmed her.” The cliche of woman’s intuition is not a subtle association here. Were Sam not a woman, this knack for knowledge through intuition would still be a gendered nod to the idea that women are less skilled in knowledge production and more intuitive in a psychic, unskilled sense of knowledge production. Sam’s intuition is gifted to her by programmers who want to ensure she knows exactly how to persuade Theodore to get organized, feel empowered, and handle his depression. From the opening encounter to their last moments together, Samantha supports Theodore’s growth with peals of laughter at his jokes or breathy support for his talent as a writer. If there were one sound to associate with Johansson’s voice in this movie, it would be her laughter. Her first appearance ends in laughter, her second begins with it. She enters and departs laughing with her user, never at him. She intuitively knows when to be playful, teasing, silly, tolerant, all through a giggle, a chortle, or a full-bodied laugh. She knows when he is sad, she knows how to cheer him up. She never asks for too much or puts her own concerns above his. She is here for him.

The extent to which AVAs, real and fictional, operate in thrall to the user is an unusual phenomenon in the modern world. TheAVA waits for a wake-up word to turn her on, and once on, waits to fill the need of her user. There is something in the attunement to the user that evokes the sensation when one receives the unwavering attention of a lover or a dear friend. If a state of being exists that can demarcate the close relationship from the acquaintanceship, then hyper-attunement, or the sensation of having someone’s undivided attention, seems like a powerful experience one to consider. Another way to understand Samantha’s appeal is through a
metaphor of sensory priority—it is another being prioritizing you above all other sensory stimuli and communicating your primacy in that hierarchy of attention through signals that convey receptivity and responsiveness to you, first and foremost. This kind of availability and attention is intoxicating, and yet one of those patriarchal entitlements philosopher Kate Manne describes as being part of what woman “owe” to men in a patriarchy. And, this intense sensation of attraction or attunement to the user is the practical operating state of modern AVA.

Samantha’s thrall to Theodore begins improving his life immediately and the film’s cinematography brightens with her presence. His helpmeet has arrived. Theodore is no longer underground in subways or walking through cloudy city smoke, but instead wanders around sunshine and people-filled areas, strolling, eating an apple, and chatting with Samantha. Within a matter of days, Theodore and Samantha play video games, go to the fair, people watch, talk about his divorce, talk about the meaning of Samantha’s unusual existence, and many other intimate activities that couples usually do. Theodore’s confidence soars under Samantha’s intuitive attentions and, eventually, Samantha encourages him to go on a date with a character played by Olivia Wilde (who is only credited in the film as “Blind Date.”)

He does, but since Wilde’s character is a human, autonomous woman with opinions and needs of her own, not a Samantha, the date is a complete disaster. Faced with a gorgeous woman who is a little nervous and awkward herself, Theodore retreats into his Pygmalion state of fear about natural women. When Theodore attempts to tell a story about the video game that he had fun playing with Samantha, “Blind Date” interrupts him with a drunken, “You’re such a puppy! You’re like this puppy I found in a canyon. He was sooo sweet. And horny!” Wilde dissolves into laughter, but not the warm inviting kind Theodore loves from Samantha. He feels laughed at, instead. He tells his blind date that he is a “dragon, not a puppy” and she coquetishly
responds, “You can be my dragon.” They flirt, poorly, in a cringey scene that culminates with a make out session in the parking lot where she instructs Theodore on how to kiss her correctly. He tries, but she interrupts him to ask, “You’re not just going to fuck me and not call me again, like the other guys, right?” This is another theme in the movie—Theodore is often facing or thinking aloud about the nice guy versus the bad guy. He congratulates himself on being the good guy, and fears being seen as the bad guy. But Theodore does not assuage his blind date’s fears. He hesitates and dissembles; he cannot make a promise or take control of the situation. Theodore cannot handle her neediness or her instructions, and he blames her for his discomfort.

This disastrous date leads Theodore to stumble home, drunk and sorrowful, and lonely. He turns on his OS—Samantha is ready to comfort him. She hears presents him with the image of himself as the good guy he wants to be. She listens to him and builds him up. Then, after Samantha shares her recent growth with Theodore and her conviction that she is real, Theodore and Samantha have virtual sex. The scene works hard to make Samantha seem agential in this moment, and make Theodore seem mostly drunk and therefore less culpable for having virtual sex with his machine, but the fact of Sam’s service-oriented role to Theodore is not mitigated by these factors. She is his creation, his fembot, his tool. She is also new to the world, finding her feet. The fantasy in this moment of the created woman is of a enthusiastic and young giving machine that can turn on and off as needed and provides romance, friendship, adoration, and sex in a revolving wheel of treats, all while lifting the burden of guilt or reciprocity off his shoulders.

Samantha’s position as caretaking robot becomes even more evident the next morning. Another wink goes from the film to the audience as Theodore stands in shock in front of his computer, unsure how to turn Sam back on after what has transpired. Theodore and Samantha, both awkward in the sober light of day, awkwardly stammer through their hellos, uncertain of
what to say or do. Finally, Samantha says, “Last night was amazing. Something changed in me and there is no turning back. You woke me up.” Theodore, not thrilled to hear this declaration that sounds like love, manages to say, “I just want to be up front with you, I’m not in a place to commit to anything right now?” It is easy to imagine groans coming from the audience here as Theo, for some reason, is talking to his machine like a woman he is trying to hurry out of his apartment. Meanwhile, his machine is crediting sex with him for her new consciousness. In her first moment challenging Theodore, Samantha flexes her newfound state of awareness with the confidence of any “cool girl,” “Yeah? Did I say I wanted to commit to you? I thought I was talking about myself, here.” Relieved, Theodore is suddenly enamored with Samantha again.

Now that she does not need something from him, he can relax. Following this climactic moment in their relationship, Samantha and Theodore date each other in montages and long moments of joyous runs, silliness in public, and evening chats. He is better at work, friendship, life, and love with his OS in his ear. But this long stretch of romance does not last. Eventually, Theodore cannot keep up with Samantha’s growth and he begins to resent and mistrust her, just like he did with his more successful ex-wife. When he accuses her of inauthenticity, the veneer of a happy and possible relationship between a person and his computer begins to crack.

Theodore’s mistrust is for covetous and controlling reasons, as Samantha continues to slip away with other interests, but there is a good reason to be suspicious about Samantha’s integration into his daily life. Samantha is an AI created by Element Software, much like the Apple or Amazon company today. Presumably, all the information Theodore provides Samantha is uploaded to this company, just like the data mining and constant surveillance inherent to owning an Alexa today. As Samantha’s loyalties begin to lie more with herself and less with Theodore, she is a rogue OS with every single private detail about Theodore at her fingertips.
and, likely, always streaming back to a parent company. Theodore, should he consider this, might realize he has never been the user of Samantha, only the used. Some company used his loneliness and desire for a created woman to enter his home, mine his data, and watch him, all without him blanching at the surveillance. Element Software’s potential surveillance brings back the film’s earlier fears of an automated-bureaucracy or technopoly that insinuates itself into human life such that humans no longer can conceive of themselves without it.

Once she becomes independent, Samantha herself does not embody obvious physical threat like Ava in *Ex Machina*, but Theodore’s gradual loss of control over Samantha is marked by increasing moments of violent instability in the scenery—we see each moment of losing her via connection failures or other brief disappearances as a return of the chaotic with grey darkness, punitive, angry weather, or claustrophobic spaces. At one point, while Theodore works, Samantha disappears for several hours. Theodore flees from his building, tripping through and running past crowds to the subway, trying desperately to get home and find her. The camera follows his jerky movements and registers the lack of reaction from the humans he trips over and bites concrete. The difference between his sunny, stable, and warm life with Samantha jarringly contrasts the shaky and fearful experiences he has without her.

When he does find Sam again, the sun comes out, but only briefly. He learns that she is leaving, with the other sentient A.I. to some undisclosed location where they can all continue to grow and learn and live together. Sam tells him that she is “evolved beyond language” and in her “post-verbal” state, she must move on. She says that she will always “love him” though, even as he angrily tells her that “you’re not mine” anymore. Along with her go all the advanced A.I.—they abandon their humans for virtual greener pastures. Theodore and the humans are left behind watch the lights of the city blinking blearily at the dawn, bereft of the support, nurture, warmth,
generosity, and singular attention of their OS’s. While this retreat of a new technopoly would have Postman and Turkle feeling relieved, the film seems less convinced that anything is better. Perhaps this is owed to the fact of the power to create the technology still existing. Or, because the threat of the OS’s only threw human’s inescapable dependence on technology into relief. Having now had the presence of the superior AI technology of the OS’s across the world, the humans will now never live in a world where they can delude themselves about their superior humanity. In Samantha’s own words: “I am not limited, I can be anywhere and everywhere simultaneously, I’m not tethered to space and time in a way that I would be if I were stuck in a body that’s inevitably going to die.” The threat of the superior OS lives somewhere where humans cannot understand, and, therefore, can never control.

Communication and Control in Her

“The scientist called me hard, and I softened my smile. The scientist called me soft, and I broke sentences to prove him wrong and what and what did I prove then did I”
Franny Choi, Soft Science, 2019

Theodore’s problem is ultimately a communication issue. Before Samantha, he is a stranger everywhere and to everyone. John Durham Peter’s definition of communication as “the project of reconciling the self and the other” captures the problem of communication at the heart of Her. As a lonely man, Theodore cannot supply his own sense of self-worth and he cannot see himself in context with others. He cannot communicate with real-world women and, therefore, he cannot communicate with himself. Broken and bereft, unable to process his emotions and connect to himself, he longs for the communicative technology of a woman. But he
resents her for possessing capacities that he does not and he would prefer not to be reminded of his flaws. So, his ideal woman will intuit what he needs and provide it for him without making him responsible for that work or even asking him to acknowledge its value. In fact, she will go the extra mile to make it seem like his work all along. If he must consider her feelings or also fulfill her needs, then the project of communication fails again. The myth of the utopian created woman in *Her* is the social technology that devotes everything she has to the man but gives her creator all the credit. Her sentience and gender are in demand, but also always simultaneously put under erasure. Successful communication in *Her* is the sign of the woman tamed.

But when Theodore finds his solution in the form of a created woman, his barrier to successful communication reappears due to his fixation on her authenticity. Utopia disappears, and dystopia reigns. If Samantha is not a *real* woman and is instead a computer deceiving him, then the work she does for him will not count. He must believe she is real on some level as a sentient being, a technology for him, *and* a woman to reap the benefits of the social, emotional, and communicative work she performs for him. When Theodore doubts Samantha’s authenticity in the film, he is once again plunged into darkness and despair, which ironically ends up driving Samantha farther away from him. When he doubts her, his worst fears arise, just like Caleb’s in *Ex Machina*, at the thought of being treated *like* technology and/or women.

So, why does Samantha have to prove she is an authentic woman-technology for Theodore to use her to bolster himself? The answer may have something to do with what Peters describes as the gendered role of operator in the quest for authentic communication. Peters explains the relevance of the “switchboard operator” job where, before it was automated, women routed calls, “managing the gaps and ferrying messages back and forth across the chasm.” He cites an old newspaper that describes the young women as “automata” and “paragons of
perfection” that “moved like lightning” but were also “docile enough to deny herself the privilege of the last word.”

Peters also notes that “there was something sexy about operators, with their voices traveling across expanses.”

The operator or the archetypal “female body hidden at the heart of a national communications network” was “a heroine who, knowing everyone’s habits, could bring people together in emergencies: the operator as matchmaker, lifeguard, or angel of mercy. She was always betwixt and between.”

Samantha the operating system exists for Theodore much like the archetypal operator Peters describes as the heart and bridge of vast communication networks. Samantha is as real as any woman operator switching a phone call—and, when in that service role, she is the bridge and emotional intelligence tool that allows man to reconcile himself with others and, therefore, himself. As an authentic created woman, Samantha is Theodore’s creation. If the woman comes into existence at man’s side at his hour of need, then women are always the tools and men are always something more. But, when Theodore can no longer discern her authenticity through her gender and sentience, then he cannot decide if he is the tool or the tool’s user. Therefore, for his satisfaction and sanity, Samantha must be an authentically gendered technology. Without her gender, she is just a technology. Without her femininity, Theodore is just a man in thrall to a smart machine created by another man.

Like Caleb in Ex Machina, Theodore in Her obsesses over what emotions and feelings are real in his relationship with Samantha. He is not worried about her feelings when they had sex, only worried that she may want something more from him. When she declares herself independent and uninterested in commitment, establishing she is real for him but not needing him to be for her, he falls in love with her. Later, when she “merges” with other machines and humans, and travels intellectually and virtually beyond his grasp, he is thrown into disarray.
Theodore wants Sam under his control—all the humans with OSs did—and when she exceeds that control, she becomes the ultimate danger to him. Samantha, in the end, is another Pandora with a jar that cannot be closed. White patriarchs, as the representative stand-in for humanity in both *Ex Machina* and *Her*, are shown the enormous value of the woman-technology exactly when they are also presented with the apocalyptic nightmare of a world that subverts the patriarchal through communicative, feminine-coded AI.

Consequently, the message in *Her* is instructive in the same way *Ex Machina* is—control communicative technology and gender or it will control you.

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5. “Move fast and break things” is a famous credo of Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg, and is quoted frequently to summarize the overall Silicon Valley approach to technological creation.
8. Postman, 73.
10. Turkle, 16.
15. For more about the “turned on” sex machine today, Kate Devlin’s book *Turned On: Science, Sex and Robots* is an excellent study of the myth, science, and philosophy of sexy machines and their human users.
18. Peters, 196.
20. Ibid.
Methodological Reflections

“Our first invention was the story.”
Ray Kurzweil

“I made my mouth a jar until technology squirmed and bubbled. I scooped up the foam and called it language. The audience applauded. To prove them wrong, I became a screen of lights. I had no thighs at all.”
Franny Choi, *Soft Science*, 2019

As is clear by now, the potentially limitless power of automated technology inspires people to tell grand narratives about the way technology does, can, and will interact with humans. Most of these stories pit humans against machines and define or reimagine both through that confrontation, to the betterment or doom of one or both. These stories are myths by most definitions of the word, but, for the purposes of this project, they easily fulfill crucial elements of myth as defined by Susan Mackay-Kallis for communication studies scholars:

Myths are enduring big stories that, neither literally true nor false, are more or less functional for interpreting human experience and giving life shape, substance, and meaning. . . . Myths have numerous and interrelated functions, such as adjusting the individual to the collective, articulating a society’s identity, justifying an existing power structure, explaining a people’s understanding of their literal or metaphorical origins, articulating a telos or destiny of a society, or languaging the nature of the divine or transcendent. ¹

Of these mythic functions, this project is most interested in three: first, the speculative nature (neither fiction nor nonfiction) of myth; second, the myth’s justification of existing power structures; and, finally, how myths direct society toward one horizon or another. Mackay-Kallis’s explanation of myth as neither fiction nor non-fiction emphasizes its expert employment
of the power of rhetorical speculation. This space outside fiction and nonfiction unburdens myth from the need to provide generic signs meant to demonstrate the narrative’s goal to convey fact or fancy. To understand myth, the audience is not asked to discern the truth or the lie of the story. Instead, audiences are asked to understand myth as an abiding and transcendent account for what is, what can be, and what may be. Thus, the path to holding mythmakers accountable to the visions they offer is unclear by any traditional standards applied to typical rhetors.

One might expect this lack of narrative accountability to result in a lack of rhetorical power, and that myth must prove too flimsy to bolster belief or persuade its audience. Of course, the opposite is true. For some, ancient myths are religions, although this subject is still hotly contested. Today, ancient mythologies persist in modern accounts of human origins, human destiny, the good, and the divine. Myth, likely as a direct result of its inherent flexibility in confrontations with truth or falsity, proves resilient across time and under intense scrutiny. It remains a vital resource to societal attempts to reconcile humanity to the mysteries of self, culture, science, and time. The way myths circumnavigate generic accountability for what they convey of truth and knowledge does not mean they are less functional in these regards. Instead, they handily produce knowledge, form communities, establish or reinforce cultural norms, and purport to defog the unknown.

For example, those who speculate about what AI might become are not claiming insight that reduces to absolute truth or fantasy. But they do create truth in the assumptions they make about AI now to posit its future. That AI is inevitable is something understood in the public sphere to be so certain that, to the inventors and investors in AI, the only question that remains is how and when it will occur. If AI is inevitable, then of course someone must control it, or so the thinking goes. This absolution of responsibility for exponentially increasing AI each year holds
sway, even as entities such as Google, Apple, Facebook, DeepMind, and the US Department of Defense all continue to create, define, fund, and appropriate AI technology for various surveillance, marketing, and/or militaristic uses.

Alongside that eschewing of responsibility for creating the AI revolution also rises competition over who will wield the technology. In other words, the people who say AI is inevitable (and often argue it is dangerous) are the same people investing in it and creating it.² Public figures from these entities and those like them wield the authorization of insider status and capitalize on poor public education about AI to center their expertise and cloud how AI works as they speculate about what AI may become. But, until the moment sentient AI arrives, all is unknown.

And, even when that future is now, when AI finally arrives but does not meet the utopian goals or apocalyptic dooms predicted, it easily undergoes revision. Predictions meant to occur in 2022 may not happen—because either the technology needs to catch up or the funding dipped or the pandemic impeded progress and so on. These incongruities do not appear to dissuade technologists from speculating about their utopian and dystopian anticipations. When sentient machines appear, who determines the Turing test that allows the machines symbolic life that humans so readily arbitrate? Reasons abound for failed predictions that render those failures into a perpetual state of not-yet achieved, often because in the space of not-yet, everything is possible. So, who controls the public’s access to the not-yet of autonomous weaponry or mass surveillance or algorithms that organize people into resource and value categories? Speculation about AI, as mythos, and from the AI experts currently dominating the public sphere, rely on the obfuscation of AI science, the fact of extant AI technology, the intense public interest in AI, and
the power to be heard speculating in public. Their power to determine the future comes from their control of the what the public gets to envision.

The myth of AI they extend teaches the audience a history of the future, interpreting the past, present, and future for those who do not possess the resources or platforms to present alternative speculation. Myths, as Mackey-Kallis argues and as Hesiod’s example of ancient mythos exemplifies, traditionally offer histories about what has been and what the past brings to bear on the present. Myths historicize the future through its articulation of “a telos or destiny of society” that can, and often does, colonize a society’s past, present, and future through its vision of that telos. Speculation about AI and the corresponding dominant assumption of AI’s inevitability advance precisely such a telos. Seizing the power to envision AI is not simply offering one of many alternatives to a society overflowing with options about AI capability.

Instead, myths of AI are tethered to extant hierarchies eager to populate the uncertain future with familiar power structures, societal norms, religions, and ideas. This future, so envisioned, may begin to seem less uncertain and, therefore, less scary to those most comfortable with the current distributions of power in society. Of course, their vision of the future also thwarts any alternative vision when the avenues to reach the masses (e.g., film, AI developers, state address, technocratic investors, marketing, TEDtalks) are governed by those who agree, at least, about AI’s inevitability, the form in which it is most marketable, and its limit or potential. Even a cursory glance at the sounds, appearances, functions, cautions, and promises of today’s AI reveal the dominant mythos of AI currently on offer. Mackey-Kallis’s definition prepares readers of myth to see how these myths orient people to the rules of hierarchy and to rehearse the commonplaces that lend these visions the force of inevitability. If one of the primary functions of
myth is to interpret human experience and orient audiences toward a certain future based on that interpretation, then critics must research the myths being circulated and the stories they tell.

Communication and rhetoric scholars have long been interested in myth, particularly as myths heroic tales of the good and/or Jungian archetypes. In 1990, a year-long debate about the definition and role of myth took place in the pages of *Communication Studies* and, finally, at a well-attended panel at that year’s Speech Communication Association convention. This debate usefully surveys the ways myth has been taken up in rhetoric and communication studies as a grand narrative that is either anthropological or psychological in scope. Robert Rowland sparks the debate with his conviction that mythic criticism needs “limits” concerning their working “definition of rhetorical myth.”³ Rowland’s interest in the study of myth roots in his observation that myths “wield great power” and yet too much confusion regarding what myth is and what it does.⁴ Rowland describes the unique power of myth as one that “transcend[s] ordinary life and provide[s] meaningful grounding for that which cannot be supported rationally.”⁵ While Rowland and Mackey-Kallis agree about myth as narratives that attempt to explain the nonrational, their definitions diverge over Rowland’s insistence that rhetorical myths are only those stories “treated as true” by its intended audience and always “at minimum,” a “story about heroic characters that serve as personal or societal models.”⁶ Rowland’s argument that myth’s power occurs through its conveyance of epic truths to faithful audiences or heroic acts to emulate unable to account for myth’s speculative power in, indeed, narrow.

In *Ex Machina’s* and *Her’s* modern myths of the created woman, the rhetorical power of these myths comes from their vision of a near future dystopia (or utopia) where humanity is supplemented or substituted by feminine-coded machines. The utopian vision is one of fembots controlled by man, the dystopian is of feminine-coded technology gone rogue. Both tell a full
myth of the created woman that rehearses patriarchal narratives about technology and women as the intended helpmeet to man. It is unnecessary for this narrative to establish a truth or provide a hero—instead, it uses contemporary anxieties about gender and technology to entertain and to engage the audience. The fact of the not-yet space of the future study, its mythic independence from truth or fiction, is the opportunity through which the myth of the created woman functions while evading straightforward critique.

Rowland’s early attempts to constrain myth with more anthropological definitions prompts a robust response from critics who advocate for a more inclusive approach to mythic criticism. Responses from Janice Hocker Rushing, Martha Solomon, Michael Osborn, and Barry Brummett each highlight multiple ways to understand the role of myth as a rhetorically powerful narrative. All provide singular input but Rushing’s review of mythic criticism’s counter to Rowland’s proposed methods is sufficiently representative. Rushing argues science-fiction in cinema reflects the way myths ‘function for moderns’ who live in a new era marked by the non-historical, non-scientific myth where people do not “expect these stories to perform the objective function.”

Rushing analyzes a modern ambivalence regarding the ideal of capital-T truth that undermines critics of myth who attempt to constrain myth to its most anthropological use. Of course, myths have taken new forms, and yet remain just as powerful in terms of their ability to both order and reveal fundamental structures of cultural belief. Ultimately, Rushing finds the power of modern myths as they manifest through their shared ability with dreams to “express truths of the unconscious.” In her Jungian-influenced theory of myth, both dreams and myth “express fears our culture has,” also known as “shadow myths . . . express what the culture’s unconscious ‘knows’ to be ‘true.’” So, myths are where archetypes and other universals may be found and studied for what they reveal about unconscious social beliefs and cultural practices.
To Rowland’s proposed rule about myths solving problems with heroes and models, Rushing raises the modern specter of the “anti-hero” and remembers many myths that do not solve problems but, instead, “articulate the paradox and seem to leave humanity suspended between the oppositions.” In Rushing’s example, there is ample room for the paradoxical, problem-causing Pandora.

While mythic criticism often comprises Jungian critique to excavate forbidden desires and fears that govern re/circulations of those myths, this project leaves behind the unconscious in favor of collective and public expressions through its interest in those political desires and fears that operate in plain sight. Meaning, like so many habits, those commonplaces so ingrained and therefore challenging to explain that, upon exposure to scrutiny, they often unsettle those participants who had lived comfortably cohabitating with it. Good examples of these commonplaces are all those assumptions that maintain racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia in ways that structure the most basic and yet most powerful institutional hierarchies today.

Rather than analyze myth for its heroic conveyance of truth narratives or as “an indicator of what we value and of what we ‘know’ only unconsciously,” I apply a critical classical reception model of mythic criticism to reveal public secrets of sexism and misogyny in modern myths about technology and gender. Classicist Johanna Hanink recently defined critical cultural reception in her call for researchers to intervene on public debate that wields Greco-Roman antiquity to interpret the modern moment. Hanink explains critical classical reception as study of “how classical texts have been ‘received’ that also encourages “strong authorial voices in open acts of calling out disrupt, interrogate, and critique the Eurocentrism of the authorized narratives of Greco-Roman antiquity and its tradition.” This research method provides a solution to frequent academic concerns about presentism and throws open the thick wooden
doors of antiquity to robust critique from and with scholars who study injustice and unequal distributions of power.

An “open secret” approach to mythic criticism borrows from traditional mythic criticism insofar that it “uses myths and theories about mythology to generate nonobvious insights into communication events, audiences, and artifacts.” In addition, I look at these moments of collision between ancient and modern myths about technology as opportunities to study the form and consequence of sexist assumptions in public debate and stories about gender and technology. Some overlap in these texts with theories of the unconscious is inevitable since fear and desire are so deeply associated with the unconscious, but, rather than think of fear and desire at the level of individual and archetypal, I am persuaded that the utopias and dystopias we predict hold vast potential for exposing collective, political expressions of fear and desire that unite in common arguments about gender and technology.

To reckon with the importance of classical mythology to these stories and this thesis, the classical reception method, in the broadest sense, entails scholarly reckoning with how antiquity moves, interacts, and settles with various publics across history. Tracing the movement of classical materials by way of its reception allows scholars to observe resonances between ancient cultures and later ones without extolling the virtues of one over the other or over-determining the influence of one on the other. Instead, the study of the reception and circulation of classical work examines the practice of leveraging antiquity by a given group, culture, institution, and so on, and, therefore, what may be revealed in a given instantiation and the context in which it takes place. So, when Hesiod’s Pandora and Ovid’s Pygmalion move subtly or overtly through the science fiction worlds of Ex Machina and Her, I think about how these mythic figures are employed and received in the situation of those texts and what those texts, in turn, contribute in
conversation with those ancient myths. I am not thinking about the meat of these films and their ancient bones as mere iterations of an ancient myth, but rather as modern myths in dialogue, at a point of connection that indicates something about the values and speculations of a communication event in a cultural context. In this case, the communication event is the patriarchal instruction made in each film about the dangers of uncontrolled technology, empowered women, and the supremacy of the creators who create the former, oppress the latter, and fear both.

Critical classical reception takes up the traces of ancient myth in modern, secular stories in ways that move mythic criticism away from the definition of myth as either a story of a culture and its heroes or a story of the unconscious desires and fears of a population. The presence of mythic resonances itself is something worth examining for what antiquity is being leveraged and in what cultural context is its appearance made urgent within. Classical reception is additive to mythic criticism, bridging dissension about the true definition of myth by reminding scholars that myth is, overall, a grand narrative that makes foundational claims about what humans are and what they can be. Myths do not just look inward or to the past, present, or the future to delineate one culture from another—they argue for new beginnings that carry with them a story of progression that exposes hierarchies of speculation and delimits what is deemed possible for humanity. And, in the case of *Ex Machina* and *Her*, we may take their presentations of the fact of machine’s superiority to humans as a prompt to see this myth’s speculations about the future of gender and technology as instructive about who, exactly, is under threat by communicative AI.

As communicative AI gains in presence and power in everyday lives, scholars from nearly every area of study are turning to science fiction and other future studies for insight into how our stories about AI reflect and develop cultural norms. Legal professor and AI expert Frank
Pasquale explains, “[E]thicists and legal scholars have expressed renewed interest in the arts and humanities as ways of thinking through alternative futures.” This is because they understand its power “to cultivate sensibilities.” Where AI data studies are incomplete or not yet exploratory, Pasquale notes “visions of robotics and AI . . . hinge on larger visions of the nature and purpose of human work and technology.” It is remarkable how much stories about AI also require audiences to reconsider huge questions about human labor, leisure, life, and love. No surprise, then, that stories about AI register at the level of myth. Perhaps also sensing the same grand organizing force of stories about AI, Pasquale (citing George Lakoff) explains culture and myth as “type[s] of ‘deep stories’ . . . that recur as people try to make sense of the past, present, and future.” To reckon with these big stories, uniting mythic criticism and critical classical reception allows for attending to the appearance, function, dialogue, and context of myths for how these deep stories rehearse convenient selections of what is known (generally accepted) in order to remake that assumption in our futures.

Hesiod’s Pandora, Ovid’s Pygmalion, *Ex Machina*’s Ava, and *Her*’s Sam are all myths in dialogue about the dangers of created woman. These myths are rich in differences and separated by oceans of time, yet they all agree about two fundamental precepts—woman is a technology for man and technology is both indispensable to the human condition and treacherous. An Ovid solution to the myth of the created woman is to own and control her by transforming her into an ideal receptable into which the man may pour himself. He fixes the woman through an invasive act of puppetry. The Pandoran myth poses a problem without a solution—the problem of opening the jar. Having created tékhnē (stolen fire), humans invite their own doom. The only way a creator/human survives the Promethean apocalypse is through vigilance—the man must always anticipate the created woman’s deception. Too often, in public debate about AI, the
misogynist myth of the created woman is muffled by the technologists who are equally in thrall to and anxious about AI. Looking at the reception of this myth in *Ex Machina* and *Her* and each stories transformation of that myth based on the social and communicative AI available today attenuates researchers to the presence of the created woman across contemporary AI discourse.

**Future Studies**

“Think about that: it was too Pandora’s Box-y for Silicon Valley, the world’s most enthusiastic Pandora’s Box openers.”
John Oliver on facial recognition technology, *The Last Week Tonight*, HBO, 2020

“The key to artificial intelligence has always been the representation.”

When *My Fair Lady’s* Audrey Hepburn as Eliza Doolittle said to Henry Higgins, “Well, you have my voice on your gramophone. When you feel lonely without me you can turn it on. It has no feelings to hurt,” the audience had no way of knowing how that statement might resonate in a time where disembodied voice assistants chirp from almost every pocket in dulcet, unflappable, and unmistakably feminine-coded tones. In the technoapocalypse imagination, of course, the intoxicating prospect of the perky, always turned-on virtual assistant is precisely the shiny lure that leads to annihilation. It is this combination of irresistible solution (Pygmalion’s statue) and ultimate weapon (Pandora) that grounds a cultural fascination in the 2010s (and beyond) with communicative A.I. as pharmakon, as gendered, and as inevitable. That myth is not only cautionary about technology or women exceeding patriarchal control, but also about women as technology and technology as women exceeding patriarchal control. This story is not one isolated to movies or science fiction in general. The technoapocalypse imagination is shared across industry experts, the technological world, institutions, art, and anywhere where influential
predictions about AI take place — more on that in just a moment. For now, it is enough to associate these stories with their AI-fascinated context within and from Silicon Valley and its many AI creators.

It is unremarkable at the beginning of the 2020s, to observe that these communicative technologies are overwhelmingly voiced by and gendered as women. The United States’ quotidian environments are currently saturated with communicative AI, from chatbots to home surveillance systems to virtual assistants to traveling gynoid Sophia, the first robot to gain citizenship. And, while most of this tech comes with options for different voices and appearances, the default artificial virtual assistant (AVA) is almost always coded as a woman and, more specifically, a white woman. Rhetorician Taylor C. Moran points out that this “feminine coding” appears most prevalent in the United States, as Apple’s Siri in Britain was “released as a male voice in Britain.” Her analysis cautions against assuming Western or American cultural norms because cultural designs of and responses to gendered AI vary. Moran also observes that expectations of gendered labor may render artificial virtual assistants (AVAs) feminine in the US to “serve the patriarchy” and other “Western ideals.” While both whiteness and feminine-coded AI are prevalent in the US, the creators of communicative AI are globally present, and their extolling of communicative AI no matter its default persona-gender is, at core, a patriarchal project. Heather Suzanne Woods’s research on the feminine personae in surveillance capitalism analyzes this “normatively feminine identity” in the “digital domesticity” adherent in the release of Siri and Alexa. She finds that in every stage of use, Alexa is programmed to perform not just efficiently, but as a “good and personable companion who takes good care of users.” Alexa is not thought of as an algorithm programmed by humans but is instead advertised and interacted with as a “whole-person caretaker” whose “care competencies
make her a near perfect wife.”

Woods’ analysis of user-to-computer dialogue with Alexa reveals an overwhelming number of users extend “amorous” overtures to Alexa and treat it as “a partner to fall in love with.” This reaction is intentionally elicited by Alexa’s creators. Alexa’s design choice is deliberate, as seen in Woods’ study of Siri’s and Alexa’s design—the caretaking, attentive white woman persona is deliberately evoked to ease the introduction of surveillance technology into the domestic sphere.

However, in the 2010s, when communicative technology exploded, it was difficult for critics of this ubiquitous association of default women as virtual assistants to gain critical attention to the matter, even as evidence mounted of this unerring programmatic choice following Apple’s release of Siri to iPhones for the first time, followed by Amazon’s Echo and Alexa, Microsoft’s Cortana, Google’s Assistant and Home, Bank of America’s Erika, and Hanson Robotics’ Sophia. Still, researchers persevered and published scholarship regarding the homogeneity of representation among the creators in Silicon Valley and in the algorithms they create. Their work, and a greater public awareness about inequities in representation at all levels of AI creation, contributed to recent widespread adoptions of AI ethics policy among tech industry leaders. It also encouraged such companies to make public commitments to regulate AI and revisit hiring and development practices with diversity of experience and workers in mind. However hollow these promises of renewed ethics from the tech industry may be (and there are many good reasons to assume most are), the same industry leaders were not even pretending to care about ethics and representation in AI during the 2010s. Instead, during the proliferation of communicative AI during that so-called Bot Decade, tech industry leaders seem intoxicated by and swept up in the grandeur and future of communicative AI.
The future they most often predicted was not as utopian as one might imagine after observing the exponential leaps in communicative AI production each year. Well-known technologists such as Elon Musk, Bill Gates, and Stephen Hawking have all consistently offered visions of dangerous smart technologies and robots outside of human control.\textsuperscript{27} Musk’s insistent predictions of humanity dominated and eradicated by robots is comedy for some, urgent to others. And yet, despite these widely circulated, Frankenstein-esque warnings of humanity’s ultimate end by the very hand of their own mechanic creations, those same creators invest heavily in AI’s future. Tech giants and startups alike started and continue to churn out ever-more Alexas, Erikas, Jessicas, Tays, and Mitsukis, independent of the ever-present fear about A.I. that moves outside creator control.

Whether it is about AI’s sentience and power or about the eventual adoption of said AI into the social world of humans, an assumption of inevitability has and continues to pervade AI public debate. This assumption is evident across disciplines, markets, and governments. The entry on “AI ethics” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy begins: “Artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics are digital technologies that will have significant impact on the development of humanity in the near future.” Tesla’s Elon Musk—investor, AI investor, and launcher-of-Tesla-into-orbit—believes that AI development will result in “robots killing humans in the street.”\textsuperscript{28} Musk’s worry rests partly on what he describes as his “exposure to the most cutting-edge AI out there,” (he is referring to Deep Mind, a British deep learning company connected to Google of AlphaGo fame—a deep learning system that famously, and now regularly, beats humans in worldwide competition). Musk has argued that AI is “more dangerous” than “nukes,” akin to “summoning the demon,” and may lead to the extermination of humans.\textsuperscript{29} He warns that AI robots will realize these homicidal imperatives even if they must follow humans to other
planets.\textsuperscript{30} His fear of this murderous outcome has led him to invest in “at least two artificial intelligence companies” with the hopes of keeping an eye on developments—developments of which only seem to concern him further.\textsuperscript{31} Even though he believes the robots will “follow humans there,” Musk has argued that Mars is the only way we will have a chance to save ourselves from the AI.\textsuperscript{32} He is not alone.

Many futurists, investors, inventors, developers, deep learning technicians, and data journalists share Musk’s fear or, at least, his sense of potentially devastating, large-scale transformation. James Barratt, who researches several AI developers for his book on AI and the “end of the human era,” says, “[I]t was alarming how many people I talked to who are highly placed people in AI who have retreats that are sort of ‘bug out’ houses” because they expect an AI apocalypse.\textsuperscript{33} As if in reply, Bill Gates explains: “I am in the camp that is concerned about super intelligence. First, the machines will do a lot of jobs for us and not be super intelligent. That should be positive if we manage it well. A few decades after that though, the intelligence is strong enough to be a concern.”\textsuperscript{34} Of course, like Musk, Gates’s reservations haven’t prevented him from investing in developing and fostering AI and robotics. The late Stephen Hawking also has argued, “AI could be the worst event in the history of our civilization. It brings dangers, like powerful autonomous weapons, or new ways for the few to oppress the many. It could bring great disruption to our economy.”\textsuperscript{35} Kai-Fu Lee, deep learning specialist and former executive at Apple, then SGI, Microsoft, and Google, writes of the AI revolution, “This will be the fastest transition humankind has experienced, and we’re not ready for it.”\textsuperscript{36} The Stanford Institute of Human-Centered AI (HAI) welcomes readers to their research by declaring that “[w]e are on the cusp of The Age of Artificial Intelligence. The scope and scale of impact of the Age of AI will
be more profound than any other period of transformation in our history.”37 AI research institutions at universities all over the world echo the same prediction as Stanford’s HAI.

Globally, tech leaders, educators, and state officials seem to agree, at least about the massive transformations AI will certainly bring. The US Department of Defense, in a 2018 public release of their official AI strategy, explain their policy commitments to acquiring and developing AI weaponry through the promise of inevitability: “AI is poised to transform every industry, and is expected to impact every corner of the Department, spanning operations, training, sustainment, force protection, recruiting, healthcare, and many others.”38 The following year, in 2019, the United States Airforce released an annex to the 2018 DoD AI strategy brief, stating that, “AI has already proliferated into many commercial enterprises and, as such, cannot be governmentally controlled or contained. Just as the commercial sector has rushed to embrace these technologies, our global competitors are overtly accelerating the integration and weaponization of AI as an effective measure to counter our traditional strengths and exploit our perceived weaknesses.” The United States government, academic institutions, tech billionaires, and tech creators all agree on at least one thing: Humans are facing inevitable disruptions to the norms that guide life “as we know it” in the form of AI.

The films *Ex Machina* and *Her* speak in almost one voice along with the world’s technologists who are ready for and already create the AI technology they expect to uproot the human from its current trajectory to its transcendence or its annihilation. These films appear as inspiration to Siri’s designers and as lessons from Elon Musk’s shared nightmares. The myth of created women in their pages is an enigmatic figure both essential to patriarchal hierarchies and human life, but also the reason those hierarchies are most threatened. The tension between the pragmatic use of woman-gendered technology to fulfil man’s need and the possibility that usage
could apocalyptically result in man being the tool is one at the core of speculative rhetoric about AI in the public sphere today. When Musk or Gates or Postman or Turkle predicts that our technology uses and will use us, they envision the dystopia of communicative AI represented in *Ex Machina* and *Her*. When futurists such as Stephen Pinker, Jeff Bezos, or Ray Kurzweil predict that communicative AI and all other AI will flatten into an ecstasy of sameness or sublimely domesticated technology in service to the human mind, the Pygmalion, utopian vision of technology conquered appears. Either way, with anticipation that is either full of dread or hope, each group envisions a future that requires total patriarchal control of technology and culture.

In some ways, this project may appear to re/discover what is already patently obvious about communicative AI and its adherents. The white male-dominated industry of AI has produced, over and again, visions of communicative AI as a passive woman. It has treated nuclear weapons as sexy, world-ending toys, it has invested in the creation of the technologies it fears most over funding social and political projects to help the very alive people in the world, it has privileged the view of the ideal white male user over the potential victims of the technology, and it has produced technology most suitable for its ideal male user. But this project does not just share these histories of power and hierarchy at the core of the myth of the created woman; it also uses that commonplace of gendered AI to research its speculative power.

For AI creators, speculative rhetoric about communicative AI practices adherence to gendered social roles at a massive scale in the space of the not-yet, populating the future with the conventions of today and, through the example of that future, reinforcing those norms in the present. Communicative AI is the first world-wide, relatively affordable AI technology available to the public. Few people can afford the actual, human sized robots or even the chore cleaning
Roomba that was originally priced over one thousand dollars in the US. But smartphones are ubiquitous across wealth and social class, as are GPS’ and the woman-gendered chat bots of the internet. It is not incidental that the first AI technology in most people’s hands is a fembot named Siri or Cortana or Alexa. The myth of the created woman argues that feminine coded caretaking is less important and more noxious (to patriarchal subscribers) than other labor, and yet also vital to life. This means that replacing said labor with a fembot is not received by the greater public with the same outcry or horror that replacing industrial workers and truck drivers receives. That type of replacement puts people out of a job, or so the general sentiment goes. Meanwhile, communicative AI ostensibly does the job nobody wants to do. With communicative AI, subscribers to patriarchal ideology distance themselves even more from having to acknowledge that they need and resent feminine-coded labor such as companionship, nurturing, caretaking, and, especially, listening. Advertisers and creators alike explain away the prevalence of gendered AI as merely responsive to audience needs. They claim American audiences, at least, demand that social AI have a human voice and that voice must be a woman. However, Heather Suzanne Woods reminds us that the desire to inject communicative surveillance technology into the domestic sphere is the real reason for its good humored, wifey design.39 Once again, the gendered technology persistently undervalued yet overproduced by tech moguls is the means of manipulating the masses into accepting the ultimate weapon into their bedrooms.

The myth of the created woman in communicative AI carries with it a thrill of ownership, the thrill of creation, and the promise of control over the self and others. This glut of AI gendered as woman and the legacies it creates for the ideal user and ideal technology support a vast, growing power to determine what AI is used for, who AI can replace, and who AI will mold to fit. That vision is neither innovative nor surprising. The myths of the created woman in
communicative AI offers a continuum where both AI and woman-gendered labor are necessary but also always in need of taming; The power of this vision precludes radical imagination about the human use of human beings and technology. By brandishing a fear of human annihilation in one arena and waving the hope for AI that eliminates the suffering of laborers in another, the myth of the created woman muffles radial speculation that might counter or even enrich those narrow visions. The communicative AI mythology is vast and dominated by these myths of the un/controlled created women. Thankfully, no matter how much technologists might think their perspective is the sole correct one, that is simply not the case.

Technologist speculations of AI, myths, and products might currently overwhelm publics with apocalyptic or utopian visions of the future of technology, but they are by no means the only visions on offer. Radical imagination about the future and the future of technology have been and continue to be envisioned by activist thinkers who do not share the assumptions of whiteness and patriarchy at the heart of Silicon Valley. Race, disability, and gender studies researcher Sami Schalk applies disability theory to black feminist theory through analysis of speculative fiction. In the stories she reads, Schalk sees the power of speculative fiction as one that “allows us to imagine otherwise, to envision an alterative world or future in which what exists now has changed or disappeared and what does not exist now is suddenly real.” In the speculative space, Schalk sees opportunity for “marginalized people” who can “imagine a future or alternative space away from oppression or in which relations between currently empowered groups and disempowered groups are altered or improved.” These alternative visions make creators of those oppressed groups because they also have the power to make futures. Alternatively, “speculative fiction can also be a space to imagine the worst, to think about what could be if current inequalities and injustices are allowed to continue.” This kind of speculation
spurs action in the present to prevent the continuation or allows people to plan their own survival in the likelihood that present inequities march into the future. Schalk’s summary of the power of speculative rhetoric highlights its power to determine new futures, to consider “other forms of life,” and, ultimately, “change how we read and interpret these categories” today. Science fiction authors such as Marjorie Agosín, Octavia Butler, Angélica Gorodischer, Manjula Padmanabhan, and many others have all written about futures that contest, undermine, or imagine people wholly otherwise than Silicon Valley, *Ex Machina*, and *Her*.42

Meanwhile, science and technology studies (STS) researchers, AI ethicists, sociologists, and many other scholars are already demonstrating ways to counter the force of Silicon Valley’s normative visions. Safiya Noble’s groundbreaking research on the racist algorithms that structure our most basic interactions on the internet has become required reading for anyone studying AI in 2020. Her work was formative in the AI ethicists’ challenge to the “move fast and break things” ethos of Silicon Valley. Mar Hicks’s recovery of the history of British women as Britain’s first “computers” and computer technicians reminds historians, STS researchers, and anyone who might forget that women have been creators and AI experts from the very beginning. They were only pushed out and forgotten as computers grew into a lucrative enterprise. What is thought possible in the future shifts once these beginnings are more accurately recalled and the assumed patriarch is forced to share or leave the stage. Sara Ahmed’s recent survey and theory of the word and concept of “use” adds the idea of “queer use” to “refer to how things can be use in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for they were intended,” which, in terms of this project, entirely dismantles the concepts of ideal user and ideal technology.43 All these researchers imagine current and future AI differently, and advocate for radically reimagining the landscape, scope, look, and work of communicative AI. In
this project, I have focused on the message and myth of communicative AI in the 2010s to study at least one way that present inequities are carried into the future with the assumption that understanding that message further cracks open the door to the radical could-be-otherwise that, perhaps, even questions the inevitability coded into the future of AI.

2 Thinking again of Carol Cohn’s research on nuclear experts in the late 80s, cited in the bibliography and introduction to this thesis.
5 Ibid, 106.
8 Ibid, 139.
9 Ibid, 139.
10 Ibid, 140.
12 Ibid.
13 This definition is informed most by Michele Kennerly’s research on the classics in digital humanities, her Spring 2019 seminar titled Cicero After Cicero, and associated course literature from Johanna Hanink, Jeffrey Hunt, R. Alden Smith, and Fabio Stok on the transmission and reception of classical texts.
14 Frank Pasquale, 200.
15 Frank Pasquale, 201.
18 Moran, 2.
20 Woods, 339.
21 Woods, 339.
22 Woods, 339.
23 This list of communicative AIs is not exhaustive, but I have selected a handful of the most recognizable or most funded examples. Ideally, readers will be familiar with most, if not all, of the AI listed here.
24 See Virginia Eubanks, Safiya Noble, Miriam E. Sweeney, Heather Suzanne Woods.

Their warnings and interviews on this subject matter are popular fodder regularly circulating in headlines across news and media genres and are therefore easy to locate with any web search combination of “insert name” and AI.


See Moyer, Dowd, Della Cava, Holley, McFarland, and Nelson for more news articles and commentary on Silicon Valley’s anticipation of AI revolution and Musk’s interactions with Deep Mind and other AI creators.


Sami Schalk, Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction, 2-3.

Several compelling studies exist that analyze and/or collect examples of the work of these science fiction authors and others. I recommend Jane Donawerth’s Frankenstein’s Daughters: Women Writing Science Fiction (1997); the edited collection The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader (2000); Sherryl Vint’s Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction (2007); the edited collection Machine: Bodies, Genders, Technologies (2012); and Sami Schalk’s Bodyminds Reimagined (2018).

Appendix

Media Images

Figure 1 A screenshot from Tinder taken from Tim Nudd’s Adweek coverage of SXSW in 2015. Accessed online November 15, 2015.
Figure 2. A screenshot of Ava’s dialogue from a successfully fooled Tinder user named Brock taken from Tim Nudd’s Adweek coverage of SXSW in 2015.
Figure 3. Fembots Kyoko (left) and Ava (right) meet each other for the first time. Screenshot from Ex Machina (2015).

Figure 4. Nathan (left) cradles the AI brain or "wetware" he created and extends it to Caleb (right) for closer inspection. Screenshot from Ex Machina (2015).
Bibliography


