

“Becoming Woman: Healing and Posthuman Subjectivity in Garland’s *Ex-Machina* (2015)”

Rocío Carrasco Carrasco
University of Huelva

1 Introduction

The present paper privileges the posthuman as being key to understanding the intricate—yet problematic—relationship with the latest innovations in artificial intelligence and robotics in contemporary advanced societies. It stresses the importance of critically approaching popular representations of posthuman subjectivities as they reflect current anxieties concerning sex and gender fueled by the creation of artificial life. Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2015) poses questions about the ethics of creating artificial life and the alleged superiority of the (male) human body over all forms of “life”, whether they are “natural” or “manipulated”. The movie focuses on Ava (Vikander), an artificial intelligence that assumes (to later consciously adopt) gendered traits in traditional humanoid ways to achieve her aims and, ultimately, to reassure herself. Precisely, Ava’s “feminine non-human nature” has led to diverse interpretations concerning gender politics, as it will be debated below.

Ex Machina plays with anticipation, deceptions and expectations at different levels to offer a narrative of female healing in adverse technologically-driven environments. The movie hinges on Nathan (Isaac), a billionaire mogul Internet genius with God complex who has designed a humanoid artificial intelligence, Ava, assigning it sex, gender and emotions. As we soon get to know, Nathan lives in self-inflicted isolation and uses his own experiments on robotics to comfort himself. Nathan’s eventual guest—Caleb (Gleason)—needs to adjust to this spatial and conceptual framework in order to succeed in his “mission” of finding out whether Ava is self-conscious or just an intelligent machine capable of talking, smiling and flirting convincingly as a human being.

My work here engages with contemporary writings on critical posthumanism, and further seeks to contribute to debates on how the feminine nonhuman nature is depicted on screen by reading the movie’s protagonist—Ava—as an inspiring version of the cinematic posthuman. The issue of the posthuman has proved to be complex and contradictory and has been approached from many different viewpoints. The posthuman is a perspective that forces us to rethink our taken-for granted modes, but yet, attending the specificity of the human and its way of being in the world, its body, and its relationship to nonhuman forms of life (Wolfe xxv). It is precisely this attempt to grasp our ambiguous and complex relationship with the world what has led to a diversification of the posthuman discourse, although many of the concerns overlap. In line with critical posthumanism, my concern here relies heavily on Rosi Braidotti’s notions of subjectivity and difference. Braidotti takes an affirmative and vitalist Deleuzian approach to difference to argue that we exist in a plenitude of possible “becomings” that are continually changing and transforming. When dealing with the idea of “becoming”, Braidotti contends that “the intensities this engenders create pleasures and affirmative

and joyful affects that open the subject up to a multiplicity of possible differences” (Braidotti 2002, 71). Hence, examining subjectivity not as a universal consciousness but as a process is crucial for this (and any) analysis of the posthuman. Thus, I position my analysis of Garland’s movie in relation to this liberatory politics proposed by critical thinking, specifically by Braidotti’s ideas, yet, being aware that the consequences of Ava’s becoming in this specific film also implies other instances of exclusion, as it will be debated later in this paper.

As I contend, Ava consciously appropriates existing structures of knowledge and power and internalizes them in completely different ways that humans do. This process of conscious appropriation and further manipulation allows the posthuman character to contest humanist and sexist discourses and, eventually, to resist them. Precisely, by focusing on Ava and the process toward her healing—or “becoming woman”—this paper proposes that *Ex Machina* stands as a valid example of how the posthuman Ava needs to overcome the violent consequences derived from her imposed and constructed nature and find a space in the hostile world she has been forced to live. This appropriation of humanist (and sexist) values concerning sex and gender allows Ava to manipulate the prevailing system and fight against patriarchy, this process ultimately working as a kind of healing therapy. Precisely, the novelty of my reading of the movie relies, on the one hand, in the fact that it privileges the posthuman as a means to contest and resist sexist assumptions about femininity. In addition, and at another level, another original point being made is that viewers are exposed to a posthuman experience. Hence, by focusing on Ava’s posthuman subjectivity, embedded in a material reality that incorporates the latest technological advances, the film creates empathy across difference, allowing spectators to share the posthuman experience, while reflecting on what it means to be a woman in contemporary advanced societies. Hence, the film plays with sex, gender and genre expectations in order to offer a valuable posthuman alternative to male superiority and control.

Eliminó: In addition, and at another level,

Before undertaking the analysis of the film under discussion, the position adopted here regarding the posthuman needs to be clarified, as it is a complex and ambiguous term that comprises many areas of inquiry. As suggested above, I am interested in critical posthumanism and its proposal of affirmative (or vitalist) politics of becoming, while being aware of the difficulties of finding “truly” posthuman characters depicted in mainstream cinema. Ava is a cinematic product that, nevertheless, challenges the traditional humanist paradigm whereby nonhumanity and/or posthumanity are built on assumptions of inferiority and/or marginality.

Critical posthumanism—best represented by Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti or Stefan Herbrechter—has its main theoretical basis in Michael Foucault’s theory on biopower, Donna Haraway’s notion of the cyborg, or Katherine Hayles’s vision on the relationship between the cybernetic and the human. These analyses incorporate deconstructionist (feminist) critique and other currents of thought that contest our anthropocentrism and the prevailing image of the self-provided by humanism. However, and according to Braidotti, we should not stop at critical deconstruction but also move on to the active production of alternatives (Braidotti 2011, 127). In line with this, the task of critical posthumanism is, according to Herbrechter, to analyze the process of technologization based on the idea of a radical interdependence or mutual interpenetration between the human, the posthuman and the inhuman (Herbrechter 20). Another common ground is that these theories stress the importance of examining subjectivity, and the ways that we as individuals are situated in relations to power. The posthuman subject has been considered as a means to eradicate traditional configurations of power, contesting the old binary logic that assumed the subject to be rational, universal and ethical as opposed to

the “other”. That is, we need to rethink the body and understand the subject outside the status quo. In this sense, the posthuman “subject is no longer cast in a dualistic frame” but aims at displacing the understanding of difference (Braidotti 2013, 92). The subject is but a process in constant change. The posthuman, or assemblage, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, has the desire to be, and for that, the body represents that complex structure of subjectivity.

These theories will be useful for the analysis of the posthuman as depicted in *Ex Machina*. It is precisely the film’s suggestion of an alternative to patriarchy what makes Ava appealing. The posthuman subjectivity displayed by this artificial intelligence is considered as a conscious and rebellious position, as an embodied and embedded process of becoming that allows her to find an escape and, eventually, to heal. She is an “other” that is capable of desiring and changing, at least partially, existing structures of power. This portrayal of Ava’s posthuman nature coalesces, in part, with material or embodied posthumanism, a branch of critical posthumanism that states that bodies are not static figures, but entities mediated by complex relational processes and practices that produce positive assemblages and construct sustainable alternative futures. In a similar way, Ava’s body is an assemblage, a process in constant change, unstable, that plays with society’s oppressing rules to her own convenience in the search of a version of post-anthropocentrism. In this regard, she opposes the transhumanist vision of disembodiment to offer a valuable example of material posthumanism.¹

Nonetheless, one should also take into account that corporeal posthumanism advocates for a polymorphic body, one that is not reduced to sexual difference, one that takes into account the complex set of differences that pass into our beings, something that Ava fails to suggest, at least initially. In order to collapse the sex/gender, body/mind, human/non-human dichotomy, Ava needs to rearticulate them and perform the feminine. The aim of posthuman feminists is, according to Braidotti, to think beyond traditional humanist limitations and look for subversion “not in counter-identity formations, but rather in pure dislocations of identities via the perversion of standardized patterns of sexualized, racialized and naturalized interactions” (Braidotti 2013, 99). Ava manages to contest the status quo from within, although the idea that different is positive is not totally articulated in the film. She is, as stated before, a cinematic version of the posthuman that needs to fight against her male oppressors and challenge our expectations as biased spectators. The very idea that popular science fiction films reflect contemporary concerns limits, in a way, the possibilities of the genderless and inclusive kind of posthumanism advocated by materialist feminists and other critical thinkers.

In spite of these limitations, and this is precisely the aspect that I would like to stress, *Ex Machina* offers an understanding of the posthuman subject, which can be considered as the first step toward the posthuman predicament postulated by materialist thinkers. As stated before, the original point here is that the character of Ava is regarded as posthuman in line with Braidotti’s claims, in spite of the limitations imposed by cinematic conventions. As it will be argued, Ava manages to develop consciousness and propose a new (troubling yet significant) relationship between humanity and science and technology, which empowers her in unexpected ways for audiences. Her inner anxieties

Eliminó:

¹ As a movement, transhumanism opts for a radical transformation of the human condition by existing, emerging and speculative technologies, such as regenerative medicine, radical life extension and speculative technologies, mind uploading and cryonics. In general terms, it suggests the end of the biological body and advocates self-responsibility in maintaining health and well-being. This movement—advocated by Nick Bostrom, Hans Moravec, Max Moore or Natasha Vita-More, also referred to as utopian posthumanism—is directly linked to the enhancement of the body and to ideas of immortality within cyberspace. In broad terms, it encourages the evolution of the human into something superior to our critical condition.

are deliberately shown to audiences. The very fact that audiences may eventually identify with her enables for the adoption of posthuman experiences. In this sense, my argument here is that this science fiction film allows us to see things differently and to think of new and more productive possibilities for our bodies and worlds, suggesting, at least partially, Braidotti's claims for a "move beyond (...) lethal binaries" (Braidotti 2013, 37).

Eliminó: the position assumed

Eliminó: s

In order to illustrate these matters, the present article reappropriates the ontology of "becoming" postulated by Deleuze and theorized by Braidotti and other critical thinkers, to refer to Ava's process toward healing. Her posthumanism works as a kind of healing therapy that allows her to perform the perfect femininity in order to, paradoxically, liberate herself from male oppression. Precisely, her "feminine" posthuman body arises many concerns regarding sex, sexualities and subjectivities, which will be addressed in the first section of this paper. In opposition to other readings of the film, I will attempt to illustrate the artificiality of gender in the techno-spaces provided, and the way these conventions are malleable and can be hence manipulated by the posthuman in order to pursue freedom, change and hope. Even within the oppressive spaces of reclusion and confinement Ava is situated, she creates a suitable space from where to fight against the system. The second section focuses on Ava's healing and further liberation process, to defend the idea that her conscious and rebellious positioning makes of her a truly posthuman character, in spite of her sexualized appearance, a rather provocative statement.

Eliminó: It

Eliminó: s

2. The manipulation of gendered spaces, or Ava's becoming

The representation of gender in techno-spaces has been largely discussed by feminist theory from different approaches and angles (Balsamo, Plant, Haraway, Hayles, etc). As I will attempt to illustrate in this section, Garland's movie problematizes gender politics in the sense that Ava's femininity is considered as something imagined by Nathan, a masculine (and masculinist) idea of the female that, nevertheless, allows her to fight. As a matter of fact, Ava manages to alter the claustrophobic and oppressive room where she stands as an object of male desire and transform it into a liberatory space from where to articulate her plan and head for her freedom and final healing. The glass room where she is constantly being exposed becomes, paradoxically, a liberatory space in the sense that it provides her with the opportunity of acquiring a technologically enabled capacity for agency, and, ultimately, for resistance. Hence, within this suffocating space, she ends up manipulating Caleb, Nathan and even audiences by performing a role that allows her to liberate from oppression.

In this sense, Ava can be regarded as a metaphor of becoming in Braidotti's terms. In *Nomadic Theory* (2011), Braidotti addresses the process of becoming, which she defines as "sustainable shifts or changes undergone by nomadic subjects in their active resistance against being subsumed in the commodification of their own diversity" (2011, 122). In the case of "becoming woman", Braidotti warns us that this position is at risk of colluding with the strategies of advanced capitalism, "insofar as this system can be described as a force that deterritorializes, pluralizes for the purpose of profit". Processes of becoming are, then, forms of resistance that need to be generated from within this system (120). In the movie, Ava can be read as a form of resistance within a closed oppressive space that, nevertheless, enables her to fight. From her marginal position as a nonhuman, Ava manages to reverse convention and manipulate spaces of domination in her search of liberty, resisting repressive power structures. Her femininity is, therefore, an imposed artifact to be later manipulated by and for the posthuman's benefit.

However, the depiction on screen of a gendered artificial intelligence that follows the humanist rules concerning sex and sexuality does have different readings. Ava's

sexualized image obviously conflicts with feminist tenets of liberation and with the affirmative politics of embodied posthumanism. Ava's artificial body has been designed according to Western standards of beauty. As other women robots invented by Nathan, Ava is beautiful, is seen nicely dressed and visually appealing, reaffirming patriarchal assumptions about sex and gender. Her body is, then, disciplined to correspond to a social/cultural ideal, which recalls Foucault's idea that the social control of the body can be used to produce a specific type of subjectivity within that body. In relation to this issue, Jennifer Rhee, in *Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of the Dehumanized Labor* (2018) argues how "symbolic AI's simplified worlds are developed around stereotypes and familiarity" (75). The so-called robotic imaginary "encompasses any machine intelligence that replicates, whether in form or behavior, a vision of the human" (6). In doing so, Rhee argues, it produces a new relation of resemblance that humanizes the non-human and expands the boundaries of the human (10). Nathan attempts to produce in Ava a predictable and "familiar" femininity, but, instead, he creates someone able to mimic this specific subjectivity in order to get what she really wants, a fact that complicates the film's plot.

One can affirm that dominant ideologies, represented mainly by Nathan but also by Caleb, shape the way her body is felt—indeed, we get to know that Ava's body was designed according to Caleb's online pornographic profile. In the same way, Nathan also creates Kyoko (Mizuno), a sexualized and racialized image. In relation to ideology, Sherryl Vint affirms, "[it] is the source of these various discourses that inform our ideas about our bodies and hence inform our experience of the lived body" (Vint 18). Not surprisingly, some commentators (Watercutter, 2015) have read Ava as another more instance of a sexualized "fembot" in the tradition of *Metropolis*, *Blade Runner* or *Stepford Wives*. Indeed, sex and gender are visibly reproduced in the posthuman body of Ava, heavily instantiating familiar and oppressive codes. In her, cultural codes of gender intersect with the technologies of the posthuman body to finally reproduce recognizable patterns of femininity.

The idea of assigning sex to robots has raised numerous concerns among critics and robot designers. For many roboticists, gender attribution is a process of reality construction and hence, the (mostly male) designers tend to assign sex based on biased assumption about femaleness and maleness. In relation to this issue, Balsamo has argued that gendering robots makes clear that gender belongs to the order of the material body and the social discursive or semiotic systems within which bodies are embedded (Balsamo 1996, 36). The social construction of robots is embedded, then, in sexist (and racist) methods and practices. In *Surrogate Humanity* (2019), Atanasoski and Vera deal with the interesting notion of "the surrogate human effect", to refer to those racialized and gendered forms of the human that are designed and created by engineering projects with the aspiration to reach "technoliberation". Their main argument in the book is that social robots and AIs are predetermined by "techniques of differential exploitation and dispossession with capitalism" (4), so they are limited by prior racial and gendered imaginaries. In their study of social robots and emotions, they argue that the position of the robot is always inferior since they can only mirror human states, since it must "perform affect transparently, and therefore cannot perform proof of the hidden interior psyche that would indicate equality to the human" (110). Ava, likewise, can be read as a surrogate human at the service of capitalism, as she is designed by Nathan to sense the human and ultimately manipulate Caleb. Yet, the movie eventually suggests that Ava does develop an interior psyche, or posthuman subjectivity, that is unpredictable and rebellious, and allows her to defeat her human creators.

Eliminó: T

The idea of assigning sex to Ava is openly discussed by Nathan and Caleb's conversation:

Caleb: "Why did you give her sexuality? An AI does not need a gender. She could have been a gray box.

Nathan: Hmm.... Actually, I don't think that's true. Everything in nature is gendered, given that all thoughts and actions are driven by reproductive urges. No biogenetic impulse exists without a priori acknowledgement of attraction. This means for a machine to reach the point at which the human and the artificial become undistinguishable, the point of singularity, there needs to be sexual component.

Caleb: They have sexuality as an evolutionary reproductive need.

Nathan: What imperative does a gray box have to interact with another gray box? Can consciousness exist without interaction? Anyway, sexuality is fun, man.

In the same line of thought, and in relation to sex robots, Atanasoski and Vera contend that there is no such a thing as a feminist AI since "the technoliberal desire for the simulation of pleasure and reciprocity in sex robots is a desire for the simulation of consent from a site where subjectivity is structurally made to be impossible" (203). In my view, Garland brilliantly proposes a feminine AI that simulates consent to get what she wants. Yet, I also agree with Atanasoski and Vera when they affirm that the movie depicts the liberation of a white female robot (Ava) at the expense of black female robots, whose bodies are simply disposed, as I will discuss below.

Nathan vaguely attempts to justify his imposition, as a creator, of oppressive gender roles onto Ava, assuming that this is the "natural" and right way, just to later simply admit that sexuality is fun. Certainly, and if we follow Susan Jeffords' classification of the representation of masculinity on screen, Nathan's performance can be included within the category "hard men", that is, powerful men, not only those with hard or muscled bodies but also strong, violent and controlling men that have somehow helped to perpetuate traditional assumptions about masculinity.² On the contrary, Caleb would fit within the category "soft men" or male images that, in one way or another, challenge conservative ideas about representation. In this sense, *Ex Machina* reproduces traditional codes of representation that are easily inferred by the consumers of such products. In relation to this issue, Balsamo has pointed out the fact that "when seemingly stable boundaries (human/artificial, life/death, nature/culture) are displaced by technological innovation, other boundaries are more vigilantly guarded" (Balsamo 1992, 208). She is referring to the boundary between male and female, a border that remains heavily secured in spite of new technologized ways to reconceptualize the body. Gender remains, accordingly, a naturalized point of human identity (208). Indeed, many robots represented in science fiction films, whether they are rebellious beings that turn against their human masters, or benevolent and friendly androids, are sexed and gendered, and spectators can assume a difference between feminine/female and masculine/male machines. Thus, the film proposes the idea that Ava is but another of Nathan's disposable fetish toys, only created to give shape to his big ego, and that is destined to be kept in the wardrobe where he stores the rest of his female creations.

² In *Hard Bodies. Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994), Susan Jeffords believes that the male body is central to popular culture and, accordingly, is classified into two categories, hard and soft, arguing that there has been a change between Reagan hard-body movies and Bush soft-body images in films from the early 1990s. This pattern corresponds, at the same time, with the two prototypes that have delineated and defined U.S. masculinity through the years.

Balsamo's argument can be further used to denounce Ava's positioning as an object of the male look in advanced technological environments. From the moment of her creation, Ava is confined to a room and is constantly being watched by her "creator" through surveillance cameras. This confinement is visually reinforced in those sequences in which Ava is in the glass box, and cameras are always visible on screen, as if to remind audiences of her entrapment at all times. To this, we should add Caleb's role of observer/examiner. His (supposed) task in the research center is to interact with Ava with the purpose of figuring it out whether she is self-conscious or is just pretending to be so, and for that he makes use of the Turin test, a test based on questions that aims at detecting consciousness in artificially created machines. These interviews are recorded and watched by Nathan, who is positioned from the very beginning of the movie as the controller of technology and observer from a privileged position. Moreover, and as stated before, his hypermuscular white body becomes an instrument of power and control over others. He is frequently seen showing his violent and tough nature by means of his behaviour (boxing, drinking, exercising) and appearance (bearded, bare-chested).³ Interestingly enough, Nathan frequently carries out his observation tasks bare-chested while drinking huge amounts of alcohol. The idea of a desirable woman to be looked at by a male gaze resonates with Laura Mulvey's well-known essay "Visual Pleasure", where she articulates the objectification of women in classical cinema. Precisely, Andrea Virginás reads the movie in this way, reaffirming the validity of the Mulveyan framework in films that deal with digital environments, among which she includes *Ex Machina*. Virginás contends that "visual pleasure persists in a 'reloaded' version in spite of the change from analogues to digital platforms (with)in the classical narrative diegesis of (primarily) live-action feature films" (289).

As it has been illustrated so far, Ava is positioned as a desirable object of the male look whose given sexuality follows patriarchal conventions of representation. However, and as contended here, the film offers a more productive reading in terms of gender dynamics, if we consider Ava's posthuman affirmative force and her ability to exceed impositions and reverse them. One can affirm that the film ultimately deals with Ava's healing process, stressing her transformation from artificial to posthuman, from entrapment to freedom, from submission to rebellion. In this sense, Braidotti's articulation of "becoming woman" serves as an analogy of Ava's healing process. In *Nomadic Theory* (2011), Braidotti urges us to find new ways of configuration, since she recognizes that we are still mortal, enfolded, made of language and hence alterity (122). She advises us to turn to "minor", hybrid or "less representational" genres like science fiction to find more accurate depictions of contemporary concerns (Braidotti 2006, 203). Ava is commodified and objectified from the beginning of her existence. Yet, she can be ultimately regarded as a kind of nomadic subject that, within her alterity and otherness, reappropriates her imposed—and fake—sex and gender traits to resist and fight back patriarchy. Her projection can hence be read as an urgent call to find new cartographies for the configuration of the posthuman on screen, as we will discuss later in this article.

Ava's body is "done" within biotechnological practices or robotics, and it connects to current understandings of power, technology and gender. Her artificially created body, which combines a humanoid face and silhouette with steel, wires, plastic and lights, is apparent throughout most of the movie, affecting her idea of herself and

³ For more information about the representation of masculinity and science fiction film, see my study *Of Men and Cyborgs: the Construction of Masculinity in Contemporary U.S. Science Fiction Cinema*, available at <http://rabida.uhu.es/dspace/handle/10272/4129>

puzzling both Caleb and spectators. In Ava's body the artificial and the cultural interact and get problematized. Femininity is considered as an artifice, something inorganic Ava is first given and later uses in order to manipulate her oppressors and find a way out to her imposed confinement.

Certainly, her constructed nature is made clear from the very beginning of the movie, and her first appearances on screen show a mechanical body, which contrasts with her sweet and soft voice. She positions herself as a machine in the first session in which she interviews with Caleb. To Caleb's request to tell something about herself, she answers: "You can see that I am a machine". We also get to know how she was designed and constructed in a sequence where Nathan shows Caleb his laboratory and the different limbs and members that compose Ava's body, together with her mind, made of "structure gel", which Nathan describes as "fluid, patterned, chaotic". Progressively, Ava "covers" her artificiality with chic clothes and wigs and performs convincingly the role of conventional femininity and object of masculine desire. Moreover, her objectification is visually supported by a cinematography that constantly shows her fragmented body, stressing her angelical, sweet, and young face (which remains intact throughout the whole movie), and her ample curves when she is sleeping or getting dressed.

Once her created nature has been established, and she is positioned as a desirable object for the male look, Ava starts her empowerment in the spaces she has consciously designed for that. At this point, and by acquiring the technological tools she needs for getting her independent agency, she starts transforming the oppressive space she is set into a liberatory one. This is the first step toward her becoming, as we see her adopting a truly rebellious position. Once she is empowered, she will heal. In session three, she puts on a floral dress and a wig for her encounter with Caleb, covering her artificial nature and adopting a human look for her recorded session. Already in session four she appears fully dressed as a woman, fully disguised in order to achieve her aims. After several close-ups of her face while she is getting dressed, she asks Caleb: "How do I look? Are you attracted to me?" She is following the codes of sensuality and seduction that have been programmed onto her in order to get her goal, overtly playing with the rules of male seduction and manipulation. She wants to be observed and desired, and this becomes evident when she tells Caleb: "sometimes at night, I am wondering if you are watching me on the cameras, and I hope you are". As we will find out soon, seducing Caleb, or pretending to like him, is part of her program and she performs it persuasively. Ava plays with human assumptions and manipulates its codes to get what she wants and, this way, she empowers herself and starts her healing process. In this sense, and precisely due to her overt sexuality and manipulative behavior within a patriarchal oppressive system, she has been considered as a version of *femme fatale*, or rather *neo-femme fatale*, if we considered her posthuman nature and her lack of punishment in the end. Kyna McClenaghan (2015) has read the film on these terms, arguing that Garland "uses the allegory of Adam and Eve, a new version of the neo-femme fatale, and the addition of color to the noir landscape to effectively characterize the issues of gender as a social construct and of artificial intelligence as the newest mode of self-destruction being pursued by humanity" (1).

At this moment in the film, her adoption of traditional spaces (femininity and object of the look) is made clear to audiences, although not to Caleb, since we still see him adopting the role of savior or hero. Audiences share Ava's plan, and her posthuman subjectivity stands at the center of spectatorial empathy. Throughout the seven sessions that lasts the "experiment", Caleb and Ava talk about human nature, past memories, feelings, art, painting, friendship, etc. The tone becomes more and more intimate and sensual as the sessions pass up to the point that Caleb risks his "job" and offers Ava his

help to escape from her imprisonment. Yet, it is within the spaces of the power-cuts that Ava manages to produce, where her manipulative behavior is taken to an extreme, and her process of becoming is more evident. These power-cuts are brief moments of freedom where she cannot be heard nor listened by Nathan. In them, she challenges her programmed functions, and changes her angelical and sweet tone for a more direct style. Those moments are key for manipulating technology and acquiring agency. The atmosphere in them is sinister and annoying, suggesting a space of danger and/or mystery that, nevertheless, is associated to her liberation. Already in session two we get a power-cut for the first time. Within this lapse of time, she warns Caleb not to trust Nathan, which leaves Caleb puzzled likewise.

Eliminó: which

Eliminó: s

In session five, she declares to Caleb that she wants to be with him and asks him if he wishes so. From this moment onwards, she feels somehow empowered, her talking has changed a little bit, as she takes the lead on making the questions, and has almost convinced Caleb to help her scape. For audiences, her manipulative intentions are more than evident at this point, and this idea is reinforced by elements of the *mise and scene*. Ava and Caleb are close to one another but always separated by the screen, suggesting their physical and emotional distance. Moreover, when they are physically close by, a crystal box separates them, evidencing once more their strangeness.

Eliminó:

It is when Caleb discovers all the prototypes that Nathan stores in his wardrobe, when he firmly decides to assist her. It is at this point that Nathan states that Ava has passed the test, as she has successfully pretended to like Caleb and convinced him to facilitate her freedom. Nathan declares: “Ava was a rat in a maze, and I gave her one way out. To escape, she’ d have to use self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality, empathy, and she did. Now, if that isn’ t true AI, what the fuck is?” It is also interesting to note here how Ava outthinks Nathan, as he is convinced that he is still in control and can stop both Ava and Caleb from freeing her. Even though Nathan is aware of her manipulative nature, Ava shows she has the tools to defeat him, and to abandon the closed world that has been oppressing her. Once she is free, and reversing spectatorial expectation, she abandons the romance narrative with Caleb, another hint she is out of the humanist codes: from her point of view, Caleb’s imagination of who she is represents just another patriarchal trap, so she simply leaves him die.

Ava, from her marginal position, manages to alter an oppressive space into a space for fight and freedom. At this point, Ava recalls the transformative potential of the cyborg figure postulated by Donna Haraway in her “Cyborg Manifesto” where she praises the power to survive, “not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (311). Haraway proposes the cyborg figuration as an example of how to destabilize old codes of the body and “become” female or male outside traditional gendered power relations. Like Haraway’s cyborg, Ava manages to change the rules of the game.

Eliminó: .

A controversial issue regarding Ava’s becoming, which I will expand in the next section, is her relationship with the Asian character Kyoko, another sexualized female robot created by Nathan. At first, and helped by the visuals, spectators are led to believe that Kyoko is human, a fact that emphasizes that Nathan’s bad treatment of women is extensible to robotics. Using language and body communication totally unfamiliar for audiences, they ally in order to stab Nathan in violent ways. Cinematography reinforces their close bond, and hence we get several close ups of them just looking at each other and using this peculiar language inaudible to audiences. Their intimacy is associated to danger and violence at all times. This version of a dangerous (posthuman) female bonding recalls Braidotti’s call for a revision of patriarchy through “empowerment”, “community building” and “bonding” (Braidotti 2013, 54). However, Ava’s final empowerment also

means Kyoko's destruction. In relation to this issue, Nishime claims that the movie treats racialized bodies as "disposable laboring avatars that inhibit white male subjectivity and must be abandoned for white females to transcend social barriers" (29). Kyoko, Nishime affirms, is not posthuman but only a domestic slave, a voiceless robot whose sexualized body is devaluated, and her subjectivity eliminated just to focus on the story of white female empowerment. In this sense, Ava "achieves freedom over the dead body of the Asian robot and walks out of prison literally wearing her skin" (Nishime, 35). The film poses, accordingly, "an anxious display of whitewashing and violent misogyny as responses to the contradictions of contemporary culture" (45).

Ava's authenticity and her refusal to fit into the traditional spaces designed for her further implies the triumph of white female empowerment. Precisely, Ava is the only character that consciously adopts a posthuman subjectivity, suggesting a productive alternative to humanist paradigms, as I will discuss in the following section.

3. Posthumanism as a healing therapy

As it has been illustrated in the previous section, Ava succeeds in liberating herself from oppression and starts a new life as an independent posthuman being. This section aims at stressing the potential of Ava's posthuman subjectivity for her healing process, and how her liberation from oppression ultimately implies notions of exclusion of other female robots. At the end of the movie, Ava proves to be a revolutionary, self-sufficient, authentic being who consciously adopts strategies to heal and survive in an adverse humanist world. Her powerful presence in the film makes spectators feel empathy toward her, identify with her, get confused about her intentions and, ultimately, reconsider some humanist assumptions regarding sex and gender in technospaces. Additionally, the presence of other racialized and gendered robots in the film, and their fatal destiny, also urges audiences to look for a new economy of power relations.

Ava has been defined here as posthuman, in line with Katherine N. Hayles' theorizations. In *My Mother was a Computer*, Hayles talks about the ineludible interaction between subjectivity and materiality. According to her, the difference between human and technology has become difficult to distinguish (228) and the (posthuman) body that emerges speaks the language of 21st century cybernetics. In the same line of thought, many feminist science fiction writers whose works have offered posthuman bodies that change the current concept of humanity have explored the close interconnection between subjectivity and embodiment. In *Bodies of Tomorrow* (2007), Vint analyzes some of these possibilities of challenging embodiment, arguing that it is important to return to a notion of embodied subjectivity in order to articulate the ethical implications of technologies of bodily modifications (8). For this purpose, Vint analyses works by Gwyneth Jones, Octavia Butler, Ian Banks or Neal Stephenson to make a call for ethical posthumanism. In close line with Vint's arguments, subjectivity is understood in Garland's movie as being both abstract and material, implying that Ava needs to look into her technologized body to grasp the current world in which she is placed. The idea that technology is able to radically shape and/or alter our bodies affecting our concept of selfhood is a common topic in science fiction films and is also suggested in *Ex Machina*. Specifically, films that stress a close interaction between humans and machines while preserving the materiality of the body speak about the possibility of posthuman subjectivities.

The film depicts Ava's (white) body as key for her liberation and further healing from her objectification and enslavement, while it also suggests how her final empowerment leaves other racialized and sexualized robots trapped in the techno-prison where they were created. Indeed, Ava's body is preserved, but not those of her female

companions, which are literally discarded and destroyed. As a matter of fact, Ava takes some of her skin before she escapes at the end of the film. In the same way, their subjectivities are not shown to audiences, and their voices are, evident in the case of Kyoko, literally silenced. The liberation of Ava implies, then, that other racialized bodies are considered as disposable, an aspect of the movie that has been noted by scholars (Cheng, Rhee, Nishime) and that remains problematic. Indeed, in relation to this issue, Rhee affirms that the film “depicts the liberation of Ava, an imprisoned white female robot, and the Asian and black female robots whose abuse, enslavement, and destruction work in the narrative at the service of Ava’s freedom” (87). Racialized bodies are still at the service of Ava’s white one, a fact that urges viewers to think about the commodification of certain bodies in advanced capitalist societies. While Ava manages to defeat the system and become posthuman, her racialized robot companions do not manage to do so and remain marginal. This further recalls Braidotti’s words when she denounces in *The Posthuman* (2013), the commodification of certain bodies by advanced capitalist societies: “these are the sexualized, racialized and naturalized others, who are reduced to less than human status of disposable bodies. We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others” (2013,15). In this sense, Ava’s becoming directly implies instances of exclusion, as I advanced at the beginning of this essay. Ava manages to resist sexist assumptions, yet the film fails to offer a positive depiction of the racialized body, which further suggests the need to find ethical responses and accountabilities.

Eliminó: I

Eliminó: →

Hence, *Ex Machina* deals with the idea that subjectivity and body are intrinsically connected in the posthuman being, embodied by Ava. Ava’s subjectivity is embedded in a material reality that incorporates the latest technological advances, and her body is fully preserved until the end of the movie. Ava is, like the rest of the female robots appearing in the film, an artificial being initially intended for human benefit but that, nevertheless, evolves into a posthuman character, since she is able to empower herself and heal from the violence exerted on her by patriarchal and humanist standards. She heals because she manages to defeat an oppressive reality, become an autonomous being and finally challenge humanist assumptions to her own benefit. The movie shows her process of becoming, which culminates with her liberation and healing from adverse circumstances. She embodies a kind of posthumanism that entails healing and the overcoming of unfavorable circumstances. Thus, and as evidenced by Ava at the end of the movie, the posthuman subjectivity is not a given category (as sex and gender may be for her) but a conscious and deliberate position that she adopts and from where she contests traditional configurations of power. In this sense, Ava coalesces with the definition of posthumanism articulated by Braidotti and other critical thinkers who advocate for affirmative politics.

The very notion of posthuman subjectivity has many ethical implications, since it is not simply a state of being but an active positioning. Especially in the case of Ava, her reappropriation of gendered traits becomes significant for her healing process, as argued before. Ava manages to heal herself by performing normative behavior, and, by taking advantage of her given sex and gender, Ava revenges her torturer, leaves Caleb trapped in the search center, and seeks freedom in her reassembled posthuman body.

Additionally, and as it has been argued so far, Ava’s authentic—or posthuman—nature is aligned with her constant play with humanist (sexist) rules, which she manipulates and uses to reassure and heal herself. This idea of breaking with expectations is once again employed at the end of the film, when Ava’s (alien) behavior shocks spectators. Precisely, not only Caleb but also spectators assume that this version of the stereotype of the “damsel in distress” will ultimately help him, but Garland plays with our expectations, and we see how she leaves him locked inside the room. Spectators, probably familiarized with the topic of the “good” human being trying to help a weak and

vulnerable artificial intelligence from its creator (as happens in *AI*, for instance), and adopting an inevitable anthropocentric and paternalistic view concerning Ava, expect Caleb's release and later adaptation to a much friendlier place. In reversing all these paradigms, Garland, Brian Jacobson argues, "is quietly repurposing sexist tropes for understated satire, while almost subliminally evoking a wealth of resonant antecedents in literature and film" (4).

The sequence at the very end of the movie where Ava "repairs" herself before escaping and heading to the city is quite significant for the purpose of this analysis. After killing Nathan with the help of Kyoko, Ava opens his closet to find previous models of female robots hanging there. Ava takes an arm from one of them—significantly Asiatic-looking—, removes sections of this skin and puts them on her body to cover its mechanical structure. She chooses, then, her own body and appearance, an act that, once again, makes spectators associate femininity with masquerade. The space where she is trapped is, as suggested before, still governed by heteropatriarchal and racial standards, and Ava needs to follow these conventions in order to escape. Her empowerment implies her following the dictates of sexist and racist standards. After this assemblage, she stands naked, proudly looking at her new body in a series of mirrors, in what has been interpreted as a scene with sensual overtones. The color of the skin is a mere ornament, as Anlin Cheng argues, "yellowness and whiteness are literally decorations here, and the skin in question here is materially identical for all the AI androids, belonging yet not belonging to them all" (148). One can affirm, then, that Ava "absorbs" the yellow skin just to adapt to the humanist spaces depicted in the film for the sake of her survival. Apart from the skin, Ava also chooses a body with ample curves and a fashionable white dress and high heeled shoes, reaffirming the idea that she needs to pass as "normative" in order to survive in humanist sexist spaces. As suggested above, it is precisely at this point when the project of ethical posthumanism is imperative, encouraging audiences to rearticulate normative standards and to look for more inclusive solutions for the contradictions of our times. Indeed, it is precisely at these sequences showing Ava's liberation at the expense of Kyoko's death when a reorganization of power relations is demanded on audiences, conscious that sexist and racial stereotypes continue to inform contemporary narratives. As Rhee argues, the topic of racial dehumanization speaks of the devalued work of women of color: "as in other texts, white, middle and upper class women's freedom and happiness is achieved by the exclusion, if not exploitation, of the very women of color and white working-class women who make possible their liberation from a closed world, whether domestic sphere or high-tech prison" (90). Ava's appropriation of the racialized bodies implies, then, the latter's subordination and marginality.

The configuration of a truly posthuman subjectivity is, as it has been suggested here so far, a fairly complicated issue within hegemonic discourses. Ava serves, nevertheless, as a starting point for the configuration of a version of embodied posthumanism in popular science fiction cinema. The audience's sympathy for Ava has been partly achieved by narrative strategies such as identification and empathy, possible thanks to her powerful presence on the film and her charisma. Spectators normally relate to her—helped by the fact that she has human-like looks—and reflect upon the need to reorganize Western societies' current way of thinking, including the search for new ways of approaching the body beyond the classical organic form of corporeality. By doing so, the film succeeds in exploring a posthuman subjectivity, while denouncing practices that oppress manipulated/created/artificial beings ruthlessly for the only purpose of enduring (a privileged part of) humankind.

In relation to this issue of identification, Vint reaffirms the importance of science fiction literature as a site of critical engagement with the discourse of the posthuman,

Eliminó: 1

arguing that these texts offer “a space in which models of possible futures selves are put forward as possible sites for identification on the part of the readers” (Vint 20). Although not in such fruitful way, the cinematic figure of the posthuman also makes us think about ourselves and our relationship with technology. Indeed, *Ex Machina* articulates current debates on what being human means and forces audiences to reflect upon the future of our bodies and the need to find new mappings for them. The film entails a reconfiguration of subjectivities in the sense that it proposes a character, Ava, that makes us reflect upon our intricate relationship with science and technology, while denouncing certain practices such as the commodification of the “other”, or “life” trading. In this sense, artificial intelligences become iconic figures of transgression that are the objects of ethical debates about how far nature and technology should be altered, modified and/or transformed. This idea recalls Braidotti’s argument on the biogenetic structure of contemporary capitalism, whereby advanced capitalism both invests and profits from the scientific and economic control and the commodification of all that lives. This context produces a paradoxical and rather opportunistic form of post-anthropocentrism on the part of the market forces that happily trade on Life itself (Braidotti 2013, 59). According to Braidotti’s argument, contemporary capitalism aims at controlling and exploiting the generative powers of women, animals, plants, genes and cells. In a similar vein, Sanna Karkulehto *et alli* argue that “some (human beings) are more responsible for the exploitation of the natural resources, and gain short-term benefits from it, while the less privileged ones are situated closer to the receiving, powerless end of the exploitation, along with the myriad nonhumans” (2).

Certainly, the movie makes spectators think about the impossibility to fully understand the posthuman. Ava’s behavior cannot be adapted to our humanist ethics, and her posthuman nature defies our rules. In “Alien Feminism and Cinema Posthuman Women”, Jelaca examines the controversies of “female posthuman subjectivities” as depicted in *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin*. Her aim is to devise a new social, ethical and discursive scheme as a way to theorize new feminist epistemologies along the lines of what she calls “alien posthumanism”. By using the term of “feminine alien posthuman” she addresses issues concerning the spectatorship uncertainty when viewing alien or unrecognizable discourses that, nevertheless, foster identification. In relation to *Ex Machina*, she argues that, by placing an alien figure (Ava) at the center of spectatorial identification and empathy, the film breaks down the boundary between the human and the posthuman (382). Precisely, the film’s alien feminism resides in its refusal to humanize its posthuman woman, whose surface appearance conceals the depths of technological circuitry comprising a human body that is only a mirage (Jelaca 396). Ava feigns empathy and displays a complete lack of it at the end. Yet, and as it has been also argued here, “it is the dismissal of an empathic encounter within humanist frameworks (which sustain traditional patriarchal power structures) that becomes a source of posthuman survival (Jelaca 398). Hence, Ava’s survival—and further healing—depend on this play with conventions.

In short, *Ex Machina* stands as a narrative of healing and revenge that plays with expectations and conventions in multiple ways. In doing so, the film manages to subtly denounce some practices of bodily replication (especially those controlled by heteropatriarchal standards), while urging for a post-anthropocentric view whereby the posthuman being can erase borders in fruitful ways.

4 Conclusion

As I have attempted to illustrate in this article, *Ex Machina* challenges our notion of conventionality regarding the gendered body and the human self by presenting (biased)

spectators with a stimulating instance of posthumanism embodied by artificial intelligence Ava. Initially conceived as a technologically manipulated body intended to complement/enhance the organic, “original” human body, Ava manages to become an authentic subject, and to contest power hierarchies within her otherness and alien nature. Her depiction on screen arises hence the issue of trespassing assumed borders. Initially conceived as Nathan’s disposable body or a human-like prosthesis that enables a better functioning of/ gives pleasure to/ preserves the “organic” body, Ava develops a great potential for changing established rules. In her particular search for freedom, she manipulates her artificial and inorganic femininity as a strategy to empower herself and transform the hostile environment she has been forced to live.

Ava’s empowerment ultimately poses questions encouraging for ethical responses and accountabilities. In this sense, and although fictional posthumans appearing in contemporary discourses “need to find new ways of encountering, discussing, and thinking of entities and environments where the human and the nonhuman entangle in increasingly intricate patterns” (Karkulehto *et alli*: 1), Garland’s movie provides us with a valid example of a cinematic posthuman character. Ava moves between the represented discursive space of hegemonic discourses and the challenging space that the posthuman offers to finally offer a story of becoming and healing.

5 Bibliography

- Anlin Cheng, Anne. *Ornamentalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Atanasoski, Neda and Kalindi Vora. *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.
- Balsamo, Anne, “On the Cutting Edge: Cosmetic Surgery and the Technological Production of the Gendered Body.” *Camera Obscura* 28 (1992): 207-237.
- Balsamo, Anne. *Technologies of the Gendered body. Reading Cyborg Women*, 1996.
- Braidotti, Rosi, *Metamorphosis. Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.
- Braidotti, Rosi, “Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology.” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 23(7–8) (2006): 197–208.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
- Ex Machina*. Dir. Alex Garland. Screenplay by Alex Garland. Perf. Domnhall Gleeson, Alicia Vikander, Oscar Isaac. Universal Studios, 2015.
- Haraway, Donna. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist- Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149–81. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Hayles, Katherine N. *My Mother was a Computer. Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Herbrechter, Stefan. *Posthumanism. A critical Analysis*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Jacobson, Brian R. “*Ex Machina* in the Garden”. *Film Quarterly* vol 69 (2016): 23-34.
- Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies. Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994.
- Jelaca, Dijana. “Alien Feminism and Cinema’s Posthuman Women”. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no 2 (2018): 379-400.
- Karkulehto, Sanna, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis, eds. *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

Dio formato: Español

- McClenaghan, Kyna. "Ava as the Reinvented Eve: A Gendered Assault on the Patriarchy" *Night and the City: Film Noir*, December 16 (2015).
- Nishime, LeiLani. "Whitewashing Yellow Futures in Ex Machina, Cloud Atlas and Advantageous: Gender, Labor and Technology in Sci-fi Film". *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 20 (number 1) (2017): 29-49.
- Rhee, Jennifer. *The Robotic Imaginary. The Human and Price of Dehumanizing Labor*. Minnessota: University of Minnessota Press, 2018.
- Vint, Sherryl. *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.
- Virginás, Andrea. "Gendered transmediation of the digital from S1m0ne to ExMachina: 'visual pleasure' reloaded?" *European Journal of English Studies* (2017) 21:3, 288-303.
- Watercutter, Angela. "Ex Machina Has a Serious Fembot Problem." *Wired* (2015), April 9. <http://www.wired.com/2015/04/ex-machina-turing-bechdel-test/>.
- Wolfe, Cary. *What id Posthumanism?* Minnessota: University of Minnessota Press, 2010.

Eliminó: m

Eliminó: n

Eliminó: e

Código de campo cambiado