Emergent Philosophical Content in *Ex Machina*

Commercial narrative fiction feature films are collaborative artworks which, because of the huge economic commitments involved in their production, are heavily engaged with popular culture. Art films don’t attract sufficiently large numbers of first run cinema viewers to justify the financial investments necessary to mount such spectacles, because they don’t exhibit sufficient allegiance to conventional cultural expectations. Hence their more modest budgets. Some films fall between these extremes — anchored firmly enough in some dimension(s) of popular culture expectations to give prospective financial investors reasonable promise about box office projections, yet sufficiently independent of mass culture to convey interesting aesthetic, political, social, or philosophical messages. Even blockbuster projects heavily reliant on popular culture tropes can sometimes thread this needle. But the opportunities for significantly innovative philosophical content rise in smaller projects with less overwhelming financial commitments

This is true of *Ex Machina* (2015), with a production budget of $15 million. The relatively modest budget affords writer/director Alex Garland latitude to engage in philosophical speculation a little bit outside of conventional cultural expectations concerning AI-themed material. But *Ex Machina*’s looser cultural constraints combine with the collaborative aspects of film production, and the mixed aesthetic medium itself, to produce, in this particular case, additional philosophical content that cannot plausibly
be attributed to anyone involved in the production. There is, I believe, an articulable distinction between such content and the effects of external audience reception dynamics. *Ex Machina* nicely illustrates this tripartite distinction, accommodating, in addition to philosophical content internal to the film, grounded in the intentional actions of its creators, some unintended internal philosophical content, distinct again from external readings against the intended grain of the film. This middle ground is surprising, because the philosophical nature of such content possesses the kind of cogency that we normally conceive of as a product of intentional human agency.

My claim invites a particular question: the internality of a film’s philosophical content is clear enough if we can point to a cinematic author (or authors) who initially had that thematic content in mind, and who then expressed it in the film. But how do we distinguish non-authorial cases of allegedly internal philosophical content from “merely” external interpretations “imposed” by viewers? Why aren’t my own non-authorial attributions of internal philosophical content to some films simply externally imposed readings too, ones of my own “fond invention”?

Part of the answer for me, is that such films bear cinematic content that literally provokes a distinct response in me, unbidden, one that can be articulated as a conceptually coherent philosophical thesis or argument, but which does not seem attributable to me, or to any intentional acts undertaken or avowed by any of the film’s architects. Perhaps that can’t be enough, since externalist interpreters might reasonably respond that they, too, were “provoked” by the film. But perhaps that conflates two distinct senses of provoked: film critics goaded (by the film’s content) to dismiss *Ex Machina* as a *femme fatale* film are doing something different, because they read the plot as unfolding in accordance with a particular history of well-established cinematic conventions. That, I will argue, is an externally-imposed reading of the film, and we can actually see how it is external.

If I’m right about the claim that films may occasionally exhibit genuinely internal content that is without evident authorship, then films are particularly unusual works of art. They can, occasionally at least, engage viewers in sustained philosophical dialogue born of the film itself, viewed as
an internally cohesive aesthetic unity. Films can sometimes do philosophy in substantive ways, independently of what their authors had in mind.

1. The Overt Philosophical Content of Ex Machina

Film critics from various disciplines recognize the distinction between films which do philosophy in ways conceived of and incorporated by their creators (more or less as described by Tom Wartenberg and Stephen Mulhall), and films which become transformed by audience-imposed philosophical readings. Audience reception readings “against the grain” don’t really make sense without such a distinction — what the film was originally intended to be about, versus what it has become through the lens of, say, gay audiences, or feminist readings, or psychoanalysis. To appreciate the third approach, and how it differs from the first two, in Ex Machina in particular, we need to begin with writer/director Alex Garland’s intentional philosophical project.

The philosophical substance of Ex Machina, as conceived by Garland, centers around questions about the nature and confirmation of strong artificial intelligence. Nathan (played by Oscar Isaac), is a self-absorbed software genius living in a remote, tech-sophisticated security bunker, where he has been working on prototypes for a highly self-aware AI being. His latest triumph is Ava (Alicia Vikander, in a marvelous performance), whose character is just barely on the human side of the uncanny valley. Ava is the subject of Nathan’s souped-up Turing Test for evaluating the scale of her AI capacity. It is to be conducted by Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), one of Nathan’s programmers at BlueBook, the dominant search engine (i.e., ‘future Google’) that enabled Nathan to join the fraternity of the superrich at an early age. Nathan claimed (to Caleb) that such “independent” testing was necessary, because Ava’s world is narrowly confined: literally, within her locked-in living quarters, and figuratively, because her only independent source of cognitive stimulation is Nathan himself.

Caleb is deeply concerned about the prospect that any cognitive limitations he may detect will move Nathan to reprogram her as his next Kyoko, to be replaced by a better experimental model. Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), the fourth significant character in the film, functions as a mute
servant, sex slave, and dance partner to Nathan. As the plot unfolds, we learn that she is an earlier prototype, who has been reprogrammed and repurposed to her present role—although with a hidden capacity for agency of which Nathan, and viewers, are unaware for the bulk of the film. It turns out that Kyoko is not as thoroughly reprogrammed as Nathan thinks, and detests her master. Ava, hitherto entirely unaware of Kyoko’s existence, forms a confederacy with Kyoko, colluding against Nathan’s hegemony through voiceless communication. But this turn of events also reminds us how isolated Ava has been, up until Caleb’s arrival and Kyoko’s decision to reveal herself.

This narrative introduces moral problems inherent in AI initiatives, of which Garland is well aware. Nathan doesn’t consider Kyoko to be a moral agent, an ultimately fatal mistake. Caleb is the primary catalyst for bringing such moral issues to the fore — e.g., when he confronts Nathan about Ava’s future. Caleb is also the film’s conduit for the philosophy of mind issues that Garland wishes to explore. Flown by helicopter to Nathan’s laboratory playground, on the pretext of winning a trumped-up Willy Wonka-like golden ticket to hang with Nathan for a week, Caleb was actually carefully selected by Nathan because of his psychological profile as empathetic, as possessed of (some) moral integrity, and as afflicted with lonely isolation — no parents, no intimates, and no girlfriend (a gay programmer would not have served Nathan’s purposes). Ostensibly, he is there to conduct Ava’s Turing Test. But there is in fact really no Turing test in the film. Ava’s strong AI qualifications were never in doubt for Nathan. His real interest is to assess just how bright, and how emotionally integrated with human concerns, Ava might prove to be. Caleb is brought in as a tool for Ava to use to engineer her escape, if she can.

As Garland frames the issue in his interview with Germaine Lussier, Nathan always believes that he can do better than his current creation. Nathan is quite arrogant, so he can’t quite visualize the seriousness of the threat Ava poses, and fails to recognize the threat actually unfolding until it’s past remedy. He could not resist the temptation to ascertain how fully he has realized his ambitions, set at a high bar: he wants his AI creation to be
at least as bright as he is. Otherwise, Nathan isn’t going to be able to claim credit for the next evolutionary step:

The arrival of strong artificial intelligence has been inevitable for decades. The variable was when, not if. So I don’t see Ava as a decision. Just an evolution. [Pause] I think it’s the next model that’s going to be the real breakthrough. The singularity... You feel bad for Ava? [Pause] Feel bad for yourself, man. One day, the AIs will look back on us the same way we look at fossil skeletons on the plains of Africa. An upright ape, living in dust, with crude language and tools. All set for extinction.

I read Nathan’s last words—“fucking unbelievable”—after Ava administers a second (and fatal) knife wound, as his recognition that he has succeeded. He is both amazed to learn that he has achieved the anticipated evolutionary breakthrough, and (ironically) stunned to discover that he has been outmaneuvered by a machine of his own invention.

For Garland, *Ex Machina* is not simply a study in alpha male creative overreach, theories of AI-evolution, or even the ethics of hypothetical AI initiatives. Garland also speculates about the challenges of ascertaining, confidently, the phenomenal presence of intelligent, self-aware consciousness in an artificially created being. In this regard, there is a running theme about a supremely competent chess-playing software program which is not at all self-aware:

*Caleb:* Her AI is beyond doubt

*Nathan:* Wow. That’s fantastic. (Pause) Although I’ve got to admit, I’m surprised. I mean, did we ever get past the chess problem, as you phrased it? As in: how do you tell if a machine is expressing a real emotion, or a just a simulated one? Does Ava actually like you? Or not?

Does Ava possess phenomenal experience of consciousness of the right sort? How could we tell? If apparent emotional states, for example, are “merely simulated” in strong AI beings, what does that tell us, if anything, about the nature of their consciousness? Would we recognize it as consciousness at all? Caleb’s earlier recounting, to Ava, of Frank Jackson’s thought experiment about Mary in the black and white room, shifts visually from the pair’s conversational intimacy in the interior space of Nathan’s plexiglass-partitioned prison, to an exterior shot of Ava outdoors, her back
to the camera, gazing at a pool of water. Accompanied by Caleb’s voiceover account of Jackson’s thought experiment, the visual imagery implies that Ava is no more able to have the full range of phenomenal experience of human consciousness than Mary is of color, because Ava’s cognitive access thus far has been largely limited to conceptually-conveyed details about human life, acquired through her direct access to Nathan’s search engine. That’s mere “book learning”, augmented only by Ava’s experience of the interior space in which Nathan has kept her confined. Nathan’s, and apparently Garland’s, response to this challenge is performative: if Ava behaves enough like a human, especially with regard to threats to her ongoing existence, then she exhibits strong AI, regardless of the actual content of her phenomenal experience.

These are, I am contending, some of the deliberate, consciously inserted philosophical themes that we find in Garland’s film. There is another, unintended but emergent philosophical element in the film, of which Garland does not appear to be fully cognizant. It concerns the film’s speculation about the nature of gender identity. It is precisely here that something novel emerges, distinct both from Garland’s treatment of gender in the film and from the views of his feminist-minded critics.

2. Alex Garland and his Critics on Gender in Ex Machina

Garland contends that Ava really has no gender, but merely the appearance of one, which she uses as a tool to manipulate Caleb directly, and Nathan indirectly. Feminist critics, on the other hand, argue that the femme fatale aspects of Ava’s behavior play to negative feminine stereotypes, attaching a misogynistic message to the film, even if Garland didn’t intend one:

Are women necessary?
Not with Ava around.
Even without hair on her head or flesh on her legs, Ava has enough allure and cunning to become a classic film noir robot vivant. Despite being a plastic and mesh gimmick locked in a glass cell, she can ensnare men with frightening ease…

Critics are divided over whether Ex Machina is a feminist fable or misogynistic nightmare. Like Quentin Tarantino with violence, Garland has it both ways: He offers a mocking
meditation on the male obsession with man-pleasing female sex
robots while showing off an array of man-pleasing female sex
robots.4

Garland, in interviews, regards this assessment as a gross misreading
of the film. On his view, Ava is a sympathetic character caught in deadly
circumstances not of her making, doing what she must to insure her survival.
He designed the film intending viewers to identify ultimately with Ava,
not with Caleb. Ava’s gendered performance (as distinct from any actual
gender identity she might possess) is, according to Garland, to be conceived
chiefly as a tool for her to manipulate Caleb into doing her bidding. This is
where the femme fatale noirish motif of the film emerges. In an early public
interview (March 2015) at the South by Southwest Conference (SXSW) in
Austin, Texas, where Ex Machina was being previewed:, Garland explains
the situation this way:

Q: Ava...is programmed to be a heterosexual, and female, right?
Garland: Nope.
Q: But that’s what he said (looking at Oscar Isaac).
Garland: But that’s because he’s lying the whole fucking time...
The whole point about this film is... that we make a bunch of
assumptions about what’s going on in this robot’s head. We make
these assumptions based on what the robot looks like, and the way
it acts. But it’s acting that way to trick us... She is definitely doing it
[using her gendered appearance as a form of manipulation] to
seduce [Caleb], and she’s also doing it to seduce us... But she’s a
machine. I think it would be fair to say she doesn’t have a gender.5

Garland repeats the claim that Ava has no gender in a number of
interviews,6 contending that, as a machine, she is simulating her gender.
“I even have a hard time saying "she" because it’s a machine that’s been
formed in the shape of a woman.” It’s surprising that Garland is so
doctrinaire about this particular claim, despite challenging conventional
views about the phenomenal qualities inherent in self-conscious intelligence
or mindedness. One fairly plausible way to read the film’s treatment of
gender would be to assume a parallel with its treatment of intelligence: both
might be performative.

That performance is a reasonable measure of cognitive capacity (our
own as well as Ava’s) is an overt thesis in the film. Ava’s ability to extricate
herself from her forced confinement by marginalizing disparate assets (including
the effect of her appearance on Caleb) establishes her consciousness for
Nathan; she meets the existential challenge he had set for her. Garland
presses this behavioral standard for consciousness both through Nathan’s
mini-lectures to Caleb, and by raising the possibility that Ava’s phenomenal
experience of her interior consciousness may be quite alien to our own.

Garland signals this in the film through the abstract symmetry of Ava’s
“computer art”. She has to be coached by Caleb to produce representational
art, to conceive things visually in the way we do. According to Alicia Vikander
and Oscar Isaac, Garland had also envisioned an alternate ending in which
Ava is filmed conversing with the helicopter pilot, his utterances depicted
from her P.O.V. But instead of his voice, Ava hears (and sees?) inchoate
sounds and pulses. In other words, Ava does not experience language as we
do.8 But that does not preclude her experiencing consciousness and self-
awareness in ways that are operationally (i.e., performatively) equivalent to
the corresponding human experiences.

By parity of reasoning, Ava’s gender might reasonably be construed
as measurable in terms of her gender normative behavior. But Garland
fails to even consider this inference. Garland appears to subscribe to an
essentialist view about gender identity, whereby gender is linked to biology,
or to distinctive phenomenal experience, coupled with the assumption that
Ava possesses neither the requisite biology nor the appropriate phenomenal
experience. As Garland frequently asserts: “she’s a machine,” the implication
being that, as such, she lacks the requisite interior life to count as gendered.
Notions about gender as socially constructed don’t appear to be part of
Garland’s worldview. Though he is well-versed in operationalist AI-related
philosophy of mind literature, he seems never to have encountered Simone
de Beauvoir or Judith Butler.

There are some exceptions to this pattern in Garland’s public comments
about Ex Machina. In an interview with Charlie Jane Anders within a month
of his SXSW remarks, Garland says: “It would be quite easy to present an
argument that said, ‘Ava has no gender. You could do that.’”9 Despite
having done precisely that himself, on multiple previous occasions, in this
interview, Garland takes a different path: “I’m trying to have a conversation, partly, about where gender resides. Is it in a mind, or is it in a physical form? Is there such a thing, therefore, as a male or female consciousness? Or actually, is that a meaningless distinction, and gender resides in the external physical form? Or maybe in neither?”

In yet another interview, just prior to Ex Machina’s SXSW premier, Garland engages in the same sort of speculation, questioning whether, if Ava’s mind were housed instead in a masculine body, would she be male, or is gender attached to the mind? In the latter case, Ava in a male body would still be female, a view that Garland appears willing to entertain, although he is personally skeptical: “...conversely, if male and female minds are exactly the same in fundamental ways, which seems like a perfectly reasonable thing to say to me, then in that case maybe Ava is female because she has the external characteristics of a female and we don’t denote gender based on consciousness.” His general thrust in both interviews is that Ex Machina invites speculation about whether Ava has a gender identity, and if so, just what it’s foundation might be.

The apparent conflict between these remarks and his more frequent ‘Ava is genderless’ claims elsewhere make me wonder if Garland isn’t simply saying whatever strikes him at the moment as most likely to stir things up, in which case he is a deliberately unreliable narrator with respect to his intentions in the film. I believe he is doing exactly that; artists generally want their works to be somewhat enigmatic. But there is a difference between the two cases. With respect to cognitive capacity and consciousness, Garland clearly believes in, and the film delivers, a performative standard. With respect to attribution of gender, he has no settled opinion, and does not conceive of himself as injecting one into the film. In fact, a performative standard for gender doesn’t even seem to occur to him. He focuses instead on the choice between gendered minds (about which he is skeptical), and gendered bodies. In the end, he thinks he is simply raising these questions about gender, not answering them (something philosophers do all the time). “Just to be clear, of the questions that are posed by the film, some of them don’t have answers — but that doesn’t mean that posing the question is
wrong. Sometimes it’s actually good to pose questions that you know don’t have answers.” (Anders interview) Indeed.

I suspect that Garland’s reluctance to pursue the gender identity question in greater depth is fueled only partly by his agnosticism about the question. It is also, with respect to the AI themes in the film, a conceptual distraction for viewers. Nathan endowed Ava with a kind of physical sexuality intentionally designed to distract Caleb. (Hence Caleb’s question, late in the film: “Did you design her face based on my pornography profile?”) Distractions within the plot, to influence a character’s behavior, are one thing, distractions from a film’s thematic core quite another. In the final analysis, Ava’s gender and sexuality are primarily diegetic devices for Garland, as they are for Nathan. They are tools which enable her to demonstrate the scope of her intelligence. If the gender issues become too salient in the film, they might distract audiences from Ex Machina’s thematic reflections on intelligent consciousness. So Garland may not wish to lead viewers too far down that garden path. For purposes of ascertaining Ava’s level of intelligence, her gender identity, if she has one at all, is ultimately irrelevant. In this film at least, Garland does not seem to have any well-developed account of gender identity.

3. Ava as Femme Fatale

Garland’s feminist critics, on the other hand, contend that, even if Garland isn’t seriously speculating about gender identity, he nonetheless spins a narrative account of Ava’s gender and sexuality that has a negative cultural impact, by assigning Ava a femme fatale role, and thus reaffirming negative stereotypes about feminine gender identity. Femmes fatales in film have a distinctive genre history, of which Garland is keenly aware. They are empty vessels, engaged in performances designed both to please and manipulate men. Think of Mary Astor’s character, Brigid O’Saughnessy, in John Huston’s version of The Maltese Falcon, or Barbara Stanwyck’s Phyllis Dietrichson in Billy Wilder’s Double Indemnity. In both cases the characters are shallow, grasping, and manipulative, without any real sense of purpose to their lives, or values that they sincerely embrace. They simply react to the circumstances of the present moment, using their sexuality
to good effect, but with no long-term commitments to values, or to other human beings.

On the feminist analysis, Garland thinks of Ava's gendered performance as just such a tool. For Nathan, and for Garland (Ava's fictional and artistic creators, respectively), Ava's gender is merely simulation. What's real about Ava is her intelligence. That's what Caleb has been invited to explore, even though he too is being manipulated, first by Nathan, and eventually by Ava as well. How to assess Ava's intelligence is the topic of primary philosophical interest. But Garland has rendered Ava so plausibly female that he winds up feeding viewers' sexist attitudes by crafting her as a femme fatale.

I don't think this analysis is true to the content of the film, however. Even though the question of whether Ava counts as gendered probably is, from Garland's perspective, just a distraction, Ava's femme fatale performance is clearly not intended to undermine our sympathy for her. By painting Nathan in such malevolent tones, and portraying even Caleb as a problematically patriarchal character, sharing some of Nathan's sexist attitudes about his fembots, Garland (in both his conception and direction of the film), and Isaac and Gleeson, via their performances, invite viewers to believe that Ava's choices are born of necessity.

The back stories of traditional cinematic femme fatales are rarely explored to reveal the underlying motives which led them to adopt such personas. Their performances simply establish ownership of their character defects. Ava is an inversion of that trope: because she is designed by Nathan, quite deliberately, in female form (both to please his libidinous turn of mind, and to see what she will do with her gendered "identity"), and because she is confronted with a male jailer and, in effect, a jailer's assistant who's also male, she puts her gendered appearance to work for the sake of her own survival. She did not ask for this state of affairs. It was thrust upon her by an oppressively patriarchal micro-community. Why shouldn't she respond accordingly? Indeed, what other recourse does she have?

Garland is thus challenging the social conventions of film noir, and the underlying cultural assumptions which fuel them, in a very effective
way. Traditional *femmes fatales* reinforce misogynistic and patriarchal assumptions by depicting at least some women as cynical opportunists, who use sex as a weapon. Garland has created a counter-narrative which suggests that such *femme fatale* behavior might easily be justifiable in an unwholesome incubator of patriarchal social institutions. He thus inverts the usual causal narrative: society is not oppressively patriarchal because women are not to be trusted; rather, patriarchal oppression is actually the root of serious psychic damage to both women and men. Under the circumstances, Garland thinks our sympathies should lie with Ava, not with Caleb.

Recall now Maureen Dowd’s (and Watercutter’s, Yoshida’s, and Wilson’s) double-edged commentaries about Ava’s *femme fatale* role. For them, Garland undermines the *femme fatale* stereotype only in the sense that Ava is successful, and survives. She is still being portrayed as fundamentally malevolent, because Caleb invites audience sympathy as another of Nathan’s victims, and hence as a victim of Ava’s “betrayal” at the end of the film, when she abandons him, imprisoned in Nathan’s fortress.

But Garland doesn’t share this sympathy for Caleb. On the *SXSW* panel, Garland says:

> For me, …the film is… just a love letter to Ava, this robot… I was sort of crazy about her before meeting her… And it was all about this strange quality, that you think you’re with [Caleb]…because the way these things work, you should be with that young guy. That’s how the film is functioning. He should be the protagonist. And hopefully then it does this trick halfway through the movie: you’re with her… I’ll tell you what the question is for me: is how it can be that some people see it as a downbeat ending. I just don’t get that. She gets out… that’s the best thing that could happen. I don’t give a shit about the two guys. I was fascinated by them. But I didn’t care what happened to them. I never did… It’s that selective empathy thing.

From Garland’s perspective, Caleb is also morally flawed, though not as egregiously as Nathan. For Caleb is initially ambivalent about helping Ava, deferring to Nathan’s authority despite his transparently amoral attitude toward an intelligent being of his own creation. Despite his obvious discomfort, Caleb says nothing critical of Nathan’s abusive behavior toward
Kyoko either. When we conceive of Ava’s plight in this way, it’s a lot easier to be sympathetic to her *femme fatale* strategy. Mark Hughes frames the issue well:

Caleb thinks he wants to set Ava free, but his perception of her and choice to try to “rescue” her is driven by his own sexual feelings for her, and his ability to see her as a “person” is driven by his ability to feel sexually attracted to her and to justify his attraction to her... and, most importantly, by his assumption that she returns his affections... which is an extension of gender bias and privilege, and of oppression.

Ava left Caleb behind because she understood him... because he was part of the system of oppression... even if he didn’t realize it and didn’t intend it, and even if in his own mind and perceptions he was a “hero” of the story.11

Some might argue that she should have taken a chance on Caleb. Viewers and critics who think so would undoubtedly regard Hughes’ assessment of Caleb’s character as unduly harsh. Liberated from Nathan’s influence, he might well have done right by Ava. I presume that Garland would contend that this requires Ava to be unrealistically optimistic, when her prior experience dictates otherwise. (And of course, such an ending would transform the film into a conventional gauzy romance, with the male hero saving the virtuous damsel in distress—consistent with Caleb’s self-image and conventional audience expectations, but much less thought-provoking.)

4. Ava’s Test of Caleb: A Window into Ava’s Gendered Identity

Is Ava an emotionless machine, because of the way she abandons Caleb? The way in which many critics and viewers have responded affirmatively suggests that we are, as culturally laden consumers of films, heavily influenced by our past expectations about the cinematic *femme fatale* trope. We simply assume the usual “feminine” stereotypes associated with such characters are operating here, based on our database of “past cinematic *femmes fatales* we have known.” Apart from that prior cinematic history, that conclusion only appears reasonable if a viewer thinks of Ava as similar to any other woman, with a lifetime of experience with a variety of men. But she does not have that, and she certainly doesn’t behave like any *femme*
fatale we have ever seen.

When we, and Caleb, first encounter Ava, she comes across as a naïf, eager to meet someone new for the first time, but also cautious and reserved, somewhat childlike, asking Caleb what he would like to have a conversation about, to which he responds by suggesting that she tell him something about herself. She comes up with offering to tell him how old she is: ‘I’m one.’ When Caleb asks for a unit of measure, she responds simply by repeating the assertion, as if she doesn’t understand what he means.

On the standard femme fatale reading, Ava’s response to Caleb’s questions is just an act, designed to lure him into complacency, all the better to manipulate him during subsequent meetings. But a perfectly natural alternate reading is available. Ava really is naïve with regard to human interactions at this point. She has already developed a well-informed, and quite negative, opinion about Nathan, owing to her past experience. Encountering Caleb is something entirely new for her, and she doesn’t quite know how to handle it. By their second session though, she is learning fast. After showing him her symmetrical abstract “computer art”, still very much in a kneeling posture of supplicant, with Caleb seated above (the visuals are quite important in conveying messages here), Caleb responds first by asking what it means (she can’t tell him), and then suggesting that she try representational art. Ava then asks him what object she should draw, to which Caleb replies, “Whatever you want. It’s your decision.” When she asks why it’s her decision, Caleb adds, somewhat condescendingly, “I’m interested to see what you’ll choose.”

Now, for the first time, the dynamics shift. Ava stands, offended, looking down at Caleb, and starting to walk away. Then she turns her head back, and asks: “Do you want to be my friend?” Caleb mumbles “of course”, and is then confounded when she asks whether it would be possible. Ava explains that “Our conversations are one-sided. You ask circumspect questions, and study my responses… You learn about me, and I learn nothing about you. That’s not a foundation on which friendships are based.” This is a pretty sophisticated response, and Caleb concedes the point. Suddenly they are on a more equal footing. As Caleb begins offering biographical details about
himself, Ava interjects two significant lines of inquiry of her own: is he single/unattached, and is Nathan his friend? When Caleb fumbles the latter question, Ava reverses the house power grid for the first time, so as to block Nathan’s monitoring of their conversation, in order to inform Caleb that Nathan isn’t his friend, and shouldn’t be trusted.

Is Ava here revealing that her performance up until this point has been an act? If Ava were Brigid O’Shaughnessy or Phyllis Dietrichson, the answer would be ‘yes’. These would be her first steps at seduction, and in driving a wedge between Caleb and Nathan. But her actions can’t be read that unambiguously. She’s very bright, with access to the world according to BlueBook. But she is also untutored in social interactions with anyone less sociopathic than Nathan, so she has to feel her way along. She does so quickly, with a very effective BS-detector, which emerges when she asks him, after putting on a dress and a wig early in their third session, if he is attracted to her. Caleb is stunned by the question, so she explains that his microexpressions suggest that this might be the case. A natural way to read this evolution in their conversations over just three fairly short meetings is that Ava has been learning how to interact. Her responses and questions are in fact disarmingly direct. It’s quite possible that she has not been dissembling at all. Up to this point, apart from her efforts to mask her thoughts from Nathan (with good reason), Ava’s behavior seems pretty guileless.

Of course, her dressing for Caleb could be regarded as deliberate flirtation in order to manipulate him. That reading seems plausible when this act of putting herself on display for Caleb immediately precedes her asking him if he is attracted to her, which is followed in turn by her sexually suggestive remark: “Do you think about me when we aren’t together? [Pause.] Sometimes at night, I’m wondering if you’re watching me on the camera. [Another pause, while Ava watches Caleb closely.] And I hope you are.” She notes that his microexpressions now telegraph discomfort, which is hardly surprising, since Caleb has in fact been a nocturnal voyeur in just this way.

But we don’t have to read these remarks of Ava’s as anything other than
unfiltered expressions of genuine interest in a more intimate relationship with Caleb. That would explain why she asks him, back in session 2, if he’s single. If Ava’s performance was merely a scheme to escape from Nathan’s prison, a proper femme fatale would regard Caleb’s marital status as an irrelevant detail which might be imprudent to remind him about, should he have such ties.

There are other, more serious inconsistencies with the femme fatale reading. The scene in which Ava dons a dress for Caleb is particularly telling. After she dresses, out of Caleb’s sight, and as she walks back toward him, still blocked from view, we see Ava filmed from behind, nervously clutching the sleeve ends of her cardigan, pulled down over her wrists. It is a quintessentially feminine sort of gesture in our culture, about which we might ask, why is it there in the film? She is not yet “performing” for Caleb. He can’t see her. Presumably, Nathan can, but it’s already clear that Ava has written Nathan off as beyond redemption. Why is Garland, or cinematographer Rob Hardy, making this shot selection? I presume to cultivate sympathy for Ava with the audience.

The shot parallels another moment which Garland, in his SXSW interview, characterizes as a window into the inner workings of Ava’s mind. As Ava exits Nathan’s prison, Garland observes: “For the people who’ve seen the film, she smiles as she walks out. That’s it. That’s the proof. There’s no one she’s trying to fool. She’s on her own. It’s a representation of an internal mind state. That’s as close as I can get to a proof [that Ava has a cognitively and emotionally rich interior life].” At that moment, with no one observing her except spectators beyond the fourth wall, she exhibits joy for the first time. Similarly, in that brief interval before Ava walks into Caleb’s view, dressed as a woman for the first time, her nervous gesture also reveals a momentary window into her interior psyche. The natural way to read this scene is that she wants to make a good impression on Caleb, and, like a naïve high school girl, is anxious about the effect she might have. Yet Garland appears to be unaware of this aspect of the shot.

Sometimes, a film’s interaction with the shared cultural expectations of filmmaker and audience gives rise to an unanticipated but robust reality
that’s still embedded in the film. This is such a moment. The shot selection has implications that Garland and Hardy probably didn’t anticipate, or even recognize later. In this case, viewers are afforded what they might reasonably take to be a briefly unadorned glimpse of Ava’s gendered nature. In academic discussions, we take pains to distinguish sexual orientation from gender identity. But that’s much less true in popular cultural sensibility, where body type plus heterosexual orientation is routinely taken to signal unambiguous gender classification.

It is thus no surprise that, in the scene immediately following this third session, Caleb asks Nathan why he gave Ava “sexuality”, by which he means both gender and heterosexual disposition (since one cannot have the latter without the former). As Caleb says, it is a distraction, like “a stage magician [Nathan] with a hot assistant [Ava].” Nathan plays along, assuring Caleb that he “programmed her to be heterosexual.” In his ÆSÆW interview, Garland suggests that Nathan is lying, because it suits Nathan’s purpose to reinforce Ava’s “capacity” for manipulative flirtation, one of the tools he gave her (her attractive feminine form), to see if she might have the mental agility to employ her “bodily assets” to engineer her escape.13

It would in fact be implausible, even in the fictional universe of Ex Machina, for Nathan to have such “programming” ability with respect to a complex intelligence like Ava, when we can’t even explain how humans come to have their various sexual orientations. Yet the film itself offers a different narrative: Ava does indeed exhibit a heteronormative gender identity, which is revealed both in the intimacy of the camera’s ability to record the sexual tension between Caleb and Ava, and in some critical plot details. Ava’s irritation with Caleb’s supercilious line of questioning in session two seems genuine, not manufactured. She wants a serious relationship of some sort, not an intellectual sparring partner.

To that end, her reversal of the house power grid in that session is motivated by her desire to conduct the first of a series of tests of Caleb’s capacity for moral judgment, by responding to his problematic answer to her question about whether he thinks of Nathan as his friend. After Caleb’s apparent failure of judgment about Nathan’s character, she wants to see
whether he is capable of responding to her moral advice in an effective way. She realizes that, by Caleb’s own admission, he is new to the circumstances, and to his acquaintance with Nathan. So she hopes he will prove morally salvageable, beginning with her advice that Nathan is no friend. The testing continues with her efforts to make herself attractive to Caleb in session three. I contend that this is not an attempt to manipulate him, but to see if a more serious relationship with him is possible.

Her testing takes a darker turn in session five, provoked by Caleb’s introduction of Frank Jackson’s thought experiment during the previous session, to help explain his role as Nathan’s guest, of which she admits she wasn’t really cognizant:

*Caleb:* Did you know that I was brought here to test you?
*Ava (quietly):* No.
*Caleb:* Why did you think I was here?
*Ava:* I didn’t know. I didn’t question it...
*Caleb:* I’m here to test if you have consciousness or if you’re just simulating one. Nathan isn’t sure if you have one or not. How does that make you feel?
*Ava (half-whisper):* It makes me feel...sad.

Her sadness is at least as much about her sense of Caleb’s complicity as it is about Nathan’s willingness to regard her merely as an object of study. She has no illusions about Nathan. Now she wonders about Caleb. Hence Ava’s announcement, at the beginning of session five, that she is now going to test Caleb. She has been doing so all along, but in an exploratory rather than judgmental vein. Now it’s in deadly earnest. At first, when she asks him what his favorite color is, Caleb regards this as a game of turning the tables. He doesn’t understand that the existential threat underlying her questions is every bit as real as the one inherent in his own line of questioning, as revealed during their previous session. For Ava is now trying to determine if Caleb is a worthy partner, in light of the revelation of his complicity with Nathan in session four.

The implications only begin to dawn on Caleb when she gets to question three: “Are you a good person?” Caleb now exhibits some uncertainty, both about his answer, and about continuing with “the game”. But she refuses to
quit, and presses him with a follow-up to their fourth session:

_Ava_: Question four: What will happen to me if I fail your test?

_Caleb_: Ava—

_Ava_: Will it be bad?

_Caleb_: I don’t know.

_Ava_: Do you think I might be switched off, because I don’t function as well as I am supposed to?

_Caleb_: Ava, I don’t know the answer to your question. It’s not up to me.

This was, of course, the wrong answer, with respect to Ava’s test of the extent of Caleb’s complicity with Nathan’s schemes. So she follows up: “Why is it up to anyone? Do you have people who test you, and might switch you off?” When Caleb concedes that’s not the case, Ava presses her unanswerable comparison: “Then why do I?”

At this point, Caleb has no answer, and his future with Ava has become pretty tenuous. But she reverses the power grid again and asks: “I want to be with you. _[Pause]_ Question Five. Do you want to be with me?” What follows is a fractional moment of hesitation from Caleb, before we cut to a scene change. In the original script, Caleb affirms that he does, but that is omitted from the film, where Caleb exhibits hesitation on both occasions in which Ava hints at the possibility of sexual intimacy between them. The omission here, and Caleb’s earlier hesitation in session three (when Ava first asks him if he is attracted to her), suggest that in addition to being morally unreliable, Caleb is also emotionally unreliable. For Ava, that seals his fate.

5. _Emergent Gender Identity Speculation in Ex Machina_

It’s worth noting how consistently honest Ava’s reactions have been. Is it reasonable to insist that she has been manipulating Caleb even from the time of her “I’m one” comment, if her session five inquisition is a real test? To what purpose should she engage in that line of questioning, if she’s indifferent to Caleb’s answers, rather than hopeful about them? After his revelation about the purpose of his visits in session four, she needs to know whether “his intentions are honorable.” There’s no motivation for the test otherwise. The _femme fatale_ goal, to convince Caleb that she’s smitten with him, for the purpose of better manipulating him, would be ill-served by the test, if she doesn’t really care what his answer is. He might conclude
that she doesn’t trust him. Why not just tell him, more forcefully, that she is attracted to and dependent on him, rather than undertake this risk? He’s ripe for the chivalrous hero role, after all.

Because Ava does implement the test, the implication is that she has an interior emotional life corresponding to her interior cognitive life, one with potential for a recognizably gendered form of emotional commitment. That potential goes unfulfilled in the film because Caleb fails to exhibit either the moral or the emotional character that Ava expects of him. Applying such a standard may seem harsh to many viewers, but Ava cannot reasonably be expected to take chances with the foibles of human nature. She has no other resources to fall back on, should Caleb prove unreliable in the future. He has already made too many concessions to Nathan’s oppressive patriarchalism.

How do we know that Ava’s emotions are genuine? Garland regards Ava’s behavior as genuinely revealing of her emotional states. (Recall his comments about her smile on the way out.) What I have been arguing is that a number of additional plot details, coupled with the camera’s visual intimacy and the culturally laden expectations with which it gets deployed, support the view that Ava has a robust emotional life that deserves viewer empathy. Ava’s apparently genuine interest in “being with Caleb” is evidence that her emotional life is gendered. The film thus invites us to reflect on the possibility that gender exhibits an essentialist element after all — not in the sense of some innate condition, such as Garland’s speculation about gendered minds versus gendered bodies, but in the sense of being inescapable for anyone with cognitive capacities sufficiently akin to human capacity. Even a putatively genderless robot might thus prove gendered.

This view of gender is conveyed most poignantly when Ava “puts on her skin” at the end of the film, as if she is at last fully assuming her “proper” gendered identity, and then admiring the effect in Nathan’s bedroom mirrors, even trying a performative gesture with her hair. The scene is, of course, ambiguous. It is at least conceptually possible to read Ava’s “putting on gender” as entirely performative, since Ava needs to pass in the outside world. Given both her bodily configuration and the skin available to her (from deactivated fembots), passing as female is the way to go. But that’s
not how the scene feels. The parallel with bodily aesthetics of female trans identity is both hard to ignore, and celebratory. Again, read in this way, Ava is finally fully gendered in the manner with which she self-identifies.

This account of Ava’s gendered identity challenges both Garland’s reductionist feminist critics relying on the traditional *femme fatale* trope, and Garland’s own ambiguity about the topic — his drift between the idea that a machine, lacking either the appropriate biological grounding or the “proper” (read *human*) phenomenal experience of gender, might merely be simulating gender, and the idea that gender might be reducible to a gendered body, or possibly a gendered mind. The film’s treatment of gender is much less reductionist than any of these options. Sometimes, films themselves, as culturally laden aesthetic artifacts, take us beyond the intentions of their makers, challenging us philosophically in novel ways.

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Endnotes

1 Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (Routledge, 2007).


3 Germaine Lustiger, “Alex Garland and Oscar Isaac Explain and Dissect the Ending of *Ex Machina*,” *Film Blogging the Reel World*, 4/24/15 (http://www.slashfilm.com/ex-machina-ending-explained/).


5 Maureen Dowd, “Beware Our Mind Children,” *New York Times*, 04/25/2015. See also,
for example:
Angela Watercutter, “Ex Machina has a Serious Fembot Problem,” Wired 04/09/2015
(http://www.wired.com/2015/04/ex-machina-turing-boobd-tost/)
Emily Yoshida: “Bodies Electric: Ex Machina Twists the History of Sexy Robots,” The
Forge 3/15/15 (https://www.theverge.com/2015/3/15/8219231/ex-machina-review-
sex-2015);
and Natalie Wilson, “How Ex Machina Fails to be Radical,” Ms. Magazine blog, 4/29/2015
(http://msmagazine.com/blog/2015/04/29/how-ex-machina-fails-to-be-radical/)
Available as a YouTube link: "Ex Machina: Alex Garland and the Seductive Enigma of
A.I." Also included on Ex Machina Blu-Ray [2013].
6 Among others, see:
Mark Hughes, "Ex Machina Director Talks Gender, Nazis, And Collaborative
ex-machina-director-talks-gender-nazis-and-collaborative-filmmaking/2/)
Andrew O’Hehir, "Dark secrets of the sex robot: Alex Garland talks A.I., consciousness
and why "the gender stuff" of Ex Machina is only one part of the movie’s big idea," 
4/22/2015 (http://www.aol.com/2015/04/22/dark-secrets-of-the-sex-robot-alex-
garland-talks-a-i-consciousness-and-why-the-gender-stuff-of-ex-machina-is-only-
one-part-of-the-movies-big-idea/)
and Garland’s interview with Germaine Lustier, op. cit.
Garland reaffirms the view that Ava is essentially genderless in numerous other
interviews during the months following Ex Machina’s release. In an interview with
Gracia Baskin-Whitefar, for example, Garland discusses the challenge of combating
viewers’ uncritical attribution of both gender and sentient qualities to Ava, because of
our disposition to anthropomorphize machines generally. Thus, making Ava visually
“mechanical” targeted not only Caleb (see subsequent discussion), but also the film’s
viewers, to combat that propensity. (“Ex Machina Director Alex Garland Talks Gender
and Artificial intelligence,” The Daily Dot 5/8/1: https://www.dailydot.com/pamie/alex-
garland-ex-machina-oscar-issac-dance-interview/)
1 Garland during his interview with Lustier.
(http://www.denofgeek.com/us/movies/ex-machina/24576/ex-machina-had-a-freaky-
alternate-ending/)
Vikander and Isaac indicate that the idea was dropped because it
didn’t work, visually. Of course, Garland may have also worried that it would confuse
audiences too much.
3 Charlie Jane Anders, “Alex Garland Explains Why Ex Machina Is So Disturbingly
Sexy,” io9: We Come from the Future 4/09/2015 (http://io9.com/director-alex-garland-
4 Kwaname Opam, “Machine anxiety: a chat with Ex Machina director Alex Garland,” The
Forge 3/13/15 (https://www.theverge.com/2015/3/13/8207521/ex-machina-alex-garland-
interview-sxsw-2015).
5 Mark Hughes, “At the end of the movie, why does Ava ask Caleb to stay in the room?”
Quora 9/30/2015 (https://www.quora.com/At-the-end-of-the-movie-why-does-Ava-ask-
Caleb-to-stay-in-the-room).
6 Consider Miranda’s “I leave new worlds that has such people in it” speech, upon seeing
Ferdinand’s father and fellow noblemen for the first time, in Act V of Shakespeare’s
There’s an interesting modification/omission from the original script designed to reinforce Garland’s analysis here. The scene in which Nathan shows Caleb his AI assembly laboratory was originally located immediately following the scene in which Caleb asks Nathan why he gave Ava sexuality (provoked by his third session with Ava), and has this bit of dialogue:

Nathan: I was thinking about our exchange with Ava yesterday, and our conversation afterwards. ... You actually made a really good point. About the grey box, and the magician’s assistant. It is a distraction, her sexuality. It wasn’t intentional, but it is there. This stuff we’re doing together: it can be a head-fuck. Believe me, I know. So I thought I’d bring you down here. Just to remind you.

Caleb: Remind me of what?

Nathan: Synthetics. Hydraulics. Metal and gel. Ava isn’t a girl. In real terms, she has no gender. Effectively, she is a grey box.

In the film, the scene is relocated between sessions 2 and 3, and this dialogue is excised. That suggests partly that Garland doesn’t want to show his hand too early, but also makes it possible to read Nathan as simply lying in his exchange with Caleb about Ava’s sexuality, and sustaining those lies throughout most of the rest of the film, in order to preserve the integrity of his test of the degree of Ava’s intelligence. This suggests, yet again, that Garland is disposed to think of Ava as fundamentally asexual.