# Female Robots and AI in Science Fiction Cinema

## The Fabular Femininity of Gynoids

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# Contents

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AI | Artificial intelligence |
| ATU Index | Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index |
| CGI | Computer generated images |
| GenAI | Generative AI |
| LAPORTS | Love-as-proof-of/road-to-sentience |
| LLM | Large language model |
| MIT | Massachusetts Institute of Technology |
| ML | Machine learning |
| NLP | Natural language processing |
| OS | Operating system |
| SF | Science fiction |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| USA/US | United States of America |

CHAPTER 1

# Gynoids and Fabular Femininity

## 1.1 Introduction

In 2015 two science fiction (SF) films, *Ex Machina (UK)* and *Chappie* (South Africa & USA) shared a similar subject: sentient artificial intelligence (AI) fighting for their right to exist and be free. The titular Chappie (Sharlto Copley) is a humanoid law enforcement droid who can never pass as human but presents as male through his male voice and pronoun-gendering by the human characters.[1] Child-like, Chappie grows through experiences while in the care of two criminals, Yo-Landi (Yolandi Visser) who fosters his creativity and kindness and Ninja (Watkin Jones) who teaches him how to act "gangsta," tricking Chappie into killing people. Chappie's creator, Deon (Dev Patel), instils in him the rule that Chappie should not hurt others, and this war between kindness and violence shapes Chappie's evolution. In contrast, *Ex Machina*'s Ava (Alicia Vikander) is deliberately gendered as female by her creator Nathan (Oscar Isaac) through her female form, her human-appearing face, voice, behaviour and, once fully wearing synthetic flesh and hair, can pass as human. Ava is a captive forced to prove that she is a marketable, conscious AI product to two men. Neither nurtured nor educated, instead, Ava is tested by and performs for the men. She

[1] I use the gendered pronouns used in the character's film.



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manipulates them as required, attaining her freedom at the cost of the others' lives.

These films show two distinctly gendered depictions of sentient machines and ways of proving and defending artificial consciousness. The male-presenting Chappie proves and defends his sentience through his cognition, choices, and autonomy; because of this, the humans in the film consider him a marvel and a threat. Conversely, Ava's survival depends on her female gender-presentation through her ability to sexually appeal to, then manipulate, Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson). However, even if she passes the sentience test, Nathan plans to retire her as the last in a line of prototypes that ends with Ava's successor. Both films culminate with battles between the AIs and the humans who support them, against the humans who want to destroy them, and in both instances, the AIs win, but their creators die. However, where Deon supports and fights for Chappie's autonomy and is resurrected as a cyborg at the end of his film, Nathan actively keeps Ava captive and intends to deactivate her higher functions, essentially killing her, whether she succeeds in his test or not. Intrigued by these films' representational disparity, I wanted to know why their depictions' gender seems to result in these disparate narratives. Specifically, I wanted to know if the majority of on-screen gynoids—female-presenting robots—are presented with their femininity as their defining feature.

During this research I found that these films reflect a growing reality through how real-world androids—male-presenting robots—are viewed and interacted with in terms of its cognition and abilities whereas gynoids are interacted with as sex objects (Strait et al. 2017, 1423). Comments on human-appearing or gendered robot demonstration videos, interactions with gendered chatbots, and the increasing prevalence of AI girlfriends all present a misogynistic reality where female-gendered artificial creations are sexually objectified, often to derogatory extremes (even if they are not intended to be used for sex acts), while male-presenting instances are viewed in terms of their technological sophistication or possible threat to humans (Gutiu 2016, 192). As of 2024, it has become rare in the United States (US) to encounter a male-voiced AI assistant, quality text reader, or human-appearing android in the news. Instead, we have the rise of AI girlfriend apps, female-voiced AI assistants on our smartphones and computers, and sex-bot production that, while offering androids and swappable genitals of all kinds of sexes, mainly deals in gynoids (Abyss Creations 2024). This increasing prevalence of female-presenting artificial creations is rightly concerning but also mirrors the

increasing prevalence of such characters within science fiction (SF) live-action films like *Ex Machina*. These films present a glimpse into our possible future as the current reactions are often akin to the depictions from the twentieth-century films, designed to be customisable, commodified, female embodiments of cisgender, white, heterosexual male fantasies. Thus, these filmic representations warrant a more comprehensive analysis.

This book is the result of that exploration and my need to know why, when artificial creations like AI and robots are created to present as female, their femininity is foregrounded over all other aspects of their character. If SF film's representational engagement with female-presenting technologies, as embodiment and cyborg scholar Bronwen Calvert asserts, "creates images through which we can explore our own engagements with technology," then why do films repeatedly present and limit female-presenting artificial characters (2017, 3)? Using a technofeminist lens that views "the history of technology design, production, and use as an inherently male enterprise," I trace and examine the representational evolution of these female-presenting artificial creations (Haas 2018, 413). I consider

> how hegemonic definitions and designs of technology often [are] heavily biassed against women; [is] inextricably bound to male-dominant domains of science and industry; and reproduce[s] harmful stereotypes of women as technologically inferior, disinterested, fearful, passive, and submissive [and will try to] underscore that technology is always already political, value laden, and subjective. (2018, 413)

I argue that these characters signal their contemporary society's (often misogynistic) ideals of femininity, expectations for future female-presenting technologies, and shifts in women's depictions within live-action and SF films through how this character type is presented and changes. By examining these representations across 80 US and United Kingdom (UK) live-action films, I argue that there is a fabular version of femininity that is appealed to and shaped by these characters that has become a part of SF's mythos which in turn echoes into real technologies. However, these representational trends are changing and shifting away from passive, submissive depictions towards more agentic figures, something that is far in the future for our current gynoids and female-presenting AI and is seen as highly undesirable.

I am not the first to ask such questions. Media scholar Sennah Yee asks "where are the films that feature female AIs as (1) protagonists, (2)

not sexualized, and (3) whose story of liberation and empowerment is the main focus of the narrative?" (2017, 96). To answer these questions, this book asks some of its own: firstly, how and why are on-screen AI and robots presented as constructions which emphasise their gender as paramount to their character? Are such characters ever freed from male control within their films or are they always submissively subordinated in their depictions? Finally, and most importantly, if these characters are symbols within a modern SF mythos, then what does that say about their function as constructed, dialogic symbols of idealised male fantasies within the fabula of US and UK SF films and subsequent gendered technologies?

Given the current prevalence of female-gendered technologies we need to consider not only what kinds of narratives these creations are responding to, but also the fables that SF already has warning us of the dangers and potentialities that female-presenting artificial creations pose. We need to look at the stories we have already told to understand why we are seeing this prevalence in female-presenting AIs as opposed to male-presenting AIs in our digital assistants and tools. As Nicola Döring and Sandra Poeschl assert regarding their own 2019 study "Love and Sex with Robots: A Content Analysis of Media Representations,"

> given the lack of first-hand experience with love and sex robots in the broad population, people gain their knowledge from media representations. Therefore, the image of intimate human–robot relationships presented in […] media can have far-reaching consequences and shape public opinion, decision-making and technological development. (2019, 674)

Thus, my scope of films presents a range of representations that act as warnings about the possible outcomes of gynoid use and abuse, and the existing failures of the US system and society with respect to violence against women and minorities, allowing for an exploration of the ethics of AI and its use for sexual and illicit means, while highlighting that these are only issues for *female*-presenting creations. SF shapes our expectations and even directly influences roboticists and programmers and vice versa, thus we must be critical consumers of these technologies and narratives and disprove the prevailing myth that technology is "'by nature' neutral, objective, democratizing, [and] emancipatory" (Haas 2018, 413).

## 1.2 Definitions

This section explains the key terms used in this book. All these terms' definitions can also be found in a simplified form in Appendix E: Glossary.

First, there are terms that describe the physicality of the characters. I use 'artificial intelligence' (AI) for characters without a physical body, who exist only within the digital realm, often projecting bodies via holograms or screen images. While all my examined instances would possess AI—programming that enables them to function and run their processes—I choose to use it to distinguish between characters with physical forms and those without. Alternatively, I hereafter use the terms 'gynoid,' 'android,' 'droid,' and 'robot' to distinguish between the gender-presentations (or lack thereof) of artificial creations. 'Gynoids'[2] refers to female-presenting, human-appearing or -passing robots with physical bodies that present secondary sex characteristics and body shapes designed to mirror women's bodies, whereas 'androids' refers to male-presenting, human-appearing or -passing robots with physical bodies. 'Android' is often used to refer to any human-appearing robot without distinguishing between gender-presentation; however, in the interest of precision and clarity, I, like my contemporary scholars Jeffry Brown, Julie Wosk, Dean Conrad, and Döring and Poeschl, adopt the gynoid-android distinction.

I use 'Droids' and 'robots' to indicate representations which have mechanical, physical bodies which often make no attempt at a humanoid form and cannot pass as human. Herein, 'droid' refers to characters with degrees of sentience, who both present and perform gender in some way as they actively *choose* their behaviours and appearance. Alternatively, 'Robot' refers to characters who function only as machines, doing as programmed with no hint of sentience or personhood; presenting gender, not performing it, as they are incapable of making independent choices. Additionally, I use 'humanoid' to describe constructions that mirror the human form (while not always passing as such), with no need for gender distinction. It refers to characters whose forms conventionally bear some recognisable combination of two hands/arms, two feet/legs, a

[2] First used by Isaac Asimov in a 1979 editorial in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* to specifically denote a female-presenting robot. While gynoid is used more often now, the earlier portmanteau "fembot" (female robot) was, and often still is, commonly used for these characters.

head, a torso, and bipedal movement. 'Embodiment' refers to how these characters are made to or choose to appear, be it physically or digitally.

There are two other kinds of artificial life I mention but which fall outside my scope: 'cyborgs' and 'bioroids.' 'Cyborg,' a portmanteau of 'cybernetic organism,' "was first coined in 1960 at an academic conference to describe a hypothetical [human] figure physically adapted for survival in space" (Short 2011, 3). It has since evolved and is often used to encompass androids and augmented humans. Instead, this book uses it to refer to characters who begin as organics (human) but are augmented with technological and mechanical parts. Additionally, the more colloquial 'bioroid' (a portmanteau of biological android) is just starting to make it into scholarly discourse but has existed within the SF genre and general discourse. It refers to artificial creations that are grown, such as clones or the new Replicants of *Blade Runner 2049* (UK, USA, & Canada, 2017) as opposed to mechanical, artificial creations like gynoids, androids, robots, droids, and AIs.[3] This book excludes cyborg and bioroid characters as they both have biological aspects that carry gendered associations which a technological construct should lack.

The second set of terms concerns the distinctions between characters' range of 'agency' via personhood, subjecthood, or objecthood. 'Agency/agent/agentic' "refers to a person's ability to act of their own accord, by their own motivations and in response to their world," essentially to be autonomous (Gittinger 2019, 99). To be more specific, 'moral agents' in particular are "those agents expected to meet [or conform to at least some of] the demands of morality" (Haksar 2016). In the context of the characters examined herein, this indicates characters who would be able to consent to their sexual use. Thus, a character has moral agency when they can interact of their own accord because *they* want to, not because of control or direction from an outside force. In the case of gynoids and AI, they have moral agency when they act in ways that exceed their programming and functionality. In this way, they must be autonomous. 'Autonomous' refers to characters who think, choose, and act independently from secondary influences and thus are aware

[3] It is used within the animated series *Robotech* (1982–1984), *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* (2002–2005), and *Appleseed XIII* (2011–2012), and the animated films *Appleseed* (2004) and *Appleseed Ex Machina* (2007).

of the moral implications of their actions (Ballou 1998, 106).[4] In this book's case, these "influences" are the characters' creators, users, and limiting programming (1998, 106). 'Personhood' and 'subjecthood' refer to characters presenting as sentient and autonomous, capable of free thought, having personalities, and making their own independent choices (Dennett 1988, 147–49). Religious studies scholar Juli Gittinger notes that personhood

> is produced through a process of interaction with others, their perceptions, and a sedimentation of experience which is evaluated subjectively by both individuals and collectives [and that] the personhood of artificial beings relies upon consciousness, reasoning, self-awareness, autonomy, and environmental-social responses. (2019, 162–63)

The aspects and process Gittinger describes are the indicators of personhood for the characters I address. Additionally, 'subject(s)' denotes characters who present or assert their personhood through their actions and representations. Finally, I use Gittinger's definition for 'sentience' to mean "not only as being conscious, but also able to perceive, to feel, and/or to have subjective experiences" (2019, 11).

Additionally, to account for the literal objecthood of the artificial characters I examine, I use feminist philosopher Ann Cahill's proposed alternative term to sexual objectification, 'derivatization.' Cahill defines 'derivatization' as "reducing one subject to a mere reflection of another subject's needs or desires. […] The desires, actions, and choices of derivatized women are required to mirror nothing but the desires of men" (2011, xii, 34). This alternative is appropriate because the characters within my scope are often explicitly stated as being created as constructions who embody their creator's or user's fantasy of an ideal woman. Thus, while these characters are objectified (and are often literally objects), they are also created as derivatisations of idealised or real in-film women. As rhetoric scholar Jane Donawerth asserts, "the trope of woman-as-machine exposes the objectification of woman as the

[4] As opposed to how, within robotics, autonomy denotes the degrees of independent function a robot has ranging from direct control (human controlling the robot internally), remote control (human controlling the robot externally), or directive control (human programming the robot or giving it a task it otherwise performs independent of human control) all of which still would mean the robot is autonomous despite the human control and direction received.

machinery of society that carries out men's desire" (1997, 60). She goes on to describe "the woman as machine [role as] a literalization and thus an exposé of internalized social mechanisms, of the damaging ways in which women's role[s are] constructed by society" (1997, 65). Thus, the characters I examine are touchstones that show us what their society sees as ideal women: controllable, submissive, pleasure objects. This social construction also aligns with my use of and understanding of hyperfemininity, defined shortly, as a perpetuated trait.

In addition to degrees of personhood or objecthood, I use terms that apply to characters' sexual representation and gendered performances. The term 'eroticisation' describes a representational emphasis on bodies that prioritise sexual desirability, often overriding any presentation of these characters as moral agents within the narrative of their films (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls 2007, vi). The characters addressed in this book are literal constructions and this process of creation, as Brown asserts, is "a metaphor for male objectification and commodification of women in general. The beautiful robotic woman made for male pleasure epitomizes the common conception of femininity in our culture as a standardized, consumable, and indeed replaceable form" (2011, 103). Thus, I use eroticisation in conjunction with derivatisation to describe how an agentic character is reduced to being an object that exists to provide sexual gratification to other characters and denied personhood.

Additionally, I use psychologists Sarah Murnen and Donn Byrne's definition of 'hyperfeminine/hyperfemininity' as an "exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic[al] feminine gender role" (1991, 480). Johanna van Oosten, Jochen Peter, and Inge Boot in their study took Murnen and Byrne's work and broke hyperfemininity down to

> three interrelated concepts: first, the fundamental importance of having a relationship with a man; second, the use of physical attributes and sexuality to attract men and to maintain relationships with them; and third, the expectation that men are dominant, and sometimes forceful, initiators of sexual relationships. (2015, 307–8)

A performance of this kind of hyperfemininity aligns with media scholar Julie Wosk's description of an "ideal female—a beautiful […] woman who is pliant and compliant and answers all [a man's] needs," resulting in an exaggerated, submissive performance of hyperfemininity that is adoring

of men or a designated man, obeying, understanding, and accepting that he will, at times, be forceful (2015, 9). This understanding of hyperfemininity echoes Wosk's earlier assertion that "these simulated women [are] often shaped not only by men's fantasies but also men's beliefs about women themselves" (2015, 9–10). Melissa McKelvie and Steven Gold assert that hyperfemininity can be unhealthy through their findings that "hyperfeminine women were more likely to blame themselves for a sexual attack, and [that] self-blame was associated with a willingness to continue in an assaultive relationship" (1994, 219). Thus, hyperfeminine representations problematically perpetuate a gender performance narrative of eroticised, sexually available women, eager for their male partners, who maintain their beautiful and sexually alluring appearances for them. The performance or presentation of hyperfemininity in the artificial characters I analyse often results in them exemplifying Cahill's derivatisation. Since the constructed nature of gynoids and female-presenting AI requires a literal performance and presentation of gender, their overcompensation or deliberate programming and design often results in hyperfeminine representations. While hyperfeminine performances do not always occur, when they do, their connection to both derivatisation and eroticisation emphasise the problematic nature of such reductive depictions.

Finally, the terms 'myth/mythos' and 'fabula/fabular' need clarifying. Fairytale and folklore scholar Jack Zipes states, "it is the concept behind the formation of the myth that endows it with a value or signification so that the form of the myth is totally at the service of the concept" (1994, 6). Folklore scholar Nicholas Cragoe expands on this understanding, defining myth as

> the narratives that accompany beliefs, norms, and rituals […] In common parlance, a "myth" has become any elaborate tale that is false but passed off as if it is true […] mythology is, indeed, a story that is meant to communicate some form of truth—sometimes literal, sometimes transcendental—but in all cases employs some use of exaggeration or fiction to communicate its message. (2016, 587)

Thus, this book defines myth/mythos as tales that shape our understanding of the world we live in and our respective culture, which are typically fictions whose allegoric and symbolic language and figures convey or explore an abstract (at the time) concept and reshape it

into something comprehensible. These tales are believed and perpetuated because of the essence of 'truth' they attempt or claim to convey. In the case of the SF myths and mythos this book addresses they are the 'concepts' shaped and conveyed by the narrative trends its examined representations create, continue, and reshape with each new depiction. Similarly, I define 'fabula/fabular' as representations that function in a fable-like way that, through representational trends, appear across narratives. These cautionary tales speak to greater understandings of gender, femininity, and artificial creations.

## 1.3 Performing (Artificial) Gender

Unsurprisingly, creations made by humans on- and off-screen, and in some filmic cases by machines, present gender to ensure these representations 'pass' as human and are accepted more readily by humans because humanity primarily understands other beings through gendered terms. The characters' creators deliberately choose to give the gynoids and AI attributes which enable them to present gender, with this shaping often revealing their creators' sexual desires and their society's expectations for women (Wosk 2015, 5). Additionally, the signifiers that these characters employ reveal their contemporary SF mythos around idealised femininity. These fabula use repeated visual and auditory cues to tell tales of gendered products, regulatory fictions born from their contemporary societies that present trends within SF that perpetuate these fictions, associations, stereotypes, and SF myths about what constitutes idealised femininity versus what such creations might feel or say if given agency or what female-identifying people view as an idealised version of femininity.

Gender and race are human sociocultural constructions. This understanding explains how the AI and robots within my film scope are shaped by their contemporary cultural and generic myths to ensure they are read and understood as idealised females through their physical appearance, voice, and behaviour. While they are trying to be read as women in the film in the literal sense they are not, because they are not human. Just as we apply our gender binary to animals and do not call female animals women, referring to them with labels like 'lioness' or 'mare,' we would not call female artificials women, but rather gynoids. Significantly, with respect to the characters within my scope of films, gynoids *represent* women, acting as symbols, allegories, and allusions; standing in for what is considered an idealised female form. However, the gendered reading

of each character is dependent on their respective contemporary cultural fictions about women. This dependence is noted in feminist scholar Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity which states, "that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (1988, 523). These acts are "cultural […and] social fictions," societal constructions that, like other fictions, change over time while retaining many of its aspects (2002, 190, 191). Thus, Butler asserts that gender is a fiction, a series of myths that societies and cultures tell themselves to understand what it means by 'masculine,' 'feminine,' 'male,' and 'female' often with little space between, or degrees of combination or variance.

In this way, AI and robots can be read as male or female but are no more human than a blowup doll is human. They are artificial fabrications that replicate our forms. As Kate Devlin and Olivia Belton note, "we 'read' [artificial] bodies in accordance to socially constructed notions of race and gender" (2020, 359). In this way, we can appeal to, apply, and fabricate our "regulatory fiction[s]," onto and into artificial forms to ensure that appearance, voice, and body language adhere to those fictions without any need for it to also be human or sentient (Butler 2002, 192). Thus, AI and robots can be female, but not human or women, though some instances within my scope wish they could be or successfully pass as such within their films.

Gender is not constant, instead time, place, culture, and socialisation all shape our understanding of its norms, and by extension, its 'exceptions' allowing humans to be read as male or female in that time and place. Additionally, as Lise Nelson argues one's identity is also produced through "a recursive relationship between power/discourse" (1999, 341). As Nelson notes, we must acknowledge how political, martial, social, and personal power determine how and whether we understand gender as a fluid spectrum or as a strict binary and what that understanding encompasses. Time, place, and power make our understandings of gender vacillate rather than remain static. Thus, when on- and off-screen, human-appearing, artificial creations present constructed versions of gender *and* race, that presentation is determined by the time and place of those productions and their lack of power speaks to their existence as created things. Jennifer Robertson argues that "gender attribution [becomes] a process of reality construction," made all the more evident when that gender is constructed for a robot or AI (2010, 4). Hence, my filmic examples and real-world gynoids and AI are literally

constructed embodiments of gender, distillations of their time, place, and peoples' understanding of femininity and the power it holds or lacks. Since the façade presented visually and vocally to the world is what decides one's *perceived* gender and attributed sex, these robotic figures lay bare how gender is constructed, our stereotypes, and how our understanding of gender is so engrained in viewers that they will sex gynoids, real and on-screen, based on their appearance and performance. This is how gynoids are made to 'pass' as human *and* as female.

I must take this moment to address what I mean when I say 'woman' and 'women' in this book. The artificial creations I examine are performed by cisgender, human women who range in ethnicity depending on the role but are mainly white. Thus, the ideal presented repeatedly by these films is "white, American, and middle class […] in large part because the [films] in which they appear are produced by white American people, star white American actors, and arguably were made for white middle-class American audiences" (Faber 2020, 11). This being the idealised version of femininity is also no surprise since, as feminist cultural theorist Rosalind Gill notes "most women who appear in [US] media are young, white, able-bodied, middle class, apparently heterosexual and conventionally attractive" (2007, 12). None of the productions within my scope address the constructed nature of the white ethnicities these characters predominantly present nor directly acknowledge the slave-master relationship the human characters have with their gynoids. Considering this, it is significant that these predominantly white, heterosexual female characters are slaves. These characters are typically not created to be 'women' but fetish toys that their users can enjoy. Thus, the idealised 'women' that they are intended to replicate are instead fictions born of cisgender, heterosexual male fantasies rather than engaging with how female-identifying individuals see themselves or what they would idealise.

While these gynoids are racialised through their interactions with slavery narratives and what SF and race scholar Isiah Lavender III calls meta-slavery[5] narratives, I argue that they are not always slaves in the literal sense unless they are sentient, though all instances engage with slavery and meta-slavery narratives even when not sentient (2011, 58). Without sentience, gynoids and AI are objects, sophisticated computers and machines with human-like forms, but not persons with will, desires,

[5] See his book *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011) for his exploration of meta-slavery and neo-slave narratives.

and moral agency. However, while non-sentient instances are not slaves because they are not persons being forced to obey, their human appearance problematises their use. By having a female-passing form and enacting fetish fantasies, these figures present an embodiment of their contemporary rape culture and the misogyny of their respective societies. Their roles as sex objects connect to what black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers calls the 'body' and 'flesh' "and impose[s] that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions" (1987, 67). The gynoids I examine herein are that 'flesh.' They are disconnected from their 'body,' for instances who are non-sentient and still under their user or creators' control. That disconnect harkens to the time in US history when black men and women did not have a right to their own bodies, but were merely flesh: property owned, sold, bred, and abused. Thus, these artificial characters, whether sentient or not, replicate a white supremacist understanding of slavery that views black people as less than human: as objects and property to be used and sold. That these gynoids are predominantly white is a result of SF's history as a white dominated genre. Nevertheless, by making human-appearing and -passing objects like gynoids, even white-appearing ones, roboticists in these films, and reality, are replicating that same slave-owner mentality and making it literal. They are creating human-like bodies that can be slaves *because* they are objects. With figures like gynoids, real or fictional, we must face the constructedness of gender *and* race and the implications that construction embodies. The choices made by developers to gender their artificial creations and to put 'skin' on them or create human-appearing avatars for AI, presents active choices that evoke embedded stereotypes and desires which reinforce existing misogynistic, racist stereotypes.

Despite this constructedness, gynoids often 'pass' as human within their film narratives. I use 'passing' to mean how a creator or user wishes for a gynoid or AI to be read. K Surkan defines passing as "the phenomenon by which a person succeeds at consciously performing a recognizable identity which does not conform to the identity commonly mapped onto that individual, usually on a biological basis" (2004, 133–34). Passing can apply to ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender, nationality, or any identity that you need to conceal or wear to not be 'found out' as not a member of another group. Surkan uses examples like spies, Jews in Nazi Germany, cyborgs in SF, and mutants within the world of *The X-Men* to present the range of ways, real and fictional, one can pass. Significantly, within my scope of films, the passing is not

done "consciously" by the gynoids or AI but rather as a function of their programming and creation (2004, 133).

This 'passing' is relevant in my scope of gynoids and AI because they are presented as sexual partners, love interests, companions, and threats all *because* they are human-appearing, but significantly, *not* human. The films, and reality, want these creations to fill a niche; specifically, the heterosexual, cisgender, white, male sexual desire for 'perfect' customisable, commodified, female 'flesh.' Thus, if gynoids did not attempt to pass as human, they would struggle to achieve their intended purpose. However, for all that they are created to replicate a human woman, they are not; they are mechanical constructions and so require their disguise of gender and human-mirroring form so that they can fulfil their users' desires. These men are attracted to women, not computers, so they need to have a woman-shape to fulfil these men's desires.

Nevertheless, passing comes with risks, especially when it comes to gender identity. In reality this can come from when one's identity is found out, as in Surkan's spy example, but it also speaks to peoples' homophobia, racism, and discriminatory ideas. For example, the LGBTQ+ panic defence remains a prominent example of how victims of queerphobic violence are blamed for their own abuse because they pass (purposefully or otherwise). In this defence, a defendant claims that they battered or killed a transgender person because they "temporarily become insane" because of the revelation that they were attracted to or propositioned by a non-cisgender person (Lee 2020, 1424). Additionally, not all trans*[6] people wish to pass, and may feel no obligation to adhere to their society's expectations for that gender, for them to identify as it. This can also elicit negative responses from those who feel inconvenienced, offended, or reject the fluidity of gender. In early instances and in more lethal instances within my film scope, when gynoids are found out, the men react violently and with disgust, or relief when they find what they thought was a robot was a real woman all along. However, later instances in my scope of films rarely encounter backlash from their users when their artificiality is found out because being attracted to a robot becomes more expected and accepted as an outcome, especially if they are sentient. This shows how SF conventions have changed over time, but also how the

[6] An inclusive version of the term transgender which is intended to include all gender identities that fall outside the traditional male–female binary.

increasing prevalence of female-presenting artificial creations and technologies surrounding us has made it seem more understandable if not acceptable that humans would be attracted to robots or AI.

In conclusion, gender performativity, the scholarly work building upon it, and our understanding of passing answers how something that is inorganic and has no sex, like AI and gynoids, can have gender: they present or perform gender through appearance, voice, and action that are based on their contemporary society's norms for idealised femininity. The gynoids and AIs within my scope have human female performers and adhere to the dress, mannerisms, and appearance expectations of their contemporary societies, resulting in them being read as feminine by audiences and the films' other characters.[7] That femininity ensures their passing, but their artificial origins always keep them from achieving the human status of 'woman.'

## 1.4 The Myth of Fabular Femininity

In her 1976 essay "Myth and the Archetype in Science Fiction," Ursula K. Le Guin asserts that "science fiction is the mythology of the modern world […] For science fiction does use the mythmaking faculty to apprehend the world we live in, a world profoundly shaped and changed by science and technology" (1979, 74–75). I define myth and mythos as tales that shape our understanding of the world we live in and our respective culture, which are typically fictions whose allegoric and symbolic language and figures convey or explore an (often) abstract (at the time) concept and reshape it into something comprehensible. As sociologist Vincent Mosco states

> A myth is alive if it continues to give meaning to human life, if it continues to represent some important part of the collective mentality of a given age […] To understand a myth […] means figuring out why the myth exists, why it is so important to people, what it means, and what it tells us about people's hopes and dreams. (2004, 29)

Thus, myths are believed and perpetuated because of the essence of 'truth' they attempt or claim to convey.

[7] The same could also apply to male-presenting characters.

In the case of SF's myths and mythos, I argue they are the concepts shaped and conveyed by the narrative trends that representations create, continue, and reshape with each new depiction. I assert that these trends speak to greater understandings of gender, femininity, and artificial creations because these larger concepts are what these depictions implement and convey through their symbolic use, thereby shaping the myths and mythos of the US's and UK's SF films. Thus, if SF is our modern "mythmaking," our means of better understanding our world *now* despite the futuristic settings of this genre, then the trends and representations within it are contemporary fables, narratives exploring abstract concepts, new technologies, and social expectations (Le Guin 1979, 74). As technology scholars Jascha Bareis and Christian Katzenbach assert "the deconstruction of successful myths brings to the forefront present desires and values as well as the underlying power structures" of their respective societies (2022, 859). With this understanding, I created a taxonomy to organise and help deconstruct these trends' fabular function, their changes, and how those myths are created, reshaped, and at times exceeded with each new instance of female-presenting artificial technologies in live-action film.

Feminist SF scholar Marleen Barr uses 'feminist fabulation' as a way of describing how feminist SF writing

> modifies the tradition of speculative fiction with an awareness that patriarchy is a contrived system, a meaning-making machine which constructs and defines patriarchal fictions — myths of female inferiority — as integral aspects of human culture […] Woman has been forced to learn to live within patriarchal laws which define her as subhuman, offer her no purpose beyond serving men, and promise her no triumph as a human. (1987, 189)

This myth of inferiority is one that plays out time and again in SF film as female-presenting machines function as subservient, submissive, expendable, and existing only to please the male characters of their films. Barr echoes Le Guin's sentiment about mythmaking but goes further to argue that social systems are also "meaning-making machine[s]" that create then reinforce these "myths of female inferiority" through legislature that ignores women's autonomy and social and gender norms that shape what women think they can do, where and when they are safe, and actively punishes men for presenting as female or feminine and women for

presenting as male or masculine (1987, 189). None of the films I examine are created by women to be feminist SF works like the works Barr labels feminist fabulations,[8] however I follow in Barr's line of fabular analysis to argue that on-screen female-presenting artificial creations also function as fabular figures, as symbols and often fetish objects within their films that reflect the "female inferiority" myth that she asserts (1987, 189). Just as the evolution of these characters representations are traced, so too are their myths. These films are modern myths about a future with female-presenting artificial creations, and from those myths I uncover symbolic tales of a fabular femininity, women's roles and place now and in the future, and what the films' respective time considers a conventionally attractive appearance or 'ideal' feminine behaviour which in turn is problematically applied to female-presenting AI technologies.

These myths are obviously fictions, yet even within the lie of fiction, grains of truth about social and cultural expectations surrounding femininity and an assumed male audience can be uncovered through their repetition and retelling. Using my taxonomy and comprehensive survey I uncover these grains and offer them for consideration because we need to be aware of the kinds of tales we are telling. As cultural scholar Sherrie Inness asserts, "representing women as not tough […] is a way of keeping them away from the mechanisms of power [and becomes] so much a part of the culture's ideology, [that it] is an effective way of controlling women" (1999, 18). In this way, media representations are mythmaking machines that shape our understanding of persons and concepts like femininity. Thus, I consider the evolution of my examined representations *and* the myths those representations create, continue, and reshape to better uncover how these trends evolve and the tales they are telling about the social understandings of femininity and women in the US's and UK's past, present, and possible futures. However, while these filmic fables explore women's 'uses' they also show how SF's representation of women and female-presenting technologies changes, shifting their fable from female objectification to increasing female agency.

The AI and gynoids I examine have constructed forms that are products of their creators' idea of femininity and the effects it has on men.

[8] Barr's study is on women's feminist SF writing from the 1960–1980s noting how "male SF writers tell stories about men attempting to subdue natural phenomena; female SF writers tell stories about women attempting to subdue cultural phenomena" (1987, 187).

As Wosk notes, "representations of artificial women […] often embody gender stereotypes, but also [are] shaped by shifting social paradigms" (2015, 7). Thus, using a technofeminist lens, I argue that the AI and gynoids I examine are fabular figures whose depictions are products of cultural and social expectations, understandings, and stereotypes of technologies and women. Feminist theorist Karen Barad states, "if performativity is linked not only to the formation of the subject but also to the production of the matter of bodies […] then it is all the more important that we understand the nature of this production" (2003, 808). In this way, these characters' production determines their performance of femininity, a femininity that, narratively, is not inherent or natural, but a construction based on their creators' understanding and desired exaggerated form of femininity and the creation's intended use. This should not surprise us, as feminist scholars Eleanor Drage and Kerry McInerney state,

> sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy are deeply interwoven throughout the tech industry and the products that we use on a daily basis. This includes the female-gendered voice assistants that are expected to answer our every beck and call […thus] New technologies often serve as a crucible for existing forms of injustice and oppression, albeit repackaged in a new, electronic form. (2024, 1)

Hence, the instances I examine are material manifestations of gendered social roles and functions played out to a derivatised extreme. They are fictional explorations of the growing reality of technological invasiveness, commodification, and inherent biases that are at the core of these female-presenting creations.

For an AI or robot to be read as female, it must present images, sounds, or actions that a film audience will recognise as female. Often, this is achieved by simply having a cisgender female actor portray the character on-screen physically and vocally. When an AI character presents as female, her constructed femininity is foregrounded, often by presenting her as an idealised, 'perfect woman' whose behaviours are outlined as primarily domestic, subservient, and focused on pleasing her (typically male) user, as established by the first instance within UK film, *The Perfect Woman* (UK, 1949). Additionally, as Calvert asserts, when an artificial creation is "gendered female, it/she is often seen to embody the problematic relationship of the female to (monstrous) technology. She is

viewed as 'hypersexual', presenting an exaggerated version of femininity that reinscribes gender markers onto a constructed[, often commodified and controllable,] artificial body" (2017, 9). Thus, these characters are designed by male creators and users to satisfy their desire for a specific sexual form and functionality. Female-presenting technology is only monstrous because men have made it so. They reduce these creations to a derivatisation of sexual, submissive fantasy figures who will best please their users. This femininity is a male fantasy, not a reflection of female capability or desire. Only more recently have these depictions included instances who reject that functionality, assert their autonomy, voice their desires, and present a possibility of femininity beyond sexual service or submissiveness to men; an outcome that is utterly undesirable to current female-presenting AI creators and users.

If these artificial creations present an *ideal* of femininity and womanhood, even with humorous intent, if they are fostering an idea of femininity as over-sexual and monstrous when combined with technology, despite those associations resulting from programming, not anything innate or inherent to their female form or presentation, if these creations are made by and for men, then an examination of these depictions over time should speak to what is considered ideal femininity and what makes this gendering of technology as monstrous, the ways these perceptions have changed, and why. Significantly, that these on-screen creations are described as perfected *women* not perfect robots or AI, emphasises how their on-screen creators are not interested in *technological* perfection, but creating a controllable, perfect female *for* men.

This emphasis exists off-screen where roboticists, like Hiroshi Ishiguro, describe their creations as the "'most beautiful woman'" and how "a male's perfect companion is a customizable female design, dictated, and completely controlled by its (male) human user. […] a mirror that lacks its own interiority" (Atanasoski and Vora 2019, 190). Feminist scholars Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora assert that these roboticist's attitudes "help us understand why a feminized bot might offer a more effective surrogate human effect than a gender-neutral bot" (2019, 190). This is seen in other roboticists' sex-bot creations where "the dominant themes and practices among the design imaginaries of McMullen, Ishiguro, and Santos point to the perpetuation of a desire for heterosexual, masculine agential sex with animate, humanlike, seemingly nonagential [female] objects" (2019, 191). Additionally, this dominating pattern plays out with real-world female-presenting chatbots, like Microsoft's TayAI (2016)

taken down sixteen hours after launch because of users' inappropriate interactions with it, or Scatter Lab's Lee Luda (2020) that has guides on how to make it a 'sex slave' through chat interactions (Cross 2016; McCurry 2021). This trend extends into the realm of AI girlfriends, a billion-dollar industry at the time of writing,[9] and AI assistants that are almost exclusively female voiced and named at the time of writing and that literally exist to serve. Bearing this in mind, I explore how the AI and gynoid characters within SF are mythic figures who frequently present white, heterosexual, cisgender male fantasies of female constructions which are symbolic playthings that fulfil desires and obey commands, a fantasy becoming a reality in these real-world female-presenting technologies.

## 1.5 The 'Cyborg,' Posthumanism, and Filmic Gynoids

Gender and artificiality are at the heart of Donna Haraway's 1984 "A Cyborg Manifesto," which calls for the various feminist factions of the time to unite by emulating the hybridity of the cyborg figure, and so embrace difference rather than remain fractured, arguing for "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction" (2000, 292, emphasis in original). Here Haraway asserts the cyborg as a figure who would embrace and thus mix various backgrounds, experiences, and expectations, allowing them to transcend being limited and separated by categories or divisions stating, "the cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with […] seductions to organic wholeness" (2000, 292). This manifesto introduced cyborg theory into critical discourse as well as popular culture and contributed to the beginning of posthumanist theory. In it, Haraway shares a desire for all gender distinctions to cease being used and calls for a redefinition of our identity categories.

Haraway's work, while garnering much attention and enthusiasm, also has problematic reasoning. Carlen Lavigne examines the problem of Haraway's imagined AI and the 'cyborg' and the fallacy of androgynous cyborgs asserting, "Haraway's proposed cyborg androgynies were

[9] Geographic Scope and Forecast. (2025). "AI Girlfriend App Market Size, Expansion, SWOT & Forecast". Market forecast 864,636. Verified Market Reports. https://www.verifiedmarketreports.com/product/ai-girlfriend-app-market/.

too threatening, in practice, to be allowed to play in Hollywood [and the internet]—instead, an increase in technological superiority meant a subsequent increase in stereotypical sex characteristics, to downplay any dangerously gender-free imagery" (2013, 83). Rather than cyberspace freeing us from our physical identities and creating a liberatory space of simply shared humanity, it became one strictly policed by accounts requiring your gender, users fearful of being 'catfished,'[10] and now a reality where you might not even be talking to a human at all. Lavigne goes on to cite Claudia Springer's observation about cyborgs in fiction and how "gender, rather than disappearing, is often emphasized after cybernetic transformation," an observation reinforced by the characters examined herein (1994, 171). Essentially, Lavigne and Springer agree that, rather than breaking down gender, cyborgs reinforce and exaggerate gender dichotomies in extremes through their on-screen gender-presentations. These exaggerations are a trend I note and address, as I explore the extent of this statement's application to my scope of films. Lavigne points out the standard reasoning for this clear gendering:

> when a cyborg becomes recognizably human, it is unable to challenge the human stereotypes, calcifications and expectations guiding its performance—as, *in order to* become recognizably human, the cyborg must behave in predictable ways and operate according to dominant social norms, thus abandoning its own potential for liminality. (2013, 83, emphasis in original)

Hence, while these creations are artificial in being, for them to 'pass' they must behave and appear stereotypically human, including adhering to a gender dichotomy. Like humans, AI and robots construct their gender by using established, contemporary norms and signifiers. Thus, they mainly reinforce "dominant social norms" rather than being sights of gender fluidity or transgression (2013, 83). However, as Lavigne notes, an AI is

[10] When a person creates a user profile that is not authentic to themselves, typically men pretending to be attractive women to take advantage of other men through romance fraud.

> an ideal construct for [deconstructing gender], because its thought processes are quite literally *constructed;* […] and if the AI can 'pass,' so much the better for illustrating the artificial nature of the human thought processes and performances it so seamlessly imitates. (2013, 83)

Therefore, while these artificial characters are not presenting the bridge Haraway hoped for, they still contribute to our understanding of gender, social interactions between genders, and the standards and expectations built around binaries which we apply to our real technologies.

Other scholars note how, rather than transcending gender through their artificiality female-presenting artificial characters are often limited by it. Jane Donawerth notes how created women in SF are quite different depending on who is telling the story. She states that "the subordination of women-as-machine does not carry the [same] proof of man's rational powers that it does in science fiction by men" compared to how "mechanical women created by women writers will not stay in the servant mould men have designed for them" (1997, 60). While Donawerth writes about SF novels, this trend of depiction tied to the sex of its creator(s) still applies to screened works as these films are still mostly written, produced, and directed by the cisgender male-dominated film industry with on-screen male creators. Much of the history of the depiction of female-presenting AI and gynoids shows this subordination, and typically when the created woman rebels, she is destroyed. *The Perfect Woman* (1949) exemplifies this as its male inventor, Professor Ernest (Miles Malleson), makes Olga (Pamela Devis) according to his idea of female perfection. However, Olga explodes at the end of the film when 'she' hears the word 'love' and starts flailing her arms at the people in the room. Alternatively, the closer a film is to 2023 the more you see this representational trend shift, with gynoid and AI characters surviving their rebellions and presenting them as sympathetic figures who deserve their victories. This change suggests how these characters' representational trends change alongside real-world developments in women's rights in the US and UK.

The introduction of cyberspace and the cyberpunk subgenre within SF rekindled Haraway's hopes for genderless-ness: here was the potential space for true genderless representation as no physical body need get in the way of online interaction. However, these hopes were unfounded and unfulfilled. Ying Liang engages with Haraway's "Manifesto" and Anne Balsamo's work on women in cyberspace, focusing on the presentation

of women in SF within the space of cyberpunk, cyberspace, and cyborg characters. She finds many reiterations of the old trend in SF of incapable or passive women, attributing this trend to how "historically the properly feminine body was considered to be constitutionally weak and pathological" (2015, 2037). She continues, "yet if we cast our eyes to traditional science fiction, the picture is both monotonous and disheartening: the female body is always negatively constructed. It is gendered passive, self-denying, obedient, and self-sacrificial" (2015, 2037). While this may be true, she does not address how the male body is often similarly presented as such when the male-presenting characters are robots like C-3PO (Anthony Daniels, *Star Wars IV—A New Hope,* USA, 1977) or Sonny (Alan Tudyk, *I, Robot,* USA & Germany, 2004).

While women are often gendered and thus subordinated by the societal systems they exist within, they can also resist that subordination and interact with it, not as passive subjects but as active agents. Liang asserts that these bodies exist within the gendered system despite Haraway's attempt to use the cyborg as a transcendent figure (2015, 2044). While some of the instances I examine follow the old tropes and presentations, many engage these old standards and audience's expectations. These instances trouble and draw attention to problematic behaviours, limitations placed on women, and the expectations around their interactions.

Some scholars view these AI and robots as posthuman figures, describing them as "female entities explor[ing] the posthuman female body as a site of ontological and epistemological struggle around feminism, femininity, bodily sovereignty, and subjectivity" (Jelača 2017, 381–82). Yet most of that exploration is not presenting a *post*human image, more a *past*-human one as Ferrando has noted previously. If, as posthumanist scholar N. Katherine Hayles asserts that "even a biologically unaltered *homo sapien*[*sapien*] counts as posthuman" then why do we need the term 'posthuman' at all, what is so wrong with "human," since that is what we are (1999, 4)? The gynoids and AI of my examined films are created to mirror humanity, and many want to be as human as possible (often to please their male partner). However, there are some instances described as "a conflation of the posthuman with the postracial […and] these fragments cause glitches, or a lag, in this process of futurity by recalling the past into the future" (Wong 2017, 37). These depictions complicate our understanding of things like humanity and race, because for them it is just pigment in silicone, a hologram, a human-appearing image or constructed chassis, a female-presentation enacted