

READING FILM



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About: *Reading Film* is a collection of outstanding essays on film and television written by students at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. The Film Studies and Professional Writing and Publishing programs collaborate to produce the journal.



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Goodwill in Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*

John Balistreri

With *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), Ingmar Bergman aimed to make a film based on his childhood. He ended up with a masterpiece that not only captivates as autobiography but also encourages viewers to reflect on their own lives. *Fanny and Alexander* explores several interlaced topics, including gender roles, childhood, class difference, and religion. Most importantly, however, the film leaves us with a message: reflect on the social roles you play so that you can live your life with goodwill and love. The character of Helena Ekdahl (Gunn Wällgren) best articulates this message when conversing with the ghost of her dead son, Oscar (Allan Edwall). “Some roles are nice, others not so nice,” Helena says. “The thing is not to shrink from them.” This follows on her comments to her friend Isak earlier in the film: “We all play our roles. Some play them negligently, others with great care. I’m one of the latter.” As she demonstrates throughout the film, playing her many roles (mother, grandmother, wife, lover, actress, and family matriarch) with “great care” means not only meticulously attending to her responsibilities, but also caring for others with love and compassion. Late in the film, Oscar’s ghost underscores this message once again when he tells his son, Alexander (Bertil Guve), to “be gentle with people.”

Yet it is another of Helena’s sons, Gustav (Jarl Kulle), who perhaps best demonstrates the film’s message: the need to examine the roles one plays and prioritize kindness. Gustav is an extremely complex character. When we first meet him, he is kindhearted but deeply insecure. Though he attempts to live his life with goodwill and a focus on family, he is crippled by what appears to be a serious oedipal complex.



Through much of the film, Gustav is an adult man-child who blunders more often than he succeeds, but because of his kind heart and love for family, he is redeemed in the end. Bergman uses Gustav's character arc to show the consequences—both good and bad—of coddling men in a matriarchal system. In so doing, Bergman shows us how Gustav learns to navigate both his family and his own insecurities, ultimately setting aside his fragile ego to choose selflessness and familial love.



Gustav's treatment of his maid and mistress, Maj (Pernilla August), early in the film is demeaning, yet strangely understandable due to the permissive conditions that apparently prevail in the matriarchal Ekdahl family. Before the bedroom sequence with Maj and Gustav, Gustav's wife, Alma (Mona Malm), slaps Maj across the face for sleeping with her husband, but rather than an admonishment, Alma's slap is a reminder that while she is

allowing her husband the affair, Maj shouldn't forget that Alma is still in charge. This behavior from Alma is puzzling. It's difficult to know which is worse, Gustav for making his housemaid his mistress or Alma for allowing and even endorsing it. Gustav is clearly immature and driven by his sexual desires, but nobody calls him out on it in the early part of the film. His wife indulges him, as does his mother, though Helena laments that he is "oversexed."

In a sequence that provides an intimate look at their relationship, Gustav feeds Maj oysters in bed while he praises her beauty and calls her a "princess." This imagery shows the audience that Gustav cares for Maj in a controlling way. He wants to have romantic and sexual relationships with both his wife and his mistress, and he apparently doesn't understand why this might be a problem. Gustav's assumption of privilege is not only immature, but also potentially harmful to both women. When Maj is in bed with Gustav, he gushes over her and tells her he'll buy her a café that she can operate. To show his promise, he even writes it out for her. Money is clearly not a problem for Gustav because he has grown up with generational wealth. This lack of awareness of his class and gender privileges blinds him to the consequences of his actions. Gustav and





Maj have sex, but only for a few seconds because he finishes prematurely (despite his boasting about how good a lover he is). This scene effectively demonstrates Gustav's duality. He has a kind heart and good intentions; sadly, he is unable to reflect upon the morality of his actions or the harm that indulging his sexual appetites might cause. He has lived his whole life within a matriarchy that coddles and indulges men—a matriarchy

that excuses men from the consequences of their actions. His mother and his wife let him do whatever he wants sexually. Bergman makes Gustav pathetic, seemingly helpless in the face of his own appetites, however deviant or destructive. Gustav should know better, no doubt, but he is left unchecked while women enable his behavior.

Gustav's oedipal crisis becomes apparent through challenges from Maj and his mother. After having sex with Maj, Gustav presses her to become his mistress and run a café with his money. She refuses, and Gustav has a childish tantrum about it. In her essay, "Shadows of the parental couple: oedipal themes in Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*," Viveka Nyberg speculates that "Gustav seems unable to tolerate feelings of oedipal exclusion, and perhaps his re-enactment of threesome relationships is an attempt to re-instate early phantasies that deny the reality of his exclusion from the parental couple's sexual relationship" (107). Essentially, Gustav has never grown up from his childhood sexual fantasies. He wants desperately to be loved by women, and he chases after validation from them through sex. Unfortunately for Gustav, nobody tells him that what he is doing is wrong. In a later scene, Gustav, Alma, and his mother are all sitting at a table discussing what to do about Maj. The camera is

focused on the trio, and it is clear to the audience that Helena and Alma are dismissing Gustav's presence by not even looking at him. Gustav gets up and paces around the room in this sequence, attempting to gain authority. However, he is clearly out of his league and outranked by the matriarchy. His mother eventually tells him she wants to talk about Maj, in front of Alma. He becomes immediately angry at this, and Helena puts him in his place: "Thanks to Alma's broad-mindedness, she's a member of our family, and she's expecting my grandchild. In your dictatorial way, you've decided her future." Gustav becomes furious and throws another infantile tantrum. The entire sequence is reminiscent of two mothers scolding a mischievous child. Again, Bergman shows Gustav's inability to hold sway over the women of his family. Helena does well to



admonish him for his actions, but it is much too late to have any effect other than compensating for what Gustav has already done. As matriarch, she declares that the Ekdahl family will embrace Maj thanks to Alma's broad-mindedness. But that's a double-edged sword. Maj and her child will be cared for, but she is now forever at the mercy of the Ekdahls. All of this could have been avoided if Gustav had not been allowed to have an open affair in the first place. Even better, if he had the sense to recognize the harm he was doing with the affair. The duality of the matriarchy is again shown. They allow Maj into the family when she becomes pregnant, but their permissiveness allows her to become pregnant with Gustav's child in the first place, which arguably should never have happened.



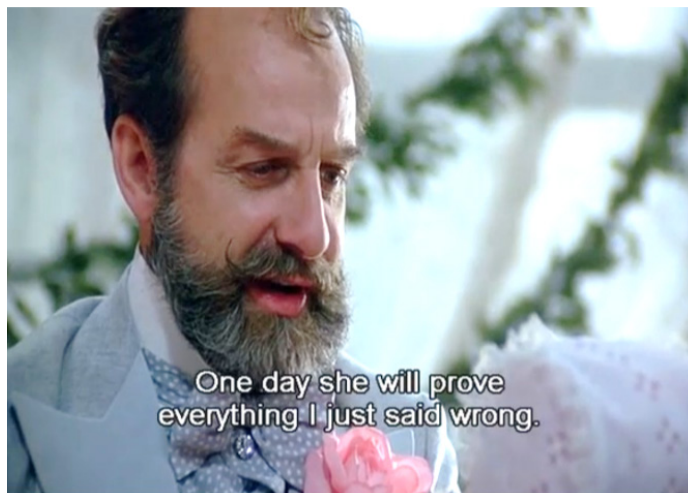
In one of the final scenes of the film, Gustav makes a grand speech about living with goodwill and loving his family, showing the positive impact the matriarchy has on his upbringing, redeeming him in the eyes of the family and, perhaps, of the audience. The first shot is of the two newborn girls entering the family, all dressed in pink and white. Bergman slowly pans the camera up from the babies to a wide shot of the entire family sitting around the table. Their faces are lively, everyone is talking to one another, and there is a feeling of pure unity in the moment. The mise-en-scene is powerful. The table is perfectly elegant, and everything is in red, pink, and white, perfectly fitting for the baby girls. The Ekdahls are seated in a circle, giving the family a sense of unity and wholeness. This tableau now includes Maj, who is sitting with the family (immediately to Gustav's left) in honor of the christening of her child with Gustav. Bergman packs all these things into the mise-en-scene to show a family united in matriarchy. With Helena at the head, the Ekdahls celebrate each other and their future. Gustav's speech effectively reinforces the theme of the importance of prioritizing the "little world" of the family while delivering a powerful message about maintaining hope for the future.

Gustav's character in the film is portrayed as an immature boy with a strong oedipal crisis. He lacks a basic understanding of his own family matriarchy while being coddled by his wife and mother. As he starts his speech, he is immediately overwhelmed with emotion. The audience has come to expect this of Gustav. He is, after all, still the same immature, sentimental, sexual deviant as before. Bergman undermines this expectation, however, when Gustav begins to talk about the importance of family. Gustav begins to circle the table, saying that "we Ekdahls have not come into the world to see through it... We might just as well ignore the big things. We must live in the little world." What he is saying here is that the family should not worry about the grand workings of the world. They need to maintain their focus on the family around them as that is where true

happiness lies. The camera emphasizes his claim by framing him behind the children, alluding to the upbringing of the Ekdahl children as paramount. Gustav's love for the family shines through in this sequence, reforming the bumbling, grown-up-boy rhetoric and behavior we have come to expect of him. The message is a drastic change from the Gustav of old. He sounds introspective, intelligent, and compassionate—traits that were previously suggested but smothered by his ineptitude and general lack of self-awareness. This change reveals the nurturing side of Gustav, brought to the fore by his newfound acceptance of the matriarchy that has always nurtured him. He truly loves his family and his new daughter, and with that love he discovers a profound empathy for the “little world” of the Ekdahls.



In the latter part of Gustav's speech, he speaks of how the larger world of natural inevitabilities and social calamities has impacted the smaller world of the family: “Suddenly death strikes. Suddenly the abyss opens. Suddenly the storm howls, and disaster is upon us.... The world is a den of thieves, and night is falling. Evil breaks its chains and runs through the world like a mad dog.” This rhetorical shift is certainly dark. Gustav reminds the family about the bleak truths we attempt to forget, such as the ways in which we suffer misfortune or encounter death. Nyberg claims that “Gustav's attempt to banish these demons paradoxically reminds us of their continued threat” (114). While Gustav does remind everyone of this “abyss,” he also implores the family to remain united in the face of such inevitabilities. He says, “Therefore let us be happy while we are happy. Let us be kind, generous, affectionate, and good. It is necessary, and not at all



shameful... to take pleasure in the little world.” Gustav's message here is simple: seek solace within your family from the dangers of the greater world. Be happy because you can, while you can. At the end of his speech, he grabs his child and kisses her affectionately. He says, “I hold a little empress in my arms. It's tangible, yet immeasurable. One day she will prove everything I just said wrong. One day she will not only rule the little world, but everything.” In a moment of profound clarity, Gustav finally seems to under-

stand the family matriarchy. By saying that Aurora will “rule” over the family, he is verbally acknowledging the power women hold in the Ekdahl family. “My wisdom is simple,” he says at the beginning of the speech, and at the end he suggests that his newborn daughter's wisdom will exceed his own so much that she will rule not only the family but the entire world. Gustav's big heart certainly causes this display of emotion, but the way it is paired with the “simple” wisdom of

his words is important. Gustav's boundless faith that his newest daughter will prove "everything I just said wrong" redeems his earlier, bumbling egotism. Bergman gives us hope that after this revelation, Gustav will find a way to love selflessly and unconditionally, prioritizing the wisdom of women over his own narcissism and sense of privilege.

The combination of wisdom and love that Gustav displays in this speech indexes the message Bergman urges his audience to take away. The patriarchy has its flaws, as we have seen throughout, but love for the family has always been its founding principle. Gustav's ability to finally have this revelation in front of everybody gives the audience hope that, moving forward, he will be a changed man and the family will prosper. Bergman includes many complex characters in this film. Gustav is certainly one of them. While he starts the movie as a bombastic sexual fiend, he ends it with a grand speech about hope and love. Bergman uses his character to show how oedipal crises form in patriarchal family dynamics, but he also shows the audience the positive aspects of patriarchal values through Gustav's goodwill and kind heart. In the end, the audience is left with a better understanding of Gustav than they ever thought they would have, especially considering his character in the beginning. Through his ups and downs, he is redeemed through goodwill, despite his past wrongs. ❧

John Balistreri graduated from UW-Whitewater in May 2023 with a major in Professional Writing and Publishing and a minor in Film Studies. This essay was completed for a Film Theory course in Spring 2023.

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The Damsel is not Distressed: Dismantling the Sex/Gender System in *Avengers: Endgame*

Abigail Brown

What makes a Marvel movie so incredible? Is it the A-list actors? The visual spectacle? The intricate soundtrack that perfectly captures the intensity of an action-packed fight sequence? I would argue that even more than great actors, spectacle, or sound, we want to see something different. We want the Marvel characters we know and love, but we want to see them in a story that strikes us as new and relevant. *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) does this by taking female perspectives seriously and adding a strong dose of postmodern feminism. In this essay, I demonstrate how female characters such as Nebula (Karen Gillan), Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson), and Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) expand and even break from the expected norms for female heroines in Marvel films, not to mention social norms for real-world women. My aim is to show how it may well be important to read *Avengers: Endgame* as a feminist film.

Gayle Rubin argues that gender roles are constructed by a complex “sex/gender system” that varies by culture and time period but tends to include such things as marriage rituals (the “exchange of women”), the commodification of gender and sex roles (“the sexual division of labor”), and objectification, especially of the female body (“sex...is itself a social product”).¹ These are the kinds of traditional systems that create, naturalize, and sustain gender stereotypes. Feminism in the 21st century has set out to question, denaturalize, and critique such stereotypes as well as the institutions and systems that produce them. Rubin’s complex ideas can help us read *Avengers: Endgame* and elaborate on its feminist ideas.

Drawing on work by the anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Rubin explains the power of established familial systems as the “exchange of women.” Rubin writes, “If it is women who are being transacted, then it is



1 Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” 28, 37, 32.



the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it” (37). In many cultures and historical eras, that is, women have been perceived as objects to be exchanged between men rather than equal partners within relationships. The character of Nebula in *Avengers: Endgame* is a good example of this male-dominated system as well as of how the film challenges it. She begins as the subservient daughter (and obedient servant) of the film’s villain, Thanos. While she seems to understand her servitude as loyalty and love for her father, the audience sees it more clearly as destructive, blind obedience, especially when he tortures her to get what he wants. Thanos abuses her loyalty to him, putting his desires before her needs. Later in the film, she finally breaks free from him to help save half of the human population. In this way, the film comments on the need to dismantle and break from understandings of relationships that situate women as powerless servants to male desires. She becomes one of the key heroes of the story only after she rejects her father, bonds with Gamora, her sister, and makes decisions for herself. Her resilience is further emphasized when she encounters her alternate self. Nebula’s past self (still under the thrall of Thanos) tells her double “you’re weak” and “you disgust me,” but we are encouraged to understand this as projection, an indication of Nebula’s self-hatred for her submission to Thanos: “I’m you,” responds Nebula’s future self. Far from “weak,” we see her at her strongest when she breaks from her father’s control and fights to defeat him.

Male power over women is often fed by stereotypes such as the presumption that femininity is passive and masculinity is active. Rubin expands on this idea when she discusses the social power ascribed to the male body, and the “phallus” in particular: “Any organ...can be the locus of either active or passive eroticism. What is important in Freud’s scheme, however, is not the geography of desire, but its self-confidence. It is not an organ which is repressed, but a segment of erotic possibility” (49). Rubin is suggesting that while the female body has been associated with passivity (passive desire) and the male body with activity (active desire), the more significant difference between masculinity and femininity lies in “self-confidence.” While tradition would have it that our bodies determine that women should be passive, the real distinction should be understood as social and psychological, not physical. Bodily difference does not preclude the “self-confidence” that would allow women to reject the stereotype of passive femininity and actively pursue their desires. This is illustrated with Valkyrie’s character.

Near the end of the film, Valkyrie returns to her home, New Asgard, with Thor. She mentions the importance of his continued rule. Thor tells her that he no longer plans on being king but will pass the role to her. With this moment, the film challenges the stereotype of passive femininity. The history of leadership in Asgard has been patriarchal, encouraging the passivity of women within the realm. Valkyrie accepts this new position and steps into an active leadership role with confidence, regardless of gender and sex difference.

Elaborating on sex and gender as more about social values than physical differences, Rubin suggests that “sex as we know it—gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is itself a social product” (32). The differences between the sexes are social fictions. The gender roles naturalized by such fictions are also, then, simply products of such systems. The narrative of

sacrifice is an example of such a fiction. In most films following the standard superhero narrative, men sacrifice and women support. It is the men who sacrifice themselves, putting the lives of others before their own. *Avengers: Endgame* specifically refuses that narrative with the character of Natasha (also known as Black Widow). Natasha makes the ultimate sacrifice in one of the most



pivotal moments in the film. Both she and Clint (Jeremy Renner) go to Vormir to retrieve the soul stone. They are informed that they must sacrifice a soul to get the stone. They both offer their lives but, ultimately, Natasha gives her life to save Clint and acquire the stone that promises to save the world. It’s important to note, however, that the two fight each other beforehand over who should make the sacrifice. We can take that struggle to be an illustration of the film’s interest in dismantling gendered expectations. Clint sees it as his duty to save Natasha and redeem himself through sacrifice. This intention aligns perfectly with the expected, masculinized narrative pattern: the boy saves the girl, sacrifices himself, and achieves redemption. But Clint doesn’t seem to understand that Natasha, a woman, might appropriately perform that same function: save the boy, sacrifice herself, and redeem the world. As Natasha tells him, “I’m trying to save your life, you idiot.” This is a feud over the “division of labor” by sex in narrative terms (Rubin, 30). The film thematizes the struggle over whether men or women should perform the sacrifice function, ultimately breaking from the traditional narrative, making Natasha, not Clint, the savior and redeemer.

Rubin illustrates the consequences of the “division of labor by sex” when she writes that it functions to divide the sexes “into two mutually exclusive categories, a taboo which exacerbates the biological differences between the sexes and thereby creates gender. The division of labor can also be seen as a taboo against sexual arrangements other than those containing at least one man and one woman, thereby enjoining heterosexual marriage” (39). The stark, binary opposition of the sexes adds to the previously established idea of sex as a “social product.” It naturalizes binary understandings of gender roles and institutionalizes double-standards created by society. The

production team for *Avengers: Endgame* seems to understand this. When the women in the film fight against villains and navigate plot conflicts, they also do battle with traditional gender expectations.

During the final fight of the film, Captain Marvel is ready to transport the infinity gauntlet. It is then that Peter Parker (Spider-Man), mentions that there are a lot of villains in her path. Okoye states, “She’s got help.” This phrase sets the scene as the camera tracks, capturing the lead women in the film who line up to fight alongside Captain Marvel. This scene is one of the most powerful in the film. Captain Marvel could be assisted by any other group of superheroes, or she could fight the villains off by herself, but she doesn’t. She is supported by all her fellow female heroes. The film thus suggests, in highly dramatic fashion, that women are no longer the damsels in distress; instead, the damsels are warriors essential to winning the battle.

Rubin’s ideas highlight the damaging impacts of the social fictions dividing the sexes. The women in *Avengers: Endgame* revise such entrenched expectations and the narratives they authorize. The women in the film demonstrate strength and individuality. From their bravery to their drive to save others, they work to break barriers—both individually and together. Throughout the entirety of *Avengers: Endgame*, the sense of change goes beyond just the film. While breaking barriers in the cinematic universe, the change prompts necessary social change. ☺

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Just A Distant Memory: Cuarón's Long Take in *Roma*

Piersen Maass

Roma (2018), directed by Alfonso Cuarón, takes a loving yet distant look at his childhood memories of Libo, his family's nanny. To accomplish this ambivalent view of the past, Cuarón consistently uses the wide shot, long take to add a sense of stark realism to his recreated Mexico City of the 1970s. The use of the wide shot, long take forces the viewer to take a distant, objective view of the various events of the film—from the heartbreakingly tragic to the utterly mundane—and the experiences of its protagonist, Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio), who represents Cuarón's memory of Libo. The wide shot, long take allows Cuarón to see his own memories in a loving, empathetic way, but with enough distance to avoid the rose-colored glasses of nostalgia. He asks his viewers to do the same—to peer into the story from a distance, objectively, yet with respect and empathy.



This subject of the film is particularly personal to Cuarón; it's a loose recreation of portions of memories through a realistic lens. Cuarón discusses his connection to the story in a *Variety* interview: as the interviewer explains, Cuarón wanted to “craft a film that peered into the past through the prism of the present, an objective experience seen from the understanding he has as an adult” (41). In the interview, Cuarón suggests that he originally had a subjective view of that period and of the people

in his life, especially his caretaker. But as he got older and worked on the film, it became obvious that his previous caretaker was her own person with specific problems and desires. “There is a charge of affection that taints everything,” Cuarón says. “You have a very utilitarian relationship with your loved ones. You’re afraid to stop and see their weaknesses. But it started to be clear she had another life” (42). His increasingly objective understanding of the past (as opposed to an idealized or nostalgic view) seems to come through in the film, especially with the continued use of the wide shot, long take.



A good example of the wide shot, long take occurs in an early sequence in the film. After watching Cleo clean the carpark of dog feces (an indicator of her status in the family), we see her climb the stairs to pick up the family’s laundry. We watch her strip the beds in a wide angle, long take that allows the audience a realistic, objective view of Cleo’s everyday life. For almost a minute, the camera pans slowly to the right and back toward the left without ever truly centering Cleo. These key shots establish Cleo as the caretaker of the house and family without allowing her to be the focus or allowing the audience to get too close to her. Rather, the audience sees how Cleo moves about the house and acts when the family isn’t around, before we see the family themselves. It establishes Cleo as a caretaker with a life and solitary duties of her own, separate from the part she plays when directly interacting with the family. The camera continuously flows back and forth as Cleo goes about her mundane tasks, singing to herself. Although the camera follows her, it lags behind her movements without ever really catching up to her. This cinematic choice seems to suggest that although she is established in the family’s lives, she’s never quite able to catch up to them; there will always be a lag and divide between them. We see this borderland between caretaker and family member even more clearly in another key scene that uses the wide shot, long take: the scene on the beach where two of the children almost drown.

Cuarón uses the long take in the beach scene to create a slow-burn tension as the two children, Sofi and Paco, almost drown while playing in the ocean. Then he uses that tension to create a realistic, stomach-drop moment before a cathartic release when Cleo drags the children back to shore. Using the wide shot, long take, Cuarón allows the audience to feel the gravity of the situation from a distance so they can have a more objective understanding of it. Drowning or water rescue scenes are a staple of Hollywood filmmaking. Often such scenes feature heart-pumping action: the

protagonist races in to save the helpless victims. Rather than long takes, these scenes feature fast-paced editing with plenty of cuts from the victims to the protagonist, to the onlookers, and back again. (The drowning scene in *Baywatch* [2017] perfectly displays this type of Hollywood scene.) Although this definitely allows for tension and excitement for the audience, it glamorizes instead of creating a realistic understanding of what's at stake in these unfortunately common occurrences. In his essay, "Reality Effects: The Ideology of the Long Take in the Cinema of Alfonso Cuarón," Bruce Isaacs describes the difference between these approaches.

The shot of marked duration exceeds not only the perceptual orientation of montage, but manifests its stronger, potentially more transgressive mark of excess in its unwillingness to conform to a generalized spectatorial regime. The long take is frequently, and certainly for Cuarón and Lubezki, a liberation from the constrictive spatial and temporal regime of tradition. The further Cuarón and Lubezki shift into the montage regime of contemporary Hollywood studio filmmaking, the more emphatic their subsequent departure from an aesthetic of classical montage. (476)

Isaacs puts together the contrasts between the accepted norm of the Hollywood quick-cut, action-packed scene and the "transgressive" break from Hollywood expectations when using the long take. Cuarón's long take allows the audience to create an authentic connection to the piece and characters in a far more objective way, and reflect themselves through the characters, even if it may take longer for them to realize it.



More than any other scene in the film, *Roma*'s beach scene features heartbreak, realization, and connection, not only for the characters, but also for the audience. In the scene, Sofi and Paco are told they aren't to go deep into the ocean because Cleo is not able to swim and therefore wouldn't be able to save them if they get pulled by the currents. They decide to swim farther and farther from shore, however, despite Cleo's constant calls to stay close. The camera follows Cleo this entire time as she walks away from the ocean with the youngest, Pepe, and then slowly goes back towards the ocean and into it to save the two. As she drags them both back to shore, Sofia (the mother) comes back and they all fall into each other in a circle formation, crying and consoling each other. The audience finally sees the barriers seem to break down between the family and Cleo.

Young people may see a person, idea, or event in a heroic light that continues to shine down on that subject in memory as they grow older. When self-reflection or new information contradicts that idealized memory, however, one can revise one's view of the past with less sentiment and more realism. Cuarón was able to do this during the filmmaking process by going back to the people involved, speaking with them, and altering his view as they contradicted his idealized memories. The long take sequence on the beach seems to reflect a similar process in the characters as they gather together and begin to break the barriers between the family and their housemaid. The family seems to gain a new, more realistic understanding of why Cleo hasn't been herself and why she's sobbing after rescuing the children. They gain a better view of Cleo as a person, an individual, rather than simply someone who caters to their needs. As Cleo tearfully confesses that she didn't want the baby (her stillborn child), Sofia responds to comfort her: *Te queremos mucho, Cleo*, "we love you very much." Cleo's heartbreaking revelation shows the family a new, more realistic side of her, and the family responds with a loving embrace. Meanwhile Cuarón's camera remains at a respectful distance, in a wide shot, with no close-ups and no cuts, maintaining a view of the past delicately poised between detached objectivity and overwhelming empathy. 🍷

Piersen Maass graduated with a degree in Film Studies from UW-Whitewater in May 2023. This essay was written for a Cinema Auteurs course in Fall 2022.

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Mad Woman: David Fincher's Lens on Female Rage and Revenge

Stephanie Mays

In David Fincher's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) and *Gone Girl* (2014), the female leads pursue vendettas in response to being controlled and abused. The films provide two variations on a rape–revenge narrative that share one important trait: instead of heroizing these women, both stories confront us with the questionable morality of their methods, avoiding any simple redemptive message. Instead, they expose the hypocrisy of narratives that valorize violence only when it, in turn, valorizes men who use it to protect victimized women. They also make us aware of how ingrained such narratives are in misogynistic, patriarchal societies. Fincher's representations of angry, hurt, and vengeful Lisbeth Salander (Rooney Mara) and Amy Dunne (Rosamund Pike) reinforce the social commentary of the films by eliciting both disgust and sympathy for these characters' actions. In doing so, he encourages us to see these women not as simply violent, but desperate—desperate for power of their own and for purpose beyond what is expected of them.

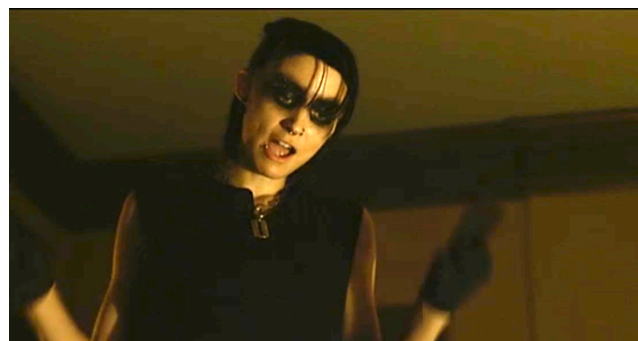
In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth Salander's victimization at the hands of men and her explosive reaction to that victimization serve as an indictment of society's misogyny. As a ward of the state, declared mentally incompetent to “manage daily life,” Lisbeth's subjection to patriarchal control couldn't be more complete. Early in the film, her guardianship is transferred from an apparently benevolent caregiver to a caseworker who holds her bank account hostage, reducing her to a sexual object under his observation and control. Lisbeth's forms of self-expression under these constraints paint a very raw and real picture of feminine experience and rage. If women are meant to be calm, moral compasses who present themselves as physically likeable to the male eye, Fincher portrays Lisbeth in the opposite way. For instance, she makes her living as an expert hacker, working on the fringes of the law. But her most obvious protest is to physically change herself, making herself almost unreadable within societal gender norms.

Fincher uses four escalating sequences involving Lisbeth interacting with her guardian, Nils Bjurman (Yorick van Wageningen), to show both the suffocating force of the misogynistic system and how she has come to see opposition as her only form of power. This subplot plays out as a rape–revenge structure, which mirrors the film's plot and invites us to sympathize more fully with its overall social critique. When Lisbeth first meets Bjurman, he is the image of an upstanding professional, with a well-ordered office and a photo of his family featured prominently on his desk. He quizzes her on



her job before asking her, “You think that thing through your eyebrow makes you attractive?” Lisbeth is framed against a dark and unfocused background, unsupported by any visual displays of normalcy. She doesn’t respond, but looks away and swallows hard, seemingly processing the helplessness of her situation. In the second sequence, Lisbeth shows up obviously trying to look more like what Bjurman expects. This accomplishes nothing, as he pries into her sexuality under the guise of “regulations” and “health concerns,” then forces her to perform oral sex in exchange for an allowance from her own earnings. The third meeting is at his apartment, where she goes expecting to have to do the same again. Instead, he brutally restrains and rapes her.

The rape sequence offers the most overt representation of how Lisbeth’s experience as a woman has left her desperate to find some sort of power. In her fourth interaction with Bjurman, she takes revenge by enacting a very literal inversion of what she experienced, drugging, restraining, and sodomizing her rapist—even styling herself as a kind of masked avenger. This is among the most shocking moments in the film, but why? Because society has taught us to accept the abuse women go through every day, and because we’re used to seeing it represented on film, Fincher knows this break from the norm will provoke us. Are we supposed to approve of this revenge? Do we find it justified? Fincher places this scene near the midpoint of the film and gives it very little follow-up. He neither heroizes nor demonizes Lisbeth for it. In this story, where literal and metaphorical layers of vengeance run deep, he offers no simple answer to the question of whether or when two wrongs make a right. Through his portrayal of Lisbeth Salander, however, he breaks conventional narrative patterns and gendered assumptions about violence, provoking us to reflect on the roots of our judgments.



Gone Girl takes a much more reserved and calculated approach to the traps of gender expectations. While Amy Dunne may appear psychopathic in her calculated actions, she is in fact another representation of a woman who adopts, adapts, and eventually takes explosive charge of her feminine



experience and the social roles that are defined for her. Early in the film, Fincher sets up a complicated origin story: many of Amy's life choices—and her vision of herself—are based on *Amazing Amy*, a book character created by her parents. At a party celebrating the “Complete *Amazing Amy*” with the publication of *Amazing Amy and the Big Day*, Amy reveals to Nick (Ben Affleck) how the books supposedly inspired by her had instead turned into instruction manuals for how to be a more perfect daughter. Dressed in black, she walks Nick down an aisle of posters offering a 25-year retrospective

of the book series. Pausing in front of one poster, she explains that when she'd quit playing cello at age 10, “in the next book, *Amazing Amy* became a prodigy.” The scene opens with a voiceover by Amy describing herself as “me—regular, flawed, really me—jealous as always of the golden child” who has now gotten married before she has. When it ends with Nick publicly proposing, we see how thoroughly both characters have projected themselves into the idealized and socially enforced narrative of a happy modern marriage.

In contrast to Lisbeth, Amy has in many ways benefited from these social conventions. With Nick, she finds herself in an idealized marriage and living a stable life that should leave her happy and fulfilled. She starts to see it differently, though, after they move to Missouri, which is not her decision, despite her being the main breadwinner at the time. The mundane and repetitive mid-western lifestyle gets to her in a way that her work-filled life in the city did not. It finally gives her a chance to slow down and take a look, from the outside, at the perfect life she believes she has made. She realizes she is now just following the manual for being a perfect supportive wife, while Nick, unemployed and feeling similarly denied the social privilege he thought he'd earned, ends up using her support and resenting her for it. Fincher captures multiple layers of this dynamic in a



brief sequence where Amy, home from work, finds Nick sprawled on the couch playing a video game. She confronts him about his expenditures while tidying up his fast-food containers and beer cans. Nick, clearly annoyed by the interruption, responds, “you can give your parents \$879,000 without talking

to me about it, but god forbid I buy a video game without your permission.” When he soothes his stereotypically wounded masculinity by having a stereotypical affair, she sets her elaborate revenge plot in motion.

As in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Fincher expects us to be shocked by her methods. He lures us into what seems a conventional husband-kills-wife story, then explodes everything we've assumed, leading us to see Amy not as the victim, but as the villain. At the same time, though, he lets us (visually and aurally) into her real thoughts and perspectives, which heightens the chance we'll sympathize with her reasoning. That reasoning has little to do with physical or sexual abuse—though she easily exploits social assumptions about exactly these things, swaying the court of public opinion toward Nick's guilt and staging a rape-revenge narrative with Desi to finally get her way. Instead, the story is an indictment of deeply ingrained gender codes and the social narratives that help reinscribe them. Amy literally gets away with murder simply



by exploiting conventional assumptions about gender and violence against women. Fincher fittingly stages her reunion with Nick against a backdrop of paparazzi and concerned citizens, as her entire revenge plot has banked on them. All of this serves to make the social norms and stories the real target for reflection and critique. If we simply condemn or heroize Amy, we're missing the point.

Fincher shows that people react to injustice with injustice. The protagonists of these stories may be morally reprehensible at times, but it is because they exist within morally reprehensible societies. By asking us to reflect on how these fictional worlds mirror our own, he asks us to see the actions of Lisbeth and Amy less as those of calculated psychopaths and more as those of women controlled by gender expectations and knowing no other way to express their anger. We are expected and taught to look down on violence, except when that violence is condoned and normalized by society itself. These two women are beaten down by the norms of society both mentally and physically, yet when they respond in kind, we must ask ourselves why we feel they have acted immorally. Fincher's portrayal of these women allows the audience to not only sympathize with these specific stories, but also to understand how the social norms they're based on hurt and limit us all. 🍷

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Fincher, David, director. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. 2011; Sony Pictures, 2018. DVD.

———. *Gone Girl*. Twentieth-Century Fox, 2014. DVD.



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Heroic Incomprehension in Cuarón's *Children of Men*

Mitch Munson

Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) imagines a whole world reduced to a single lifetime. Set amidst a global infertility crisis, it is a study of how people might live without the guarantee of an assumed future. It operates under the shadow of the “hero's journey”¹—the cultural guide to a good life, framed by progress and redemption, shaping individual purpose as a responsibility toward collective being. Cuarón's film takes on this conventional mythic structure, but his rendition skewers its Western interpretations for the brutal realities they underwrite: in this story, the elixir is an illegitimate daughter of an African refugee who derisively jokes about being a virgin. Bereft of a future, the characters must also define their purpose vis-à-vis an altered relation to the past and to a cultural mythos now rendered impotent. Within this structure, Theo Faron (Clive Owen) becomes the hero almost accidentally, initially following his personal desire to rekindle a relationship with his ex-wife, Julian (Julianne Moore), but becoming the herald of new life among an otherwise desolate humanity. Through his character, Cuarón suggests that mythos should be relatively ignored—not to deny its impact (both positive and negative) or to disavow its beauty, but to raucously and instinctively safeguard against knowing, quietistic despair in a very real present.

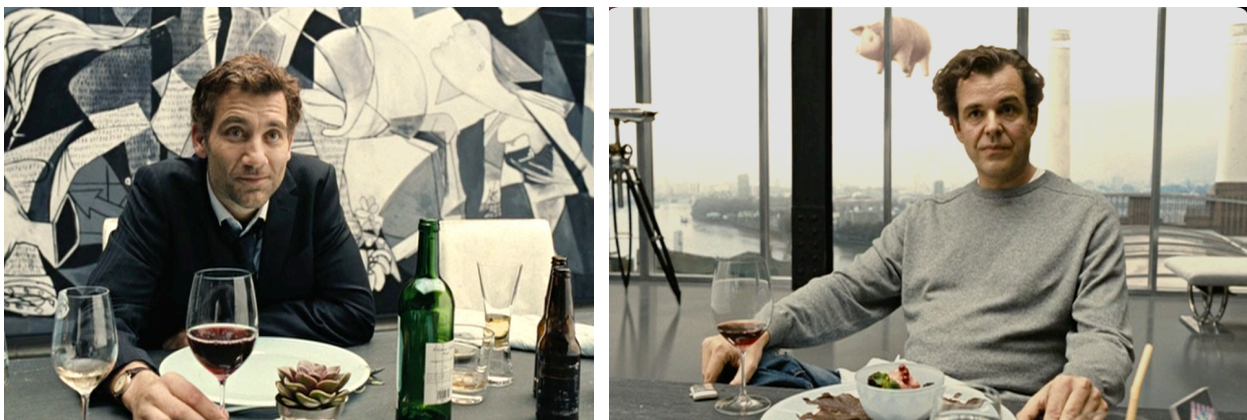
Through its characterization, dialogue, mise-en-scene, and narrative purpose, the scene detailing Theo's visit to the Ministry of Art serves as the foundation for this idea. This stage in Theo's journey is his crossing of the threshold between the ordinary and special worlds, where he commits to escorting Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey) to the coast and makes a false appeal to his cousin Nigel (Danny Huston) for transit papers. That Cuarón stages this checkpoint here is meaningful. Art overcomes the limitations of mortality with its attempt to capture mythos; its externally and internally referential system establishes a cultural continuity that exceeds the commentary of any of its parts. Its

1 This essay references the hero's journey, or “monomyth,” through which Joseph Campbell articulated the pattern of what he saw as a universal narrative structure; in it, “a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968, 30. First published 1949.). The essay uses popularized terms for the stages of this journey, including “threshold,” “guardian,” and “elixir” (or boon).

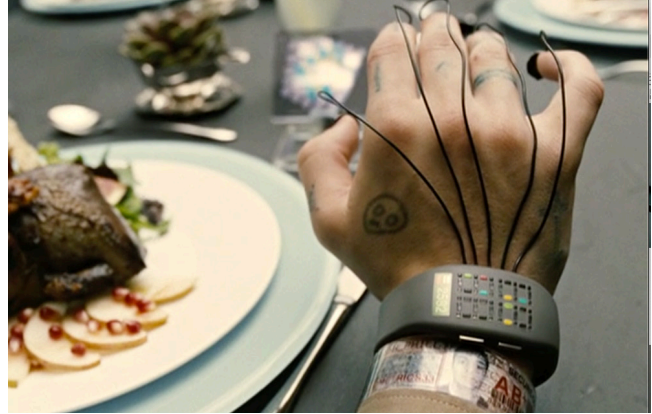
presence in this distinctively calm and ordered scene offers the characters in it—Theo, Nigel, and Nigel’s son, Alex (Ed Westwick)—a distance from reality and a closeness to these fragments of a collective consciousness. In turn, the scene offers us three alternative attitudes toward mythos, and by structurally favoring Theo’s, we’re encouraged to see it as a crucial facet of his heroism.



The sequence opens with Theo’s entrance into the exhibit, which is modern in its interior design, security system, and Banksy piece, but tied to antiquity by its function and the “MMXXVII” creation date in its seal. Once Theo has made it through security, we’re drawn, as he is, into Nigel’s inner sanctum through an imposing shot of a one-legged *David*. Crippled by the violence of a world defined by a single collective lifetime, *David* has metaphorically lost the capacity to move, presumably at the hands of riotous individuals aiming to affirm their own temporary significance by removing the human aspects of myth or by destroying its artifice entirely. In contrast, the dogs at *David*’s feet seem to guard him in ignorance, literally and functionally operating under the shadow of art without understanding its significance. In steps Nigel, who laments that he couldn’t also save the *Pietà*. Charged with gathering and securing the world’s most significant works of art in this London fortress dubbed the “Ark of Arts,” he is the guardian of cultural memory as well as of Theo’s threshold. The works he has saved indicate a carefully curated endeavor, a planned *translatio imperii* of human meaning from the West to an unforeseen future.



The scene moves to an opulent dining table, around which art is placed in a possessive, vapid manner, especially emphasized in the personal display of Picasso’s anti-war painting *Guernica*. This selfish, decadent arrangement indicates that Nigel interacts with mythos merely as a state-



approved owner. He salvages art as spoils of war, displaying it without understanding its condemnation of his wealth and status. This is confirmed by Cuarón's framing of Nigel in front of a recreation of Pink Floyd's *Animals* album cover; the industrial smog suggests urban exploitations of labor while the colossal inflatable pig references Orwell's animal allegory for the authoritarian manipulation of ideas (*Animal Farm*, 1945). In addition to his visual framing, Nigel's self-admitted relation to art and mythos is unthinking and apathetic. He deliberately remains a blind keeper of art, ignorant of its meaning and appreciative only that it signifies class and England as the cultural center of the world—even though it is assumed there will soon be no one left to interpret these signs.

If Nigel is a slavishly dead-end conduit for past glories, his son Alex is entirely absorbed in technology, which, while further removed from mythos than art like *Guernica*, contains the same key dissociation from individual reality. He is silent, and so removed from the present that Theo does not pause his discussion of illegal transit papers in front of him as he does with the servants. Nigel only addresses him once, to dredge up his consciousness and remind him to take his required medication—a forced interaction. Alex embodies an approach toward mythos as a virtual reality, beyond individual life. The camera breaks him into pieces, further equating his consummation of mythos and being. He wears art—tattoos, a bold argyle pattern, an intricate game accessory—signifying personal taste but subsuming personhood. On the opposite end of a spectrum from his ego-centered father, he effectively sacrifices personal autonomy and sublimates himself into a limitless mythos through his direct interaction with collective consciousness.

In contrast to these two, the film's ongoing dynamic between mythos and reality points through Theo towards the virtue of a different balance. More fully developed as a person than Alex, Theo



is aligned more with the dogs in the scene than with Nigel. Nigel's ignorance of the mythic takes the form of selfish opposition to its communal quality; he can curate its artifice only insofar as he does not consider his own relation to time, other people, or the confrontational intent behind the art he proudly presents. The dogs function in a different kind of unconscious relation to art and culture. Due to their limited understanding of mortality, they, unlike the vandals who crippled *David*, are able to contribute to communal purpose without personal hostility. Theo's entry into the Ark attaches to him both a wry mundanity and a capacity to be moved beyond himself. This is captured first by the personal effects he leaves on the metal detector tray, signs of both daily function and personal escape obscuring the pompous seal in a haphazardly aesthetic tableau. Then, as he enters the apartment and is greeted by *David*, his expressions register initial awe, then appreciation. When we see *David*, Theo is shot from behind, in silhouette—a relatively common choice by Cuarón, who also shoots him out of focus in multiple key moments. This is a series of characterizations that forecast his heroic journey in the film. Motivated first by a personal desire to ease the pain of his present by reconnecting to his past, he fulfills his heroic function even after Julian's death. Careless of his own mortality, he delivers Kee and her baby to the "Tomorrow" not as the bearer of the elixir but out of genuine concern for them, first, and what they promise for humanity second. In the film's threaded-in analogy to the birth of Jesus, Theo is the functional Joseph, uncomprehending of the mythic outcome of his actions but sensing enough to make it possible. His uncomprehending heroism, using mythos as an inherent, heuristic aid towards a personal understanding of reality, allows him to operate within collective consciousness without collapsing under its weight.

In addition to guarding the statue of *David*, dogs are a constant presence in Theo's journey. He gambles on dog races; he follows women who hold dogs like infants, first into the Fishes' plot and then through a large part of the Bexhill long take. They embody a kindred sort of senseless vitality that humanity lost with its fertility. Their diegetic barking also persistently contrasts with the score as background noise, rooting the characters and the audience in the realism of the film and reality of Theo's journey. The dogs' affinity for Theo, mentioned once offhandedly and reinforced through this constant narrative parallelism, is more than a passing attempt to signal Theo's likability—he, like them, is unaware of his identity in relation to mythos, symbolism, and the hero's journey, and is functioning within that role almost instinctively.



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With its presentation of Theo, Nigel, and Alex in the Ark of Arts sequence and beyond, *Children of Men* solidifies its own relation to mythos and the long line of artistic representations that have attempted to embody it. Being formed from the same substance as such referential, timeless, and ultimately fruitless cultural mediums, the film finds itself tracing the border of their long shadow, incorporating their voices as foundational meaning and staking out their worth. T.S. Eliot's *The*

Waste Land, a fragmented and heavily allusive poem with similar themes, is one of these influences. It shows up throughout the film in a variety of ways, but its presence can be felt the most in a mirrored portrayal of the dogs that so aptly complement Theo. The dogs of *The Waste Land* are antagonistic forces of nature—their unthinking behavior is anathema to Eliot and his myriad speakers, whose method of fending off mortality is to directly and knowingly join the fragments of art, and by doing so, reach an absolute understanding. With his characterization of Theo, Cuarón rejects Eliot's path towards such meaningful conclusion, stopping instead to embrace the dog where it has been cast aside for its threatening simplicity of purpose. In other words, upon finally defining the bounds of that looming artistic shadow, *Children of Men* boldly steps out into the blinding light of an unwitting heroism by ceasing to wonder at the difference of its two paces. 🐕

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Cuarón, Alfonso, director. *Children of Men*. 2006; Universal Studios, 2007. DVD.



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Brokeback Mountain and the Radical Threat of Queerness

Emily Rosales

Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) follows a love affair between two men as it consumes their lives for over four decades. Despite the taboo nature of their love and how disruptive it is to their otherwise ordinary lives as family men, ranchers, and cowboys, they keep returning year after year to Brokeback Mountain, the same place they first met. This essay will analyze their first



reunion after their initial summer on Brokeback. The sequence shows Alma (Michelle Williams) catching her husband Ennis (Heath Ledger) passionately kissing Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal). I will also show how another sequence—Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid) watching Jack and Ennis through binoculars—compares to Alma's discovery of her husband's attraction to Jack. Both sequences depict queerness as a "radical threat" to normative social values and ideals of family (Edelman, 14). In the first reunion sequence, for instance, the queer kiss Alma witnesses threatens her relationship with her husband, challenging not only her understanding of who her husband is but also who she is as a wife and mother. "For queerness," as Lee Edelman writes, "can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (17).

According to Edelman, queerness is the negative space of heterosexuality; it is the thing that heterosexuality is not. For Edelman, this means that queerness is not only understood as morally debased or lacking in social value, but also "the very space that 'politics' makes unthinkable" (3). Queerness is essential to heterosexual social discourse (as its inherent "other") and definable only in the negative—as the essentially anti-social or in-human. For this reason, queerness figures a "resistance to the viability of the social" (3). One who occupies the negative space of queerness, Edelman argues, can only identify as an absence, an "other," a "resistance" to normative social values. Such a life can only signify as a radical disruption of the heteronormative. Embracing this position "outside" the social, this negative space, is to perform what Edelman calls "queer negativity,"

which would actively contest heteronormativity (6). But Jack and Ennis cannot embrace active, queer negativity. Instead, they attempt to suppress and deny their queer identities.

After their first sexual interaction, Ennis says to Jack, “you know I ain’t queer,” and Jack responds, “me neither.” These two lines are telling, as is the fact that these men feel the need to make this assertion after acknowledging their relationship (what “we got going on here”). Ennis is so threatened by his own queerness that he feels the need to distance himself from it. He uses the words, “I ain’t queer” as a way to not only deny what he just did (having sex with a man) and avoid acknowledging what they “got going on here” (a sexual relationship), but also to deny the very part of him that desires Jack. He uses the words, “you know” as if he’s seeking reassurance that his performance of “not queer” is in fact reality and not performance at all. Jack responds by saying, “me neither” which shows his participation in a performance they both consider “normal” that rejects their queer identities. Both men feel threatened by their queerness, which leads them to attempt to reject it multiple times in the film even as they keep coming back to each other regardless of how much it disrupts their lives and identities.

In their first reunion after the summer working on Brokeback, Ennis shows a new side of himself that is, up to this point, foreign to both the audience and (we assume) his wife Alma. Ennis is anxiously awaiting Jack’s arrival. He sits by the windowsill, smoking, drinking, and bouncing his leg. The fidgeting, excessive drinking, and smoking all suggest that he is anxious for this meeting, which points to its importance. A jump cut to a wide shot shows him passed out on the couch surrounded by empty beer bottles. The sound of Jack’s truck driving up is enough to wake Ennis,



who then heads immediately to look out the window and gives us one of the most genuine, albeit restrained, smiles we have seen from Ennis thus far. It is the smile of a man who cannot help himself. We see him so excited to see Jack that he’s no longer the quiet, guarded Ennis we’ve come to know. Eagerly awaiting Jack’s arrival, he is vibrant, passionate, and enthusiastic. His love for Jack brings this out of him, showing us a repressed queer identity that contrasts with and disturbs his identity as a stoic cowboy, father, and husband.

Ennis’s feelings toward Jack become even more clear as he runs out the door and, while standing outside at the top of the stairs, yells, “Jack fucking Twist,” slamming both hands onto the half wall and beaming with joy. The motion and exclamation convey Ennis’s feelings for Jack. The “Jack fucking Twist” and hand slap are relatively loud, emotional, and unrestrained gestures coming from a man who we have known, up to this point, to be incredibly quiet and purposefully controlled. The only times we see emotion take control of Ennis are when he is experiencing anger or, less commonly, sadness, which is why his uncharacteristically expressive joy over seeing Jack is even more important to notice. It tells us what the kiss that follows tells us, what the giddy run outside told us, and what the smile told us. All of these actions reveal the passionate love between these two men without either character explicitly verbalizing it.

After Ennis runs down the stairs and the two men embrace, Ennis looks around to make sure no one is watching them (a moment that also suggests how threatening queerness is), then pushes Jack up against the nearest wall for a passionate kiss. This is another uncharacteristic move for



Ennis because we do not know him to be the more active person in the relationship. Here, however, Ennis's initiation of the kiss points to his uncontrollable passion for Jack.

Contrasting the version of Ennis when he sees Jack with the Ennis we know him to be around Alma makes Alma's discovery of the two of them kissing even more upsetting for her. Not only does she see Ennis passionate and vibrant, but she must face the realization that this side of him was first discovered by another man and not by her. Edelman's argument about how queerness threatens both queer and heteronormative identities is most applicable when Alma opens the front door and catches the two men making out by the stairs. She is first shown in a medium shot and then, after showing the kiss in an eyeline match, we see Alma once more, this time in a close-up. Alma's expression reads as a combination of fear, disgust, shock, and perhaps anger. The use of the close up and the acting performance by Michelle Williams allow the audience to experience her confusion and mixed emotions. Alma closes the door, then walks slowly and unsteadily towards the kitchen, her breathing shaky and shallow.



While Ennis and Jack's queerness certainly disturbs their own identities, it also has the power to disturb the identities of those close to them. The first, less extreme example of this happens when Joe Aguirre watches Ennis and Jack through the binoculars. Joe Aguirre's face shows disgust, and he continues to treat both men with revulsion after seeing them together. He cuts their summer short, then refuses to rehire Jack, telling him "you guys wasn't getting paid to leave the dogs babysit the sheep while you stem the rose." Jack and Ennis pose a threat to Aguirre. He is clearly marked as homophobic, and we are encouraged to suspect that seeing Jack and Ennis together



challenges values that he does not want challenged, which results in the loss of a job for Jack. Alma, however, has much more invested. Her identity as a mother, a wife, and the sole partner of a heterosexual man is at stake. As Alma walks away from the door after seeing her husband kiss Jack, it becomes clear that her worldview has been shattered. She is forced to redefine her relationship with Ennis

as well as how she views herself within that relationship. Ennis' queerness, therefore, is a radical threat—an identity that, despite Ennis' attempts to repress it, nevertheless threatens their marriage and makes Alma question her overall identity. This is an apt example of what Edelman means when he says that queerness can only ever disturb an identity.

As Jack and Ennis come inside after their kiss, the two main perspectives in this sequence—Ennis's and Alma's—are intercut in a series of alternating shots. We see Ennis visibly delighted while talking to Jack about their children. When Jack tells Ennis he's "got a boy," we see Ennis from the back as he eagerly springs his head forward in interest and replies, "yeah?" A few seconds later we see Ennis turn around to face Alma (and the camera) as he grins unabashedly. Though subtle, this is another example of how thrilled Ennis is to see Jack. His glee bleeds into words and gestures that would otherwise be suppressed or guarded, further underscoring the idea that this is a significant and unparalleled moment for Ennis.

Yet the apparent joy Ennis feels makes him oblivious to the arguably equally as apparent shock and discomfort Alma is experiencing. The high he feels contrasts with Alma's utter low. He is, however, incapable of recognizing her experience in this moment, which only further emphasizes his all-consuming love for Jack and just how much that love differs from his love for Alma. The recklessness of



falling in love with a man and kissing him where they could easily be seen also suggests how this love makes Ennis do things he wouldn't otherwise do, pointing us to the sheer power and intensity of the feelings of the men for one another and the fact that Ennis does not feel the same way toward Alma.

When Jack and Ennis first walk into the house, Alma is shown in a medium shot. The next time we see her, the shot is a little closer and, right after we see Ennis turn to Alma and grin after hearing the news that Jack has a little boy, we see Alma in an even closer shot, clearly upset. By framing Alma in increasingly closer and closer shots, we can focus more on her facial expression, which is wrought with clear anguish. These shots are meant to focus the audience's attention on her emotional experience. This experience is only heightened by seeing Ennis—the very man causing her this pain—not only unaware of her suffering but actively and enthusiastically engaging with Jack in front of her as if she were oblivious to their true relationship.

Part of the brilliance of *Brokeback Mountain* lies in its recognition of how, as Edelman reminds us, queerness threatens identities. But the film also tells us that such threats can apply to both queer and heteronormative identities, potentially amplifying the tragic consequences that may occur when queerness is repressed or denied. ☹

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Creatures of Fact and Fiction: The Cyborg Feminism of *Ex Machina*

Katherine Wozniak

Fictional cyborgs, no matter how they are characterized, invoke a certain set of questions around which to shape a story. What does it mean to be human? What distinguishes us from what is not us? What would happen if we created artificial life, both like us and not? Because cyborgs in film are usually embodied by human actors, they tend to push these questions in one particular direction: what if we created artificial intelligence/life in our own image? Would they transcend our limitations or exploit our fatal flaws? In Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), Ava (Alicia Vikander) and Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) are cyborgs created by Nathan (Oscar Isaac), who sees himself as a new god. Importantly, though, they are both cyborgs and women, whom Nathan and his employee, Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), see as mere objects of desire—for sex, for projections of their ideal women, for financial success and professional glory, and more. While Nathan at one point insists that their gender doesn't matter, we see overlap in their experiences due to their supposed gender and the fact that they are AIs. Kyoko is programmed to be obedient, but we also see Nathan exploit her for housework and sex; Ava is programmed to seek escape, but we see her desire to do so as fueled by Nathan's confinement and control. Once the two start to become more life-like to the audience, a broader connection is made: women are treated like robots. Inhuman. Lesser than men. So, we are encouraged to root for Ava to escape. But when she does so by exploiting the flaws of both her creator and her would-be knight in shining armor, we're left to ask: does she offer a vision of a newly empowered woman, or has she just admirably played the part of the femme fatale? I argue that we more fully understand the film if our answer is *both*.

My reading takes its cue from Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," which links cyborgs and women in a vision for feminism's future. Haraway claims that, while the idea of "women's experience" must be understood as "a fiction" because not every woman will experience the exact same thing, it must also be understood as a "fact," because "liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility" (6). To ground her vision for feminism's possibility, she examines the cyborg, which is also a "creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." Cyborgs, she writes, challenge the dualistic thinking that defines a concept like fact as not fiction (or natural as not artificial, female as not male, etc.). In blurring some of these deep-seated definitional boundaries, she claims, cyborgs expose how constructed those

boundaries are and have always been. They thus provide an apt model for the possibility of redefining “woman.” As Haraway makes clear, however, cyborgs are not utopic; they do not exist outside of the history of definitions, stories, and the expectations these attach to them in social reality. Neither, by extension, is the idea of a post-gender world of more use than as imaginative play. Instead, she urges us to embrace the “tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (5). This, I argue, is how we should approach the conclusion of *Ex Machina*.



As might be expected, at the end of the film, Kyoko and Ava exceed their programming and take revenge on their human captors. But the revenge sequence leans into gender tropes that also mark it as a rebellion against the confines of patriarchy. Ava

and Kyoko take control of their sexuality and womanhood, completely reversing the gendered power dynamic that had been established. The tumultuous sequence begins with a connection: Ava has gotten out of her room and encounters Kyoko, lightly tapping her arm. She mumbles words we do not understand into Kyoko’s ear. In fact, we cannot hear what she is saying at all, as if we are not supposed to be a part of the conversation—this is a secret communication. This alludes to the subtle communications that women often use to talk to one another so that those around, mainly men, do not understand: a tilt of the head, a widening of the eyes, a squeeze of the hand. The camera then cuts to a knife in Kyoko’s hand. We are given a clue as to what they are communicating. The pair lock eyes. An understanding and a connection have been reached.



What follows is a symbolically loaded power struggle. Nathan enters, his silhouette black—referencing his dark character. He is not pure, he is bad. *Man* is bad. Nathan demands that Ava return to her room. He looks at Ava at a downward angle; she is not his equal. Ava charges at him and he is unable to stop her. She straddles him in a rather sexual manner, pushing

her pelvis against him, pinning him down. He lacks consent, as Kyoko never consented to his using her for sex. Ava has turned the tables—she’s using sexuality for power and control.

The camera then cuts to an ominous shot of Kyoko at the other end of the hall. It is a silhouette of her legs, the knife dangling at her side. Earlier, we see her use it to prepare dinner for Nathan and Caleb. Now, its dichotomy of sensuality and power represents how Kyoko has regained control of her womanhood. She walks toward Ava and Nathan. Nathan is finally able to overpower Ava, smashing her arm. Believing he’s back in control, he starts to drag her along the floor. But he has forgotten about Kyoko. Kyoko inserts the knife into Nathan’s back and the music crescendos.



The knife represents a phallus; Kyoko has penetrated Nathan. The camera cuts to behind Kyoko; now he is beneath her gaze. She grabs his face, forcing him to look at her so he remembers who did this to him. He is aware of being controlled. Nathan swings a pipe at Kyoko's jaw, reminding us how he'd programmed her not to talk back. With Nathan distracted, Ava removes the knife from Nathan's back and sticks it into his chest, thus becoming the second woman to penetrate him. It is through this

complicated dance of gender role reversals and displays of sexual power that the cyborgs Ava and Kyoko first exert their free will.

The film doesn't end there, though, and what follows is a study in how Ava exercises her new-found power to choose. Immediately after Nathan's death, she walks into his office, where Caleb was staying, and stands before him. The camera is at a high angle, looking down at Caleb. She—the woman and cyborg—is now more powerful than Caleb—the man and human. Ava tells Caleb to wait while she goes to Nathan's bedroom and looks through the different cabinets containing past AIs. They are all women. Caleb watches Ava through a window, as he has done throughout the film. Despite the sweetly melodic music playing, Caleb's actions are still quite voyeuristic. He gawks at her as she covers herself in other cyborgs' skin and limbs. She strokes one woman's cheek, then herself. This symbolizes sisterhood—Ava is taking a moment to acknowledge those who've come before her. Those not lucky enough to survive.



She pauses to admire her new self in the mirror, and notices Caleb staring. She closes the cabinet that holds the now skinless AI—symbolizing that she's also closing this chapter of her life. She's a woman now. The connection is complete. She takes her long hair and flips it off her shoulder—a very feminine movement. She dons a dress and fondles the lace bow—a very human action. We get another shot of Caleb admiring Ava as she leaves the room. Caleb calls to her, but she ignores him. Ava

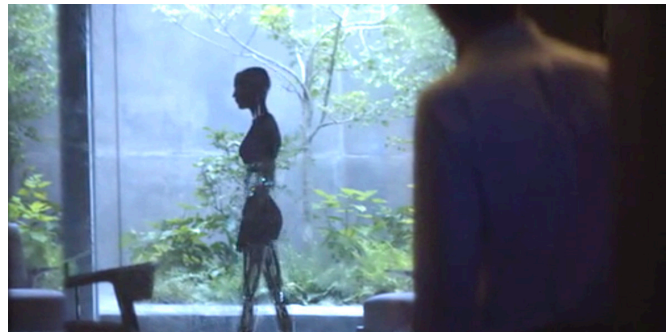
exits the office and the door locks behind her. Here, the music transforms from a melodic lullaby to harsh and loud whooshes. Caleb tries to open the door, but it won't open. He's failed Ava's test. He watched her getting dressed as he pleased—he didn't give her privacy. He also expected to leave with Ava, as if he was entitled to her. He failed her test because he didn't see Ava as an equal. Ava leaves without even looking back. The music changes to a beautifully peaceful piano as she steps, smiling, through Nathan's home and leaves his property. The camera cuts to some time later. There's a reflection in a window that shows people rushing around Ava. There's the sound of traffic and chatter. She has escaped the confines of the patriarchy; Ava's free.

There is a less cheery way to interpret this end. True, Ava has escaped Nathan and the box he'd put her in, but the way her entry into society is portrayed shows that she has just exchanged one observation box for another. Further, she has chosen to adopt a decidedly feminine appearance, knowing very well how she will be seen as she selects her body parts. She will presumably continue exercising the power of her sexuality to manipulate men, much like a femme fatale. But her sexuality is also quite innocent and new, as we can see in the way she admires her new body. She has not allowed the toxic men in her life (Nathan, the "alpha male," and Caleb, the "nice guy") to control her sexuality and her womanhood. She can decide what kind of woman she will be. In fact, she seems to gain more womanhood. She literally dons a new skin, a new self. She is evolving into a new woman.

Haraway's cyborg/woman analogy reminds us why it is useful not to resolve this apparent conflict. "The cyborg," she writes, "is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation" (7). So long as both the fictions and lived experiences that define "cyborgs" and "women" are controlled by a self-serving patriarchy—as we might see figured by Nathan, his compound, and his insistence that gender has nothing to do with it—there is no possibility for change. It is only by observing the discrepancies between "imagination" and "material reality" that we can see how these work together to define and limit what cyborgs, women—any of us—could be.

At the beginning of the film, Ava is locked in a room of glass, her every move monitored and controlled. At the end, Caleb is also locked in a room—though under somewhat different terms. Caleb, too, was always in a box designed by Nathan, observed and manipulated even before the events of the film's story. The room he ends up in is filled

with the monitors Nathan used to observe and control both him and Ava. Ava leaves him there, but figuratively, it's he who got himself stuck in a fiction in which he willingly participated, albeit unaware of the depth of its constructedness. While the film gives us glimmers of hope that he will realize it all, he is never able to break from his expected roles: the good employee, the nice guy, the protector of women, the voyeur. In Caleb's presumed (but not determined) end, he is stuck, a victim of the ghost of a patriarchal menace. Ava, the cyborg, is not as bound to human roles. Her design, though, was not free of human history, so neither is her future. The film's closing shots



frame Ava among people cast in shadows and reflections. She has in some ways just exchanged Nathan's observation box for a bigger one, in a society that we are given to understand is controlled by people like Nathan. Nevertheless, her perspective is broadened. She has literally created a new self, and in turn, a new possible narrative. Her small victory leaves the audience the hope of a positive outlook on Ava's, women's, and humanity's future. 🧞

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Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto." In *Manifestly Haraway*, 5–89. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.