



Ideologies in *Ex Machina*:

An Analysis of Masculinity and Individualism

Victoria P. Kelly
University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown

Rhetorical Criticism
Dr. Paul Lucas

Introduction

Looking past surface-level value and instead looking for mental frameworks in an artifact is the making of Ideological Criticism. This means looking at interpretations, language, interests, and beliefs. Dozens if not hundreds of scholars have contributed to this critical method over the years, developing Ideological Criticism into a major player in Rhetorical Criticism as a whole.

In this criticism, character and theme analysis are ideal subjects. The 2015 film *Ex Machina* as an artifact is a multi-faceted and model example for Ideological Criticism. The film covers an array of themes in gender, psychology, identity, sexuality, beauty standards, relationships, communication, and even biblical allusions. Feminist Criticism and the exploration of Post-Human ideals has been a previous focal point for similar films involving a female AI, *Ex Machina* holds a great deal of Masculinist stereotypes and makes a statement towards Individualist ideas. This is found mainly in the characters and situation, but many of the themes are understated. While *Ex Machina* is undeniably complex and captivating for its images and psychological appeal to an audience, how exactly does the film display Masculinism and themes in Individualism? Cultivating an answer for this will involve unraveling the film's themes in those ideologies.

Artifact Description: *Ex Machina*

Ex Machina is a 2015 film directed by Alex Garland. The plot begins by introducing two of the main characters: Caleb (Domhall Gleeson), a programmer that won a weeklong trip to his CEO's estate; and Nathan (Oscar Isaac), the reclusive but brilliant CEO of Bluebook. Nathan ends up wanting Caleb there to participate in a Turing Test for his project, a beautiful robot named Ava (Alicia Vikander). These three characters along with Nathan's housemaid, Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), spend the week at Nathan's isolated home in Alaska.

In that time span, Caleb and Ava have testing sessions to determine her capabilities to display consciousness. Nathan watches from another room as Caleb and Ava interact through a glass wall. The conversation between them turns into a conspiracy to help Ava escape from Nathan's control. Caleb believes Ava's distress due to Nathan's harsh character, as he enjoys drinking heavily and talking down to Kyoko. As Caleb explores the high security estate, he discovers different horrific prototypes from Nathan's obsessive project. Kyoko is revealed to be not only Nathan's maid and sexual partner, but a robotic project herself. Caleb then finds Nathan's closet of five other attempts in creating a perfect, female AI. All of these past prototypes met their end after displaying violent tendencies and a strong desire for freedom. Even before discovering this closet for herself, Ava is self-aware enough to question what would happen to her should she fail this Turing Test. She secretly plans her escape with Caleb by turning off the power during their sessions, consequently removing the surveillance Nathan uses to analyze them.

Caleb puts their plan in motion to get Nathan drunk so he can alter the house's security. Once Nathan is inebriated, Caleb bypasses the system and prepares to free Ava the following day. Nathan reveals the true nature of Ava and his suspicions that Caleb would try to free her. Nathan was testing Caleb and his ability to be manipulated by Ava, who is programmed to have such persuasive capabilities. Despite Nathan preparing for this exact scenario, Caleb had outmaneuvered by him and Ava would be able to escape. Both men realize their mistake, and as Nathan tries to remedy it, Ava and Kyoko kill him. Ava sees Caleb without a barrier for the first time and he watches her stare at the prototypes in Nathan's closet. She takes their synthetic skin and parts to complete her image as a human, adding hair and clothes. She locks Caleb in the home and walks to the helicopter that was meant to pick him up from the estate. The film ends

with her shadow in the middle of a busy street of people. This is a scene she claimed to want to see with Caleb so she could observe a spectrum of human interaction.

The film parallels our own reality in having a Google-like company (in this case, Bluebook, created by Nathan) developing artificial intelligence. Much like self-driving cars, artificial organisms have a stigma of having an underlying desire in dominating the human race. The film brings up several questions in complexes, male compensation, and dominance in human nature, but what about the intent of artificial intelligence? The film leaves a vague ending in Ava standing in the street to allow the audience to determine for themselves what her intentions are. The audience is also left to question whether they sympathize with Ava, much like Caleb, or if they pity the hubris of Nathan and his revolutionary project. Both men display different complexes as their compensation of masculinity. Subsequently, the male characters alter the persuasion to the audience.

Criticism Description: Ideological Criticism

As mentioned, dozens of scholars have helped to develop Ideological Criticism in the Communication field. Ideological Criticism is used when the rhetoric of an artifact is being analyzed primarily for what it suggests about beliefs and values (Foss, 2009, p. 209). *Ex Machina* as an artifact suggests values and assumptions about gender (masculinity in particular) and individualist culture. To use Ideological Criticism, a critic must identify the “presented elements” in an artifact, identify the “suggested elements” linked to the presented elements, formulate an ideology, and identify the functions served by that ideology. To code for presented elements, a critic is to look at an artifact for signs that point towards an ideology. This can be the basic images, physical features, evidence, terms, arguments, and symbols (Foss, 2009, p. 214). A suggested element, on the other hand, includes coding for references, themes, ideas, or allusions.

Meanings are identified in the elements and will be the basis for criticisms. The third step in analyzing an artifact in Ideological Criticism is to formulate an ideology. To formulate an ideology, the suggested elements are grouped into categories to create a framework that constitutes the ideology that is suggested in the artifact. After these three steps, the final step is to identify the functions served by the ideology, mainly for the audience (Foss, 2009, p. 217-220).

Gender Studies are used heavily in Ideological Criticism. Feminism is a very popular ideology researched, especially for films, but *Ex Machina* as a rhetorical artifact demonstrated more Masculism stereotypes and elements (see Findings). Charlotte Perkins Gillman coined Masculism as a term in 1914 (Allan, 2009). As an ideology, though, Masculism includes the advocacy of opinions, values, and attitudes regarded as typical of men. The ideology has a divide on if differentiated gender roles are natural or not, but is not to be confused with anti-feminism. Masculism can uphold several stereotypes in masculinity such as control, sexual appetite, aggressiveness, assertiveness, and self-confidence (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993, p. 140).

Individualism, the second ideology coded for in *Ex Machina*, is mostly found in Culture Studies. Individualism is the idea that people and people's behavior are determined by their own specific goals or values, rather than those of the "in-groups" of the society they are in. This means an individual's attitudes and driving forces take priority to their in-groups' objectives. The United States, the setting of the film, is considered to have an Individualist Culture (Triandis, 2001, p. 909).

Findings

Masculinity Stereotypes in Caleb and Nathan of *Ex Machina*

Elements. The suggested elements of Masculism in *Ex Machina* have been divided into three parts: stereotypical male traits in Nathan (aggression, assertiveness, and self-confidence);

male-female relationships between Nathan, Ava, and Kyoko; male-female relationships between Caleb, Ava, and Kyoko. Presented elements such as the character interactions led to these three parts.

Nathan. Nathan is brutish in nature. He spits openly on the floor, drinks heavily, and bullies. His obsession with control over both the females he has created and the male employee in his home suggests a God complex. It displays a common idea that certain high-tech areas emphasize power and masculine connotations. In turn, this supports the male stereotype of domineering personalities (Rommes, van Oost, & Oudshoorn, 2005, p. 245). The first encounter Caleb and the audience have with Nathan is him boxing with a punching bag and claiming to be hung-over from the night before. While he was exercising, the punching act itself suggests aggression in this first interaction. Nathan shows assertiveness in his treatment towards Caleb and Kyoko especially. He interrupts Caleb at times and is forceful towards Kyoko. The overassertive behavior to Kyoko is interesting in that she is supposed to be his maid as well as sexual partner. Her subservient role is often seen with subtle resentment from Kyoko (see *Figure 1*). The stereotypical trait of self-confidence is shown the most in Nathan. Caleb praises his work with AI's and claims it to be the "history of Gods." Nathan would later misquote him saying "I'm not a man, I'm God," supporting his complex (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993, p. 140).



Figure 1. Screenshot from Scene 9 of *Ex Machina* (2015). Kyoko in forefront, Caleb left, and Nathan center.

Female-male relationships with Nathan are complicated in that they take on an almost Electra-Complex form. Nathan says himself he is like Ava's father. He creates five other AI organisms besides Ava and Kyoko. If he is implying that by creation he is Ava's father, is he qualifying as a father to the other six? This daughter-father relationship would have Neo-Freudian tendencies considering Kyoko's main role is to relieve stresses through house keeping, entertainment, and most notably, sex and intimacy. Footage of his previous creations shows all of them were nude (despite him having clothing available for them), assumingly heterosexual females waiting for his instruction. So it leaves the audience to question the motive behind Nathan's work. Bodies, muses, or "daughters" are possibilities for what he was working towards. After observing the suggested elements in Nathan's character, it would display that his God complex extended into not just control and creation, but for sexual objection.

Caleb. Caleb directly contrasts Nathan in several ways. Where Nathan is crude and overbearing, Caleb is sympathetic and reserved. Despite having a similar situation to Nathan (an intelligent programmer and bachelor), he comes across as empathized for being single and mostly alone after his parents' deaths. Caleb, however, develops complexes of his own by trying to fulfill a typical male motif of the "knight in shining armor." His relationship with Ava displays this the most. A Savior complex to be Ava's only rescue blinds Caleb throughout the film. Theories in Attachment Theory would suggest Caleb is mirroring aspects with this relationship. This can consist of three systems: attachment, caregiving, and sex (Levy, 2007, p. 27). Caleb's near obsession with watching Ava, his need to care for her, and his sexual attraction show these three systems. And where Caleb has sexual interest and compassion for Ava, he also holds pity for Kyoko. Caleb is much more active in his Savior complex for Ava, but still has sympathy for Kyoko from afar.

The Merriam-Webster definition of a *deus ex machina* is “a character or thing that suddenly enters the story in a novel, play, movie, etc., and solves a problem that had previously seemed impossible to solve.” This word play in the film’s title is in reference to the relationship between Caleb and Ava. Caleb does not realize it, but he became Ava’s *deus ex machina* to free herself from Nathan. The difference between most other examples of this trope is that Caleb was chosen carefully for this role by Nathan, likely for those aforementioned traits that would develop into their own complexes.

***Ex Machina*’s Statement on Individual Identity in Ava and Kyoko**

Elements. Suggested elements for Individualism themes coded for included: Ava appealing to individualistic traits (autonomy) and observing overall themes in self and identity. As mentioned, Individualism consists of being “autonomous and independent from their in-groups,” in groups being groups such a family, community, or nation (Triandis, 2001, p. 909). Self and identity are more straightforward elements in that they are mainly presented elements that do not use suggestion to display ideological themes. Choices and observations are the main elements being analyzed in both Ava and Kyoko.

Individualist traits. Autonomy is a trait in Individualism that consists of self-sufficiency and independence (Triandis, 2001, p. 926). Ava is autonomous in several ways. She can charge herself, she has a space to herself that she draws in, and she can create her own situations, should she feel the need to do so. She uses her charging ports to overload the power system to have undocumented time with Caleb. This gives her an opportunity to persuade Caleb how she needs to free herself from Nathan’s home. She uses persuasion on Kyoko as well. Despite not understanding English, according to Nathan, she finds a way to communicate with Kyoko to help her leave. The fact that she made it to a busy street intersection put together and in

new clothes shows her self-sufficiency in an ironic way of assimilating into a new group, another trait of Individualists (Triandis, 2001, p. 916).

Self and identity. Choices and observations are the major focus in analyzing the big question of if the AI's have consciousness and an identity. When explaining Ava's programming to Caleb, Nathan says himself that:

Ava was a rat in a maze, and I gave her one way out. To escape, she'd have to use self-awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality, empathy, and she did. Now if that isn't true AI, what the fuck is? (Macdonald & Garland, 2015, Scene 16)

This conversation reveals that while Ava did have an underlying agenda, she was complex and shifting. There is constant questioning of her sentient ability. There is the binary on if she can or if she cannot feel, but also the question on if she is *pretending* to feel. At times, it is possible she can do all three. Her "emotional" software consists of phone conversations. When presented with emotional or empathetic situations, she can mimic an expression. It is however, when Ava and Kyoko are candid and alone that you can observe their more genuine identities. This is in three scenes in particular: when Ava is getting dressed for Caleb for the first time; when Kyoko is observing the Pollock painting and Caleb in the bathroom; and when Ava is seeing the rest of the house after her escape.

When getting dressed, Ava has several options of dresses and hair. She takes her time to *choose* a dress and wig and admires images on her wall of other women. Observing her choice in clothing shows that she conceals her otherwise nude form. Her outfits from henceforth reflect this with the exception of her outfit when exiting the house, as she simply takes clothing from another robot's body. The final scene of the film shows her simple, concealing clothing again, implying that she would choose this for her own taste. Kyoko, too, shows clothing choices. She

usually wears white and black sheath dresses and heels, a sort of uniform likely assigned by Nathan. However, after the dinner scene that Nathan lashes out at her, she is later shown in the hallway with her heels off and sitting alone. The audience would be questioning reasoning behind this after finding that she is AI. Why would she feel the need to remove her shoes? If she knows she is being unobserved, is this her true self in solitary?

Much like Ava admiring a picture on her wall, Kyoko observes different things in Nathan's house and seems to express thought. The Pollock painting (an "action painting" in the Abstract Expressionism movement) is a representation of automatic action but not acting automatically, according to Nathan. After the audience hears his analogy with the Pollock piece, Kyoko is seen staring at the painting. The audience is left to interpret if she is thinking about what the painting means or if it represents her mind much like Ava's drawings represent her cognitive thought capability. A second important observation by Kyoko is when she is watching Caleb through a monitor as he cuts his wrist. This is after she revealed to him that she was one of Nathan's creations by removing parts of her synthetic skin. She has an expressionless stare at the monitor, leading to more ambiguity.

An interesting expression of emotion from Ava is when she is happy. Her usual smiles towards Caleb were soft and polite. The first time she makes an actual smile, and even a laugh, is when she is free and roaming the upper level of Nathan's house. The audience can interpret that her programming to escape went so far as to say that happiness was in her escape, especially when outside for the first time.

Discussion

Ex Machina is layered with different themes. Gender themes are, in a way, the most prevalent for the masculine stereotypes and the female representations in the AI's. The audience

can be persuaded by gender roles in this artifact in several ways. This could include the oppression of Ava and Kyoko; their objectification; the Savior complex in Caleb; or the God complex in Nathan. Looking again at the male gender roles, their complexes lead to overconfidence in Caleb's ability to "save" Ava and Nathan's ability to control all of the characters in his home.

Nathan's hubris in particular would lead to the demise he alludes to himself when drunkenly reciting Promethean literature. Prometheus gave man fire, which would in turn anger Zeus. His punishment was to be chained to a rock and be tortured daily by having his liver torn at by an eagle. Nathan in this case is the bringer of fire, or the creator of Ava and Kyoko. While it was not a higher power that punished him, his death would be from a stab wound to the back and liver area by the hands of his creations. Nathan's death also shows a major gender role reversal from a sexual viewpoint. The knife in Kyoko's hand is phallic in nature and both Kyoko and Ava are sure to put the knife in him slowly. As Nathan turns to Kyoko, she repeats a gesture that he had her perform earlier in the film, where she places her hand on his cheek, almost romantically. During the climax of the film in which Ava is freed, her fight with Nathan shows a reversal of dominance in a subtly symbolic way. When she tackles him to the floor, Ava is between his legs and over top of him, a reversal of the traditional missionary sex act (see *Figure 2*).



Figure 2. Screenshot from Scene 17 of *Ex Machina* (2015). Kyoko in forefront, Ava attacking Nathan in focus.

Individualism in Ava is the most evident between her and Kyoko. However, the audience is to decide if this is truly her individualist nature or if Nathan programmed her that well to pretend. As mentioned, her ability to be autonomous, assimilate into groups, and make decisions develop an idea that she has a self and identity. She takes time to choose clothing, decide on drawings, and manipulate Caleb. This shows intellect and awareness, but not sentient. Nathan lists her ability as AI to Caleb and does not deny that she may have liked Caleb without programming, but admits she was programmed to want a way out. With Caleb as her pawn, she either liked him and used him; did not like him and used him; or pretended to like him and used him. All three options point towards her programming to want an escape, but not if she holds consciousness. She *wants* to observe a city intersection to people-watch and claims to want it with Caleb. After reaching that destination, the audience is to determine what she would do next. Would her programming leave her without a new goal, or would her identity be present in finding a new individual goal? These questions throughout *Ex Machina* are what make it a compelling artifact for having such an interpretative artifact-audience relationship.

References

- Allan, J. A. (2009). *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Sexualities, Histories, Progressivism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Foss, S. K. (2009). Ideological Criticism. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (4th ed.)(pp. 209-221). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.
- Huddy, L., & Terkildsen, N. (1993). Gender Stereotypes and the Perception of Male and Female Candidates. *American Journal of Political Science*, 37(1), pp. 119–147.
- Levy, D. (2007). *Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships*. New York, NY: Harper Collins. pp. 27.
- Macdonald, A. (Producer), & Garland, A. (Director). (April 25, 2015). *Ex Machina* [Motion picture]. United States: A24.
- Rommes, E., van Oost, E., & Oudshoorn, N. (2005). Gender in the design of the digital city of Amsterdam. In A. Adam, E. Green (Eds.), *Virtual Gender: Technology, Consumption and Identity Matters*(pp. 245). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Triandis, H. C. (2001). Individualism-Collectivism and Personality. *Journal of Personality*, 66, pp. 907–924.