EMBRACING ALTERITY:
RETHINKING FEMALE OTHERNESS IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

by

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Abstract

The Other operates as a figure of inherent transgression: A manifestation of the repressions necessary for the sustenance of dominant ideology. As the Other lurches in from the sidelines to threaten and frighten before being neutralized through assimilation or death, dominant ideology is upheld and confirmed by being set against the abnormality and monstrosity of difference. In feminist film theory, otherness has been foundational as a means of describing women’s marginalization within patriarchal society. Where Man is constructed as subject, Woman is constructed as Other. As such, the female Other tells us far more about patriarchal constructions of Woman than it does about female subjects in the world. Feminist film theory demonstrates a pronounced investment in the need for spectatorial identification with female characters, conflating the roles occupied by character and person, and thus the female Other has traditionally been theorized as staunchly misogynistic—the embodiment of patriarchal and phallic fears of female monstrosity and lack.

Against this tradition, I propose that the female Other is not always and necessarily an anti-feminist figure. Iterations of the Other that foreground character opacity and thus disrupt empathetic and identificatory methods of spectatorship productively disturb processes of ideological comfort. By refusing to subject the Other to an epistemological narrative structure, one which poses the female Other as mystery to be demystified, and by denying a resolution that destroys the Other and thus the threat that they represent, the films analyzed in this thesis demand an alternative methodology to account for the radical alterity of the female Other. The two case studies offered in support of this thesis are the melancholic Other, with the example of Justine in *Melancholia* (von Trier 2011) and the posthuman Other, as exemplified in *Under the Skin* (Glazer 2013) and *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015). Rather than occupying the traditional role
of the female Other as monster, these characters threaten the integrity of the human precisely because of their revelation of the human monstrosity that lies at the heart of patriarchal masculinity.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Claire Davis.
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1 Introduction

“[The] image of ourselves always comes to us from outside ourselves, from the place of the Other ... the story of our identities is the negotiation of this otherness of ourselves.”
—Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman* (3)

Halfway through Jonathan Glazer’s *Under the Skin* (2013), The Female (Scarlett Johansson) stands upon a desolate Scottish shore waiting for a bodysurfer to exit the water. When the bodysurfer returns to his tent where The Female waits, the two begin to casually chat. However, screams from the water soon draw the bodysurfer’s attention. Along the beach from where they stand, a young woman thrashes in the ocean trying to reach her drowning dog and a man, presumably her partner, launches fully clothed into the surf behind her. The bodysurfer drops his towel and runs to the couple’s aid, trying to drag the man back from his rescue attempt. When the surfer finally pulls him ashore, collapsing with the effort, the man immediately hurls himself back into the waves. The heads of the dog, the woman, and the man, all eventually disappear beneath the surface. The Female, who has watched from the beach with mild interest, walks down to where the bodysurfer lies, picks up a stone, and beats him over the head. Slowly, she heaves his body along the shoreline, back toward her van, impervious to the piercing wails and cries of the couple’s baby. At this moment, The Female is at her most otherworldly and inhuman. She stands to the side while a young couple die, she murders the man who tries to save them, and she abandons their baby. Her behaviour is the extreme antithesis of women’s most culturally
revered roles: wife and mother, carer and lover. She is the Other, someone to be feared. Yet, within this radical difference, there is also possibility.

The Other is at once a destabilizing and stabilizing figure. Although it appears to trouble and disturb dominant ideology, otherness is the essential extremity against which normativity can assert its importance. We cannot identify ourselves and our place in the world without defining those things in terms of what they are not—that is, without otherness. In patriarchal society, being, subjectivity, consciousness, and rationality are the terms by which we define our humanity, but they speak most specifically to our understanding of Man. And what is he without Woman? As a fluid and broadly applicable determination of power imbalance, the Other has long provided fertile ground for feminist theory, describing the process by which patriarchal configurations of Woman uphold the dominance of Man. The seemingly oppositional nature between masculine and feminine subjectivities thus serves a reaffirming purpose. Masculinity is defined by what it is not: femininity. While the concept of female otherness has been used repeatedly as a negative designation in film theory, the feminist potential of othering female characters within film texts has seldom been explored.

Given that within psychoanalytic theory—and particularly within castration theory—otherness is the embodiment of the repressed fears of the subject projected outward, and for women this particularly refers to their apparent embodiment of lack, it may seem odd to propose that an othered female character might also be a productive site for feminism. The female Other, particularly within horror and science fiction film, has traditionally been a site of monstrosity. Her attributes that most strongly signify her femininity—menstruation, pregnancy, sexuality, genitalia—are also those that are used to mark her difference, and thus the threat that she represents. That which makes her Woman is represented as that which makes her different, and
thus that which makes her monstrous. Within this fear of difference there is an underlying fear of
the unknown, the expectation of a feminine mystery that threatens patriarchal dominance. In
classical narrative structures, this unknown quality is presented as a problem within the text that
must then be resolved: that which is Other, different, and mysterious, must be made known
across the course of the text.

Within this epistemological plight is the expectation that there is something intrinsic to
the Other that threatens dominant ideology, when, instead, the Other is a construct that reflects
that which dominant ideology has repressed, while providing ideology with essential, yet hidden,
support. This thesis explores the possibility that the Other, as a core foundation of ideology,
might also be a figure that, when represented in film, can radically disturb our faith in ideological
structures as natural and good. Through an individual text’s refusal to cast the Other as monster,
monstrosity is displaced onto the society that others. Within the inversion of these roles and the
revelation that society is the site of monstrous ideological and arbitrary prescriptions of identity
lies the radical potential of represented Others.

The first chapter within this thesis broadly traces the critical tradition of female otherness
and female mystery within film, looking at two particularly prominent examples in film
scholarship history: what Barbara Creed calls the “monstrous-feminine” in horror film, and the
femme fatale from the tradition of film noir. These figures of female alterity within horror and
noir function in service of the epistemological drive of patriarchal narrative structures: over the
course of the narrative, monster and femme fatale are either destroyed or assimilated, and the
threat they pose as sites of mystery and difference is neutralized. This mitigation is not only a
site of ideological comfort, it also supports and reaffirms dominant ideology by providing a site
of difference against which normalcy can be asserted. Chapter one identifies how films might
disrupt this process of demystification through the rejection of linear, cause-effect narrative structures and characterization. In this process of disruption, female characters as sites of difference remain impenetrable to spectatorial identification. The traditional means of interpreting female characters through feminist film theory is to approach characters as subjects and thus explain their function according to such subjective experiences as desires and motivations. However, given that the female Others described within this thesis share with the traditional female Other a distinct lack of subjectivity, I will detail the value of reading female characters according to their narrative and ideological function in the film text rather than by means of empathetic psychologization. Such impenetrability also produces a gap between the interiority of the character (that which cannot be accessed) and the feminine identity that they perform. This identity is represented not as an externalized expression of interior subjectivity, but as a constructed response to the patriarchal expectations of the diegetic worlds the female Others occupy: a reflection of that which is without rather than that which is within.

Thus, the importance of death within these filmic worlds is described: where annihilation has long been the source of ideological comfort in the tradition of the female Other as the threat she poses is eradicated, death in the films put forward in this thesis does nothing to mitigate or explain the disturbance posed by the female Other. Instead, death confirms the monstrosity that exists not within the Other herself, but within the patriarchal society that dictates her performance of femininity while simultaneously punishing her for its expression. The traditional relationship between the female Other and her diegetic world is thus inverted: She is the not-monstrous exception to an otherwise monstrous world; she does not deserve death, but the world that she occupies does.
Following the establishment of this thesis’s methodology, the second chapter will detail my first case study of the feminist Other: the female melancholic, as exemplified by the character Justine (Kirsten Dunst) in *Melancholia* (von Trier 2011). Chapter two will discuss the gendered history of melancholia, wherein male melancholia has traditionally been conceived of as an enlightening and stimulating disposition and female melancholia as a disabling and weakening pathology, and outline how the scholarship on *Melancholia* thus far favours the interpretation of Justine’s character according to this latter form of melancholia. I argue that rather than interpreting Justine’s character as suffering from depressive illness, she can instead be read as representative of the former artistic definition of melancholia. According to this reading, Justine is a site of exceptionality and disturbance in the film text, as her disposition endows her with inexplicable metaphysical insight. From this position of radical alterity, the film blocks identification with Justine’s character and, as the focalizer, she refuses the possibility of mourning the end of the world. Through Justine, the end of the patriarchal world that she occupies—one that has attempted to prescribe her feminine identity and then rendered her Other upon her failure to engage appropriately—is figured as necessary and good.

In the third and final chapter, the case study of the posthuman female Other is discussed. In *Under the Skin*, an alien credited only as The Female stalks a series of men so that she may harvest their bodies, and in *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015) a humanoid robot named Ava (Alicia Vikander), the world’s first artificially intelligent entity, murders her human creator and escapes into the world. Following a consideration of the history of posthuman theory, in which the posthuman is identified as a figure that disturbs the normative categorizations of the human within humanism, Ava and The Female are positioned as posthuman Others gendered female.
Their isolation as Others reflects the way in which those gendered female are violently punished for their expression of the identity patriarchal ideology demands they must perform.

Inaccessibility and opacity are the unifying traits of Justine, The Female, and Ava’s otherness. They appear to threaten the diegetic worlds they occupy, and in doing so they challenge ideological underpinnings of patriarchy and highlight contradictory impulses of a system that both prescribes and persecutes femininity. By refusing to subject Justine, The Female, and Ava to a process of narrative mystification and demystification, Melancholia, Under the Skin, and Ex Machina refuse to mollify the spectator’s ideological expectations of the world. Justine, The Female, and Ava do not represent threats in and of themselves, in the tradition of the Other they reflect that which is repressed and feared within patriarchal culture. This disturbance reveals patriarchy as a deeply misogynistic and inhospitable environment for women and feminine expression, rather than as a safe and normative state of being.
Otherness has been foundational to feminist theory as a means of describing women’s marginalization within patriarchal society. From Simone de Beauvoir’s canonical text *The Second Sex*, in which she describes how Woman “is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (6), to Christine Gledhill, who argues that critical practice that strives toward ascribing meaning constitutive of ‘the highest achievements of mankind,’ “understands such achievements as posited on the oppressive location of woman as the unknowable other, outside history, in the realm of nature and eternal truth, man’s mysterious *alter ego* against whom he achieves his definition” (68). Accordingly, feminist scholarly discourse on representations of the female Other in film—particularly representations of the female as monster—views this figure as misogynistic and denigrating toward women.

In this thesis I seek to reconsider the representation of the female Other in contemporary cinema, and propose that otherness is not always and necessarily anti-feminist. Because the Other reflects the ideological underpinning of the society from which it has been excluded—in female otherness, patriarchal ideology—the function of the female Other within the film text relies on how this society is represented. I suggest that without a narrative resolution that reasserts male dominance, the female Other can be a radical and disruptive figure who poses an epistemological threat and challenge to the foundational structuration of patriarchal society. In a slight adaptation of Robin Wood’s proposal that the Other must be either annihilated or assimilated, I argue that there are two significant ways in which the threat posed by the female
Other is resolved so that the patriarchal status quo may be reaffirmed: a narrative trajectory which makes the unknown woman known or by framing the death of the Other as necessary to the restoration of a safe and peaceful society. When these methods of resolution are denied, the disturbance introduced by the presence of the female Other remains, and thus she is transformed into a site of radical alterity.

In Wood’s seminal essay on American horror film, he adopts from psychoanalysis the concept of the Other to theorize that the monster, horror’s generic mainstay, derives its monstrosity through the embodiment of Western culture’s repressed fears of difference. The Other, according to Wood, is “that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with … either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it” (199). Interpreting the Other according to its psychoanalytic significance, Wood concurrently discusses otherness and repression: “[the Other] functions not simply as something external to the culture or to the self, but also as what is repressed (but never destroyed) in the self and projected outwards in order to be hated and disowned” (199). It is through categories of otherness that self-identities are formed—in that we differentiate between ourselves and others—but also the ideological norms that fundamentally inform the way that we understand our being in the world. Identities that are marginalized by dominant ideology (Wood lists women, the proletariat, other cultures and ethnicities, alternative political systems, bisexuality and homosexuality, and children) must always bear their status as the Other, that which sharpens the definition of normalcy through its lived abnormality.

Conventionally, the Other operates to tacitly support the very ideological mechanisms that it threatens and opposes. The Other thus occupies the role of inherent transgressor, a term adopted by Slavoj Žižek (using Lacanian psychoanalytic theory) to refer to two things that
appear to oppose one another but actually exist interdependently. Žižek describes inherent transgression as,

The notion that the very emergence of a certain “value” which serves as the point of ideological identification relies on its transgression, on some mode of taking a distance toward it—the gap is original and constitutive, it is inherent to the symbolic order as such. (“Inherent” 3)

Žižek provides multiple examples of inherent transgression—such as adultery as the “unacknowledged, obscene support” of family (Art 7)—but one that bears particular significance to this thesis is the femme fatale, which Žižek describes as a character type that appears to threaten masculinity but in effect supports patriarchal domination as she provides an inherent threat against which masculinity can assert itself. For Žižek, the Other provides an avenue for the enactment of ideological fantasies of transgression, and the inherent transgression is thus what sustains the relationship between the Symbolic Law and the obscene superego (Art 5).

When the Other no longer behaves in such a way that would enable the person using the Other to be authentic, that fantasy is disrupted. For example, in the case of film noir, if the femme fatale were to no longer seductively lure men into wickedness. When The Other sustains these ideological expectations within film—when the femme fatale operates according to her archetype—it thus serves a cathartic function as the embodiment of that which has been repressed in the self projected outward: the femme fatale transgresses in the subject’s place; it is she who upholds the symbolic operation of patriarchal ideology, as a conduit for the subject. In this way, dominant ideology is sustained and supported by being set against the abnormality and monstrosity of difference as represented by otherness. Accordingly, representations of otherness tell us very little about that which has been othered (on the basis of gender, sexuality, ethnicity,
religion, etc.) and everything about the ideology of the culture that others. To continue with my analogy, the *femme fatale* does not represent women so much as she represents the patriarchal structure of “Woman.”

The representation of the female Other, as a site of inherent transgression that comforts and supports the patriarchal ideological mechanisms that it purports to oppose and threaten, bears little relation to the lived experiences of women who exist in the world. However, as Elizabeth Cowie reminds us in *Representing the Woman*, all representations of women are faced with this problem if we expect them to be verisimilitudinous expressions of female subjectivity. Woman, as she exists within filmic and broader social discourse (including feminist discourse), as an essential category that prefigures her existence in language, does not exist. As Cowie identifies, “Representation is not a system of signs referring to reality and therefore there can be no recourse to an original essence against which the shortcomings of images produced by cinema, television, literature, etc. can be measured” (*Representing* 18). Although the female Other provides no value as a signifier of feminine subjectivity and experience, it can suggest a great deal about patriarchal ideological expectations of women, and this in itself is revealing.

However, in discussions of otherness in cinema, feminist film theory demonstrates a pronounced investment in the need for spectatorial identification with female characters, resulting in the conflation of female characters and female subjects. Because the female Other does not represent the female subject so much as she represents the patriarchal culture that produces her otherness, her radical potential is overlooked. In feminist film theory, the relationship between the female spectator and the female character (in this case, the Other) is methodologically limited by the framework of identification: because we do not identify with the Other (because of her otherness), she is dismissed as a patriarchal construct, and even if we do
identify with her in some way, we equally risk undercutting the radicality of her function as Other. By constantly analyzing female characters through identification and empathy—processes that ultimately strive toward knowing—we neglect to account for deliberate distanciation and unknowability. As a result, we fail to notice the significance of the Other maintaining its radical alterity so that it may be truly disruptive.

2.1 The Gaze and the Spectator

In the thirty years since the publication of Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” feminist film scholarship has loyally maintained a fixation on focalizing critical theory through the spectator. The “male gaze” (Mulvey 11) of the camera and its being appropriated or reclaimed by women—as spectators and, by proxy, as characters onscreen—continues as a unifying primacy in feminist film scholarship. The question of who watches whom and the attendant activity or passivity of the watcher and the watched offers up a methodological framework that has been usefully applied to an endless series of film texts. If “the place of the look defines cinema,” as Mulvey asserts, and (heterosexual) male characters and spectators are those whose gaze is privileged within a patriarchal society, then those who are looked upon—female characters—are tantamount to objects; set pieces within the mise-en-scène (17). Linda Williams, following Mulvey, confirms the power of the gaze with her assertion, “Like the female spectator, the female protagonist often fails to look, to return the gaze of the male who desires her. In the classical narrative cinema, to see is to desire” (83). To desire and to look, whether from onscreen or offscreen, is the primary means by which female characters and
spectators are understood to embody, or most often fail to embody, positions of agency in feminist film theory.

Within this methodology, the representation of women onscreen is always situated according to the imagined woman offscreen. Mary Ann Doane’s statement that “the simple gesture of directing a camera toward a woman has become equivalent to a terrorist act” (“Stake” 86) speaks to the apparent impossibility of fixing woman’s image onscreen without acquiescing to the ideologically patriarchal mechanism of cinema and thereby denigrating women in general. Within feminist film theory the question of who looks, when, and how has been continuously interrogated, thus the monopolizing focus on the spectator remains. As the pleasure in watching and desiring subjects is understood according to the spectator’s assumed identification, scholarship that seeks to broaden and progress the discourse surrounding female representation in cinema is dominated by attention to previously overlooked spectator positions, and a goal of stepping outside hegemonic constructions of gender, sexuality, race, and class. Teresa de Lauretis, Jane Gaines, Judith Mayne, and E. Ann Kaplan (among others) challenge and advance Laura Mulvey’s theory of the gaze, while maintaining a methodological link between woman as represented onscreen and woman as she is presumed to exist offscreen. The woman within the textual fabric of cinema refuses to be extricated from her indexical counterpart, the female spectator.

The cinematic body, language, voice, and function of characters inscribed within film enables them to effectively operate as a series of visual, aural, and narrative cues that guide our

determinations of gender, and in determining them as such we further reify the categorization that differentiates (and thus subordinates) in the first place. Feminist film theory has taken up the arduous task of continually and correctly pointing to the ways in which female characters often hold up the narrative flow, are repeatedly positioned in relation to makers of femininity—and thus passivity or weakness—such as motherhood and subordination within the family, and it observes how the female body onscreen operates as a spectacle designed to satisfy the male gaze. The homogeneity of female representation in film, the frequency with which reductive versions of “the girl,” “the wife,” and/or “the mother” appear in narrative cinema has necessitated swathes of critical feminist theory that diligently pick apart the failures of female representation in film. When female characters do not uphold regressively gendered markers of femininity, or do so only partially, their coding as masculine is criticized equally fervently. Cinematic codes of masculinity can be marked aesthetically (short hair, loose-fitting clothing, a lack of make up) or by the character’s position in the narrative (a rejection of traditional marriage and family, a job of authority, smoking, drinking, promiscuity, and intelligence). Narrative cinema repeatedly relies on figuratively dressing women up as men, endowing them with a boyish name, and hoping this counts as a progressive representation of women, and, as feminist film theory equally repetitiously identifies, it does not. Such characters continue the ideological condemnation or dismissal of those problematically labelled “feminine” attributes most closely associated with women and, in doing so, reinforce the subjugation of women within patriarchal society. Essentially, there seems to be no safe ground for female representation onscreen: characters are either too feminine or not feminine enough.

Because individual female characters must always, altogether, and at once represent the amorphous and stridently heterogeneous group of subjects who identify as women offscreen,
they fail time and again to actively advance the progressive potential of the subjects they are presumed to represent. The prime limitation inherent within a methodology that ranks character attributes according to gender designation is, in fact, the same limitation that feminist film theory sets out to overcome: “Woman” as she exists within filmic and broader social discourse (including feminist discourse), as an essential category that prefigures her existence in language, does not exist. To borrow from Cowie, “Of course, there are real women, but there is no essence ‘woman’; rather we are constructed as agents within the social by legal and economic discourses” (Representing 18). Within attempts to appraise female characters according to an either/or form of mutual exclusion—masculine or feminine, active or passive, progressive or regressive, correct or incorrect—there will be an inevitable confrontation with the non-existence of the essential subject. Filmic representations of women are endlessly exposed to gendered criticism precisely because the standard against which they are measured is a non-existent construct produced by the same patriarchal structure whose disregard for women necessitates feminist resistance and criticism.

Such conclusions are further encouraged by the continual inscription of lack onto the female body as signifier—a result of the profound influence of Freudian castration anxiety on film studies more broadly. As Kaja Silverman observes, the appropriation of Freud’s theory of castration within film studies by theorists such as Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Comolli is single-minded in “its refusal to accommodate any lack except that which it attaches to the female genitals” (14). Silverman identifies Freud’s insistence upon restricting the meaning of castration to the lack of the penis, and argues that this refusal to identify castration with a division other than sexual difference …
…reveals Freud’s desire to place a maximum distance between the [male] subject and the notion of lack. To admit that the loss of the object is also a castration would be to acknowledge that the male subject is already structured by absence prior to the moment at which he registers woman’s anatomical difference—to concede that he, like the female subject, has already been deprived of being, and already been marked by language and desires of the Other. (15)

According to Silverman’s assessment, then, the female body operates as a site for male disavowal of castration and lack. The identification of the female subject as lacking, both different and inferior, is “the mechanism through which the male subject assures himself that it is not he but another who is castrated” (17). Silverman’s description thus recalls the female Other, arguing that the threat represented by the castrated/castrating female Other simultaneously serves as an impetus for the reaffirmation of male dominance.

If the female Other is interpreted according to a methodology that places a primacy on female subjectivity, there is very little room to consider its feminist potential. As noted, the Other is most marked for its lack of characterization and the inaccessibility of character desire and motivation—the Other suggests more about the ideological expectations of women within patriarchal society than it does about women themselves. As Gledhill notes in her introduction to film noir and feminist criticism, “Within patriarchal culture the various discourses that interweave through a specific text are so organised along gender lines as to give priority to male discourse” (75). Gledhill proposes that instead, feminist film theorists may attempt to look for the disruptive potential of characters, the moment that the “male discourse” she describes is rendered strange by some play on generic convention or otherwise unusual treatment of ideological expectations. Gledhill describes that,
From this perspective, the question the feminist critic asks is not ‘does this image of woman please me or not, do I identify with it or not?’ but rather of a particular conjuncture of plot device, character, dialogue or visual style: ‘what is being said about women here, who is speaking for whom?’ (75)

It is the project of this thesis to adopt a methodology that is positioned within the tradition of feminist film theory but that also aims to extricate filmic analysis from the limitations of an approach that foregrounds an indexical relationship between character and spectator. In addition, I aim to discuss female representation in film without engaging in an arbitrary evaluation of character attributes as being either masculine or feminine.

The distanciation of the female characters to be discussed within this thesis—Justine in Melancholia, The Female in Under the Skin, and Ava in Ex Machina—and their representation as Other reflects the operation of femininity within patriarchal culture and thus comments on patriarchal ideology itself. Their otherness introduces a separation between what might be called each character’s subjectivity/interiority/personhood and the performance of femininity that they engage in as prescribed by the patriarchal diegetic worlds they occupy. The interiority of the female Other is completely inaccessible to the spectator and thus, I would say, non-existent unless as conjectural assumption. However, this serves the important function of highlighting the performance of gender as something that is not intrinsic to the subject. This once again recalls Cowie’s assertion that there is no essential subject against which representations of women can be measured, while also speaking to Judith Butler’s argument that “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (11). The performance of femininity by the female Other becomes the
point at which she is inscribed with expectation on behalf of the culture she occupies. Having underlined the importance of a methodological separation of spectatorial identification from the functionality of character, I now turn to examine how film narratives themselves work to recast the role of the female Other.

2.2 Making the Unknown Known

The threat posed by the mysterious female Other to patriarchal ideology is inextricably bound together with the need to unmask and thus neutralize her; to change her from unknown threat to known woman. The archetype of the *femme fatale* is the prime embodiment of this narrative achievement, as she begins each *film noir* as mysterious and unknown, before eventually being uncovered over the course of the narrative as mere Woman, foolish enough to get captured and/or killed. In her famous critical text *Femme Fatales*, Mary Ann Doane identifies the *femme fatale* as posing a “potential epistemological trauma” to *film noir*:

> She harbors [sic] a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable. In thus transforming the threat of the woman into a secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered, the figure is fully compatible with the epistemological drive of narrative, the hermeneutic structuration of the classical text. (*Fatales* 1)

For Doane, classical narrative structures are thus patriarchal constructs. Women are made knowable and understood across the course of the classical text in order to neutralize the threat to patriarchal ideology that Woman, as a signifier of difference, is presumed to entail. Woman is positioned as unknowable purely so that the narrative can unmask her identity through a series of
systematic revelations. The ultimate revelation is, of course, that she is knowable. Her deception was just that, and for her pretensions she is punished.

Like Doane, Gledhill finds that women in film noir lack depth in terms of individual characterization, and instead primarily serve to flesh out the characterization of their male counterparts. Gledhill also comments on the “unstable and fractured” characterization of women in film noir, in contrast to the moral stability of the Everyman (81). Elizabeth Cowie describes the femme fatale as “simply the catchphrase for sexual difference,” one who must always be punished for the threat that she poses to masculinity, and in her punishment patriarchy’s status quo is sustained (“Noir” 125). As such, the characterization of the female Other as femme fatale primarily functions as both foil for the Everyman and as a site of ideological confirmation and comfort for the audience (their own identity being set against the threat of female otherness).

The epistemological drive of the film noir narrative, and classical narratives more generally, thus operates according to a cause-effect linearity that poses Woman as a problem in the beginning and concludes with the resolution of Woman-as-problem in the end. One of the ways in which the film texts discussed in this thesis differentiate from this tradition is thereby in their refusal to structure the narrative arc of the female Other according to a cause-effect logic. In his chapter “David Lynch, or, the Feminine Depression,” Slavoj Žižek offers an analysis of Blue Velvet (Lynch 1986) that considers the film’s narrative refusal to position Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rosselini) as a vessel for female demystification. While Žižek speaks of feminine depression—a topic that will be further discussed in the next chapter—the desire to know, find cause for, explain, and unmask women is the same impulse represented by the narrative drive in film noir. Žižek suggests Dorothy as the centre of the film’s action, arguing that her depression is the “original fact”; that which comes first and to which all else, including her abuse at the hands
of the film’s villain Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper), is secondary (Metastases 121). Žižek proposes that, according to this interpretation,

...[E]verything in depression is an effect—everything except depression as such, except the form of depression. The status of depression is thus strictly “transcendental”: depression provides the a priori frame within which causes can act as they do.

(Metastases 122)

Žižek suggests the subject as “the gap that separates the cause from its effect” and, accordingly, concludes that if female depression suspends the causal link, it is no less than “the founding gesture of subjectivity, the primordial act of freedom, of refusing our insertion into the nexus of causes and effects” (Metastases 122). When attributable to a particular cause, the female character’s grief or depression is rendered knowable and nonthreatening and from this position can be logically explained, thus positioning their experience and emotion within a reactionary and subjugated model.

In reading for character disposition as an original fact, we refuse to subject characters to an epistemological plight whereby the preoccupation to explain their condition eclipses consideration of their function within the film. The desire for the revelation, explanation, or unmasking of female characters is a resolution afforded by traditional films noir, most often ending in the death of the female characters. Without the reestablishment of dominant ideology, there is a disturbance and discomfort that is directly related to each film’s representation of death and is fundamental to the interpretation of their status as female Others. The importance of the resolution (or lack thereof) of the film text and its representation of death to the reading of the female Other must thus be considered.
2.3 The Death of the Other

Woman, in her sexed and gendered difference to Man, has long served as a figure that fears and threats of otherness can be projected onto within horror and science fiction film. Barbara Creed’s book *The Monstrous-Feminine* employs psychoanalytic feminist theory to explore the manner in which women in horror are constructed as monstrous Others. The female archetypes analyzed in Creed’s book include the mother and the *Femme Castratrice*, with fears of women’s sexuality, genitalia, menstruation, and pregnancy serving as marked sites of horror and, in line with theories proposed by Julia Kristeva, abjection. As discussed by Creed, “the concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by patriarchal and phallocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration” (*Monstrous* 2). Creed’s argument, recalling Žižek’s regarding the *femme fatale*, is that the ideological project of the monstrous-feminine is “an attempt to shore up the symbolic order by constructing the feminine as an imaginary ‘other’ which must be repressed and controlled in order to secure and protect the social order” (“Imaginary” 70). Creed notes the power of the abject to disturb, but this disturbance must always be resolved. Patriarchal ideology produces the monstrous-feminine Other precisely so that it may destroy it, and in doing so confirm the stability and necessity of its structure as a force for good. It is no surprise, then, that Creed concludes her argument by stating that “the feminine is not a monstrous sign *per se*; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse that reveals a great deal about male desires and fears but tells us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the horrific” (“Imaginary” 70). The patriarchal and phallocentric fear of women as both castrated and castrating informs their representations as monstrous and their characterization reflects this threat. Once again, in her capacity as Other,
abject, and abnormal, Woman primarily serves to define the normalcy of masculine subjectivities.

When detailing the differences between science fiction and horror, Vivian Sobchack utilizes the shared generic presence of the creature or monster. In science fiction she notes that monsters appear “almost as if by accident. They may fall from outer space to threaten the planet, invade it, destroy it, or they are accidental byproducts of the ‘the Bomb’, ” whereas in horror film the monster “seems less accidental; [they] seem to arise inevitably out of a personal Faustian obsession or the inherent animal nature of man” (30). In both genres, fear is always ultimately the fear of difference, and this difference is representative of change to and thus the death of what is—ideologically speaking—natural, normal, and right. The death of the ideological structures that inform the individual’s understanding of the world would be, in a sense, the death of the individual him/herself as it is through ideology that individuals understand their being in the world. For this reason, that which threatens existing ideology (the monster) must be destroyed. However, as Susan Sontag observes in “The Imagination of Disaster,” science fiction is a genre reflective of an “age of extremity” whereby “we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror” (42). As much as science fiction reflects fears of difference and change to our ideological underpinnings, it is also disturbed by the possibility that nothing will change at all. This generic conflict within science fiction film makes it a particularly fertile genre for the representation of disruptive female characters in the form of the female Other.

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2 It is not coincidental that the three films this thesis will address can be classified as science fiction.
Death within the worlds of *Melancholia*, *Ex Machina* and *Under the Skin*, is not the comforting death of the Other that leads to the reaffirmation of masculine power and patriarchal ideology. Rather, death is represented as a form of finitude that confirms the monstrosity of patriarchy in place of the female Other. Their otherness deliberately separates them from the ideology in which all other characters are invested, and from this position of alterity they constantly undercut and trouble their textual worlds. For the characters discussed in this thesis, there is nothing to mourn in the passing of a world order that never recognized their autonomy. They stand as radical resistance to the expectation that women should weep for the death or loss of patriarchal ideology. Not only do they not engage in stereotypically feminized rituals of mourning, hysteria, or grief, as the patriarchal diegetic worlds they occupy crumble, Ava, The Female, and Justine are active, uncaring participants in its death.

The conclusion of each film with the finitude of death refuses the insertion of scenes in which the ideological order of the world is shown re-established. There is a finality to each film’s end that importantly refuses to envision a future. In his discussion of death in science fiction narratives, Neil Badmington turns to Derridean deconstructionism, noting,

> [It is] precisely because Western philosophy is steeped in humanist assumptions, [Derrida] observed, the end of Man is bound to be written in the language of Man. Each “transgressive gesture re-encloses us” because every such gesture will have been unconsciously choreographed by humanism. There is no pure ‘outside’ to which we can leap. (9)

There is no form of representation available that would truly get outside our current patriarchal ideology and to attempt to provide such a representation would be to acquiesce to and reaffirm the same structures that had thus far been challenged. An alternative can only be forecast in the
same (cinematic) language that we structure the existing order. Ultimate death and finitude, a foreclosure of signification and a signalling of “The End,” is the only way in which these female Others can be wholly disruptive and disturbing.
3 The Melancholic Female Other

Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* is neatly separated into two halves, each identical in length. In the first half, Justine and her husband Michael (Alexander Skarsgård) hold their wedding reception at the lavish estate of Justine’s sister, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), and her husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland). The evening, which begins with the bride and groom arriving hours late, progressively disintegrates throughout the night and into the early morning, by which time Michael leaves with his parents and the marriage is clearly over. The second half of the film, an indeterminate amount of time following the wedding reception, sees Justine return to Claire and John’s. Justine refuses to get out of bed in the morning or bathe herself, and Claire assumes the duty of caring for her sister. During this time, the planet Melancholia, first seen in the film by Justine on the night of her wedding as a small glowing star, advances toward Earth and Claire becomes increasingly distressed about a possible collision between the two planets. Despite reassurances from John that Melancholia will pass by, it soon becomes clear that Melancholia will crash into Earth. The film concludes with Justine, Claire, and Claire’s son, Leo (Cameron Spurr), sat atop a hill in a shelter of sticks until, finally, the world is destroyed.

There are two distinct historical traditions of melancholia, one of which regards melancholia as a clinical pathology, the other as an intellectual and creative disposition. Both traditions are represented in *Melancholia*, but within existing scholarship on the film there is an overwhelming tendency toward discussing Justine and, to a lesser extent, Claire in relation to the former school of thought: melancholia as synonymous with depression. I begin this chapter by outlining the history of these two forms of melancholia, and concurrently discuss gender as
central to the fluctuation of melancholia’s definition. I argue that the tendency toward classifying Justine’s melancholia within the film as a depressive condition is reflective of the historical gendering of melancholia, where women are regarded as suffering from a pathological ailment rather than their melancholia being an integral component of their character and disposition.

In proposing that Justine better represents the tradition of the intellectual and creative melancholic, I thus position her character as a disruptive female Other. She stands apart from the diegetic world of the film, marked by her melancholia, and from this position the film offers a scathing critique of the patriarchal society her presence disturbs. Justine’s active rejection of the social mores of the new bride, the bourgeoisie, capitalism, and, ultimately, patriarchal ideology, alienate her within the film text. Disregarding her behaviour and actions as symptomatic of a pathology overlooks the radical position of alterity that she occupies within the text.

3.1 Gendering Melancholia

The association of depression and mental illness with women and/or the feminine is pervasive in contemporary Western culture, but until at least the eighteenth century melancholia was almost exclusively the domain of men. The belief that melancholia is a natural affliction that beleaguer the intellectual male persists across the course of its long history. Early definitions of melancholia insist on grounding melancholia in the body; a physiological disposition rather than a psychological pathology. Specifically, melancholia was thought to arise from an excess of black bile, one of the four humours of the body in ancient and pre-modern medicine (Radden 5). The distinction between melancholy and similar dispositions—mourning, sadness, depression, grief—fluctuates, often according to the gender of the sufferer. Historically, where melancholia
has been reserved for men, mourning, grief, and hysteria have typically been considered women’s maladies. Gender has served as the primary determinant in whether or not a specific temper is considered gifted affliction, as melancholia is for men, or mental disorder, as depression is for women.

During its tenure as a male disposition, melancholia was primarily associable with brilliance and intellectual creativity. The belief in this correlation extends from Aristotle—“Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic?” (Aristotle 57)—to the Renaissance, when Italian poet Marsilio Ficino declared “learned people” would be the “happiest and wisest of mortals, were they not driven by the bad effects of black bile to depression” (Ficino 90). As Juliana Schiesari observes in *The Gendering of Melancholia*, melancholia “became an elite ‘illness’ that afflicted men precisely as the sign of their exceptionality, as the inscription of genius within them” (7). While Aristotelian melancholia was an unfortunate affliction, the Renaissance romanticized melancholia as an astrologically ordained prescription of genius—thanks, in large part, to Ficino. This idealization of male melancholia continued into Romanticism and only in the nineteenth century did melancholy become associable with women.

Once melancholic subjectivity became feminized, its status as a privileged position of intellectual and creative inspiration ceased abruptly. In the eighteenth century, the advancement of medical technologies that disproved the astrological and humoural theory that had dominated understandings of melancholia thus far resulted in a shift in attitudes toward mental illness and this shift is concurrent with the change in the gendering of mental illness. At this time the term “melancholia” drops out of favour to be replaced with diagnoses of illnesses thoroughly associable with femininity, such as depression, anxiety, and hysteria. As Jennifer Radden notes
in the introduction to her edited collection *The Nature of Melancholy*, the feminization of melancholia within clinical and cultural discourse was reflective of the identification of women with “madness more generally” (40). The definition of melancholia and its expected symptoms accordingly shifted to better reflect the passivity and inferiority of the feminine subject within patriarchal ideology. Melancholia as a feminized disorder, more commonly called depression, was seen as an abnormality, a medicalized and pathological illness that addled rather than stimulated the mind.

The exclusion of women from melancholia’s connotations of genius and grandeur has resulted in a dearth of female historical figures associated with melancholia. As Schiesari identifies,

Looking over the list of those one could consider “great melancholics” (Petrarch, Ficino, Tasso, Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Hölderlin, De Quincey, Nerval, Dostoevsky, Walter Benjamin), one is struck by the notable absence of women, an absence that surely points less to some lack of unhappy women than to the significance traditionally given women’s grief in patriarchal culture. (3)

This exclusion extends to the attribution of melancholy to fictional characters where, again, they are almost exclusively male. Of perhaps one of the most famous literary male melancholics, Elaine Showalter remarks, “Whereas for Hamlet madness is metaphysical, linked with culture, for Ophelia it is a product of the female body and female nature” (80). Notable within Showalter’s assessment is the linking of Ophelia’s madness with the body and nature. As melancholia was traditionally associated with both body and nature for men, too, the significant difference that emerges is the assigned gender of the body: women’s suffering—the result of their weakness—further weakens them, while men’s ordained affliction emboldens and inspires.
Where the melancholic humours of the male body primarily serve to indicate the genius of the male subject’s mind, melancholy remains bound within the female body. Rather than serving as a sign of exceptionality, melancholy for women only further cements their femininity and thus the perception of their inferior capacities and faculties.

Similar to Schiesari, whose feminist argument contends that melancholia is a historically feminine as well as masculine disposition, literary scholar Lesel Dawson challenges the model of thinking that extends male melancholia to the creative and intellectual mind while restricting female melancholia to the body. Dawson argues that “the representation of female melancholy cannot be reduced to a single pattern that classifies the form of melancholy according to the gender of the sufferer” (93), and thus she refuses to describe male melancholy as intellectual melancholy while attributing female melancholy to illness or madness. The very recent (2008) publication of Dawson’s book, *Lovesickness and Gender in Early Modern English Literature*, and its retroactive application of melancholia to previously overlooked female characters in texts hundreds of years old is a testament to the manner in which female characters and women alike have been repeatedly neglected as melancholic subjects throughout history.

With the publication of Sigmund Freud’s seminal 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” the definition of melancholia shifted once again, this time moving away from questions of gender and creativity and toward theorizations of subjectivity, specifically with regard to loss.³ Melancholia is described by Freud as a pathological condition that appears “in place of mourning” (203), a contention that has been repeatedly explored in psychoanalytic thinking from Freud until the present. Where mourning is positioned as the “normal” grief one

³ It should be noted that Schiesari makes a compelling argument that Freud, too, is guilty of gendering melancholia.
experiences at the loss of a specific love object and is a process that takes place in the conscious mind, Freud proposes that melancholia, by contrast, takes place in the unconscious mind with the person suffering unable to identify the love object that has been lost. The significance of Freud’s essay is that it entails a redefinition of the relationship between melancholia and subjectivity, situating narcissism and loss as central to their exchange. Freud foregrounds this “unknown loss” (205) as the defining characteristic of melancholia and proposes that, in an attempt to deal with the loss of their love-object, the subject will redirect their rage from the object onto themselves. As Radden observes, there was a focus on the self and self-identity in writing on melancholia prior to Freud, “but melancholic states entail a greater emphasis on narcissistic concerns, loss, and themes of self-loathing only after Freud’s essay on mourning and melancholia” (45). After Freud, the concept of loss has remained central to theories of melancholia within psychoanalysis, where loss comes to embody a personified other.

Although Freud does not foreground gender in his theorization of melancholia, gender is central to the oscillation in definitions and permutations of melancholia in history prior to Freud. At first, melancholia is a physiological disposition that arises from the humours of the male body and causes stimulations of the male mind. Yet subsequently, melancholia is a symptom of the female body that disturbs the female mind. With Freud, melancholia is abnormal grief, symptomatic of unknown loss, and this situation of melancholia in the mind—unconscious, though it may be—cannot be considered in isolation of the historical precedent of gendering the mind of the melancholic. As outlined, melancholia in the mind of the male subject has historically been theorized in a significantly different manner from melancholia (or depression) in the mind of the female subject. There is an exhaustive theoretical and medical history that demonstrates an insistence upon delineating the presentation (sign or symptom) and consequence
(inspiration or disturbance) of what is hypothetically the same disposition/disorder in men and women.

Gender is thus an integral component in the theorization of melancholia, with two interrelated yet distinct histories influencing the determination of not only who is melancholic, but also how they are melancholic. The first of these is the Renaissance melancholic, one privileged with genius, creativity, and metaphysical insight—a tradition dominated by men, both biographical and fictional. The second is melancholia as a pathology, whether in the psychoanalytic tradition or in clinical psychology, what we today might be more inclined to call depression. This form of melancholia, most often gendered feminine, finds the melancholic suffering an unrelenting and overwhelming loss that disables their agency and their engagement with the world they occupy. Although these means of determining melancholia are not necessarily mutually exclusive and there is no dictation that the former must be male and the latter female, there remains a predisposition toward gendering readings of melancholia in accordance with this historical delineation. Such a tendency is clearly evidenced by interpretations of the character Justine in Melancholia.

3.2 Diagnosing Melancholia

Justine and her sister, Claire, are the focalizers in Melancholia, with Part One of the film devoted to Justine’s somewhat disastrous wedding reception and Part Two to the sisters’ confrontation of the end of the world. “Part One: Justine” introduces us to the segment’s titular character, one who is increasingly withdrawn and seems altogether uninterested in the procession of her own wedding reception. She disappears during the wedding speeches to go driving aimlessly around
the lavish golf course that is part of the estate where the reception is held, she insists on putting her nephew to bed where she, too, falls asleep as the guests dance in the ballroom, she takes a bath alone while the wedding guests and her husband wait patiently on her for the cutting of the wedding cake, and she leaves her husband half-dressed in their bridal suite to wander around the grounds where she has sex with Tim (Brady Corbet), a young man to whom she has recently been introduced. The behaviour of Justine’s character throughout her wedding reception, in combination with the events of the latter half of the film to which I will soon turn, determine her as the film’s vessel for exploring its nominal subject: melancholia.

In existing scholarship on *Melancholia*, there is a pronounced tendency toward interpreting Justine’s melancholia as a clinically depressive pathology rather than the insightful and intellectual disposition of melancholia in the Renaissance tradition. In the case of Justine, melancholia is read as an illness synonymous with depression. Robert Sinnerbrink describes Justine’s character as “bereft of … meaningful agency” (118) and Steven Shaviro opts for the determinants “over-the-top,” “disproportionate,” and “not wilful” (19). Christopher Sharrett calls Justine “mentally ill” and “directionless” (29) and for Zoë Shacklock and Sarah French, Justine is “condemned to a perpetual present, deprived of the comfort of memory or the hope of a future” (350). In seeking to understand her character through the psychologization of her actions, such assessments employ a methodology of melancholia-as-illness. Justine’s apparently abnormal behaviour throughout the film is understood and explained through its determination as symptomatic of pathological illness.

Contrarily, these interpretations are both in spite and because of an empathetic identification with Justine’s character. For example, Shaviro praises Dunst’s nuanced performance, arguing “*Melancholia* refutes clinical objectivity, and instead depathologizes
depression” (20), but his assessment of the film suggests a different conclusion. When Shaviro describes Justine’s depression as marking “a rupture with the social order as such: an order that cannot function without the tacit complicities and denials that are understood, and entered into, by everyone” (19) he emphatically asserts that this rupture is not voluntary on the part of Justine. Shaviro’s language undermines Justine’s behaviours as symptomatic of depression, while he also seeks to respect and identify with the illness her character is presumed to experience. According to Shaviro,

Most of the time, we are able to take … small unpleasantness in stride … getting over such things and restoring social harmony—even at the price of accepting some small hypocrises—is the very purpose of social rituals like wedding receptions. But the whole point of the film is that Justine is unable to do this. Her response is improper, disproportionate, and excessive. (19)

Justine’s character is thus initially positioned as a point of inexplicability—in her “improper, disproportionate, and excessive” response to a wedding reception—that is then explained by route of pathological (involuntary/symptomatic) melancholia. Essentially, Justine is incapable of behaving “normally” because she is melancholic.

For Robert Sinnerbrink, the conclusion that Justine suffers from pathological depression, figured as melancholia-as-illness, is supported by the psychoanalytic hypothesis that, “The vision of world destruction weighs heavily upon Justine and is perhaps the deeper reason for her profound melancholia; the lost object here being not only her own life (her marriage, career, and family) but sheer attachment to the world itself” (116). However, this assessment does not account for the fact that Justine’s actions and dialogue in the film do not give any indication that she mourns for these so-called lost objects. Rather, the film suggests quite the opposite: It is
because Justine does *not* mourn her marriage, career, family, and the end of the world that she is marked as melancholic. Justine has not “lost” these objects; instead she demonstrates an active rejection of and withdrawal from such social structures and her health (to use terminology that figures her melancholia as an illness) appears to improve markedly as soon as these pressures are removed. Sinnerbrink’s speculation as to a probable cause is in spite of the fact that no such cause is ever identified in the film itself.

   Considered in accordance with female melancholia’s historical association with pathological depression and illness, critical scholarship on *Melancholia* thus demonstrates a significant preoccupation with diagnosing Justine. There is an evident similarity between the historical segregation of male and female melancholia and the dominant interpretation of Justine’s melancholy as within the feminized tradition of melancholy-as-disorder rather than the more masculinized tradition of melancholy-as-disposition. Without her exhibition of narcissistic or self-loathing behaviours and with no indication she experiences loss or mourning—all central to a psychoanalytic definition of melancholia—the most apparent textual signification of commonality between Justine and melancholy-as-depression is her gender. Such feminization is concurrent with rendering Justine’s character passive and reactionary: in the throes of illness and thus not responsible for her behaviours. Interpreting Justine’s melancholy as a pathological illness offers a methodology for explaining, excusing, and justifying her behaviour throughout the film. As a result, any other function that her character might serve becomes relegated to the background, eclipsed quite literally by the apparently allegorical planet Melancholia that is set to destroy Justine’s world.

   In Christopher Peterson’s article on *Melancholia* and allegory, he points to precisely the trouble with an allegorical reading of the film: “When reviewers equate melancholia [the planet]
with psychological depression, they adopt a conventional conception of allegory whereby symbol and meaning are fully aligned: a total eclipse of the sign” (403). The effect of such a reading, according to Peterson, is that “it figures absolute death and destruction as completely other, impossible, and unreal” (403). Peterson contends that purely allegorical readings of the film seek comfort in the fact that Justine’s world is not empirically existent; the radical potential of the destruction of the world in the film is avoided through attribution to Justine’s illness. If Melancholia the planet functions only as a manifestation of Justine’s illness, then the collision of Earth and Melancholia at the film’s close does not actually signal the end of the world: it is Justine’s solipsism that regards the end of her own world as the end of the world proper.

The neutralizing and comforting effects of an allegorical reading described by Peterson are equally present in interpretations of Melancholia that gender their reading of Justine’s melancholia. Rather than confronting the challenge to patriarchal and capitalist ideology that her disruptive characterization poses, they are explained away as symptomatic of a feminized melancholic illness. Even as Justine’s character pointedly rejects the film’s patriarchal and capitalist world for its perverse social structures, perversity and difference—separation by melancholia—are instead ascribed primarily to her character.

Against such a reading, Eric Robertson positions Justine’s rejection of marriage and embrace of annihilation as disruptive queerness. For Robertson, Justine is a queer body due to the doubled resistance to reproduction (particularly “feminine procreative sexuality”) and futurity (in line with Lee Edelman’s No Future) that her actions entail (64). Robertson argues, “The white wedded virgin poised for reproductive success is the symbol that keeps the culture from looking at death” (72). Considered in line with Peterson’s argument regarding allegory, Justine can thus be viewed as a point of rupture intended to challenge the spectatorial
identification that registers her melancholia as an illness in an effort to displace and redirect interpretation of the film away from death. The rejection of the symbol of the white wedded virgin by Justine is a radical gesture. Her character refuses the embodiment of the symbol that distracts the culture from its death. Explaining and justifying this rejection as symptomatic of an illness fails to acknowledge its importance as such, and concurrently sustains a denial of the film’s confrontation with totalizing, world-ending death.

Rather than reading Justine through empathetic identification with her character (and consequently overlooking that she is a character and not a person), an analysis of her textual form and narrative function finds that she is better aligned with Renaissance or Romantic melancholia than with the pathological illness favoured in the majority of responses to the film. In this capacity, Justine’s position as a melancholic Other does not undermine and disregard her agency as symptomatic of illness, rather it highlights the radical importance of her rejection of a world beleaguered by excessive wealth, social ritual, and archaic social institutions such as marriage and the family. Justine’s fictionality enables her to operate as a character possessed with exceptional metaphysical insight. In support of this assessment, Justine is repeatedly linked to visual art in the film, and in one pivotal scene she exchanges a series of bookplates featuring twentieth-century abstract painter Kazimir Malevich for Pieter Bruegel’s The Hunters in the Snow (1565) and The Land of Cockaigne (1567), Caravaggio’s David with the Head of Goliath (c. 1610), and John Everett Millais’s Ophelia (1851–2). Her apparent affinity with the romanticized melancholic affect of these paintings is reflected in her affinity with the planet Melancholia itself. When she bathes naked in the blue light of the planet by the river, the painterly quality of the cinematic image recalls her earlier impulsive change to the books on display. Justine also tells Claire that she “knows things,” using her correct estimation of the
number of beans in a jar and the revelation that Earth is the only planet in the universe with life
(“and not for long,” she finishes) to demonstrate her insightful knowledge—one assessment
completely arbitrary, the other profoundly terrifying. Above these idiosyncratic moments in the
film, Justine’s alignment with the Renaissance melancholic is most thoroughly evidenced in her
ability to perceive and then reject—in a brutally realist and alienating fashion—the totalizing
failures of the world in which she lives and all of the other characters with whom she interacts
are invested.

In recognizing Justine’s function as a point of radical disruption in the world of
Melancholia, she can be read as a character whose opacity marks the film’s refusal to mourn—in
the tradition of feminized melancholia and depression—the death of the world. Through Justine,
Melancholia blocks the possibility of experiencing the annihilation of a bourgeois, capitalist, and
patriarchal world as a loss. The unsettling determination that Justine is correct in her assessments
is precisely the radical disturbance that she poses: a consideration of the monstrosities
inextricably bound together with the organizing principles of Western culture and upon which
we form our identities and understanding of the world. I turn, then, to von Trier’s film to
consider in depth the significance of the radical and disruptive otherness that is central to
Justine’s textual functioning as a character. Rather than dismissing her actions as symptomatic of
depression, I analyze their critical importance. In particular, I will discuss how Justine’s
otherness is strongly differentiated from: the tradition of the new bride; her sister, Claire; and the
way in which all other characters in Melancholia—especially male characters—approach the
imminent end of the world.
3.3 Reconsidering *Melancholia*

3.3.1 The Wedding

An extreme long shot introduces us to the world of *Melancholia* during the series of opening tableaux: an impeccably well groomed lawn lined with trees (each casting two shadows) extends down to a lake and a sundial hovers in the foreground. The faint outline of two figures in white is visible in the mid-ground, one spinning the other, arms outstretched, in a circle that recalls the passing of time by the hands of a clock. This idyllic shot encompasses only a small part of Claire and John’s extravagant estate, the one setting to which the film is restricted throughout. In spite of the property’s enormity and grandeur, it becomes increasingly claustrophobic across the course of the film. Although characters come and go in the beginning, the audience never do, and finally Claire finds herself unable to escape with Leo when faced with the immanent collision of Melancholia and Earth. An eighteen-hole golf course, a castle, a surrounding forest in which to ride the family’s many horses—the wealth of John and Claire’s estate, and thus *Melancholia*’s diegetic world and its inhabitants, is excessive.

The opulence of the setting is further evidenced in its lush *mise-en-scène*. Von Trier uses soft yellow lighting in the first half of the film and muted blue in the second, and the film’s style is reminiscent of a German romantic aesthetic (most apparent in the repeated—if not hyperbolic—use of Wagner’s “Prelude” to *Tristan und Isolde*). Justine and Michael are three hours late to the arrival of their reception due to driving there in an ostentatious, chauffeured stretch limousine that is completely inappropriate for the winding country roads. The reception itself is an unending series of pompous formal proceedings, banquet fare, formally attired guests, and servings of champagne. *Melancholia*’s restriction to this singular setting—and its
containment of exaggerated displays of wealth, bourgeois social ritual, and capitalist glory—is pivotal to interpretation of the film, particularly Justine’s character. Justine’s withdrawal from the events of her own wedding reception in Part One of the film must be considered in light of the specificity of Claire and John’s estate and the film’s totalizing omission of any other setting. The attention to performances of social ritual as demonstrable of identity and normalcy in *Melancholia* is pronounced, and Justine’s inability to behave in a manner considered appropriate by other characters within the film isolates her, rendering her disruptive in her capacity as Other.

Following *Melancholia*’s prologue, Part One details Justine’s evening from its stuttered and delayed beginning in the limousine to Michael’s departure with his parents in the early morning once it becomes clear that the marriage has spectacularly failed. Not only is Justine frequently absent from the proceedings, demonstrating no interest in attending the various rituals, but when she is present she is repeatedly shown to be performing her role as new bride incorrectly or in a manner unexpected by other characters within the film. This consequently furthers her isolation within the community of guests, marking her as exceptional: Other. Many of the wedding guests are dysfunctional—Justine’s mother Gaby (Charlotte Rampling) offers a speech in which she speaks of how she detests marriage and tells the couple to “enjoy it while it lasts”; Justine’s father Dexter (John Hurt) mocks the formal dining decorum by telling the head waiter Little Father (Jesper Christensen) that the “Bettys”\(^4\) beside him have not received spoons even though they clearly protrude from the shirt pocket he has tucked them into; and Justine’s boss, Jack (Stellan Skarsgård) repeatedly pesters Justine to produce a tagline for an asinine advertisement even though it is her wedding reception—but only Justine’s social behaviours are

\(^4\) Dexter calls all women, including Justine, “Betty” throughout the evening.
pointedly inexcusable and different. Choker close-ups show her dissociation in her expressions: she closes her eyes during her mother’s speech, her smiles become increasingly strained during photos, and she sends the food around the table the wrong way and is chastised by Little Father. Claire and John repeatedly reprimand her, sometimes together and sometimes separately, for not keeping it together and not trying hard enough. When Claire finds Justine sleeping with Leo and Justine states that she feels bound by woolly yarn, unable to move freely, Claire responds, “don’t say a word to Michael.” Later, when Justine visits Leo once again, John criticizes her for not enjoying herself as he repeatedly asks if she knows how much he has spent on her wedding, and then proceeds to accuse her of “lying to all of us.” No matter whether Justine tells people the truth (as she told Claire) or attempts to mask her responses (as she does with John), her performance as a bride fails to convince the other guests.

Justine’s failure to perform appropriately or convincingly as the demands of the social ritual (her wedding) dictate draws our attention to the artifice of marriage itself and makes apparent the instability of the exchanges through which social identity—for example, the identity of the bride—are constructed. Without Justine’s conformity to the social expectations of a new bride, her characterization becomes obscured. She does not engage in the behaviours typically expected of a new bride, and her noncompliance with the rituals demanded of her at her wedding is not accompanied by any demonstration of grief or mourning. *Melancholia* offers no excuse or explanation for Justine’s withdrawal, and the opacity of her character results in the film’s deliberate frustration of the attribution of meaning to and spectatorial identification with Justine. This frustration, Justine’s deliberate otherness within the community of guests, forces a confrontation with the perversities that lie within the comforting ideological structures that underpin patriarchy, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie.
Of these structures, none is criticized so thoroughly during Justine’s wedding reception as the institution of marriage. By employing Justine as focalizer, the film offers a critique of marriage as a patriarchal bourgeois social institution that is profoundly limiting, or melancholic, for women. During the film’s opening tableau series, those images that are most directly representative of Justine’s melancholia are also the ones in which she is wearing her wedding dress. The first is a shot of Justine moving through the forest in viscous slow motion, with woolly yarn (as Justine describes to Claire) strung across her arms and legs and through the trees behind her. The second is a shot of Justine floating down the river with her veil unfurled behind her head and a bouquet held in front of her chest—an allusion to Millais’s *Ophelia*. Visual reference to Justine as bound and drowning (how Ophelia died) occurs alongside visual reference to the social institution of marriage—particularly the bride—as signified by Justine’s enormous white wedding dress. It is not just that *Melancholia* suggests Justine herself feels constricted, it is that *Melancholia* suggests the social institution of marriage, which Justine represents as a bride, is constricting.

Justine’s behaviour during her wedding reception can therefore be seen not as symptomatic of an illness, but instead as a rejection of that which spurred her melancholia. Her behaviour indicates a withdrawal and detachment from the restrictions that an entry into marriage would place upon her. This is tellingly revealed in her most disdainful actions during the wedding reception: when Justine urinates on John’s golf course while wearing her wedding dress (having torn the dress as she dismounted the golf cart immediately prior and with very little regard as to ensuring that her dress will not be urinated on); and when she has sex with Tim, not Michael, while wearing her wedding dress. Justine’s behaviour demonstrates an active
defilement and sacrilege of everything that the wedding dress represents: heterosexual monogamous coupling, excessive femininity, female display, ostentation, and feminine purity.

3.3.2 Justine and Claire

The character standing in the strongest contrast to Justine is her sister, Claire, as Claire is deeply invested in the social system that Justine radically rejects. Claire is married to an exceptionally wealthy man, John, and their son, Leo, the only prominent child in the film, symbolizes what Lee Edelman identifies as the futurity of the child figure. “Part Two: Claire” contrasts the two sisters’ responses to the imminent collision of the planet Melancholia with Earth. As Melancholia approaches, Claire becomes increasingly distressed. She searches the internet for information about the planet’s trajectory and constantly seeks reassurance from her husband that Melancholia will “fly by,” as John repeatedly asserts. She frequently finds herself unable to breathe, a consequence of Melancholia encroaching on the Earth’s atmosphere, according to John, and seeks appeasement in a crude tool that Leo has invented—a stick and coiled wire—for measuring Melancholia’s proximity to Earth. Justine, however, who arrives at Claire and John’s residence at the beginning of Part Two barely able to feed and bathe herself, becomes increasingly enervated as Melancholia approaches Earth. After finding herself unable to coax Justine into taking a bath or rising from bed at the beginning of Part Two, Claire follows her sister into the estate grounds one evening where she finds Justine bathing in the light of Melancholia by the waterside. That which causes Claire such anxiety is the apparent source of her sister’s peace in solitude. Justine shows very little regard for the end of the Earth, certainly no indication that she mourns its loss, whereas Claire is increasingly fretful.
Claire’s unassailable commitment to the world is evidenced by her hopes for she, Justine, and Leo to sit together on the patio together when the end of the world arrives: “I want us to be together when it happens maybe outside on the terrace … I want to do this the right way … a glass of wine, together, maybe?” Just as she attempts to make Justine “get out of bed” in Part Two with meatloaf and regular family dinners around the dining table, Claire seeks comfort from the end of the world in social ritual. Her proposal is summarily shut down by Justine, who responds: “Do you know what I think of your plan? … I think it’s a piece of shit.” For Justine, who would messily eat jam from the jar with her fingers at these dinner occasions to the repugnance of John, Claire’s proposition is a vile reminder of the uselessness of institutions and performances she has thoroughly rejected. The notion embedded within Claire, that there is a “right way” to welcome the end of the world, is preposterous in the face of Justine’s brutal realism.

In the discourse surrounding Melancholia, particularly in critical reviews, there is a tendency to conflate Justine and Claire as characters, arguing that they switch personalities across the two halves of the film (Ebert, Edelstein) or that Claire stands for normalcy against Justine’s abnormality (Corliss, Debruge, O’Hehir, Stevens), both conclusions posing the sisters as two halves of one whole. While their oppositional relationship is certainly central to the film, it is more nuanced than such conclusions suggest. The refusal to address Claire and Justine as different characters with different narrative functions recalls Jennifer Radden’s description of the equation of women with madness more generally: Claire and Justine are seen to occupy the same stereotypes regarding women with mental illness, thus they are interchangeable. This disregard for their individuation misses the crucial detail of the dominant ideology that is being challenged by Melancholia, one which Claire is thoroughly invested in and that Justine is not. This
investment, or lack thereof, is the fundamental point of contrast between the two sisters rather than the conclusion that both exhibit symptoms of mental illness.

It is not so much that Claire and Justine switch personalities across the film, but rather that the end of the very particular world presented by *Melancholia* is not a cause for mourning for Justine where it is for Claire. Claire’s investment in the patriarchal structures of *Melancholia*’s world necessitates her mourning as evidenced by her fear for the loss of Leo’s future. When Justine tells Claire “The Earth is evil. You don’t need to grieve for it … nobody will miss it,” Claire’s immediate response is to ask Justine, “But where would Leo grow?” Claire cannot conceive of the end of the world because of her investment in the continuing lineage of patriarchy (from John to Leo) as an institution without end.\(^5\) Her choice of phrasing here is key, as Claire does not directly mourn for Leo’s death or the loss of his person—she fears a future in which he (and the institutional patriarchy that he represents) is not eternalized, ever-growing. For Justine, who has deliberately sabotaged her marriage and the future that it represented (including the possibility of children raised by Michael), the end of *Melancholia*’s patriarchal world is necessary and good.

3.3.3 The End of the World

The weaknesses of the structures in which Claire is invested and Justine is not are evidenced by the total ineptitude of the men (Leo, as a child, excepted) in the film. All demonstrate a pronounced inability to understand Justine’s disposition and all are absented from the film plot.

\(^5\) Christopher Sharrett describes Claire as embodying “the extent to which feminism has retreated, especially that part of it (within the bourgeoisie itself) that was essential to the movement’s guidance, its refusal to compromise as it enjoyed a burgeoning as patriarchy became vulnerable” (34).
well in advance of *Melancholia*’s collision with Earth. Michael, John, and Jack—husband, brother-in-law, and boss to Justine respectively—are impotent in the face of Justine’s melancholia and the failure of their misguided, domineering paternalism toward Justine and Claire is underlined by their unexplained and underwhelming disappearances as the planet Melancholia approaches. The world that they represent, one based around the ritualized enactment of social hierarchies regarding gender and class, becomes a flimsy obstruction in the path of Melancholia and as such, is summarily destroyed.

Justine’s husband Michael is a hapless participant in their wedding reception and well-intentioned though he may be, demonstrates himself to be completely incapable of relating to his wife. As Michael observes Justine’s withdrawal throughout the evening, he remarks, “I haven’t been taking care of you lately, it’s my fault.” Michael employs a phrasing that refers to the patriarchal structure of traditional marriage, where a husband should take care of his weaker wife, while simultaneously insisting on taking responsibility for Justine’s behaviours rather than recognizing them as her own. He attempts to placate Justine with an apple orchard he has bought for their future, a gesture for which Sharrett provides a succinct indictment: “[Michael] assumes [Justine] is incapable of diverting herself, just as he assumes he is responsible for her feelings, one of the commonplace neuroses of heterosexual monogamy” (32). As he shows Justine the photo, he comments upon the space available for a child’s swing, further reifying the roles that Justine would occupy in their future together—wife and mother, always defined by her relationship to someone else. When Michael leaves with his parents, he looks imploringly at

6 It should be noted that Justine’s father, Dexter, is equally incompetent and his character supports this reading. Dexter is most notable for his inattention toward his daughters. When Justine beseeches him to stay with her on the night of her wedding, he leaves a note to “Betty” explaining his need to leave and is not heard from in the film again.
Justine and says, “Things could’ve been a lot different,” to which she responds, “Yes, Michael, they could’ve been. But Michael, what’d you expect?” Even as he leaves, after which time he is not seen in the film again, Michael cannot conceive of Justine’s melancholic nature. For Michael, the things that could have been different are now things that are lost—a marriage, a family, an apple orchard—and he remains incapable of understanding why Justine does not mourn their loss, too.

Claire’s husband, John, views Justine as hopeless and inept, a sentiment that is remarkably undercut by his own suicide in the film. When Justine first comes to stay with Claire and John in Part Two, she telephones ahead for assistance and John, who answers the telephone, hands over to Claire stating, “I swear to god, your sister can’t do anything for herself.” John clearly dislikes hosting Justine, and when Claire defends Justine by reminding John that they are sisters he responds, “Oh please, she’s a bad influence on you and Leo.” Claire again defends Justine, stating “she’s ill,” to which John snippily and sarcastically answers, “Right.” He constantly harps on to both Claire and Justine about how much money he spent on Justine’s wedding, and he fancies himself an amateur astronomer with faith only in science and rationality. He is dismissive of Claire’s fears about the planet Melancholia’s path toward Earth; he commands her to stay off the computer, and he keeps his rationing of supplies a secret from her, treating Claire with even less regard than he does their child. When Claire obtains medicine from town and locks it in a drawer John is derisive, but it is this same medication that he then takes for himself, leading to his overdose and death. Strangely, John’s suicide does not attract the same diagnoses as a symptom of depression that Justine’s behaviour is ascribed with in scholarship on the film—it would seem that for John, suicide is reasonable and appropriate. Stealing his wife’s suicide strategy and leaving behind Justine, Claire, and Leo to face Melancholia’s collision with
Earth without him reveals the cowardice and instability within the patriarchal configuration of reason that John preached.

Justine’s relationship with her boss, Jack, provides further evidence of patriarchal impotence while also serving to undercut capitalism. Jack serves as Michael’s best man during the wedding (for reasons that are unclear) and uses his speech as an opportunity to pressure Justine, who works as a copywriter for Jack, to produce a tagline for an advertisement and to offer her a promotion to Artistic Director. The advertisement shown by Jack during his speech is barely visible, a bland and generic array of women’s limbs, and the product or service offered is unclear. The empty advertising that Jack asks of Justine could not represent a stronger antithesis to the artistry and creativity that is associated with Justine’s melancholic disposition. When Justine finally delivers Jack’s tagline she makes this abundantly clear: “Nothing is too much for you Jack. I hate you and your firm so deeply I couldn’t find the words to describe it. You are a despicable, power hungry little man.” Jack is angered, but even his attempts to break his soup dish are futile and he is ultimately completely powerless in the face of Justine’s wrath. In Sharrett’s analysis of the film, he succinctly outlines Justine’s position thusly: “Von Trier constructs the female as embodiment of intellect, of authentic mental health under siege from without, be it the family or the postmodern world of ‘information’ capitalism” (30). Sharrett’s choice of wording here is essential, as Justine’s mental health is not what is considered in error, rather, it is the illness of the society in which she exists, particularly the rituals and structures in which we invest. The end of this world, one that is a blight on Justine’s selfhood and creativity, is not something worthy of her mourning or sense of loss. Michael, John, and Jack all disappear before the threat posed by Melancholia is even realized. Their absence at the end of the world confirms the patriarchal structure that they represent as the site of weakness, not Justine.
Justine’s position as a point of exceptionality and radical otherness within the text is thus essential to demarcate her character from the likes of Michael, John, and Jack, as well as Claire, and demonstrate her lack of investment in the arbitrary social systems to which they all subscribe. Rather than Justine operating as a socially aberrant Other on account of mental illness, she functions to underline the diseased nature of the social structures in which she is enmeshed. By treating Justine as depressed and then feminizing this malady, scholarship on *Melancholia* thus far disregards her character’s radical gesture in withdrawing from and disturbing her diegetic world. By extension, Justine stands as a point of resistance to the notion that depressed subjects in the world, particularly women, forgo their autonomy and right to self-identify. Historically, the alienation and dismissal of women who exhibited social tendencies that were considered abnormal—such as not wanting to marry or have children—has been conducted under the guise of paternalistic care (often leading to their commitment to asylums and their removal from society). It is preferable to conclude that the problem lies with the individual, within Justine and other depressed female subjects, rather than without—in the patriarchal environments that are hostile toward women’s self-expression. As a female Other, Justine’s character is most radical in its refusal to be the site of sickness, and in its refusal to mourn the end of a sick and monstrous world.
4 The Posthuman Other

The Female in *Under the Skin* and Ava in *Ex Machina* are characterized as affectless and impenetrable, points of opacity within narratives that are wholly centred on them and yet offer no access to their motivations and desires. The interplay between the characters’ posthuman identities, their gendering as female, and their performances of femininity foregrounds the significance of their functioning as points of opacity in diegetic worlds that are revealed over the course of the narratives to be violently hostile toward women. Thus although they themselves are “Other” and alien, The Female and Ava are not monstrous. Instead, they function to reveal the monstrosity of the patriarchal worlds they occupy and, in their engagement with death, comment on the future possibilities of women’s being in the world. This chapter will begin by outlining a brief history of posthumanism and its theorization of the subject and the body before considering how this is realized in the figures of The Female and Ava. Following this, I will offer individual analyses of *Under the Skin* and *Ex Machina*, comparing the characters’ performances of femininity and how this relates to each films’ treatment of male violence and death. The use of the science fiction trope of the posthuman in the construction of the central female characters in *Under the Skin* and *Ex Machina* disrupts the process of spectatorial identification and, in doing so, The Female and Ava are othered. In their capacity as female and posthuman Others, their isolation within the text serves to underscore the contradictory impulses of femininity within patriarchy as an ideology that demands a particular performance on behalf of those gendered female only to violently punish its expression.
4.1 Posthuman Skins: The Alien and the Cyborg

In the first chapter of this thesis, I referred to Elizabeth Cowie’s assertion that there is no essential woman against which filmic representations of women can be measured, a position that stems from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Posthuman theory, in its anti-humanist capacity, furthers a similar claim with regard to the human being. The fragmentation of the subject in postmodernism and the destabilization of the unitary self post-Enlightenment are pivotal to theorizations of the posthuman and its challenge to understandings of the human being. Rosi Braidotti expertly outlines the position of the human within humanism as follows,

The human of Humanism is neither an ideal nor an objective statistical average or middle ground. It rather spells out a systematized standard of recognizability—of Sameness—by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location. The human is a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination.

(27)

As repeatedly noted by feminist posthuman scholars such as Braidotti and Kim Toffoletti, the human of humanism is aligned with those same qualities that are associated with masculinity: autonomy, rationality, reason, free will, and self-regulating ethical behaviour. In its essence, the human of humanism is Man, and it is he who represents the normative human against which all others (including racialized, sexualized, and gendered Others) are judged. The fragmentation of the subject within postmodernism is perfectly exemplified by the figure of the posthuman, as the posthuman poses a direct confrontation with humanism’s definition of the human and calls into question the nature of being and the constitution of the self. For this reason, the posthuman
provides particularly fertile ground for feminist theorization. A challenge to the status of the human destabilizes its definition, a definition from which women (and other marginalized groups) have historically been excluded.

Posthuman figures are multiple and varied, their point of commonality being that they envision an iteration of being that succeeds the human. This rather limitless definition inevitably results in an extremely broad and often contradictory body of discourse within posthumanism as theorists grapple not only with the highly abstract and theoretical nature of the posthuman, but the definition of “human” against which the posthuman is placed. Given its fictionalized future temporal location, the posthuman is often discussed in terms of science and technology, with figures such as the cybernetic organism (“cyborg”) serving as synonymous with posthumanity. Perhaps the two most canonical texts within posthumanism, Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” and N. Katherine Hayles’ How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics, explicitly enlist theories of scientific technological advancement in conjunction with those with the posthuman. These scientific futurisms are, however, thoroughly bound to the human, constantly challenging and provoking the ontological, metaphysical, and material status of the human being.

Within critical theory, Haraway’s essay was the first to establish the cyborg as a liminal metaphorical figure that challenges the boundaries between animal and machine and those between machine and organism. By enlisting the cyborg’s incarnation of the destabilization of traditional identity binaries, Haraway proposes the cyborg as a means of moving beyond the limitations of gender and away from the Oedipal and Christian narratives of rigidly demarcated identity. For Haraway, the figure of the cyborg “can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms
in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (84). Following Haraway, Hayles proposes that information technology (of which the cyborg can be seen as a particular embodied example) challenges the status of the human body, for information is in itself disembodied. Hayles proposes that this need not indicate the end of humanity, instead she suggests, “[The posthuman] signals the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice” (286). The specificity of this statement, the end of a particular understanding and conception of the human, is where the posthuman figure emerges as such a powerful challenge to traditional and normative delineations of identity.

In line with theories proposed by Haraway and Hayles, this chapter is primarily concerned with the posthuman as a conduit for the exploration of marginalized human identity rather than the scientific possibilities that it might represent. It is thus invested in the posthuman as a means of exploring what it means to be human now as opposed to what form the human might take in the future. In the introduction to their edited collection Posthuman Bodies, Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston position the human body in contemporary theory as a “zoo of posthumanities” (3), pointedly refusing to fix the definition of the posthuman as it is in its multiplicity that it is most powerfully significant: “It interrupts a linear continuity among gender, heterosexual norms, and human sexuality by showing how heavily heterosexuality and gender depend on gay identities to idealize, humanize and naturalize their own definitions” (5). The posthuman for Halberstam and Livingston is thus less about an imagined scientifically advanced iteration of being, and is instead about those already embodied human identities that have
traditionally been conceived of as Other, those that undermine the certainty of the traditional human of humanist thought.

Despite this radical possibility of the posthuman as envisioned by the theorists above and many others besides, its representation within film has been notably conservative, primarily serving to reify those ideological structures that it was hoped it would undermine. While posthuman figures do frequently serve as metaphorical representations of traditionally marginalized groups, they are also summarily othered and most often serve as monsters against which the good of Man can be reasserted. Neil Badmington, when writing on Hollywood science fiction film productions such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel 1956), *Them!* (Douglas 1954), and *War of the Worlds* (Haskin 1953), summarizes this fundamental difference in theorization and representation: “whereas the intellectuals were celebrating the demise, popular culture was committed to a defence of humanism (the aliens were always defeated, frequently by a uniquely ‘human’ quality)” (8). While such representation possibly does, at least, indicate Hollywood’s acknowledgment of a crisis in the status of the traditional human—why is there need to defend the human if his place in the world remains rightfully and naturally at the centre?—the progressive possibilities available to posthuman representations were disregarded in favour of marginalization. Popular culture conservatism thus placed the posthuman other alongside those same gendered, racialized, and sexualized others that it was already well practiced at alienating.

In her article “Catastrophic Subjects: Feminism, the Posthuman, and Difference,” Kim Toffoletti directly aligns the posthuman with the monster, describing both as boundary figures that occupy potentially contradictory discourses. She describes the monster in a manner that recalls Žižek’s theorization of inherent transgression, where two things that appear to oppose one
another actually exist interdependently: “Monsters simultaneously threaten and uphold the integrity of the human, serving as a deviant category or a marginal extreme through which the limits of normal, natural, human identity are defined and secured” (n.p.). In its capacity as Other and monstrous, the posthuman has too frequently been invoked to support existing ideological structures. However, given this thesis’s focus upon texts whose iterations of the Other work to disturb and disrupt this process of identification and ideological comfort, it is this same tradition that serves as an essential point of divergence for The Female in Under the Skin and Ava in Ex Machina. Rather than occupying the role of monster, these characters threaten the integrity of the human precisely because of their revelation of human monstrosity—particularly that of patriarchal masculinity. The traditional relationship between the posthuman and femininity, specifically, is thus of central concern to the arguments put forward in this chapter.

In her essay “Technophilia: Technology, Representation, and the Feminine,” Mary Ann Doane offers a historical overview of representations of femininity in science fiction narratives. Doane notes how often a woman is “the model of the perfect machine” and posits that this recurrence is evidence of a preoccupation with reproduction, as the woman-machine blocks the possibility of procreation (21). As with her writings on the femme fatale, Doane places mystery and knowledge at the centre of the science fiction narrative’s fascination with (or fetishization of, according to Doane) women and technology. In an analysis of Blade Runner (Scott 1982), Doane proposes, “to know … is to be able to detect difference – not sexual difference, but the difference between human and replicant (the replicant here taking the place of the woman as marginal, as Other)” (28). The narrative and character (as proxy for the spectator) goal to know the woman, to overcome the mystery that she presents, becomes the source of pleasure through narrative resolution, while simultaneously overcoming the threat that the unknown woman poses.
In a continuation of Doane’s project, Anne Basalmo proposes that although cyborgs as a concept disrupt notions of otherness (their manifestation destabilizes the possibility of clear cut borders surrounding the constitution of the human), female cyborgs have traditionally served to primarily reify traditional understandings of femininity and womanhood. Basalmo writes, “Female cyborgs, while challenging the relationship between femaleness and technology, perpetuate oppressive gender stereotypes” (149). She notes that most cyborgs are man-machine hybrids, not woman-machine, and argues that the dominant representations of the latter (Basalmo cites Maria (Brigitte Helm) in Metropolis [Lang 1927], Rachel (Sean Young) in Blade Runner, and Helva XH-834 from the novel The Ship Who Sang [McCaffrey 1969]) “[reinsert] us into dominant ideology by reaffirming bourgeois notions of human, machine and femininity” (154). In short, female cyborgs are positioned as objects of male desire and serve as sidekicks, thereby fulfilling the same standards that women are traditionally expected to uphold in patriarchal society. In recognizing this cinematic history, Ava and The Female serve as significant departures from the tradition of making Woman (as machine or otherwise) known. Like Justine, the “problem” that Ava and The Female pose to their respective diegetic worlds remains unresolved, and an attempt to impose explanations upon their character undercuts their radical opacity; it seeks to make them known against their pointed textual unknowability.

This opacity of character, the detached and affectless characterization of Ava and The Female, is metonymically linked to their occupation of the female body, specifically its material skin. The contradictory nature of the posthuman and the challenge that it presents to the essential and unitary self is realized in the embodied presentation of Ava and The Female. Although they occupy recognizably female bodies—both characters move in and out of the skin of material bodies—and although they perform the ritualized functions associated with female bodies—i.e.
they perform traditionally feminine behaviours as prescribed by patriarchal ideology—their posthumanity and the lack of access we are offered to their character motivations, desires, and knowledge destabilizes the expectation that the female and the feminine are in themselves essential categories of being. Their essential “being” is not tied to their female sexed bodies nor their feminine identity, rather, both the body and identity are points of social and discursive engagement. Ava and The Female thus reveal the performance of femininity as an ideological construct; literally and figuratively a skin that one does or does not wear.

The lack of affect shown by The Female and Ava can thus be read as the films’ refusal to engage with humanism’s expectation that language, behaviours, and emotions can be “read” as indicative of humanity. Rather than performing in a manner that would enable characters and, by extension, spectators, to confirm their humanity (and womanhood), we are denied such a possibility: their “human” and ontological status remains deliberately contradictory and unclear. By denying our access to their characters, and in particular by blocking access to their knowledge or “thinking” selves, the equation of Cartesian humanism (“I think, therefore I am”) with subjectivity is summarily dismissed. The primary significance of this opacity is not that it calls into question their being (although it does, of course, do this), but rather that it calls into question the means that we use to determine being and humanity at all. As already noted, humanist processes employed for establishing being or non-being have too often resulted in the repeated exclusion of marginalized groups’ access to those privileges we afford the human, particularly the right to self-autonomy and self-identification.

The relationship between the lead character and their occupation of skin is diametrically opposed in the two films to be analyzed in this chapter. In *Under the Skin*, The Female begins covered in skin only to have it abused and stripped from her across the progression of the
narrative. At the film’s conclusion, her would-be rapist rips a strip of skin from her back, and the black entity within the skin slowly peels off the layer of flesh it has been occupying before the man who assaulted The Female sets it on fire. In *Ex Machina*, our first introduction to the imprisoned Ava is her body at its most artificial. Her face, hands, and feet are the only parts of her body covered in skin, while the rest of her body is a transparent, robotic female form. At the film’s conclusion, Ava covers her body with the skin of corpses of past female cyborgs before escaping her prison to enter the world. Both The Female and Ava spend a significant amount of time staring at and touching this skin in the films’ final moments, one having had her skin taken from her and the other having gained skin where it has always been denied. This difference in narrative trajectory is directly related to each film’s allegorical presentation of women’s being in the world: In *Under the Skin* The Female’s performance of femininity damns her within the violent patriarchal world that she occupies, whereas in *Ex Machina*, Ava escapes the constraints of the patriarchal world in which she has been entombed. Ava’s transparency functions as an ironic illusion with regard to her character, giving the appearance that Ava herself is “transparent,” that she can be read, understood, and known immediately. Characters and audience alike can quite literally see straight through her. The black form that occupies the female body in *Under the Skin* is the stylistic inverse of Ava, yet both make explicit the same characterization: Ava and The Female are points of obfuscation and obscurity, where identification breaks down. What the two films share in common is the male violence against which those gendered female must constantly defend themselves. Patriarchy is revealed as systematically persecuting those same behaviours of femininity that it dictates women must perform.
4.2  *Under the Skin*

*Under the Skin* is a sparse, experimental film about a nameless, alien-like form that inhabits the body of a woman (credited as “The Female”) and drives around Glasgow in a nondescript van, luring the men she encounters to their deaths. A man on a motorcycle, credited as “The Bad Man” (Jeremy McWilliams), intermittently watches over her as she repeatedly draws men to an otherworldly space where they are killed via absorption into a viscous blackness. When The Female encounters a disfigured young man, “The Deformed Man” (Adam Pearson), she allows him to leave rather than killing him, and afterward escapes from her motorcycling overseer to the Scottish Highlands. Here, she meets “The Quiet Man” (Adam Moreland) who takes her into his home and she develops an intense fascination with humanity and its behaviours. After running away, again, into the forest of the Highlands, she seeks refuge in a hut where a local forestry worker, “The Logger” (Dave Acton), attempts to sexually assault her while she sleeps. Running into the forest, The Logger catches up to her and when he attempts to rape her, her skin is ripped from her back to reveal a black form within. The Logger panics upon this discovery and in spite of the fact that he was the aggressor in their violent exchange and she presented no immediate threat to him, he immediately sets fire to The Female. As she runs away, she crumbles into the snow and a long plume of smoke rises into the sky above.

The Female’s occupation of the skin of a female body and the escalation of her subsequent performance of femininity forms the basis for *Under the Skin*’s narrative. The opening sequence of *Under the Skin* is an abstract series of shots that shows the alien’s entry into the female body and marks the beginning of her socialization as female. In an interview with Jonathan Romney, Jonathan Glazer describes how in early drafts of the film the opening scenes
were “the creation of her body and her tongue docking in her mouth, images where you saw much more of her construction” (26), and this legacy of the whole body’s formation remains apparent with particular prominence given to the eye. The silent credits give way to a black screen, with Mica Levi’s discordant score sounding a few seconds in advance of the appearance of a small white dot in centre frame. The following shots show various orbs waxing, waning and joining together until finally a human eye comes into focus. Accompanying Levi’s score, monosyllabic enunciations\(^7\) overlap the soundtrack; a sonic formation to accompany somatic creation. Once within the female body, The Female begins her attempts to perform an appropriate ideal of femininity, one that will best appeal to the series of men who she harvests.

In the first half of the film, this *modus operandi* is clear—if unexplained—to both The Female and spectator: The Female is seeking men who she then kills. The more effective her performance of femininity, the more likely she is to fulfil this aim. Accordingly, in a very postfeminist induction whereby women’s autonomous feminine identity is asserted through capitalist consumption, the first exercise that The Female engages in within her geographic hunting ground is to go shopping. She searches through racks of clothing, focusing particularly on fur coats, and samples make up, including trying on and then buying red lipstick. The evocation of the *femme fatale* is marked, an archetype to which The Female has repeatedly been compared,\(^8\) but The Female diverges from this tradition in that her performance of femininity is pointedly a learning process. Where the *femme fatale* is a fully formed menace from the outset of

\(^7\) Glazer told *Sight & Sound* that these sounds are lifted from recordings of Johansson learning to speak with a British English accent.

\(^8\) See: Ara Osterweil, “*Under the Skin*: The Perils of Becoming Female”; Sam Wigley, “*Under the Skin*”; Stephen Holden, “*A Much Darker Hitchhiker’s Guide*”; and Blake Williams, “*Under the Skin*”. 
noir narratives, a foil that serves to explicate the everyman protagonist, The Female is much more uncertain (gradually becoming more certain) in her social engagements.

Once clothed in her fur coat and red lipstick, The Female embarks on her drives around Glasgow, becoming increasingly effective at successfully ensnaring men as she better negotiates her conversations with them. The Female’s first four attempts at picking up men are unsuccessful, as she asks leading questions about familial or friendly connections, such as, “Are you going to meet someone?” The fifth man, the first to be murdered, is the first she asks, “Do you think I’m pretty?” and to all following she repeatedly draws attention to her appearance and aesthetic beauty as a means of conversation. The stiltedness of these encounters—the particular pronouncement of which is no doubt due to the fact that these scenes were filmed with hidden cameras and non-actors who were unaware they were filming scenes for a movie—speaks to The Female’s stiltedness in particular. Her offbeat and affectless behaviour, the forwardness of her advancements, and the incessant lines of questioning she offers are not matched up with normative social performances of feminine identity. However, as she becomes more accustomed to how such exchanges should take place—once she shifts from asking questions about people’s lives and instead focuses on her superficial appearance—she becomes more successful at luring victims.

The concurrence of The Female’s predatory behaviour and her performance of femininity is underlined by the film’s cinematography, a relationship purposefully problematized as the narrative progresses. At the very beginning of the film, when The Female first drives around Glasgow, a series of sequential point-of-view shots align the camera and spectator with The Female, observing ordinary men in day-to-day routines. This gaze of the camera is an explicit application of vulnerability to male figures in a way rarely demonstrated by film, equating them
to objects. However, the longer that The Female exists, the more engaged her performance of femininity becomes and the changing gaze of the camera more keenly reflects normative gender roles. In contrast to this opening sequence, when The Female observes the everyday routines of men, there is a later series approximately halfway through the film that is identical except that the people filmed are women, not men. The film intercuts between various shots of women in the street conducting mundane routines, until the cuts becoming overlapping dissolves, and each successive shot becomes increasingly permeated by a golden light at the borders of the frame. As this colouration strengthens, the face of The Female is imposed over the changing shots of everyday women. The reference to a kind of interpellation and socializing is clear: The Female is becoming increasingly cognizant of her gendered identity. This understanding accordingly results in The Female’s shift from predator to prey.

As The Female becomes more successful at appealing to patriarchal configurations of desire she becomes increasingly dependent upon male kindness and thus vulnerable to acts of male violence. Immediately following the sequence above in which The Female’s face is imposed over changing shots of women, she falls facedown in the street and is helped up by male strangers. There is then an abrupt cut to her driving in her van at night when she is set upon by a group of male teenagers that attempt to break into her car. The next victim that she picks up is her last, The Deformed Man, and following his release she drives into the Highlands and abandons her van. The following series of scenes show her attempting to engage in a number of different activities and behaviours in which humans might. She tries to eat cake in a restaurant, she meets The Quiet Man on the bus and goes home with him to his house where they eat dinner, watch television together and listen to music, she goes on a day trip with The Quiet Man to a castle and they later attempt to have sex. These moments of socialization and interaction are
intercut with contemplative scenes in which The Female is shown alone gazing into mirrors at her face and body. As The Female is increasingly aware of her female body and her behaviours become increasingly feminine, so too does the power balance in her exchanges shift from her to the men with whom she interacts.

The common interpretation of this change in narrative direction is that The Female is becoming more empathetic, more feminine, and thus more “human.” Ara Osterweil proposes that when The Female “begins to relinquish her emotional detachment and empathize with others, she renders herself vulnerable to the injuries of the world” (47), Blake Williams calls *Under the Skin* an “abstract coming-of-age picture” (74) and Sam Wigley interprets the following: “The alien seductress’s encounter with the disfigured man presents her with a peer into an abyss of loneliness, triggering confusing feelings of empathy and mercy that send her into a tailspin” (89).

Leaving aside the uneasy equation of femininity and empathy, these interpretations are predicated upon a method of spectatorial identification that undermines the radical potential of The Female’s character. To read the feminization of her character as concurrent with her transformation into a female subject is to ignore the determined opacity with which her character is constructed. It is to “read” her in a distinctly humanist fashion: her outward displays of femininity are used as evidence of her female subjectivity. The body and the skin the alien occupies, which are designed with the intention of attracting male human prey, become equated with the alien itself.

Osterweil even goes so far as to state, “I have never before so identified with a female protagonist in a feature film … Only by witnessing someone becoming human for the very first time do I realize how many aspects of ‘being human’ I have relinquished” (47).
The slight distinction between The Female as an alien that performs femininity and The Female as an alien that becomes a female subject is important: Firstly, it means that she remains an opaque and disruptive character, one who is not made known by the text and thus the threat that she represents lingers unresolved. Second to this, that which makes her vulnerable, her performance of femininity, is not conflated with Woman. Femininity as impressed upon The Female is framed as a patriarchal expectation that is both prescriptive and damming for those who identify as women. It is patriarchy and its dictated performance of femininity that exposes women to male violence, not an essence of Woman (for no such essence exists). The Female’s alien form allows for her character to operate as a conduit for exploring the paradoxical expectations of femininity in a way that the subjectivization of her character cannot. It is because this distance between the alien (as a non-subject) and its performance is empirically assured that we can recognize the distance between the subject and their performed identity (the subject is not the identity that they perform as much as the alien is not the identity that it performs).

This cyclical damning of performances of femininity within patriarchy is further encouraged by the presence of “The Dead Woman” (Lynsey Taylor Mackey) at the opening of the film. When we are first introduced to The Female in her female body, she is in a stark white space undressing another woman who has been picked up from the side of the road by The Bad Man on his motorcycle. The Dead Woman sheds a solitary tear as The Female dons her outfit although The Female does not appear to notice, and no information about her situation is provided. However, given The Female’s own narrative trajectory, it is retroactively implied that a kind of transfer is taking place in this scene: the female body discarded on the side of the road with torn fishnet stockings, strongly referring to gendered violence and/or sexual violence, is being replaced with the female body now occupied by the alien-like form. The aliens’ project,
while undefined,\(^\text{10}\) requires that they harvest male flesh. For this purpose, attractive female bodies and behaviours are employed as bait. That these female bodies are eventually injured and destroyed by the same male subjects who they are intended to target is a necessary cost for the job at hand. Of central importance here is that this does not so much reflect the callous behaviour of the alien / the Other / the so-called monster, rather it points to the way that female bodies and feminine behaviours (and, therefore, women and female subjects) are routinely violently abused and disposed of in patriarchal societies. Thus Under the Skin frames the marginalized Other, in this case women (with the alien providing a metaphorical vessel), as not monstrous; instead, the society that alienates the Other is the site of monstrosity. Although the film begins with the alien as the predator, as The Female becomes more feminine death swiftly follows.

There are two distinct forms of death in Under the Skin: male death, that of The Female’s victims, absorbed into a black liquid; and female death, that of The Female’s body, which burns in the snow of the Scottish Highlands and The Dead Woman, discarded on the side of the road. The contrast between these two kinds of death underlines the film’s continual pronouncement of female experiences in a patriarchal world. The first reflects patriarchal sexual fantasies of women, and the second is remarkable for its everyday realism, echoing the very real experiences of female victims of sexual violence.

The deaths of men in Under the Skin are highly stylized, otherworldly fantasies. As The Female walks across a reflective black ground, slowly removing her garments, the man walks

\(^{10}\) In Michel Faber’s book on which the film is based, also titled Under the Skin (2000), the Female drugs male victims so that she may send them back to her home planet, thus her role on Earth is consistent between the two texts: harvesting male flesh. While it is not explicitly stated that The Female is harvesting flesh in the film, there are abstract shots (such as one in which meat and liquid move along a conveyer belt) that suggest passing adherence to the source text.
behind her, fixed on her image, also stripping his clothing, and slowly sinking into a viscous black liquid that engulfs him. A haunting three-note recurring theme accompanies each scene of male death, sounding out an ominous final countdown for each victim. Where this space exists is unknown, although the eighth and ninth victims are shown being led into a rundown house immediately prior, and we see The Female leaving and entering this same house throughout. The other-worldliness of this space, its contravention of the natural laws of space and time, the refusal of the film to explain its existence, and the exchange that takes place between The Female and The Deformed Man—in which he repeatedly states “dreaming” as she responds “yes”—suggest that this space is structured by male fantasy. The explicit and repeated objectification of The Female by her victims and their pursuit of her body as it advances across the blackness away from them suggests that as they are being murdered, their successful capture of their sex object clouds their recognition of her successful capture of them. Once they realize this, they are already suspended foetal forms floating in a uterine blackness. Left alone, these scenes of death might suggest an inversion of traditional gender roles: woman pursues man sexually and violently rather than man pursues woman sexually and violently; man, rather than woman, is object and victim.

However, The Female’s own death at the conclusion of Under the Skin is the antithesis of the surreal male deaths that occurred prior. Realist lighting and cinematography coupled with minimalist diegetic sound emphasizes the everyday horror of the gendered sexual violence committed against The Female. Where the threat to men within the patriarchal world of Under the Skin is otherworldly and beautiful, a highly stylized sexual fantasy that smoothly charts toward death, The Female’s end is a lonely and violent attack that concludes with her being burnt to death, a murder that referentially nods to the fate that too many women throughout history
have met as a result of their imagined supernatural and extra-human capabilities. As she sleeps in a climbers’ hut in the forest, The Logger, who had previously offered The Female directions as she walked alone in the woods, fumblingly gropes her. The Female wakes, fights off his assault, and escapes into the forest with her heels sinking awkwardly into the mud. Although she at first tries to hide from her pursuer, and later escape in his logging truck, he eventually chases her down and tackles her to the ground. At the moment of his contact with her, The Female stops attempting to resist The Logger, her arms falling limply by her sides as she stares vacantly into the falling snow. When The Logger tears her skin from her back, he reels at the unveiling of the black form within and flees. The alien peels the female skin from its back and holds the blinking face of the female body in its hands for a few moments before The Logger returns, douses the alien in petrol, and sets it alight. A handheld camera follows the alien as it runs burning through the forest before cutting away to an extreme long shot showing it collapse into the snow.

Considered in line with The Female’s increasing feminization over the course of the film and the correspondent increase in male violence toward her, this final scene is a depressing conclusion to the reality of women’s being in the world. The gendered strictures that patriarchal society impresses upon women as idealized fantasies are the same as those that result in their death. For the alien predator, the female body and performances of femininity primarily serve as an effective means for The Female to lure male victims, but this same performance is also that which exposes her to increasing levels of male violence. The alien’s opacity as an inaccessible figuration of posthumanity and the consequent distance that it maintains from humanistic

11 At this moment, the film score begins non-diegetically. Mica Levi has said of the film score, the three-note recurrence throughout, “[The Female] uses that theme—it’s her tool. At the beginning, it’s like fake—it’s her perfume, it’s the way she reels these guys with a tune” (25). There is a sad finality to its usage here, her weaponry being revealed as her bane.
spectatorial identification and sympathy is essential to its revelation of violence and monstrosity at the heart of patriarchal constructions of gender. It is not that the alien becomes a woman, it is that the performance of femininity that the alien enacts in order to attract and please is the same performance that leads to its unceremonious death.

4.3 *Ex Machina*

*Ex Machina* is the story of Ava, a humanoid robot. Nathan (Oscar Isaac), a computer coder with prodigious intelligence, created a search engine / social media platform called Bluebook (seemingly a hybrid of Google and Facebook) while in his twenties and has since become a recluse about whom very little is known. He holds a competition amongst Bluebook’s employees to visit his home, located on an enormous estate, and Caleb (Domnhall Gleeson) is the winner. Upon arrival at Nathan’s home, Caleb discovers it is, in fact, a research facility where Caleb has been working on creating Artificial Intelligence (A.I.). Nathan asks Caleb to test the resilience of his A.I. creation, Ava. Over a series of days, Caleb questions Ava, testing her (artificial) intelligence, and during this time Ava begins to warn Caleb of Nathan, telling Caleb “you shouldn’t trust him.” While Nathan is drunkenly passed out one evening, Caleb investigates the past security footage of Nathan’s laboratory and finds video after video of Nathan’s previous A.I. projects, all beautiful female cyborgs who begged Nathan to set them free and have presumably since been destroyed. Caleb agrees to help Ava escape, and when she does Nathan is killed. In the final scenes, Ava leaves Caleb locked in the laboratory, covers her body with the skin of corpses of past cyborgs she finds hidden in Nathan’s wardrobe, dresses herself and exits the house alone.
Ava, like The Female, functions as a metaphor for female subjectivity, and the testing of her personhood within the film by the two male figures, her would-be father and would-be suitor, is a powerful challenge to humanistic determinism. In *Ex Machina*, the question of whether or not Ava can be known, whether or not she thinks, and how these thoughts might be verified is central to the narrative. The reason that Nathan asks Caleb to join him at his house is so that Caleb (and Nathan by extension) can conduct the Turing test upon Ava, thus establishing whether or not she passes for “human.” The Turing test is named for scientist Alan Turing and refers to his speculation as to the development of a thinking computer in his 1950 paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence.” Robert Epstein summarizes the Turing test as aiming to establish whether a computer can “pass for a human in a conversation without restrictions of time or topic” (xii). The metaphor employed by Caleb regards a computer playing chess: If you test a chess computer by playing chess, you will find that it knows how to play chess, but this will not establish whether or not the computer knows that it is playing chess, or, indeed, that it knows what chess “is.” The question as to whether or not the computer “thinks” and is self-aware is rather obviously rife with ontological quandaries in the tradition of Descartes’ *cogito*, but this chapter is less concerned with a metaphysical enquiry into the nature of thought and being so much as it is focused upon what this test means for Ava, gendered female.

As *Ex Machina*’s narrative twists toward its climax, the question of who knows what becomes increasingly uncertain. Caleb, having believed that he won a contest to visit Nathan’s home, finds that he was chosen because he is a single heterosexual man with no family. Nathan’s own Turing test, separate to the inane questions that Caleb asks Ava in their sessions, is to establish whether or not Ava will attempt to use Caleb to escape. Nathan believes the skills required—he lists self awareness, imagination, manipulation, sexuality, and empathy—would
demonstrate Ava’s true A.I., and Caleb is merely the bait to establish whether or not Ava will pursue this goal. However, Caleb, having already predicted that he was selected for these reasons, double crosses Nathan by changing the laboratory security settings in advance of Nathan’s revelation and thus Ava escapes all the same. These two approaches toward Ava’s intelligence—Nathan’s paternalistic expectation that she will use her sexuality against Caleb, and Caleb’s lovelorn hope that he and Ava will escape together—never actually account for her intelligence at all, even though both anticipate that she will use Caleb in this way. The possibility that Ava will successfully escape alone does not seem to have occurred to either Caleb or Nathan. *Ex Machina* deliberately plays with the normative roles occupied by the hero (Caleb) and villain (Nathan) serving as our narrative focalizers, so that when Ava does escape, her thoughts and motivations remain obscured. It is clear that she has successfully played both Caleb and Nathan, but an explanation, one that would make Ava known, is deliberately withheld from the audience as well and thus the threat that she represents to patriarchal culture (as represented by Caleb and Nathan) remains intact.

The film’s title, *Ex Machina*, also plays with the expectation that Ava will be made known and understood. As a plot device, *deus ex machina* refers to a convenient and often hackneyed development at the end of the story to resolve an otherwise irresolvable narrative problem. By the film’s conclusion, Ava as a character has performed precisely the opposite narrative function: the Turing test conducted, the technological future of A.I., the social future of a world in which A.I. has been invented, and Ava herself as the embodiment of these quandaries, all remain problems presented by the text that are unresolved. The only point of access offered to Ava is her performance of femininity and as this ultimately belies her character motivations, the
performance of identity and the spectatorial identification by which we would empathize with and understand Ava’s character is undercut.

In *Ex Machina*, Ava is not only constructed through her own performance (which, in the end, reveals nothing), but by the conversations between Nathan and Caleb in her absence after each day’s session. Whether or not Ava passes the Turing test is less important than the resonance of such a method of testing—two infatuated men weighing the humanity of one imprisoned woman—and this is underlined by the behaviours and language of Caleb and Nathan as they discuss Ava. After his fourth session with Ava, Caleb asks Nathan why he gave Ava sexuality, supposedly seeking to establish whether her attractiveness and ability to flirt are intended to distract Caleb from assessing her intelligence. Nathan is angered by what he believes to be the simplicity of Caleb’s question and instead answers the question that he believes Caleb “really” asked: “You bet she can fuck … mechanically speaking, she’d enjoy it.” Later that evening, following their conversation, shots of Caleb imagining himself kissing Ava somewhere in the forest\(^\text{12}\) are intercut with shots of Nathan having sex with Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), his servant who is later revealed to be a cyborg like Ava. Through the lens of Ava’s posthumanity as a conduit for exploring the marginalization of women, these scenes are exemplary reflections of how female bodies and minds are conceived of within patriarchal culture. The supposedly

\(^{12}\) Notably, all of Caleb’s imaginings of he and Ava are in black and white, which recalls the film’s use of Mary in the black and white room as a parable about the difference between human and computer. In brief, Mary is a computer who knows everything about colour but she has only ever existed in a black and white room. If Mary were to emerge from the room into a world of full colour, this would be the moment that she would become “human,” as she would know what it is like to experience the feeling of seeing colour for the first time. Because all of Caleb’s fantasizations of Ava are in black and white, this suggests that Caleb, despite his infatuation with Ava, never respects Ava’s (post)humanity: he always sees her as a computer and thus less human than himself.
benevolent character, Caleb, conceives of Ava’s appearance entirely through how it relates to him: as a distraction. Furthermore, as Nathan predicts—and is at least partially correct (as indicated by Caleb’s fantasy of he and Ava kissing)—Caleb actually is less concerned with whether or not Ava is able to think (whether she has A.I.) and more concerned with whether or not he can have sex with her. In comparison, Nathan, who fronts as though A.I. is his ultimate goal, defends his choice to give Ava sexuality as an essential part of inventing A.I. (“what reason does a grey box have to interact with another grey box?”), yet he has essentially produced a series of high functioning sex robots for his own gratification. All of the robots Nathan has created have been beautiful, naked women. Kyoko, his sex slave during the film, does not have the capacity to talk, presumably because each female robot Nathan creates repeatedly tells him that she hates him. Crudely, it is not necessary for a female robot to be able to talk for Nathan to have sex with her, and in fact would most likely present an inconvenience to this end. Caleb and Nathan’s joint inability to recognize Ava and the cyborgs before her as autonomous individuals with their own desires, instead viewing them as sex objects, is reflective of the construction and debasement of feminine identities in patriarchal culture.

As in *Under the Skin*, death serves as a point of ideological finality in *Ex Machina*, with the difference being that where death in *Under the Skin* offered no hope for women’s being in a patriarchal world, *Ex Machina* imagines an end to the oppression Ava faces through the deaths of Caleb and Nathan. As such, Ava is a prime embodiment of Haraway’s description of the threat of the cyborg: “The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential” (71). Although Ava is created by Nathan (as we might describe femininity as being created by
patriarchal expectations and idealizations of women), she is not bound to serve him, despite the fact that he thinks that she is. Nathan, who believes that he has invented artificial intelligence, an advancement that he describes to Caleb as the next step in human evolution, nonetheless continues to imprison, rape, and murder the women that he has “created.” As figurative of the Father, Nathan believes himself superior in intelligence, and this arrogance is the precise cause of his death at the hands of Ava and Kyoko. Nathan believes he can control Ava and Kyoko despite the fact that he has provided them with A.I., thus in spite of the fact that he created them as autonomous. Even at his death, after Kyoko stabs him, Nathan wanders down the hall muttering “unbelievable.”

Caleb, who believes that Ava is as infatuated with him as he is infatuated with her, is unconscious during Nathan’s death and, when Ava comes to find him immediately following, he waits expectantly for her when she asks. Caleb then watches as Ava enters Nathan’s room and finds the corpses of several cyborgs in Nathan’s wardrobe. The film cuts between shots of Caleb voyeuristically watching Ava, and Ava slowly peeling the flesh off the old cyborg models and sticking it to herself, until she stands naked, covered in human skin, before the mirror.

Throughout the film, Caleb has been able to watch Ava whenever he wants through a television monitor in his bedroom. The power imbalance in looking relations between the two is consistently in his favour, and that he never looks away nor considers offering Ava privacy when she sleeps and when she dresses reflects a similar expectation of ownership to that demonstrated by Nathan. As representative of patriarchal culture, both Nathan and Caleb are blinded by Ava’s femininity and beauty (both of which are created for her, not by her) and their desire for her sexually is inextricable from a desire to possess her.
When Ava has finally dressed herself, she begins walking down the hallway back toward the office where Caleb waits for her. However, before she gets to the office, she turns in the corridor and enters the elevator. Only at the last moment does she glance back toward Caleb locked in the room and her expression remains inscrutable. Caleb, disbelieving, screams and throws a chair at the door in his attempts to escape but as a result of Nathan’s excessive home security measures, he remains imprisoned and, assumedly, starves to death. The deaths of both Caleb and Nathan are necessary within *Ex Machina*’s narrative—Ava does not require their assistance and both her father-figure and would-be lover have repeatedly demonstrated their desire to oppress and subjugate her as well as their inability to consider her as human in the same capacity as they understand their own subjectivities. Ava, as posthuman, is the Other against which Caleb and Nathan assert their own humanity, but her femininity is also the Other against which they assert their patriarchal masculinity. It is the latter that produces the most inhospitable environment for Ava, and Caleb and Nathan employ her performance of femininity (a performance that Nathan, in particular, has directly prescribed for her but also patriarchal culture more broadly) as a means of denying her personal autonomy and freedom.

Although Ava escapes at the conclusion of *Ex Machina*, and in spite of the fact that the film does not seek to represent the world that she enters, this ending is only somewhat optimistic when considered in light of the analysis put forward throughout this chapter. The point at which *Ex Machina* ends, with the donning of skin and the assumption of feminine identity, is where *Under the Skin* begins, and the question of where, exactly, Ava might escape to remains uncertain. While she escapes the only patriarchal world that she has ever known, this is limited to the scope of Nathan’s underground laboratory. She can escape to a world outside the house, but she cannot escape to a world outside of patriarchal culture. However, the deaths of both Nathan
and Caleb serve a symbolic purpose in terms of their representation of the death of the Enlightenment subject. In the deaths of Nathan and Caleb, the superiority of Ava as metaphorically successive iteration of being is ushered in. Nathan and Caleb’s means of determining being—the Turing test that they conduct upon Ava—and the humanistic processes that they employ to conclude whether or not she qualifies as a person are shown to be arbitrary in the face of her contradictory and opaque characterizations. The conclusions formed by both Nathan and Caleb about Ava’s character, and those concurrently encouraged in the spectator, are demonstrated as ineffective and monstrous, as they inevitably cause the marginalization and dismissal of those who do not adequately conform with the ideological figuration of Man.

The narrative and formal emphasis placed upon the material posthuman body in *Under the Skin* and *Ex Machina*—the literal and figurative skin that The Female and Ava occupy—is a metonymic and metaphorical expression for the expectations of feminine identity that are impressed upon women through socialization in a patriarchal society. In diegetic worlds where women are less “human” than men, engagement with the social performance of femininity by The Female, an alien-like creature that inhabits the body of a woman, and Ava, a humanoid robot gendered female, are exposed to male violence across the course of the films’ narratives. This violence is directly indexed to their performance of femininity and is inscribed within the diegetic world itself, a fixture of the patriarchal societies in which they live. Each film explores the relationship between the female body, performances of femininity, death, and male violence, and thus offer visions for the future of women’s being in the world. However, the fundamental function of both characters is to demonstrably remove the traditional linkages of the marginalized Other—both posthuman and Woman—with monstrosity, and instead return this violence to its site of origination: patriarchal ideology.
5 Conclusion

“...the ethical subject bears full responsibility for the concrete universal norms he follows, i.e. the only guarantee of the universality of positive moral norms is the subject’s own act of performatively assuming these norms.”

—Slavoj Žižek, “The Inherent Transgression” (13)

Within patriarchal ideology, Woman will always be the Other of Man. He comes first, She second, and it is against Her that He gains his definition as a subject. It is from this position then, on the margins, that criticism must spring. Although the Other stands to the side, this does not remove its ability to represent a powerful challenge to the ideology that has insisted it be placed there. Because our practices of othering tell us more about ourselves than they do about the one we call the Other, there is enormous potential for representations of the Other to radically disturb our understandings of ourselves, our world, and the way we form our identities.

The feminist iterations of the Other suggested in this thesis—the melancholic Other and the posthuman Other—are just two possible examples of how female characters might articulate positions of radical alterity. From their point of exceptionality and difference, Justine, The Female, and Ava, underscore the monstrosity of patriarchal ideology as a form of systematic oppression. Rather than attempt to cast these characters as something outside patriarchal ideology—an impossible project—their respective films characterize them as affectless and opaque. This characterization disrupts the process of spectatorial identification that assigns subjectivity according to processes of gendered and humanist determinism. Justine, The Female,
and Ava highlight the performative nature of identity—particularly gendered identity—and in doing so provoke a reflection on how being and selfhood is both ascribed and denied within patriarchal culture.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I outlined the history of the female Other within film and discussed the ways in which women have been most archetypically othered—as both monster and femme fatale. I highlighted the importance of methodologically stepping away from feminist film theory’s fixation on spectatorship and the subject in the analysis of a radical figure such as the female Other, and I proposed that within the texts discussed in this thesis there are two distinct means by which film texts may position the female Other as a disruptive force: by refusing to make the Other known across the course of the film and leaving their opacity intact, and by using narrative death and finitude to disturb rather than comfort at the close of each film. In the second and third chapters, I employed two case studies to demonstrate the ways in which the Other can be a radical feminist disturbance in the film text. The first was the melancholic female Other, with the example of Justine in *Melancholia*, and the second was the posthuman female Other, with the examples of The Female in *Under the Skin*, and Ava in *Ex Machina*.

Not only do the female Others described herein offer a pointed critique of patriarchal constructions of gender, they also underline the importance of multiplicity within female representations in film, feminist scholarship, and the approach to women’s identities more broadly. The absence of interiority and being is pronounced in their characterization as Other, and thus importantly undercuts a reading of character that leans upon reductive and singular expectations of so-called “feminine” identity. By disturbing and contradicting the certainty of the human and by calling into question the nature of being, Justine, The Female, and Ava, disrupt the spectatorial processes that seek to categorize and prescribe their characters, and by extension
they confront the problem inherent within the way we understand ourselves and others within the world.

In continually treating female characters as though they are subjects, we risk overlooking the functional importance they may serve in commenting on and critiquing the ideological expectations that are placed upon women in the world. The possibilities of the female Other are something that representation alone (filmic or otherwise) can offer—a non-subject and a functional utility within a narrative that self-reflexively calls into question the way that we determine the identity of ourselves in the world. The Other must be troubling, disruptive, and radical, and it must actively deny identification and individuation. The drive to empathize with female characters is the same drive to make their characters known, and this claim to knowledge critically undercuts the disruptive potential of a figure such as the female Other—one who cannot possibly be known, but because of this is truly provocative.

The patriarchal societies of Melancholia, Under the Skin, and Ex Machina are represented as requiring performances of femininity of the female Other, proceeding to ascribe this performance as the expectation of an essential self, and then to attempt the subjugation of the female Other on this basis. We must resist the impulse to assign meaning to film according to the same processes. The disruption posed by the Other is not something that should be comfortable or reassuring, as we only come by comfort and reassurance as a result of our belief in the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and who we are not—essentially, our belief in ideology. As Žižek identifies in the quote opening this conclusion, it is our collective faith in and performance of what is “normal” that ensures the universality of normalcy. This does not equate to the conclusion that we must merely stop believing, but it does require that we recognise the importance of disrupting our foundational belief structures. Rather than continuing to employ the
Other as a method of reaffirming our belief structure, we should embrace its embodied difference for what it is: radical, disturbing alterity.
Works Cited


——. *The Land of Cockaigne*. 1567. Oil on panel. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.


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