

Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*: Will artificial intelligence replace human efforts?

Dorota Niemitz
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Written and directed by Alex Garland, *Ex Machina* is a breath of fresh air in the midst of so much recycled science fiction recently displayed on movie theater screens. Alex Garland's directorial debut does not disappoint: his futuristic thriller manages to explore seemingly familiar territory—new developments in artificial intelligence [AI] technology—with a high dose of scientific knowledge, vivid imagination and artistic beauty.

A British novelist and screenwriter, best known for his novel *The Beach* (1996) and screenplays for *28 Days Later ...* (2002), *Sunshine* (2007) and *Dredd* (2012), Garland is accustomed to exploring the fragility of human civilization, vulnerable to gruesome viruses, cataclysms or the imperfections of human nature.

His apocalyptic visions and his gloomy scenario about the possibility of human self-destruction are still present in *Ex Machina*, but they are somewhat less pronounced, overshadowed by intelligently framed questions about the future of humanity and its dependence on computer technology.

Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), a geeky coder at the world's largest Internet search engine company *Bluebook*, wins a competition and is sent on a weeklong mission to work on a mysterious development project. Transported by helicopter to a remote Alaskan location, he finds himself in an isolated house, a research facility that belongs to the firm's CEO Nathan (Oscar Isaac), a computer prodigy who wrote *Bluebook*'s code at the age of thirteen. Nathan, an athletic, thick-bearded alcoholic, introduces Caleb to Ava (Alicia Vikander), the world's first true AI, with a goal to have him perform a Turing test [a test of a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behavior] to determine if, at any level, his new robot is distinguishable from a human being.

Despite the fact that Caleb can see through Ava's partially transparent body, which is covered with metallic mesh revealing luminous diodes of artificial muscles, he develops feelings for her as if she were a real woman. Fascinated at first by this scientific achievement, Caleb soon realizes that the subject of Nathan's experiment is imprisoned and abused, and he himself tested and controlled. Locked in his claustrophobic bunker-like bedroom with no windows, all exits remote-controlled and rooms under surveillance, Caleb desperately begins looking for ways to regain control and outsmart his boss. However, Nathan's intelligence can only be defeated by a higher one, the one he helped create.

Ex Machina is intriguing, sensual, exciting. Its sustained suspense is built solely on its numerous ambiguities and the tension between the characters. The film is as much about the battle between humans and technology as it is between two very different types of men who use artificial intelligence as their tools and extensions of their brains.

Aesthetically severe and nearly theatrical, with most of its scenes taking place in the hermetic, expensively elegant, Jackson Pollock-decorated glass interior and with only four characters on stage, the movie aspires to combine something of the atmosphere of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) with that of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

Garland would like to follow in the footsteps of those directors by carefully planning dialogue and movement, by cutting scenes with considerable precision. His artistic skill is best manifested in the masterful use of visual contrasts: the austere cement surface of the house set against the pristine nature on the outside, the silence of the laboratory with the noise of the power outage alarm, metal mesh set against the softness of Ava's

artificial skin, the lean body of the good-hearted Caleb against the almost military posture of the intense and manipulative Nathan.

Garland's script and characters, however, still fall prey to certain stereotypes. The girlfriend-deprived Caleb seems to stand in for every talented and naive computer nerd and is at times too predictable. Modeled after Marlon Brando's Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Nathan is a modern embodiment of the mad scientist who has removed himself from the society and whose pioneering discoveries, as was the case with Dr. Frankenstein, can pose unpredictable risks.

Nathan is also a narcissistic, misogynistic male who objectifies his female robots: mute servant Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) is the most questionable persona in *Ex Machina*, a clichéd sexually subservient and obedient Asian female. The inventor's quest for a perfect computing machine here reduces itself into a nearly pornographic hunt for "perfect" women-computers whose only role is to serve their "master."

Ava, moving with the grace of a ballerina, is an attractive temptress who has developed a "biological" will to survive. "What will happen to me if I fail your test?" Ava asks Caleb. "Do you think I might be switched off?" If the will to survive is one of the traits of every living organism, Ava crosses the line between the machine and an autonomous being. Her growing self-awareness makes us realize how much we still have to learn about the development of our own cognitive abilities and consciousness. Not knowing what her future holds, she also perhaps speaks to the uncertainty of humanity as a whole, which constantly develops and learns to orient itself in a changing world.

The invention of creatures endowed with artificial intelligence capable of feeling emotions and learning to adapt is still far away, although many scientists take the matter very seriously, some even predicting that AI may become a reality in the next few decades. Human bodies are already partially integrated with technology through artificial limbs, vehicles, cell phones, remote-controlled devices like television sets, drones, space or battle robots—we can easily envision that in the near future; thanks to the rapid progress in computer science technology, those hybrids will be more and more governed by their nonbiological components.

A famous physicist, the "robot-voiced" Stephen

Hawking, predicting that computers might soon trump people, superseding them in intelligence, efficiency and longevity, warns that artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race. At one point humans, who need many resources in order to survive (food, clothing, energy, medicine) might simply lose the competition with the faster evolving entities.

"One day the AIs are going to look back on us the same way we look at fossil skeletons on the plains of Africa. An upright ape living in dust with crude language and tools, all set for extinction," says Nathan.

This pessimistic view and Garland's own suggest that some of the debate over artificial intelligence is misguided or misplaced. Is the danger really that machines are taking over our lives? Or is that for those who see no way out of humanity's social predicament technology takes on a menacing character out of proportion to its real threat?

There is in such works as this one, and *Her*, a veiled or not so veiled criticism of—or worry about—humans who spend more time with machines than with other humans. However, the source of this sort of extreme alienation is not computer-obsessed individuals but a social life that seems more and more hostile, oppressive and intrusive, more and more dominated by wealth and the drive for profit, where giant corporations and military-intelligence apparatuses appear to rule unchecked. The problem does not lie with technology, but the social relations in which it operates.

In any event, like every good movie, *Ex Machina* is multilayered, touching on many issues. Humanity's dissatisfaction with its own biological limitations and cognitive capacities is after all the reason for the quest to develop enhanced intelligence, to go beyond the shortcomings forced upon us by nature. The film comes highly recommended as it leaves the viewer thinking about the questions it raises long after the credits roll.



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