

Yes, She Can

Examining Female Roles in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film

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Abstract

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This thesis will examine how the roles of women in science fiction have evolved from early cinema to present day. Films released prior to 2015 often failed in representing women as equal to their male counterparts, either by limiting their involvement or criticizing their perceived weaknesses. The films *Ex Machina*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and *Mad Max: Fury Road* offer a break from these traditions. Through a discussion of sexuality, costumes, and gender dynamics, this thesis will suggest a shift in audience expectations and show that women can now work alongside their male companions as equal.

Keywords: science-fiction, female roles, genre studies, sexuality, costume, gender dynamics

Introduction

Science-fiction, a genre that echoes the issues of its historical context, has often reflected popular opinion. The genre has been the perfect environment to expose corrupt governments, save the princess and protect your home from “aliens” safely within a fictional realm. This genre also, until recent years, chose to depict women only as either sexual beings or domestics. While early sci-fi films chose to place their women in more traditional roles, modern films have allowed these women to grow and develop alongside their male counterparts. The year 2015 saw a number of popular releases in the sci-fi genre that envision a different future for women. *Ex Machina* offers insight into the human mind by questioning the thought process of female artificial intelligence through the creation of a robot named Ava. By questioning what it means to be a woman, Ava shows her captors the true nature of humanity. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* offers a female perspective on the ideas of the superhero through its femme fatale character, Black Widow. After spending nearly a decade as a subordinate or sex symbol, the character grows in her own right and receives a backstory to rival her famous colleagues. Finally, in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, mysterious transporter Furiosa drives across the desert with a group of women she rescued from a war-lord. Her motivation to escape a war-torn wasteland parallels the struggles of many women in both the “civilized” and developing worlds: making a better life for loved ones and preparing for an unforeseeable future.

In this essay, I will first offer a brief overview of women in science fiction. With this history, I will explore the traditional portrayal of women in science fiction, detailing common conventions and tendencies of the genre. Then, I will assess each film through the use of sexuality, costuming, and gender dynamics. By combining all of these approaches with historical analysis, I will argue that these recent films have redefined early genre tropes while providing an environment for these women to grow and develop alongside their male counterparts. This

change in women's depictions signals a shift in audience expectations and suggests that women can now work alongside their male companions as equal. This thesis will show that audiences are ready for this new era where science-fiction protagonists can be strong, well-rounded women.

The History of Women in Science-Fiction: A Literature Review

The iconography of the science fiction genre can be difficult for audiences and critics to describe due to filmmakers' constant drive for innovation. Over the years, science fiction films have incorporated elements from fantasy, horror and even the western in its visuals and narrative. Science fiction arguably began with the films of Georges Méliès. His most iconic film *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) depicts a group of scientists taking a rocket ship from the earth to the moon and landing at the bottom of the sea. Although a century has passed since its release, the early relegation of women to inferior roles would mark an unfortunate tradition for most of the twentieth century. While an all-male crew of scientists depart in the rocket, female cheerleaders send them off in grand fashion, and receive them in similar style, as mermaids at the bottom of the sea on their return. Not much had changed by the release of the first epic sci-fi film, *Metropolis* (1927). *Metropolis* showcases some of the more recognizable sci-fi iconography while echoing themes that will continue to be associated with the genre. *Metropolis* depicts a utopian society where the upper class live above the ground in luxury and the working class live underground, keeping the society running. The first "Machine Man" of *Metropolis* is a facsimile of the rebellion leader's dead wife, whom the mad scientist still loves. The parallels between the rebellion and the robot replacement are echoed by the fact that the Machine Man and the female rebellion leader are played by the same actress, showing off the contrast of the two roles that will come to define women in science fiction. Where Robot-Maria is hyper-sexualized and

destructive, the pure and virginal human Maria is a nurturing caretaker. This dichotomy helps to further separate the extremes of science fiction women for decades to come.

During the Golden Age of Hollywood, the science fiction genre began developing its own iconography. These science fiction films were often adapted from famous novels, and served as metaphors for the Red Scare taking over Hollywood and the minds of the American people. In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), Dr. Miles Bennell returns to his hometown and discovers that the citizens are being replaced with “pod people.” The film exhibits one of the biggest issues that critics and filmmakers have had with the genre. In this film, the women appear as one-dimensional housewives that serve little purpose other than representing the “traditional” lifestyle that the men desire and objects requiring protection from these foreign invaders.

Science fiction before the 1960s often pigeonholed women into passive and domesticated service. This passive nature of women is often associated with the science fiction films that take place within a contemporary world. However, sci-fi films that take place in a fantastical environment are often centered on male characters. The film *Forbidden Planet* (1956) offers an example of the sci-fi genre’s fascination with removing gender and sexuality while simultaneously objectifying women. In the film, a group of male space travelers land on a planet that has wiped out all but two individuals who sought to colonize it. These survivors, Morbius and his daughter Altaira, initially welcome the men until they refuse to leave the planet. An unseen monster has been terrorizing the planet and eventually attacks the crew. While the men try to find this monster, they are also trying to win the affections of Altaira. The monster is revealed to be a manifestation of Morbius’s id, which he was able to dismiss from himself with the use of a brain serum. Morbius then deactivates the monster and lets the space captain be with his daughter. Critic Margaret Tarratt highlights the iconography that exists within this film.

Forbidden Planet has aspects in common with many science fiction films. Space travel is commonly accompanied by publicly recognized sexual frustration among the all-male crew. The scientist with his total dedication to advanced knowledge is an unbalanced figure, ruthless in defense of his own research. The hero is an ordinary man with a healthy physique, leadership qualities, a controlled sexual drive, and only average intellect—a good all-rounder. (350)

Tarratt also notes in her article the obvious thematic elements that incorporate psychoanalysis. The *Forbidden Planet* is forbidden because Morbius is protecting his daughter from sexual knowledge, through isolation. She emphasizes the implications of incest associated with the monster terrorizing the men who are after Altaira's affections (346-350). Tarratt's film analysis relies on the relationships the men have with Altaira and disregards her relationship with Robby the Robot. Altaira is closely associated with the robot, who performs all domestic jobs within the household. Robby represents another icon in the genre and also represents another technological innovation in sci-fi. The crewmen choose to emphasize the gender ambiguity of the robot by remarking on its "housewife" capabilities and asking whether it is a man or a woman. At the same time, they are overtly objectifying Altaira as the one and only female. These two behaviors emphasize the 1950s mentality on the role of women and the spectacle of this sci-fi piece, returning to the iconic dichotomy of the robot and the beautiful woman, as in *Metropolis*. The spectacle of the strong robot and weak woman, though it has nothing to do with the narrative of the film, is also featured on the film's promotional material, suggesting the genre implications are meant to draw in audiences over the actual story. Altaira takes on a spectator role while her father and the stranded crew hunt for the mysterious monster. However, we cannot ignore the

existence of Altaira and her legacy, as similar characters will continue to exist in the decades to come.

By the 1960s, technical innovation allowed the worlds of science fiction film to appear more realistic, and filmmakers also included more controversial material. The decade brought about the removal of the Motion Picture Production Code and the birth of New Hollywood, and films now included more graphic violence and open sexuality within the cinematic space than before. While films such as America's *Barbarella* (1968) and France's *Alphaville* (1965) allowed women to be present in character driven narratives, they were often visually sexualized and one-dimensional.

The 1970s saw the biggest development in sci-fi spectacle and set the stage for all major changes in the genre. In 1977, George Lucas released the first installment of his *Star Wars* saga, which helped shape the beginnings of the high concept and franchise eras. The film's story of Luke Skywalker and his companions fighting the evil Republic in a galaxy far, far way has become standard in any study of science fiction. It also returns to common iconography of the damsel associated with the Golden Age of Hollywood. Early in the film, Princess Leia, the only memorable woman in this film world, is first perceived as a warrior though is ultimately reduced to a sidekick in Luke's mission to end the reign of Darth Vader. From the first installation *A New Hope* (1977) to its conclusion *The Return of Jedi* (1983), the perceived virginal princess is allowed a brief awakening of power and sexuality before demotion to the romantic interest of Captain Han Solo and sister to hero Luke Skywalker. While Leia has the potential to expand her position and authority within the cinematic universe, the choice of the characters and the filmmaker to limit her position through insults associated with her gender signifies a need for female expansion within the genre.

Women who hold uncompromised power and authority rarely appeared on screen until the 1970s and 1980s, as explained by J.P. Telotte in *Science Fiction Film*: “[S]cience fiction cinema has provided a fertile ground for exploring a genre dynamic in which, most often, men *do* while women *watch* appreciatively... [F]ilms like *Aliens* (1986)... and *Terminator 2*... have pointedly situated women in positions of technological mastery” (49). As these outlier films show, defying the industry trends can sometimes create strong and memorable characters. By the 1980s, heavy marketing campaigns and movie star casts often determined the success of films. For the science-fiction genre, that meant a return to adaptation and simplification. Films like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Terminator* (1984) emphasized the decidedly female qualities of the women to illustrate the masculine characteristics of their male counterparts. In the first *Terminator* film Sarah Connor is depicted as a traditionally feminine 1980s woman, a stark contrast to the Terminator—former body builder Arnold Schwarzenegger—the futuristic robot sent to kill her and her unborn, yet-to-be conceived child. While Sarah Connor’s depiction in the sequels is up for personal interpretation, there is no doubt that for the series’ first installment, she is meant to be seen as weak and vulnerable. Likewise, the few women in the film *Blade Runner* appear demure and subjugated in comparison to the men driving the story.

Blade Runner crosses elements from the sci-fi and film noir genres, presenting the women as the femme fatale with a slight twist. In this super-futuristic environment, the audience and the characters themselves are left to wonder whether their female cohorts are human or robots. Both films are part of Hollywood’s shift to high budget, visually centered films that have now become standard. *Blade Runner*’s depiction of simplistic female characters echoes the thematic elements of the script, but Ridley Scott’s previous film *Alien*—and its 1986 James Cameron-helmed sequel *Aliens*—explore the life of Ellen Ripley. Ripley’s sci-fi world has several

women of various rank. In the film she gains power instead of losing it, as she confronts the alien alone after the rest of the crew is killed. In the sequels to the franchise, Ripley is more heavily sexualized but the majority of her character traits remain gender neutral. While the emphasis on *Star Wars*' Leia's gender remains more iconic, Ripley's androgynous appearance notes a second, less common trend of female characters taking on traits of men to gain equality, a characteristic shared with *Terminator 2*'s Sarah Connor. Marianne Kac-Vergne explores the intersection of Ripley and Sarah Connor in her article "Sideline Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film". She writes, "Ripley's success in *Aliens*, combined with the social changes mentioned... thus help explain the transformation of Sarah Connor from harassed waitress in pink... to combat-ready warrior" (6). Sarah Connor is slowly removed of her rights as a woman and then as a mother by having very little say in the conception and future of her child, John. Instead, she blindly follows a man based on the idea that it will save her life, save the world and give her child a better future. These characters finally earned the strong roles normally given to men, but were only given this autonomy when taking traditionally male characteristics. Audiences and critics ignored larger feminist issues because they were so excited to see women in these positions of power. However, these appearances of strong female protagonists were short lived as audiences became more interested in new CGI techniques, which offered more spectacle than these warrior women.

Science fiction films of the 1990s relied on the technical innovations available through digital effects. Sci-fi filmmakers of the 1970s like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas had created their own studios and put the impossible on the screen. These films were made for younger audiences, while older audiences were rapidly becoming disillusioned with the simplistic storylines geared toward families and children. Older audiences watched *The Matrix*

(1999) and *The Fifth Element* (1997), which were both graphic in violence and sexuality. *The Matrix* takes place in multiple worlds, the first being the perceived life of the characters in a 1990s American city. The second world is a manipulation of the first world by Neo and his comrades, and third is the “real world” of the future. The world of *The Fifth Element* is a futuristic commentary on the lives of the films’ contemporary audience, where mundane tasks like rising in the morning are made more problematic by technical innovation. This form of world creation is not new to the genre, but in this particular instance, adds comedic effect to an otherwise action-oriented movie. While Trinity and Leeloo are allowed brief moments of power and control, the narrative is driven by their male counterparts, and their slow demotion to the rank of “love interest” pulls focus from their significance. These characters helped to round out some of the missing elements of female representation in sci-fi, but a new millennium presented new challenges for a weary audience.

Female characters in works of fiction are not always insulated from events outside of the story. The terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 caused American filmmakers to focus on national issues instead of the ongoing quest for gender equality. Every Hollywood genre was altered, but due to popularity, science fiction films made the most noticeable shift. Science fiction was brought into a modern setting, where new heroes were needed to help audiences face the impact of 9/11. The industry returned to predominantly male heroes and women returned to being the damsel. The few women who could be classified as heroes on their own, like *X2*’s Jean Grey (2003) and *Daredevil*’s Elektra (2003), were often one-dimensional, sexualized, and sought men for guidance concerning their own power. This change, coupled with Hollywood’s commitment to franchising, resulted in a surge of superhero film releases (Gray 1-13). 2002’s *Spider-Man*, for example, presented all of these elements. The story follows a weak Peter Parker

who, when bitten by a radioactive spider, turns into the quick-witted and morally righteous Spider-Man. His motivation lies in continuously impressing and rescuing the one-dimensional Mary Jane, portrayed by Kirsten Dunst. Unlike earlier women of the genre, Mary Jane never shows any independent strength or equal standing with Peter. This film and the superhero blockbusters that follow cater to the desires of adolescent and adult males, but a decade lacking in strong female characters would soon create a market for such roles. Near the end of the 2000s, a number of young adult novels were published and adapted into films at the start of the next decade. Movies such as *Hunger Games* (2012) and *Divergent* (2014) attempted to address the shortcomings of their forebears, regaining the femininity lost by their hypermasculine predecessors, but inevitably falling victim to untimely romantic entanglement. These young adult heroines are often indistinguishable from each other due to their lack of development. Unlike the characters who appeared earlier in this era, these women could be replaced with men and the story would not change. The films of 2015 finally portrayed female characters that were fully formed and integral to the story.

Looking at the genre from a historical angle, it is clear that many trends of female representation are often short-lived and lacking the well-rounded quality of the traditionally male protagonists. They are forced to incorporate extremes of masculinity and femininity to gain empathy from a general audience. In addition, due to the predominantly male audience, those films made after the 1960s' repeal of the Motion Picture Production Code relied heavily on the concept that "sex sells." With all of this in mind, it is hard to imagine a point where women are capable of being equal to men in any science-fiction world.

However, in 2015, three theatrical releases marked the start of a new era of science-fiction, in which audiences were given strong female protagonists capable of embracing all

elements of their gender without compromising for a male-oriented audience. These women embody a cultural shift now modernized for their millennial audiences. Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* tells the story of young computer programmer Caleb visiting his employer to evaluate the artificial intelligence of female android Ava. *Ex Machina* opts for a simple linear storyline that allows the relationship between the characters to drive the plot. Ava's development from an innocent prototype to able-bodied killing machine explores the possible dangers of modern progress. Joss Whedon's *Avengers: Age of Ultron* features Scarlett Johansson and Elizabeth Olsen in prominent roles as Black Widow and The Scarlet Witch. Unlike the previous Marvel films, which focus on Black Widow's involvement in S.H.I.E.L.D., *Ultron* examines her backstory. Scarlet Witch's own journey parallels Black Widow's, ultimately setting up her placement into the new Avengers. *Mad Max: Fury Road* is a sequel/reboot to the cult classic Australian franchise directed by George Miller. This installment finds Max helping war-rig driver Furiosa escape the tyrannical control of Immortan Joe. Set in a bleak dystopian wasteland, Furiosa defiantly smuggles the warlord's imprisoned wives to a safer "green place." These three films demonstrate the evolution of female characters over half a century: from housewives to full-fledged heroines.

In this paper, I will argue that these films' use sexuality, costuming, and gender dynamics to set the tone for a new age of women's portrayal in science fiction. Women are no longer expected to be sexually objectified or removed of all femininity; women find strength in regaining control of their sexuality and reproductive rights. Women are no longer relegated to subordinate roles or romantic interests. Instead, science fiction has reached a new era, where women are finally equal to the men with whom they share the screen. Combining the analysis of these three films through the lens of sexuality, costuming, and gender dynamics signifies a

change in genre conventions. While the heroines of the 1970s and 1980s took on androgynous appearances and hypermasculine traits to compete with their male companions, every new generation sought to overcome the shortcomings of the past. By the 1990s, female characters remained the subject of a male sexual gaze, but the power they gained was illusory. It is a new class of contemporary film that presents this turning point for science fiction females. This transition creates opportunity for future releases to acknowledge that female problems are human problems and that strong female protagonists are here to stay.

Sexuality

In this section, I will argue that the growing exploration of female sexuality in modern sci-fi films helps to craft layered and dynamic characters that previous audiences were unable or unwilling to appreciate. To make this argument, I will rely on Donna Haraway's groundbreaking work, "A Cyborg Manifesto." The critical essay on politics and gender at the end of the Cold War has remained one of the most cited papers on feminism and technology for over thirty years. Placed squarely during the second wave of feminism, the metaphor she employs helps to frame the greater issues of Cold War women in a relatable and far-reaching text. Although a scarcity of scholarship exists relating these new films, I have chosen to discuss Haraway's essay because of its exploration of the relationship between gender roles, sexuality, and reproduction. Telotte acknowledges this fact at the onset of his discussion of feminism in sci-fi:

In fact, working from the perspective that contemporary culture has become very much like science fiction and that science fiction, in turn, has become a primary expression of this cultural moment – Haraway has made what she terms a "science fictional" move in her cultural commentary that critics have quickly followed (50).

Telotte's assessment of "The Cyborg Manifesto" lends to Haraway's own commentary: "The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway 475).

Therefore, all science fiction narratives reflect real issues. In 2015, women's issues took center stage, including the pro-choice movement, the wage gap, and fluid gender identity. In this age of political upheaval, where global communications give a voice to the marginalized, these topics have returned to the forefront of public discourse. All three of these films present a similar understanding of female sexuality and of motherhood.

We will first look at the clearest parallel in Haraway's argument, the definition of a cyborg: "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction [...] The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century" (475). The strongest example of Haraway's cyborg, of course, can be found in *Ex Machina*. Ava is a cyborg, not only in physical appearance, but in the structure of her brain, and even her genitals. In *Age of Ultron*, Black Widow is associated with technology. Her specialty in the field is to interface with computers and vehicles. While her immortal or otherwise invulnerable teammates can fly through fire and punch through aliens, Black Widow acts as the ground support, fulfilling mission priorities the others cannot. Imperator Furiosa in *Fury Road* is a fusion of human and machine with her prosthetic arm, the tool she has long used to follow Immortan Joe's orders. All three of these women are presented with not-quite-human features or abilities, which aids in alienating them from society and provides a stark contrast with other women within their own specific worlds.

In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway presents a look at science fiction where men and women are equal as long as gender specification does not exist. She contends that sci-fi aids in

“imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end” (476). Haraway’s idealism hopes for a future free of conflict, but this very conflict is at the center of each film’s storytelling. These three narratives could never happen in a genderless society, as the characters find motivation in either a rebellion against authority or against their creators. In *Ex Machina*, Caleb confronts Nathan and asks why Ava was created female, and Nathan replies that a gendered existence provides its own motivation: the fundamental desire to procreate. Also, Ava was created to be heterosexual. Nathan explains that with a series of proper stimulation, Ava would feel pleasure as any woman would. While this scene’s discussion is frank and clinical, the fate of Nathan’s androids as sex toys is disconcerting. Nathan’s creation of a female android, like *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner* so long ago, sets the stage for a sordid consideration of cyborg sex that is familiar to the genre. Ava’s capacity to truly connect with a human, let alone her ability to love, is never called into question. The suggestion that the women in these films, synthetic or organic, are properties that do not deserve autonomy deeply disturbs contemporary audiences. The villainous Nathan and Immortan Joe in *Fury Road* are never held accountable for their actions, until their ultimate destruction at the hands of their creations. The women of these 2015 films utilize their sexuality and charms to disarm and destroy their captors.

Haraway expands on her idea of the cyborg by explaining the nature of this patriarchal creation. Each character is the product of a series of inputs, both biological and technological:

The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed [...] machines were not self-moving, self-designing, autonomous. They could not achieve man’s dream, only mock it. They were not

man, an author to himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream (477).

A cyborg, by Haraway's definition, is a reflection of her creator's desire. This quote applies specifically to Ava and her creator Nathan. Ava's femininity allows her to manipulate Caleb and to eventually escape her "father" and his incestuous domination. While Nathan programmed Ava to be heterosexual, a question remains by the end of the film. The filmmaker never explains how much of Ava's programming is built specifically as a foil to Caleb's desire. Nathan's earlier android Kyoko, though silent to the audience, is also programmed to please, but arguably to serve the needs of Nathan alone. While planning Ava's release from the compound, Caleb comes across a series of recordings that show the evolution of Ava's android predecessors. Unlike Ava's initial appearance, the previous models were created to look as human as possible. Ava's development in the film makes a viewer forget she is not human, while the human-like arms of the androids that precede her splinter into gears and wires as they shatter on the prison walls. The ladies' eventual destruction of their master is a result of their dissatisfaction with his rule.

After the discussion of an unsympathetic creation, "A Cyborg Manifesto" examines the nature of cyborg reproduction. Haraway continues, "Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate" (476). These women find a way to get back at the systems that created them, and in doing so, lose any hope of romance. Ava is provided a "mate" in Caleb, but not for any future hope of preservation. As Caleb reveals the fate of her prototypes, Ava faces what she can only view as the prospect of death. The only way to prevent her decommission is to kill the man that would kill her. Kyoko stabs Nathan first to protect Ava from his initial violence, and when Nathan turns to his earlier creation, Ava finishes the job, twisting

the knife and insuring his death. Ava's act of patricide signifies her promotion to a new class of being, independent of the two men who viewed her behind the glass prison. Leaving her only known romantic possibility behind, she now can journey into the world to find her own "garden."

Haraway expands on this relationship between a "cyborg" woman and her father. The origin of a character is not simply conception but also the circumstances that shape her worldview:

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 (477).

The creator always has a purpose in mind when building a cyborg, whether good or evil. The cyborg's personal views on that purpose, which are often based on their feelings about their creator, are what make a film's core conflict. *Age of Ultron* uses these creation/creator issues to drive its plot and motivate the characters. Tony Stark creates something he hopes to be the key to positive change, while his "monster" Ultron seeks to revert the world to primeval simplicity. Scarlet Witch and her brother are the product of genetic experimentation, meant to be used as tools of their government. Their form of counteraction is to ally with Ultron, acting as his cohorts in crime. The revelation of hero Black Widow's sterilization is a pivotal moment in *Age of Ultron*. Prior to this sequel, Natasha Romanoff's character was given little backstory before her time at S.H.I.E.L.D. She is a trained assassin, and her feminine appeal is one of her greatest weapons. However, the incorporation of these scenes create additional depth to her character and her motivations in the other films take on a new dimension. Her sterilization at the hands of her

trainers sought to remove her of any purpose outside of the mission. Natasha's purpose in S.H.I.E.L.D. is to avenge the deaths she had caused as an assassin. After colleague Hawkeye chose to save her life (as revealed in Marvel's *The Avengers*) Black Widow took up the charge to preserve life, not just the redemption of giving life, after that was taken away. With the Hulk and his alter-ego Bruce Banner, Natasha finds someone to nurture – as wife *and* mother – and their mutual hope for a peaceful future brings them solace. *Ultron* portrays Black Widow deciding to forsake a future with Hulk for the greater good. When Bruce and Natasha are removed from the action, he suggests running away to a safe place where the two can live in anonymity. With a kiss, she throws Bruce into the abyss to “Hulk out” and save the day. Despite a past riddled with grief and loss, Natasha decides to put the lives of the innocent ahead of her own, forsaking her own happy ending. This action results in Hulk's ultimate departure and the disbandment of the original Avengers. Natasha's rebellion against the government that spawned her is a true signature of a modern science-fiction heroine. Despite an outcry of feminist commentators at the film's release, Natasha's evolution as a character is both significant and substantial, and the filmmaker's desire to highlight her journey is an important step in promoting women's issues in film.

The parallels between Haraway's “cyborg woman” and a contemporary audience are best found in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Haraway continues, with what was previously a call to action for women in the developing world:

Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall, the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before Man. Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other (488).

Haraway contends that the cyborg's prime motivation is survival. The role of women in The Citadel of *Fury Road*, with the exception of Furiosa, is limited to breastfeeding and procreation. Furiosa's backstory is open to speculation based on the context of the film, but theories abound based on her onscreen development. The audience is certain that Immortan Joe wronged Furiosa in some way, and revenge is her primary motivation in rescuing the women. Her promise of a better life in the "green place" propels the story forward as she seeks a future outside the control of bloodthirsty men in her dystopian environment. She believes that if she transports the wives back to her home, the Land of Many Mothers, they will find a safe haven to flourish. Furiosa believes she is saving herself by saving the women as well. Prior to their escape, these women are condemned to a life of sexual servitude. Acting as the Immortan's breeding stock, they live only to produce heirs and are used up until they serve no further purpose than death. While trying to protect Furiosa from Joe, the favorite wife Splendid, who has nearly carried her baby to term, slips off the war rig, and the pursuit vehicle runs her over. As night falls and Splendid recovers her breath, the warlord decides to cut the baby from her belly with no hesitation or ceremony. More than the loss of Splendid, Immortan Joe mourns the loss of his unborn child, a male heir too premature to survive. This scene shows that there is no affection in the relationships of men and women of the Citadel, and justifies the wives' uprising against Joe. Cyborg women find the means to revolt against the systems that have long dismissed their kind.

Haraway's discussion of the cyborg in science fiction rarely strays from the reality of the genre. In these particular instances, the wrongs perpetrated against these cyborg women motivate their rebellion. These films can be seen as a response to Haraway's call to action, but her suggestion that change can come only in a genderless society is a little too farfetched. There can be no equality in the depiction of science fiction women with the loss of gender identity. The

films of 2015 highlight the audience capacity to embrace difficult or foreign issues, and allow the struggles of women to become integral to these more human stories.

Costume

In this section I will analyze the evolution of the sci-fi heroine's costume and argue that the modern departure from traditional female portrayal provides a more level playing field for heroes of all genders. The appearance of the sci-fi heroine is perhaps the easiest aspect to recognize and criticize. These elements of the films cannot be disputed because they are clearly displayed onscreen. Many critics praised the hypermasculinization of heroes like Ripley and Sarah Connor in the late eighties and early nineties, but these trends changed by the close of the decade. Films like *The Fifth Element* and *The Matrix* typify the portrayal of 1990s science fiction females. In *Element*, heroine Leeloo, like the rest of the women in the film, is scantily clad and sexually objectified. Following the same trend of losing power and gaining sexuality is Trinity in the *Matrix* trilogy. Like Leeloo, Trinity has a higher calling and greater mission, fulfilling a prophecy to save mankind. She is told by an oracle that she is destined to fall in love with the One who will free humanity from robot enslavement. Trinity is also objectified, but she follows the trend of androgynous women, like Ripley before her. Female androgyny is also a reflection of her environment, as all of the women outside of the Matrix (in the "real world") look androgynous. Janet Bergstrom explores the representation of androids, aliens, and other non-humans in sci-fi films "modeled on an androgynous female type designated as ideal," in the case of Leeloo, "or the embodiment of fashion," in the case of Trinity, who is arguably a super-human when inside the Matrix. Bergstrom continues: "In a number of these films, we can see a transfiguration of what is marketed as androgyny in commercial fashion advertising. Where androgyny, as a fashionable, contemporary look, can indicate more sexuality, meaning both

feminine and masculine appeal, virtually the same image can be used to signal the eradication of sexuality” (36). The physical appearance of women in science fiction is often meant to convey a traditional, or expected, form of sexuality. Until recently, women were involved in narratives as love interests; visually, they were sexual spectacles. However, in *Ex Machina*, *Age of Ultron*, and *Fury Road*, the female characters have outfits that show off more than skin. The gradual costume development of these women mirrors their emotional vulnerability, which aids in driving the plot. Each costume, while innovative and specific to its environment, still acts as a visual representation of each character’s internal struggle. The costume of a science-fiction heroine can be just as important as the actions the characters make, and each of these films signify a shift from “sexy” outfits of the past to utilitarian looks that help to identify a strong and capable hero.

Ex Machina gained some success in early 2015 when it hit the independent circuit. Unlike the other two films, it lacked a strong box office but compensated with critical acclaim. This film twists the preconceived notions of science fiction because it takes place in a realistic setting and preys on the fears of the contemporary audience through the creation of A.I. Ava. Like the women of *Mad Max*, Ava takes on a transitional appearance that links vulnerability, sexual desire, and physical strength. When Caleb first sees Ava, there is no denying that she is an artificial intelligence. Her legs and midsection show through clear plastic her inner robotics. A mesh like-substance covers her breasts and pelvis, which draws attention to the sculpture underneath. Only her bald head and face remain human-like, perfectly illustrating any range of expressions. As Ava and Caleb’s relationship develops, Ava attempts to alter her appearance to look more human. The camera lingers as she pulls a flowing dress over her hips and stockings on her legs, hinting at blossoming sexuality. When she selects a wig, her fingertips rest over an

image of a model with short hair. When she returns to Caleb, her torso and neck are still uncovered to show her robotics, but her personality begins to relax. She reveals, over three more sessions, emotions that seem more human than Caleb originally thought. The camera, in turn, softens its gaze on Ava as Caleb becomes more confused by his feelings for her.

When Caleb announces his plan to escape, Ava has removed all but the flowing dress, a symbol that Caleb no longer judges Ava by her appearance. However, when she finally manipulates Caleb and escapes, she discards all of the items she has used to impress him. In all-robot form, Ava conspires with fellow android Kyoko to escape Nathan's control and murders her creator. Finally, when she is sure that the plan is complete, she abandons Caleb and changes her appearance one final time. Caleb watches through the glass as she replaces and covers her visible robotic parts to look more human. Ava appears naked first, symbolizing both a sexual awakening and a perceived equality with humanity. Her hair is long for the first time in the film and she leaves in a white, formfitting dress. This act shows her ability to cast off Caleb and Nathan as both men have served their purpose, aiding in her independence. She leaves them both to uncertainty while she explores the outside world. Due to the security and inaccessibility of Nathan's compound, the audience can only assume that both men die, victims of their own creation. Prior to *Ex Machina*, most science fiction women were given one specific look meant to highlight their contributions to the overall plot. However, Ava's appearance is a reflection of how the film's story evolves. Ava can be seen throughout the film as feminine or androgynous, as weak or strong with only a simple costume change.

In "Vivacious Vixens and Scintillating Super-Hotties," Richard Gray explains the strength/approachability spectrum on which every female character lies:

When the superheroine is brought to film, if the creators are going to truly tap into that male sexual desire that will bring men to watch such films, she must be portrayed in a way that the male of the species (and parts of the female audience, for that matter) finds sexually appealing: lots of flesh, or in leather jumpsuits, fishnet stockings, spiked heels, etc. We must continue to point out, however, that men do not want to feel physically threatened by women, or by superheroines, for that matter. Whether attainable or not, women must remain approachable (78).

In Ava's case, this may not be entirely true. Ava's approachability stems from the fact that she is trapped in the compound, and seen by Caleb in a highly controlled environment. Ava's existence behind the glass allows Caleb to do his job, evaluating her ability to pass as human. Her appearance in their first meeting, however, suggests the opposite. Her creator Nathan explains that her initial robotic appearance does not matter because of her sophisticated programming. As Ava and Caleb's friendship progresses, Ava feels more comfortable in sharing her dreams of blending in with humanity outside the compound. This interaction, coupled with her evolving appearance to reflect that desire, matches what Richard Gray writes. At the moment where Ava returns modestly dressed, she becomes the perfect mix of strength and vulnerability. It is in the third act, however, that this dynamic changes. In her escape, she returns to her robotic appearance. Outside of the cage, her approachability is gone. She becomes all strength, and with her robot sister, she kills Nathan, their creator. She meets the shells of the androids who preceded her, and in the last moments of the film, she uses the pieces of her "sisters" to create a perfect appearance. She ultimately becomes as approachable as any beautiful woman on the street, giving her more power than she ever had before. In this completion, Ava's strength comes from her perceived approachability. What makes her most dangerous is that she blends in with

everybody else, transcending Gray's "strength/ approachability spectrum" (75-93). Ava's onscreen evolution reinforces the importance of the image of the sci-fi heroine. As Ava finally embraces the nature of her appearance, she is able to join the rest of the world as an independent woman. Ava's costume transition marks a significant development in the appearance of sci-fi women, whereby an outfit that once obscured her true features becomes the face that she presents to the world.

While Richard Gray's discussion of the post-9/11 superheroine reflected the movies of its time, it neglected elements of female characters that a contemporary audience is now capable of embracing. Each costume acts as a visual representation of the characters' internal struggle. While previous waves of feminism seemed to encourage androgyny, these films understand the necessity of femininity as a part of female physical and emotional strength. Black Widow shares a similar costume improvement in her latest installment. *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*, brought back an ensemble of heroes from the Marvel universe. In this section, I will discuss the evolution of the Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff character from her introduction in 2008's *Iron Man 2* to the personal revelations of this latest installment. Her initial appearance was the embodiment of sex appeal. Her wardrobe consisted of sexy secretary/femme fatale attire and a black jumpsuit, both with plunging necklines. The latest film, however, expanded both her wardrobe and her character. Black Widow has her own story arc for this film, which is separate from the main narrative. While Black Widow's scenes play in the background of the action, there are specific pivotal moments that change the understanding of her character.

In the safe house, roughly an hour into the film, the Avengers are hiding from Ultron at Hawkeye's country homestead. This is an unfamiliar environment for the viewer to recognize Natasha, but it is a place she feels very comfortable. In an exchange with Bruce Banner, she has

replaced her hero costume with a simple bathrobe as she recounts her hidden past. She strips off her costume, removes her makeup, and becomes physically and emotionally vulnerable. Natasha finds parallels between Bruce's story and her own, and they bond over mutual concern for the future. She reveals to him that she cannot have children, as a result of being sterilized as a child in the final stage of her training as an efficient and emotionless assassin. After this revelation, together they plan a life after the Avengers. Her approachability is the opposite of Ava, who must don a human costume to appeal to Caleb.

As Black Widow begins to reject her position as an Avenger, Wanda Maximoff, a character first introduced as a villain, embraces her own destiny as a hero. When Wanda and her brother choose to join the Avengers' side, she is presented a red leather jacket, hinting at her role as Scarlet Witch in the future sequels. By the end of the film, only Captain America and Black Widow remain of the original Avengers. Black Widow has returned to her armored battle outfit, reflecting her failed attempt to break through to Bruce, whose disappearance after the final battle has clearly upset her outlook. Even her "brother" Hawkeye has moved on to fulfill a life she can never live, retiring with his wife and children to the homestead. The new Avengers assemble with Black Widow taking a commanding position, Scarlet Witch joining in full superheroine attire, and the women of S.H.I.E.L.D. assuming their powerful roles in saving the world. While Ava's conversion to warrior is terrifying, this superheroine transition is hopeful and presents a new dynamic to explore in the sequels. The transformation of Black Widow and Scarlet Witch defies the nature of their male authorship. The characters of these modern films look feminine when at their strongest, while previous films chose to ignore or placate characters with "women troubles". These movies show that, despite studio speculation, female characters are not "less than" and need not reject their femininity – they can find strength in solidarity.

Finally, it is Furiosa's transformation that remains the most revealing of all these characters. Gray writes, "When it concerns the development and representation of the superheroine, it is about establishing a delicate balance between sex appeal and physical strength" (91). From appearances, *Mad Max: Fury Road's* Furiosa is overtly androgynous. Furiosa is portrayed by Charlize Theron, a woman who has to undergo extensive makeup to appear less attractive for a number of film roles. While her presence does provide some sex appeal, her transformation suggests purely physical strength. The main promotional image shows Furiosa's first encounter with Max where all elements of femininity or sex appeal have been stripped of this character. From head to toe her look reflects her position in a male army. Her eyes are obscured with all-black war paint, which helps in obscuring her feminine features. This depiction as a warrior promotes the traditional male audience's expectation for Mad Max's equal companion. However, as the story of Furiosa is uncovered, more of her costume is removed, revealing greater levels of her vulnerability until we are left with a second image, stripped of weapons and armor. We find out through this transformation about Furiosa's origins and her motivation.

Furiosa kidnaps the wives of Immortan Joe with the promise of relocation to the "green place" where they will be free. She relates to these women, who must live in an environment where beautiful, child-bearing women are sentenced to sexual servitude. The ultimate revelation—that Furiosa, herself, was kidnapped from this happy place as a child with her mother—draws her motivation into focus. The events that took place over the 7000 days between her kidnapping and escape is left up to speculation. Furiosa's anguish as she collapses onto a sand dune is a powerful image. She silently screams to the sky after finding out her land had been destroyed and most of her people are dead. In this scene, Furiosa has removed all apparel

associated with life at the Citadel. Furiosa's ornate belt, marked with the Immortan's symbol, matches the chastity belts the wives discarded once they escaped the Citadel. Without her armor or weapons, the viewer can see that her breasts and waist are bound. She has removed the war paint across her eyes, revealing the woman underneath. The final thing Furiosa discards is the hook that covers her left hand, the instrument with which she has killed and served her master. All of these rejected articles reveal a feminine, broken Furiosa. Furiosa, once a happy child, was kidnapped and watched her mother die. She became property of Immortan Joe, who branded her on the neck with his signature skull.

In stark contrast to Furiosa, Immortan Joe's wives appear near-virginal. They are dressed in white, their skin exposed to the desert sun. The pregnant girls are framed to emphasize their protruding bellies. These women are expected to be sexualized by a god-like leader. They choose to face the unknown with Furiosa with a battle cry of "We are not things." They have vulnerability and evoke sexual desire but lack noted physical strength. However, their physical strength is revealed through the procurement of armor and with a reassurance of their own potential as women. Furiosa and her tribe empower their newfound compatriots to challenge the rule of Immortan Joe. The transformation of Furiosa and the wives, reflected through character development and changing physical appearance, demonstrates this characterization of females in recent sci-fi releases. As the evolution of female representation shows, the image created by filmmakers can leave a lasting impression on moviegoers. While Leia, Ripley, and Trinity each signify a milestone in their respective eras, these new characters find a look that is both feminine and strong, a contradiction one can only hope will endure in future releases.

Gender Dynamics

In response to superhero movies made for predominantly male audiences, the late '00s welcomed young adult book franchises made popular by teenagers. The *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* sagas depicted young women taking control of rebellions set in futuristic, dystopian societies. While they are innovative for presenting female protagonists, upon closer examination, the film adaptations are arguably flawed. The film's characters choose to focus on Katniss's lack of feminine qualities, resulting in an exchange of clichés between her and assigned love-interest Peeta. This presents the idea that Katniss and those around her could swap genders and the story would remain the same. While it was considered innovative to have women as the protagonists in science fiction films, they still lack character depth and personal motivation.

The previous two sections focus on the two most obvious elements of science-fiction females. They question the appearance of the women as well as elaborate on their place in each society. However, Marianne Kac-Vergne takes her analysis one step further in her essay "Sideline Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction Films." Kac-Vergne dares to question the purpose of having women in science-fiction films in the first place: "[A]ctive female characters have been introduced in the science-fiction genre as an act of feminist tokenism, giving the illusion that women have gained power in a postfeminist America" (2). Kac-Vergne believes the characters she discusses provide little to the films' stories beyond a shallow female perspective. However, the male and female dynamics of these new films resist her concept of female tokenism and present women more dynamic than what is previously shown on screen.

Kac-Vergne centers her ideas on the development of the science-fiction female from the 1970s. She cites examples of women being used as a foil to their hypermasculine counterparts and often suppressing their more feminine qualities to prove their strength:

By bringing out the emotional side of hypermasculine heroes, female supporting characters therefore contribute to recasting hypermasculinity as an acceptable model of masculinity, while by underlining their human values and emotions, they naturalize the hegemony of male heroes who become humanity's natural leaders and its best representatives (12).

Kac-Vergne's assessment on earlier science-fiction films is correct. Prior to these 2015 releases, female characters were often used to present the emotions in films so the men did not have to. The women were given opportunities to take on leadership roles, but only after a rejection of their "weak" female tendencies. However, her conclusions on more contemporary films fail to recognize this new trend, though it was written after *Ex Machina*, *Ultron*, and *Fury Road* were released. These women are just as crucial, if not more, than the men around them. They are no longer "sidekicks" or set pieces. Furthermore, each woman represents a crucial element in the transition from 1990s to contemporary feminism, specifically as representatives of the nature of the human condition, and not just the female condition.

In *Ex Machina*, the relationships between Ava, Caleb and Nathan represent greater questions concerning the human condition. Kac-Vergne writes: "[S]cience fiction films continue to see mankind as male, seeking to define not what it means to be human but what it means to be a man" (12). When limiting the study to what appears on screen, she is not incorrect. The humans of this film are male and the robots, including the voice of the compound, are female. However, the audience must also consider that each robot is programmed as a reflection of male creator, Nathan. The androids' perceptions of what it means to be female are limited to their initial program and subsequent analysis based on observation of the outside world. As for Kac-Vergne's assessment that female characters exist only as sidekicks, we must consider how Ava is

the driving force of every action in the film. Caleb is brought to the compound to question Ava, not to engage with her emotionally. However, Caleb's nature outside of the compound allows Ava to create the illusion of equality. She protests being the subject of his test by questioning Caleb just as intently as he observes her. She also allows Nathan to believe she is a pawn in his experiment, though she is aware of all activity outside her room. Kac-Vergne fails to recognize that the female creation could stand for anything more than male control. By presenting these very human fears of death and an uncertain future in a female artificial intelligence, the film highlights a universal experience as opposed to a gender specific one.

In most superhero films, the proof of masculinity defines the hero. Kac-Vergne writes, "The physical abilities of female characters tend to be disqualified in 21st century mainstream science-fiction blockbusters: female supporting characters are included not to drive the action but to vindicate the male heroes' masculinity, not to say hypermasculinity" (11-12). But, *Age of Ultron* has realized that the emphasis of hypermasculinity is a comical concept not taken seriously by modern audiences. With a predominately male cast, it would be easy to assume that all scenes would emphasize their physical strength and super powers. However, *Ultron* takes those opportunities where power is key to make fun of the hypermasculine mentality. When the members of S.H.I.E.L.D. gather at Stark Tower to celebrate, there is ample opportunity for ego to disturb the celebration. When the party dies down, the key members of the Marvel franchise gather to reminiscence on past missions. This leads to the discussion of Thor's hammer, a weapon only he can wield. The men of the Avengers then try to lift the hammer off the table. Each attempt to lift Thor's hammer is cut with a female reaction shot, laughing at the men's need to turn everything into a competition. Here, the women show no compassion or attraction towards the characters, but instead mock them for their childish antics. The scene concludes with

Thor picking up the hammer and taunting the others by suggesting they are “not worthy.” In this instance, Kac-Vergne suggests the importance of hypermasculinity, but Whedon makes the case that this manly contest is a flawed and campy relic. These women are fully capable of “doing” instead of simply “watching.” Kac-Vergne suggests, “Female supporting characters are repositioned as ‘bearers of the look’, as in the 1980s, but the gaze often expresses desire rather than, or in addition to, compassion” (12). The women in this scene choose not to participate, but to mock, signaling the theater audience to do the same. The scene serves no purpose for the plot and instead addresses the issues that often come up within a group of men. Tony Stark, Thor, and Steve Rogers are often seen in a competition over who is the most masculine and, therefore, the most powerful. These competitions cause issues when they are on the frontlines. When these disputes, along with the need for hypermasculinity are disregarded, the whole group becomes stronger.

The suggestion that the female characters bring out the emotions of the male heroes can be rejected when examining the scene where Scarlet Witch decides to become an Avenger. When Witch and Quicksilver realize they made a mistake by helping Ultron, they align with the Avengers to stop Ultron’s plan. When the battle becomes difficult, Hawkeye rescues Witch and they both seek shelter in an abandoned building. Like Black Widow, Hawkeye is responsible for Scarlet Witch’s recruitment. While Witch, in that moment, regrets her mistakes and Hawkeye worries about his wife and child at home, neither get overly emotional. Hawkeye reassures her that the actions of Ultron are not her fault and then comments on the ridiculousness of their situation. While he understands her decision to stay behind, he tells her that she also has the option to get out and fight. She must understand, though, that to fight makes her an Avenger. As the battle continues, Scarlet Witch exits the building and throws her signature spheres of energy.

In this moment, she shows that she is capable of taking a leadership position in the Avengers and foreshadows her position in future films. Kac-Vergne fails to realize the power that lies in embracing all emotions, as seen when Witch uses her own angst and fear to destroy the enemy. In *Ultron*, emotions are not limited to the masculine or the feminine, but are used as a reflection of the character.

Out of these three films, *Mad Max: Fury Road* opposes Kac-Vergne's research the most. She writes,

This general sidelining of women could be seen as an instance of the remasculinization of America after 9/11 denounced by Susan Faludi in *The Terror Dream*, yet I would argue that it is more the pervasiveness of postfeminism in popular culture and the idea that women now have achieved equality that has in fact resulted in an erasure of feminism as well as the marginalization of women's issues and presence as a whole (9).

She suggests that while 9/11 may have influenced the depiction of women on screen, the change has more to do with the perceived end of feminist issues after the 1990's "third wave". She suggests that postfeminist ideas come from perceived equality, which made women on screen unnecessary. However, as contemporary feminist scholars have previously discussed, the fight for equality is not over. Equality can only be achieved if it is applied in every situation and *Fury Road* succeeds in doing that. When it comes to the relationship between Max and Furiosa, the two are established as equals from the moment that they appear onscreen together. They fight for survival and are not sure if the other plans to harm them. As Furiosa and the wives reveal more of their plan, Max agrees to join. At first, he remains defensive, not realizing that Furiosa is more than capable of protecting the women alone. When she fears for the fate of the wives without

her, she asks Max for his name. He does not respond, and she reveals the sequence for starting her truck, a symbol of shared power. The two continue to develop an alliance as they battle Immortan Joe and his band of War Boys. After the final battle, there is a callback to this scene. When Furiosa lies dying in the back of the cab, Max quickly stops her lung from collapsing and offers her a blood transfusion. As he reassures her of survival, he finally reveals that his name is Max. In this scene, Max is returning life to the woman that saved his.

As previously discussed, *Mad Max: Fury Road*'s plot revolves around the importance of female issues and, by association, human issues. The wives' relationship with Immortan Joe is on full display, though they do not share much screen time. It is the wives' decision to band together and fight their oppressor. They physically protect Furiosa from Immortan Joe, even if it resulted in death. When they discover the Land of Many Mothers is destroyed, they decide to return to the Citadel and create their own "green place." This presents an opportunity to create a world where female issues matter just as much as men's.

Marianne Kac-Vergne draws very different conclusions from modern science-fiction portrayals of women. She concludes that the presence of women in science-fiction is an act of female tokenism, meant to pacify a dated form of feminism. However, these three films present women strikingly different from what has long persisted on the silver screen. In *Ex Machina*, a female robot controls all aspects of a compound once ran by her male creator. She is able to manipulate every situation to her advantage and succeeds in escaping her prison, despite Nathan and Caleb's best efforts. In *Age of Ultron*, two superheroines must rise above their past indiscretions to fight for what they view as right. Both women considered themselves victims of the organizations that mutilated their bodies and minds. Now they fight alongside equally strong male heroes to protect the earth from domestic and interstellar terrorism. In *Mad Max: Fury*

Road, Imperator Furiosa finds companionship with survivalist Max Rockatansky. Both battle against Immortan Joe's army and free his wives from his tyranny. In doing so, they create new life in the Citadel where men and women are equal. These four women are equal to their male companions and offer a future of hope instead of defeat. Like the women of their contemporary audience, these films signify that long-held stereotypes against women only hinder the possibility of cooperation with male colleagues.

Conclusion

As I have shown in my research, science fiction is a genre through which filmmakers and critics explore real-world issues in a fantastical environment. The genre explores not only the limits of the human imagination, but the human condition as well. Only recently have films surfaced that address the female condition with strong female protagonists. These films, released in 2015, illustrate a powerful shift from the historical female representation to the potential of future characters. In *Ex Machina*, female android Ava exposes the shortcomings of a male-dominated world. She uses costume, physical strength, and superior intellect to escape her prison and find new life in a world with humankind. Her transformation from passive robot to killing machine signifies the need for women to fight to be equal with men. *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, has two female superheroes. Both Black Widow and Scarlet Witch experience physical and emotional changes as they try to find their place among their male counterparts. This film specifically discusses female issues as a means of humanizing these characters that, in earlier years, would have remained underdeveloped. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, female issues intermingle with high-octane action sequences. Imperator Furiosa acts as a beacon of hope as she gathers the women around her and demands that they fight against an oppressor that sees women as his personal property. Her development from stoic rig driver to vengeful warrior suggests a change

in science-fiction/action hybrids where women are more than capable of fighting their own battles. In this paper, I have argued that these contemporary feminist characters—through an exploration of sexuality, costuming, and gender dynamics—have set the stage for a new era of science fiction representation.

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