

POPULAR

INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 1 / 2023

**UNCANNY ATTRACTION:
INTERCULTURAL REMARKS
ON THE AESTHETICS OF
GYNOIDS AND SEXBOTS IN POP
CULTURE**

Paolo Euron

**UNCANNY ATTRACTION:
INTERCULTURAL REMARKS
ON THE AESTHETICS OF
GYNOIDS AND SEXBOTS IN POP
CULTURE**

Paolo Euron

EIU European International University

**POPULAR
INQUIRY**

Abstract

This article offers some examples of female pop culture robots and shows how gynoids and sexbots suggest a simplified and stylized human relationship model. In some cases, this representation is ironic and/or edifying. In other cases, the artificial being offers a more complex representation of human destiny not influenced by moralism. In doing so, on the one hand gynoids become the occasion for an insight into the conditions of human existence or even an implicit criticism of sex as a power strategy. On the other hand, as my intercultural analysis suggests, gynoids introduce a stylization of desire that allows for an increase in freedom from social and economic pressures, as a playful and liberating opportunity of exploring the possibilities and limits of human relationships.

Keywords:

Artificial Life, Cultural Studies, Intercultural Aesthetics, East and West, Sex and Power, Kawaii

Attraction and deception

There is a constant presence of gynoids in pop culture. Fictional gynoids do not represent the features offered by the current market or promised by the future female robot models,

which are largely sex dolls designed to fulfill sexual fantasies. Their presence in pop culture is more complex and subtle. It sets an aesthetic and, in so doing, an existential standard. From Maria in *Metropolis* (1927) to Alicia of “The Twilight Zone” and to the artificial girl Sonma in *Cloud Atlas* (2015), from the female replicants Rachel and Pris of *Blade Runner* (1986) to the sex workers of *Westworld* (2016) and to the artificial girls of *Ex-Machina* (2014), movies, novels and TV series display gynoids which, created for pleasure or deception, arouse reflection and often provoke insurrections, clashes, social and existential turmoil.

The iconic character of Maria in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) gives a rather sinister connotation to the gynoids. Maria has a basically deceptive function. Thirty-two years later, in *The Lonely* (1959), the seventh episode of the first season of the TV series “The Twilight Zone”, we experience the unexpected presence of a gynoid. Corry, the main character, is serving a long term sentence for murder, confined on a deserted asteroid. From Earth, he receives objects to alleviate his solitude, such as parts to build a vintage car. One day, Allenby, the captain of the supply ship, brings him a special box. It contains a woman-like robot, Alicia, with the physical and psychological features of a human being. Corry’s first reaction is to compare the gynoid to the vintage car, rejecting her as a companion. Corry’s reaction is very harsh. “You are a machine? Aren’t you? [...] Why didn’t they build you to look like a machine? Why didn’t they build you out of metal with bolts and wires and electrodes and things like that... Why’d they turn you into a lie? Cover you with something that looks like flesh? Give you a face? [...] It’s a lie!”¹

The first reaction points out the deplorable attempt to present artifice as nature. This is a moral fault and this is the first condemnation gynoids receive. Through their beautiful appearance, they *want* to deceive. Their aesthetic appearance is aimed at a morally wrong purpose. Corry says: “You mock me, you know that? When you look at me,

when you talk to me, I'm being mocked. [...] You are just like this heap [the vintage car.] A hunk of metal with arms and legs, instead of wheels. But this heap doesn't mock me the way you do. It doesn't look at me with make-believe eyes or talk to me with a make-believe voice."²

This reproach is understandable. A robot in itself is not blameworthy, but a gynoid disguises her artificial nature under her beauty to deceive. This is a morally wrong action and a cognitive deception. On the theoretical level, there is no doubt: Alicia is a machine. Then Alicia, hit by Corry, falls and he notices that she cries. She only says a few words: "I can feel loneliness, too."

As I pointed out in my study *Uncanny Beauty*,³ deception is only possible if the robot is believed to be a natural being. The fictional gynoids foreshadow certain expectations we have of future artificial beings and they share one trait with sexbots: they both require a "suspension of disbelief" which must be accompanied by an awareness of their artificial nature.⁴ Under this "willing suspension of disbelief,"⁵ the interaction with robots can give an insight into human behaviours and expectations. Movies, narratives, works of art work on the same principle. Gynoids share the same essence of fictional works: they address the highest human issues and are not natural products. They are not human but convey emotional, social, and cultural qualities.

Actually, Alicia is not human but her reaction is the most human reaction: she demonstrates empathy and she proves that she is a human. This is not recognized on a theoretical level, but on a moral one. As Cockelberg wrote: "We should not conceive similarities in terms of properties alone but also consider the active, practical side. The etymology of 'companion' links the word to 'eating the same bread'; it refers to shared needs in addition to shared practices of fulfilling these needs."⁶ For this reason, "rather than rational choice, our conduct towards others is a matter of feelings for others." The cognitive and

moral issue (“what the robot is”) is secondary to the aesthetic one: “how we want to live together, given that we *already* engage in particular social relations with them in particular contexts.”⁷ Empathy increases if the robot reflects our human vulnerability. Vulnerability affects both humans and non-humans.

75

Alicia has something to share with Corry, her loneliness, her vulnerability, so that the relationship can be empathetic. Her personality mirrors Corry’s: “You’re my companion. Do you understand, Alicia? You’re my companion. I need you desperately.” “And I need you, Corry.”⁸ Like a narrative, Alicia is not a natural product, but tells about human qualities, destinies, possibilities and solutions. We are not fooled by a piece of narrative if we know it is a narrative. We are not deceived by a movie, as long as we know it is. However, in narratives and movies, we can recognize ideas, values and situations that are human. One day the distrust for artificial beings will sound outdated, like Plato’s distrust for written words because they do not offer the naturalness of oral teaching, or his condemnation of art because the work of art is a deception which confuses knowledge and behaviour.⁹ The experience proposed by the gynoid is much more similar to the Aristotelian idea of catharsis. Even knowing that this is a fiction, in the tragedy we deal “with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.”¹⁰ Now, what is this catharsis or cleansing of emotions? The representation of a fictional but coherent world arouses emotions in me, in a refined and purified form, which I could not experience in real life. “In the fictional world of the work of art, though it is only an imitation of the real world, we can have a real and strong experience of emotions that we could not have elsewhere. We experience powerful emotions in a pure and refined form. [...] You can feel differently, and you can see what – in the usual chaos of life – is perhaps not seen.”¹¹ Cognitive condition (awareness of artifice) is the condition of experiencing powerful emotions in a pure and refined form.

When the starship arrives to bring Corry back to Earth, Alicia cannot find a place there. Now Corry feels she is human, but the crew who have not felt the same emotions consider her a machine. The captain “shoots Alicia full in the face, revealing a mass of smoldering wires. Then Allenby says to Corry: “All you're leaving behind is loneliness”. Stunned, Corry replies, “I must remember that. I must remember to keep that in mind.”¹² However, Corry does not seem entirely convinced. He says: “I must remember that” as if he needs to rehearse a new narrative, in which Alicia is nothing more than a machine. But the existential issue arises and the question remains open. We cannot have any definition of the human being but now, on a human and empathic level, we think that Corry’s behaviour is questionable and that the captain is possibly a murderer, and deserves to be condemned to the loneliness that Corry escaped.

It is surprising how this empathic interpretation is usually not accepted. A moralistic explanation offers an easy escape from the dilemma: “In ‘The Lonely,’ Corry comes to *regard* his android companion as a person, but we know she is not. The episode’s effect comes from our seeing Corry’s self-delusion and its effect on his emotions.”¹³ Here the author argues for the deceptive nature of gynoids and the self-inflicted illusion of a one-way relationship. The gynoid deceives the man who is unable to be aware of reality, like a viewer who forgets that the movie is a movie.

The ambiguity of the gynoid constitutes her depth, but believing that Alicia is a machine and nothing else and that Corry is wrong or delusional is reassuring. “Much like a movie-goer who experiences fear while watching a movie she already knows is fictional, Corry reacted emotionally as if Alicia were a person and not a machine that was an extension of himself. [...] It was only an illusion that vanished when Allenby shot Alicia and announced “All behind you. Like a bad dream. A nightmare.”¹⁴

In fact, Alicia and other gynoids that come after her, relentlessly propose the issue that, having a real presence in human life and a function (even if only sexual), they need a recognized existential dimension and the dignity of human being. We seem to expect from gynoids what they by definition do not have. They represent a desire and, more than that, a lack, a difference from the norm. In this way they call attention to humanity they cannot reach. They are human (at least to some extent) because they feel that something is missing, they need being recognized. Their humanity consists of their incompleteness, of their difference from us, of their vulnerability that makes them similar to us in a different way. In the existential perspective, the impossibility of defining the project which is the authentic human being is the very essence of the human being. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man [...] Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. [...] Thus, there is no human nature. [...] Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.”¹⁵ Likewise, the uncertain and endangered humanity of a gynoid consists of her lack of human fullness and defined essence. Gynoids are not in competition with humans. When Corry hits Alicia, we do not at first judge this action morally. When Allenby shoots her, we are not horrified. We must remember that she is a machine. This was the explicit request of the production to the creator Rod Serling: “Practically speaking, Alicia the ‘robot’ is a human being, and for the purpose of enjoying the play, the viewer will go along with the fiction that she is not. However, it verges upon horror to have the camera show us fragments of her shattered face. Would you confine these odd bits of physiognomy to strictly mechanical props: wires, levers, gears, springs, etc., unrecognizable as eyes, ears or portions of human anatomy?”¹⁶ The gynoid is empathetically felt like a human being, but the show

should present her as a machine at a time when her otherness could cause an unpleasant experience and raise uncomfortable questions.

It must be clear that Alicia is a machine. Gynoids are machines even though we naturally feel them as humans. They are artificial even though they represent human qualities and possibilities on a more visible scale, in a more refined form. In this way, the gynoids present a paradox. They are a sort of simplified and stylized representation of the human being; we can grasp the essence and contradictions of existence. Looking at them, we can consider human issues in a different light, from the outside, with fewer moral concerns. At the same time, the problems are amplified and more visible. Perhaps this stylized and magnified vision, as well as the lack of competition, is the reason for their pervasive presence.

The issue of competition between human beings in pop culture deserves special attention. It is interesting to note that in many popular movies and cult TV series, human beings are always competing with each other. In this competition, they often use sexual attraction as an instrument of power, in which “the feminine body is portrayed as the primary source of women’s capital” and the primary way to “obtain power.”¹⁷ I mention one of the many possible examples. In the “Sex Education” series, we can often hear the recommendation “sex is a game and we must enjoy it”. It sounds like a tolerant and open-minded attitude. In reality, compulsive sex, selling vulva-shaped biscuits at school, care-free changing of sexual orientation “to locate homosexuality in terms of style and aesthetics rather than sexuality”¹⁸ and other similar issues represented in the series are *not* part of a game and deserve some deeper reflections on personality and society. “Sex Education” is about human beings. A sexbot should welcome the liberal and playful attitude that “sex is a game and we must enjoy it.” In fact, a sexbot like Alicia (assuming she is one), by her mere presence, claims otherwise. Sex can be a game, but, on the other side of this game, there is

always a human being (or there should always be one) playing, whose existential dimension and whose dignity are at stake in that game. We can agree on this point, but it would be very difficult to present it in a TV series about humans without being blamed of moralism. The sexbot makes it possible to question (without fear of moralism) a hedonistic and simplistic attitude which proposes sex as an innocent game and, at the same time, conceals the possible use of sex as an instrument of power. In other words, it reminds us of a much more complex situation and of certain conditions and limits of enjoyment. There is something (the full human presence, the person) that cannot be completely ignored, and that is a condition (not a means) of full enjoyment. The sexbot resizes and debunks the use of sex as an instrument of power by conjuring the person. The statement “sex as an instrument of power” deserves more discussion but, before addressing this important issue, I would like to consider a few more examples of artificial beings.

An artificial insight into human vulnerability

The charm of artificiality confers on artificial beings a peculiar moral freedom that arouses a profound reflection on the human essence. The movie *Blade Runner* (1982) offers it in the highest form. Replicants are what they have been created for. As Deckart says, “Replicants are like any other machine. They’re either a benefit or a hazard. If they’re a benefit it’s not my problem.”¹⁹ This instrumental definition expresses a technological-practical attitude. Replicants become a danger when they do not do what their instrumental definition expresses. Their essence precedes their existence, as Sartre says. But artificial beings can rebel. Roy is a warrior but wants more life. Pris is a “pleasure model” but wants freedom. Rachel delves into her memories and suspects her artificial nature. These are existential issues which remind us that the human being has an essence that is not its instrumental

function. If the replicants behave like human beings, they become a hazard because an instrumental definition is no longer applicable.

Human beings are human because of their temporal dimension. As Martin Heidegger wrote, the human being exists and its existence is its own possibilities. The human being cannot find any “definition” or “essence”; it is “thrown into the world” and “dispersed” among other things; but (unlike things) it has to choose among possibilities. This is why human existence is a project based on possibilities and oriented towards the future. Among the possibilities, there is a personal and authentic one, which no one else can live in our place. Our death is the most authentic possibility, which gives authenticity to our existence. Death is the “possibility of possibilities” and the “authentic being-toward-death signifies an existentiell possibility of Da-Sein”²⁰ or human beings. There is neither a given essence nor a stable definition of the human being. The human being must project itself, time is its meaning, the temporal dimension is its essence.

Since replicants are human in many ways, even emotionally, they cannot be eternal. They have to face death. Designers decided to equip them with a fail-safe device and they became mortals. As cop Bryant explains, “They were designed to copy humans in every way, except their emotions. But the designers reckoned that after a few years they might develop their own emotional responses. Oh, hate, love, fear, anger, envy. So they built in a fail-safe device. [...] Four-years life span.”²¹ There is no obvious reason to create a four-year lifespan safety device, except that this device introduces replicants into the human realm by means of death. Time, memories, emotions and death constitute the temporal essence of human beings.

Death is what replicants seek, because death guarantees the authentic temporal dimension of human existence. Deckart falls in love with Rachel, who does not know she is an artificial being. When Deckart kills all the replicants, cop Gaff mentions that Rachel,

after discovering she is an artificial being, is still alive and someone (other than Deckart) will kill her. Gaff says, “It’s too bad she won’t live. But then again, who does?”²² After that, Derrick (in the final version *Blade Runner Director's Cut*, 1992) accepts the possibility that he too is a replicant as well and has a limited lifespan.²³ “Who lives?” is the main question of the movie, which is an intriguing existential question because it is posed by artificial beings. Even Roy’s last words, “Time to die”, are also a very revealing statement. The replicant becomes human and proves more human than other humans (and ironically repeats Tyrrell Corporation’s motto “more human than humans”) the moment he dies and saves Deckart’s life. In the first version of *Blade Runner* (1982), Deckard’s voice over expresses the philosophical issue in a form which sounds rather trashy, if not referred to artificial beings: “I don’t know why he saved my life. Maybe in those last moments he loved life more than he ever had before. Not just his life, anybody’s life, my life. All he’d wanted were the same answers the rest of us want. Where did I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got? All I could do was sit there and watch him die.”²⁴

In pop culture, artificial beings offer a transversal and uncompromising way of dealing with human issues. The aesthetic appearance of gynoids is pivotal²⁵ because it gives way to deception and empathic responses. In 1927, Maria in *Metropolis* proved that a gynoid can only possess the beautiful appearance of a human being, but not the soul, and her function is deception. Ava in *Ex-Machina* (2015) uses her feminine charm to escape from the laboratory where she is confined and controlled by Caleb, her creator. Perhaps her actions are justified. Caleb uses Kyoko, the other gynoid, as a sex robot and destroys his creatures on a whim. Ava proves she is human by flirting with the man who has to test her behaviour. Then, she takes advantage of him and proves herself even more human by abandoning her savior in the lab, when she finally manages to escape. Ava is true to a tradition that deeply intertwines attraction, sex appeal and power. Ava proves she is human

(and physically disappears among humans) when she can use her sexual attractiveness as an instrument of power. This behaviour defines the nature (and danger) of most Western gynoids.

Artificiality and sexual attraction

There is a long tradition, from Pygmalion and Dorothea to Baudelaire, from von Kleist to Rilke, which supports the advantage of artificiality over nature.²⁶ The artifice, the marionette, the puppet (and, we can infer, the robot) have a higher moral value. They are mediated by rationality. They are not raw in nature. Baudelaire, at the beginning of modernity, set the moral standard of artifice. He writes: “Nature teaches us nothing, or practically nothing. [...] Everything beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation. [...] Evil happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art.”²⁷ Beauty alludes to something beyond the body, even in the artificial and mechanical form of the gynoid.

The aesthetic relationship between artificial beauty and attraction is complex and tricky. Our world appears to be liberal in matter of sexual behaviour and even permissive in facts of sexual morality. In fact, the idea of sex with gynoids is generally not accepted in the Western pop culture, at least not in a positive way. In a society which seems to be highly sexualized,²⁸ sexbots are more related to pornography and prostitution²⁹ than entertainment, creativity or emancipation. They are more the subject of irony or moralism than an occasion for reflection on the difference between artifice and nature.

Bryan Forbes’s classic movie *The Stepford Wives* (1975) proposes the ideal place for men as a well-ordered town with a gynoid factory, secretly replacing real wives. The caustic and social irony is clear. Artificial wives are viewed in terms of competition (they are better

- or worse - than natural women because, e. g., they are more submissive). Artificial beings are viewed in terms of competition with humans, not difference. They are not something else that can be complementary. It seems that the solution to avoid the social struggle between men and women is to replace women with obedient gynoids. The difference between gynoid and woman is erased; there is only a different degree of submission, the artificial being imitates stereotypical female behaviour, and the gynoid is a substitute that can only make way for bitter social satire.

Likewise, the sexbots who act as prostitutes in *Westworld* (2016) and *Humans* (2015) are presented with human compassion for gynoids and moral contempt for male clients. Again, there is no space for the difference. Gynoids are interchangeable *substitutes* of women and perform human functions.

In Western pop culture, the gynoid is mostly proposed in terms of competition. She rarely suggests that artificiality can represent nature on a different level and that this difference is the essence of the gynoid, who can present human interaction in a more simplified way and allow “the experience of powerful emotions in a pure and refined form”. In fact, even the relationship with an artificial being can “support creative self-expression and self-actualization in highly personal ways.”³⁰ This is possible because, as in the relationship between Corry and Alicia, human beings create a narrative in which artificial beings fit. According to Su, even rudimentary sexbots like sex dolls can do it “not only because of their lifelike faces, but also because of the imaginative stories their owners construct and tell about them. The dolls become diegetic props”³¹. They provide “fertile ground for embodied fictions and care of the self. [...] Everyday sexual intimacy is seen as contiguous with, not separated from, other forms of social engagement and wellness,” since “people regularly form intimate (both sexual and nonsexual) relationships with, derive wellness from, and engage in fantasies about the technologies around them.”³² Is it

possible to find examples where, as in *Blade Runner*, the difference between natural and artificial beings allows an insight in human existence?

Desire, consumerism and what a gynoid can teach

Let us now consider the relationship between sexual attraction and power. As mentioned above, sexual desire and its satisfaction is not just a game, like advertised in many movies and TV series (e. g. “Sex Education,” “Easy” and many others). It should highlight certain conditions and limits of enjoyment. The person is the condition (not the means) of full enjoyment.

In my essay *Uncanny Beauty*, I have shown how, despite all appearances, the Western society offers the experience of a dehumanized and de-sexualized world.³³ The seemingly permissive and sexually liberal culture conceals mechanisms of power and manipulation. Our consumer society promotes the eroticization of values, stresses the sexual function of beauty and promises an unlimited sexual freedom. Actually, this sexualization of society is not aimed to sell sex but, on the contrary, to make merchandise of all the rest, promoting a general sexual dissatisfaction and discontent. “Ads do not sell sex—that would be counterproductive, if it meant that heterosexual women and men turned to one another and were gratified. What they sell is sexual discontent.”³⁴ Our dissatisfaction for our own body and for the other’s body makes that our sexual drives are redirected on material items and supports consumerism. At the same time, consumption (of goods, behaviours, lifestyles...) confers power. “What is on offer in all these adverts is a specific kind of power – the sexual power [...] to attract male attention and sometimes female envy.”³⁵ Sexual attraction becomes more about power relationships than about people.³⁶

In this way, the competition between men and women is exacerbated, even if there is no longer any biological reason for rigorous mate selection and ruthless struggle. In this context, desire increasingly becomes an instrument of power. Not, of course, the satisfaction of desire, but its paroxysm, the delaying of satisfaction and its redirection towards new objects of social competition.

Is a more playful and less competitive attitude possible? Desire is not about reproduction. It is not about social competition for limited resources (young and fertile women). It is about socialization, as we stated earlier, “contiguous with, not separated from, other forms of social engagement and wellness.”³⁷ In this case, “a sexbot makes us tell apart the related elements of beauty, sexual attractiveness, and social needs. Sexual discontent cannot be a reason for social competition and consumerism any longer. In this way, sexual satisfaction would gain a social and even political meaning.”³⁸ A gynoid cannot support competition and manipulation. A sexbot downsizes and limits the social function of sex by presenting it as an instrument of power that ignores the person. It can also change the perception of the female body and grant it a new freedom. Today’s society proposes the body as a primary source of women’s capital and power, while the cultural industry and advertising provide “the construction of a young, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is forever ‘up for it’.”³⁹

Biological and artificial bodies

A gynoid, like a sexbot, is created regardless of any biological purpose and social competition strategy. Biological-evolutionary causes of attraction are based on mate selection mechanisms. Waist-to-hip ratio, breast and face play a fundamental role in female attractiveness. They visually represent male-female dimorphism and are indicators of

reproductive capacity, age, child nurturance ability and physical health. Along with these traits, familiarity also plays an important role in attractiveness, since “we react positively to known things.”⁴⁰ But the imitation of secondary sexual characteristics is not enough to foster a human-robot interaction.

Visual cues have the same effect in women and in artificial or even fictional women. Szczuka and Krämer write that “people tend to respond to sexualized robots in almost the same way as they would respond to other humans (including reactions of sexual arousal).”⁴¹ Psychological tests and experiments suggest that interviewed men do not rate gynoids as more attractive than women, if asked explicitly. However, men implicitly rate gynoids as attractive as women.⁴² At the same time, interestingly enough, measuring the jealousy-related discomfort, women are more jealous of a woman competitor than of a gynoid if it is about sexual intercourse. But a woman-like robot becomes a dangerous competitor if other issues are involved. In some cases, “robots evoked the same or higher levels of jealousy-related discomfort (e.g., discomfort caused by feelings of inadequacy, discomfort caused by shared emotional and time resources).”⁴³ This proves that the “narrative” proposed by the gynoid is decisive.

We need more than exaggerated visual cues, we need familiarity, emotional elements, empathy, as well as the prospect of sharing something. We need to consider the attractiveness of the gynoid in a broader context along with other elements as beauty, empathy, familiarity and sharing of experiences (as Coeckelber says: “eating the same bread”). A body of a gynoid functions like a natural body without being one. It shows that sexual attraction as a mate selection mechanism can evolve towards differentiated behaviours, such as sociability, creativity and aesthetic appreciation.⁴⁴ Reproduction and social competition for survival (imposed by rigorous mate selection) are no longer the only goals of sexual attraction. For this reason, even the attraction is no longer attributable to any power

strategy. Thanks to exaptation (and not adaptation), desire originated art.⁴⁵ On the one hand, some gynoids can use their attractiveness to gain power (such as Ava in *Ex-Machina*) but are not *desirable* for that. On the other hand, other fictional gynoids suggest a relationship in which attraction is not a reason for competition. They are a product of consumerism which becomes an instrument to limit the pressures of consumer society. In doing so, the fictional gynoids introduce a new experience of desire as a playful and liberating form that entails an increase in freedom from social and economic pressures.

Wachowskis and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas* (2012) suggests a relationship between consumer society and artificial beings. Artificial beings are objects of consumerism and support and serve the consumer system. Sonmi is an artificial woman in the future New Seoul and works as a waitress or "fabricant."⁴⁶ She becomes the rebellious gynoid who will be considered the founder of a new religion and the heroine of the movement for egalitarian rights of natural and artificial beings. Her personal revolt (which becomes a social revolution) begins when she receives a clue from the past. Again, as in *Blade Runner*, but on a much more collective and melodramatic level, the discovery of the past changes the future. Memory is not just an individual asset but a collective project. Sonmi represents the case of an artificial being who carries human values and changes the future of an enlarged humanity. Sonmi is a product of the consumer society that serves consumers and increases consumerism. She is also the turning point for a new humanism that considers artificial and natural beings on the same level.

The fictional gynoids foreshow expectations we have of future robots and some cultures are more sensitive to the potential offered by artificial beings. I will take into consideration Japanese culture and the way in which robots and especially sexbots fit into that context, conveying peculiar cultural meanings, representing a possibility of freedom from social and economic pressures and expressing values such as conformity and dissent.

Artifice and innocence

Beauty and artifice do not always and everywhere have the same meaning and the same functions. The fictional gynoids reflect the social and cultural background. From a psychological point of view, we have to consider how robots are present in the culture, how they interact and how people feel their presence. Psychologist Jessica Szczuka writes that “future studies should also incorporate the cultural background of the participants as one potentially important determinant of the reactions to robotic romantic competitors.”⁴⁷ The social, cultural, and philosophical background has often been neglected by researchers more focused on human psychological reactions and a robot’s possible, technical features. A positive or negative attitude toward artificial beings, expressed by pop culture, determines their acceptance and value.⁴⁸ It is likely that sexbot’s attractiveness rating is biased by societal stereotypes and norm adherence⁴⁹ more than any other factor. For this reason, we also need philosophical, cultural and intercultural discussions in the future to evaluate the functions and limits of the attractiveness of robots in Western society and culture.

In Japan, interaction with artificial beings does not convey distrust. From the dolls to serve tea⁵⁰ to the thriving sex doll production, from cartoons of robots to cute doll-like depiction of manga and anime characters, Japanese have a positive image of non-natural bodies – they help and serve, such as the huge number of care robots working in Japan, including a service of escort dolls. In 2004, *Doll no Mori* [Forest of Dolls], opened a doll escort service in Tokyo. Beginning with the traditional call girl service, *Doll no Mori* switched to sex-doll deliveries. Labor costs were cut and the price of a session with a sex doll was the same as that with a human call girl. In 2005, the same service started in South Korea.⁵¹

The usual explanation for this confidence in artificial beings is that Shinto, the indigenous religion, infused with animism, makes no clear distinction between inanimate and organic beings. Coupled with a popular culture that has often presented its heroes in the form of robots, this justifies the fascination with artificial bodies.⁵² In fact, reality seems to be more complex. In Shinto mythology the sexuality of deities expresses the creative power of nature, and Shinto tradition offers an undeniably lusty exaltation of the corporeal side of existence and a celebration of the sexual body.⁵³ Along with this, Japan has developed a “cult of cuteness” which originates in a cultural need to be liked and accepted in society. Extreme formalism, appearance and “artificiality” in behavior and look are seen as social virtues in a context where politeness is a means to achieve social harmony.⁵⁴ The beauty of the body is thanks to (and not despite of) its artificiality. A doll-like appearance is socially reassuring, and physical beauty offers more than an artificial, controlled environment. Japanese culture has also developed a specific cult of cuteness. “*Kawaii* or cute essentially means childlike; it celebrates [...] innocent, pure, simple, genuine, [...] vulnerable, [...] inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances.”⁵⁵ It does not matter if *kawaii* is the result of a very artificial and anti-natural attitude. As Sharon Kinsella states, consumers may not be able to develop a relationship with people and may always attempt to develop them through cute objects.⁵⁶ Cute is above all about the recovery of a childlike physical, emotional and mental state.⁵⁷ Even if cute hints to innocence and naturalness, “it is in fact extremely artificial and stylized.”⁵⁸ A neotenic look, a childish round face and big eyes are the features of manga, anime and other fictional characters. Through plastic surgery, they can also be artificial alterations of the body. In any case, they are indicators of a psychological neoteny, or of a retention of youthful attitudes and behaviours. This psychological neoteny explains the Japanese appreciation for pop icons like Sion Sono’s girls in student uniform,⁵⁹ Lolicon, or pop idols.⁶⁰ This concept of beauty as a stylized and fully

artificial construct may explain the fascination with artificial beings. We will discuss this at the end of this chapter.

On the one hand, beauty grants a ludic evasion of the duties and responsibilities of life. On the other hand, sex is accepted without social stigma: “behind an austere façade dictated by strict codes of decorum, they are perfectly comfortable with sex.”⁶¹ Beauty, cuteness, and sexiness have a recreational and playful use. At the same time, they are institutional and tolerated instruments of dissent against the austere life and the responsibility imposed by work, family and society;⁶² in Japanese art “sex and dissent go hand in hand.”⁶³ The presence of substitute forms of social and sexual interaction offered by a cute, artificial body is more than welcome. In Japan, beauty, sexiness, artificiality, leisure and dissent can easily find a connection in the sexbot. This attitude has progressed in Japanese culture more easily, further and earlier than anywhere else.⁶⁴ We can expect sexbots to become popular in Western culture and also present in the Western society too, where the distrust for the robot sums up platonic distrust for the body and Christian contempt for artificiality.

There is no shortage of gynoids in Japanese pop culture. From movies to anime, from manga to dolls inspired by popular cartoons, we find a large number of fictional gynoids who are “protecting and nurturing humans.”⁶⁵ In these examples of pop culture, “the distinction between woman and machine is blurred” and “entails a displacement of traditional roles.”⁶⁶ Among the many possible examples, I take *Air Doll*, (2009) an underrated movie by Japanese director Hirokazu Koreeda. Based on the manga by Yoshiie Goda, it offers a poetic representation of the fate of an artificial being, Nozomi, who has become a human being. There is no reason for Nozomi to become a human being. Only constant closeness and relationship with a human can trigger transformation. The doll Nozomi is not only the sexual partner of Hideo, her owner, but also the confidant, a repository of

observations and conversations about life. Then something happens. She gets up and watches the rain fall from the window. Nozomi's first word, when she is transforming from an air doll into a real woman, is "beautiful". Transformation requires an aesthetic, not a cognitive attitude. However, Hideo fails to notice that Nozomi is now a real woman, and inflates her as a doll as she repeats to herself, "I am an air doll, a substitute for handling sexual desire". This is the point: artificial beings should not be substitutes for anybody. But what are they? And the question that is more challenging is: what are human beings? The movie, according to the director, addresses this question.⁶⁷ Nozomi tries to understand life and, above all, questions life and human beings, ageing and loneliness, with an innocent and childlike attitude. She wonders, "What does it mean to get old?" "It means ageing and getting closer to death". "Death?" "Yes. Losing life". "Life..." she says, perplexed. Only an artificial being could offer such a detached and simplified point of view. Wonder is at the origin of everyday life just as, according to Aristotle, wonder is at the origin of philosophizing. The movie presents a gentle overlapping of natural and artificial life. For example, Nozomi notices the seams of stockings on a woman's legs and mistakes her for a doll. But this innocence opens up new perspectives on humanness, its characteristics and, possibly, its limits. Nozomi realizes she is empty. She collects empty bottles that clearly allude to her existential condition. However, in her emptiness the questions of everyone else resonate. Her owner Hideo, once he realizes that she is now alive and has a heart, feels uncomfortable and begs her to turn into a doll again. "This is the reason I chose you: you had no heart". Hideo's choice of a woman over whom he has complete control hides the relationship of power. Nozomi reflects on her condition and in the end says, "I am empty" and "I don't mind if I am a substitute". But more than a substitute (the human point of view), she appears to be an extremely simplified and stylized model of human existence. Junichi, her co-worker from the video store, confesses, "I am empty, too". He was dumped by his

girlfriend. Society and sexual relationships, as they entails power relationships, create loneliness and emptiness. Emptiness represents the existential dimension of the human being, its lack of definition. Who is now the emptier one? Hideo, Junichi, or Nozomi? Where is the difference between artificial and natural beings? What makes a full human? This is most visible in the artificial one, in a pure and refined form. The poem recited by Nozomi suggests an answer: “Life is so, nobody can fulfill it alone. We will fulfill each other”. This is not a solution but a starting point, like the seeds released from Nozomi’s body, which fly and reach human beings.

The artificial being represents a kind of degree zero of humanness. The movie is about loneliness and the meaning of being a human. From the doll’s point of view, the perspective seems to be clearer. Even her creator (a god-like and compassionate sex doll craftsman) has no answer, except the observation that a doll’s life is not too different from a human one; both end in death and destruction of the body. No one has a definitive answer, but the question resonates through the empty doll, not through the “full” humans.

Nozomi is a cute girl, dressed in the “cute” schoolgirl uniform or French-maid attire. According to the *kawaii* aesthetics, she is innocent and inexperienced. In fact, a gynoid was created yesterday. This is the case with Ava. She wants to see the world outside the laboratory and her curiosity becomes rebellion and revenge. On the contrary, Nozomi’s eyes open to a world full of wonders and her reaction is different. From an evolutionary point of view, her childlike traits of playfulness, her immaturity, her psychological neoteny may indeed be valuable characteristics. Nozomi is flexible and adaptable to a world that requires flexibility, with no definitions. Humans are much less flexible, unable to wonder and empty as she is. Nozomi offers a more playful attitude, open to the possibilities of a new and changing world. She makes mistakes out of innocence. She kills her boyfriend because she misunderstood his statement, “I am also empty”, and she tries to inflate him. However, her

childish, cute, and neotenic psyche is adaptive. On the contrary, Ava takes advantage of her beauty and deceives her savior. Gynoids must share something. It is not just the right to limited resources, which is what most Western gynoids aspire to and what justifies competition. They can also share the endangered nature of beings whose essence cannot be grasped by any instrumental definition.

The hollow tree

In Western pop culture, we generally expect the gynoid to be full and able to make sense of our longings. Then we are ready to blame the lack of interiority of the robot. As in the case of Alicia, we notice the deception of a robot or a human mistake. In fact, our desires cannot be fulfilled by anything other than us. The gynoid is empty and our voice can resound in her emptiness. As one critic writes, “[Corry’s] need for Alicia might have been motivated not by love but by loneliness.”⁶⁸ In fact, we can say this only if we have a clear definition of love. If we are watching a movie about love, we most likely do not have one. We are watching to learn one. We do not have a definition of love and we do not have a definition of a human being.

At the beginning of Wong Kar Wai’s movie *2046* (2005), Chow, the male main character, falls in love with a woman and says, “I can’t stop wondering if she loved me or not. But I never found out. Maybe her answer was like that no one else would ever know”. Part of the movie is about Tak, a character in Chow’s novel, who is traveling on a futuristic train from 2046. He, too, was in love and, on the train, he met a gynoid who looked just like his beloved. He thought the gynoid might give him the answer. He tells her an old story, the same one re-told by the gynoid shortly after: “Do you know what people did in the old times when they had secrets? They’d climb a mountain, find a tree, carve a hole in it, and

whisper the secret into the hole, then cover it with mud. That way, nobody else would ever discover it.”⁶⁹ Soon, Tak falls in love with the gynoid and asks her to leave with him. “Tak hopes that this android will give him answers to his present questions. It turns out that the androids themselves are incarnations of the model of time that Wong had announced in *Days of Being Wild*: they delay the present in order to re-enact it in the future.”⁷⁰ The gynoid neither accepts nor refuses, but seems to understand him and replies, “I’ll be your tree! Tell me, and nobody else will ever know”. The gynoid is like a hollow tree, she is empty and her emptiness captures our words and does not tell them further. A gynoid has no answer.

A gynoid represents who we are in a simpler and more stylized way. We do not need to humanize them. The roles are reversed. She establishes the patterns of a possible human relationship and, in doing so, suggests what is human in a world that has no room for humanity. This is clearly emphasized by Ackbar Abbas: “In the novel *Jing Wen* reappears as an android, but the novel is not a fairytale about how love can humanize even androids. On the contrary, it is the android figure that becomes the model for human love, insofar as she is programmed to respond to and even reciprocate feelings, but always with a slight *delay*, always later. Thus, when the Japanese lover says to her ‘Run away with me,’ he never knows her answer. She seems to show no emotion because her answer can only come later. And this sets the pattern for relationships between human lovers as well. [...] This is the lesson of the android – that in love it is always either too early or too late, never just on the appointed hour.”⁷¹

This is what we can learn from a fictional gynoid. She is not supposed to repeat our words. As a substitute for human interlocutors, she is a failure. A gynoid is our silence. She re-enacts what we are in a magnified, pure and refined form. She stylizes and simplifies our complex, human world.

- ¹ Rod Serling (creator), *The Lonely*, in “The Twilight Zone” (season one, 1959).
- ² Serling, *The Lonely*.
- ³ Paolo Euron, “Uncanny Beauty. Aesthetics of Companionship, Love and Sex Robots”, *Artificial Life* 28 (1) (2022).
- ⁴ See Paolo Euron, “Uncanny Beauty”, 115-6.
- ⁵ Jessica Szczuka “Negative and Positive Influences on the Sensations Evoked by Artificial Sex Partners: A Review of Relevant Theories, Recent Findings, and Introduction of the Sexual Interaction Illusion Model”, in *AI Love You. Developments in Human-Robot Intimate Relationships*, edited by Yuefang Zhou and Martin H. Fischer (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2019).
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19734-6_1.
- ⁶ Mark Coeckelbergh, “Artificial Companions: Empathy and Vulnerability Mirroring in Human-Robot Relations” in «Studies in Ethics, Law, and Technology», 4 (3) (2010): 7.
- ⁷ Mark Coeckelbergh, “Artificial Companions”, 5.
- ⁸ *The Lonely*.
- ⁹ See Paolo Euron, “Uncanny Beauty”, 120; Paolo Euron, *Aesthetics, Theory and Interpretation of the Literary Work* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 2-3.
- ¹⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b in *Aristotle’s Works*, edited by W.D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908-1952).
- ¹¹ See Paolo Euron, *Aesthetics, Theory and Interpretation*, 16-17.
- ¹² Marc Scott Zicree, *The Twilight Zone Companion* (New York: Bantam, 1982), 38.
- ¹³ Aeon Skoble, “Rationality and Choice in ‘Nick of Time’”, in *Philosophy in the Twilight Zone*, edited by Noel Carroll and Lester Hunt (New Jersey: Wiley, 2009), 152.
- ¹⁴ Charles Klayman, “True Love or Artificial Love?” in *The Twilight Zone and Philosophy*, edited by Heather Rivera and Alexander Hooke (Peru: Open Court, 2019), 58.
- ¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism” in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, edited by Walter Kaufman (Wiral: Meridian, 1989), 351.
- ¹⁶ Martin Grams, *The Twilight Zone: Unlocking the Door to a Television Classic* (New York: OTR, 2014), 311.
- ¹⁷ Rosalind Gill, “Supersexualize Me!: Advertising and the ‘Midriffs’” in *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, edited by Feona Attwood (London: Tauris & Co. 2009), 99.
- ¹⁸ Rosalind Gill, “Supersexualize Me!”, 104.
- ¹⁹ Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* (1982).
- ²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 240.
- ²¹ Scott, *Blade Runner*.
- ²² Scott, *Blade Runner*.
- ²³ See Paul Sammon, *Future Noir. The Making of Blade Runner* (New York: Harper Publishers, 1996). Viewer don’t like the idea that Deckart is a replicant. “Audiences don’t like their movie heroes being revealed as something less than human-no identification value, you see. [...] Furthermore, the cinematic notion of Deckart as a replicant originated with screenwriter Hampton Fancher. “The idea of Deckart really being an android sort of invented itself. [...] See how human you really are, because we can always be better at being human. It was a philosophical challenge, really.” Quote on pages 359-360.
- ²⁴ Scott, *Blade Runner*.
- ²⁵ Paolo Euron, “Uncanny Beauty”, 110.
- ²⁶ see Paolo Euron, “Uncanny Beauty”, 110.
- ²⁷ Charles Baudelaire, “In Praise of Cosmetics,” in *The Painter of Modern Life*, edited by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1965), 31.
- ²⁸ See Rosalind Gill, “Supersexualize Me!”, 103; and see also Naomi Wolff, *The Beauty Myth. How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper, 2002), 134.

- ²⁹ See Norman Su, Amanda Lazar, Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell, “Of Dolls and Men: Anticipating Sexual Intimacy with Robots” in «ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction» 26 (3) (2019): 2. [Doi.org/10.1145/3301422](https://doi.org/10.1145/3301422).
- ³⁰ Norman Su et al, “Of Dolls and Men”, 27.
- ³¹ Norman Su et al, “Of Dolls and Men”, 27.
- ³² Norman Su et al, “Of Dolls and Men”, 2.
- ³³ Euron, “Uncanny Beauty”, 119.
- ³⁴ Naomi Wolff, *The Beauty Myth*, 143.
- ³⁵ Feona Attwood, *Mainstreaming Sex*, 103.
- ³⁶ In pop culture, there are no geographic limits about how women can use their sexual attraction to gain power, so that they can even cope with political power (Luc Besson, *Anna*, 2019) and criminal power (Marc Vigil et al., *Diablo Guardián*, 2018).
- ³⁷ Norman Su et al, “Of Dolls and Men”, 2.
- ³⁸ Paolo Euron, “Uncanny Beauty”, 119.
- ³⁹ Attwood, *Mainstreaming Sex*, 98.
- ⁴⁰ Jessica Szczuka and Nicole Krämer, “Not Only the Lonely — How Men Explicitly and Implicitly Evaluate the Attractiveness of Sex Robots in Comparison to the Attractiveness of Women, and Personal Characteristics Influencing This Evaluation” in «Multimodal Technologies and Interaction» 1, (3) (2017): 3. [Http://doi:10.3390/mti1010003](http://doi:10.3390/mti1010003).
- ⁴¹ Szczuka, “Negative and Positive Influences”, 7.
- ⁴² Jessica Szczuka and Nicole Krämer, “Not Only the Lonely”, 15.
- ⁴³ Jessica Szczuka and Nicole Krämer, “Jealousy 4.0? An empirical study on jealousy-related discomfort of women evoked by other women and gynoid robots” in «Paladyn, Journal of Behavioural Robotics», 9 (1) (2018): 323.
- ⁴⁴ See Anjan Chatterjee, *The Aesthetic Brain. How we Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art*, (Oxford University Press, 2014), 111-112.
- ⁴⁵ Anjan Chatterjee, *The Aesthetic Brain*, 112.
- ⁴⁶ David Mitchell’s novel *Cloud Atlas* [Random, 2004] offers more details to understand fabricants. “Fabricants have no earliest memories. [...] Fabricants don’t have personalities. This fallacy is propagated for the comfort of purebloods. [...] To enslave an individual troubles your consciences. [...] To enslave a clone is no more troubling than owning the latest six-wheeler ford, ethically.” 185 and 187.
- ⁴⁷ Jessica Szczuka and Nicole Krämer “Jealousy 4.0?”, 333.
- ⁴⁸ Jessica Szczuka and Nicole Krämer, “Not Only the Lonely”, 15.
- ⁴⁹ Jessica Szczuka and Nicole Krämer, “Not Only the Lonely”, 12.
- ⁵⁰ David Levy, *Love + Sex with Robots. The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships* [Collins, 2007] p. 5; Anthony Ferguson *The Sex Doll: A History* [Mc Farland, 2010], 74.
- ⁵¹ David Levy, *Love + Sex with Robots*, p. 250; David Levy, “The Ethics of Robot Prostitutes”, in *Robot Ethics: The Ethical and Social Implications of Robotics*, Edited by Patrick Lin, Keith Abney and George Bekey (Cambridge: MIT, 2017), 224; Ian Yeoman, *2050 - Tomorrow Tourism* (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2012), 121.
- ⁵² David Levy, *Love + Sex with Robots*, 140.
- ⁵³ See Dani Cavallaro *Japanese Aesthetics and Anime. The Influence of Tradition* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2013), 56-57.
- ⁵⁴ Dani Cavallaro, *Japanese Aesthetics and Anime*, 141.
- ⁵⁵ Sharon Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan” in *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*, edited by Lise Skov and Brian Moeran (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 220.
- ⁵⁶ Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan”, 228.
- ⁵⁷ Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan”, 250.
- ⁵⁸ Kinsella, “Cuties in Japan”, 250.
- ⁵⁹ See Masahiro Morioka, *Confessions of a Frigid Man: A Philosopher’s Journey into the Hidden Layers of Men’s Sexuality* (Tokyo: Waseda University, 2017), especially the unsettling chapter “Why am I Attracted to School Uniforms?” We should keep in mind that Morioka is a professor of philosophy at Waseda University, Japan, and his book is an academic essay.

⁶⁰ See Patrick Galbraith, *The Otaku Encyclopedia* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2013).

⁶¹ Nicholas Bornoff, “Sex and Consumerism: The Japanese State of the Arts”, in *Consuming Bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art*, edited by Fran Lloyd (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 41.

⁶² Kinsella, *Japanese Aesthetics*, 241.

⁶³ Nicholas Bornoff, “Sex and Consumerism”, 44.

⁶⁴ See Nicholas Bornoff, “Sex and Consumerism”.

⁶⁵ Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine. A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 217.

⁶⁶ Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine*, 217-218.

⁶⁷ Grant Watson, “Review Air Doll” in *Fiction Machine*.

⁶⁸ <https://fictionmachine.com/2019/10/01/review-air-doll-2009/>

⁶⁸ Charles Klayman, “True Love or Artificial Love?”, 57.

⁶⁹ Wong Kar wai, 2046 (2004).

⁷⁰ Thorsten Botz-Bornstain, “Metonymy, Mneme, and Anamnesis in Wong Kar-wai”, in *A Companion to Wong Kar wai*, edited by Martha Nochimson (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 412.

⁷¹ Ackbar Abbas, “Wong Kar-wai’s Cinema of Repetition” in Nochimson, *A Companion to Wong Kar Wai*, 127-128.