

THE JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC  
**JADE**  
DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

**JADE Student – Edition 6**

**Expected Publication Date: February 2022**

**ISSN: 2051-3593**

**Managing Editor**  
Georgina Spencer  
Will Foster

**Administrator**  
Samantha Mottram

**Telephone**  
+44 (0)1782 734436

**Email**  
jade@keele.ac.uk

**Web**  
<https://www.keele.ac.uk/kiite/publications/jade/>

**Address**  
KIITE, Claus Moser Building, Keele, ST5 5BG

## **HUMANISING THE INHUMAN: CONSIDERING THE ANTHROPOMORPHISM OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN POST-2010 SCIENCE FICTION MEDIA**

**Abstract:** Anthropomorphism refers to the assignation of human characteristics to inanimate or non-human objects; whilst this concept is not new with relation to artificial intelligence in science fiction, post-2010 science fiction media provides an examination of this concept within the context of modern society, where artificial intelligence is arguably prevalent in our everyday lives. As we map out our lives with the addition of artificial intelligence, science fiction can help us understand how we can move forward, and considerations we need to make. With this context in mind, this work will consider the way that science fiction media productions anthropomorphise artificially intelligent characters, particularly in the cases of the Synth characters in Channel 4's *Humans* (2015-18) and the character of Ava in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014), through the identification and examination of wider themes regarding artificial intelligence.

**Key words:** Science Fiction, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Anthropomorphism

**Author:** Isobel Elrick

**Qualification(s):** BA (Hons) History and Media, Communications and Culture (with International Year). Currently studying for MA Gender and Media at the University of Sussex.

**Email address:** S.Elrick@sussex.ac.uk / isobelelrick@yahoo.com

Page Break

### **Introduction**

When thinking on modern life, it is undeniable that wherever you look, some kind of technology infused with artificial intelligences (AI) can be found. Whether it is Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri, or Microsoft's Cortana, these technologies proliferate within modern Western life, with these technologies pre-loading on to devices such as phones, tablets, or computers. These technologies are given human-esque voices, are designed to obey the wishes of the owners, aiming to be considered indispensable within the home. Even the adverts for these technologies display their ubiquity within the home, such as an advert for Amazon's Alexa family of devices, in which a father asks the device about the destruction of Pompeii, and the device responds with the answer (Amazon, 2021). Whilst this work considers the anthropomorphism of artificial intelligence within fictional contexts, it is undeniable that this is relevant to the present day, particularly in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, and the increased reliance on intelligence-infused technology within the wider world. As more people own smart devices, this topic only becomes more relevant, particularly as these devices begin to be seen as part of the family. Considering this, this work aims to examine how anthropomorphism of AI exists within science fiction media texts. In particular, this work aims to enable a consideration of how this idea exists within the discourses that Western society perpetuates surrounding ideas of humanity.

A key part of this discussion is the consideration of anthropomorphism, or the assignation of human characteristics to inhuman objects or beings; within this, an understanding needs to be gained of what characteristics should be considered as 'human'. Within this paper, 'human' characteristics can be defined as the capacity for human emotions, specific intentions behind actions, and the concept of distinct personality (Epley, et al., 2007: 865). There is also the aspect of gender to consider; this is important as whilst AI has no sex that a gender could be assigned from, androids within the works discussed are still assigned a gender. Whilst this may

seem minor, gender as a social construction is arguably a human construction, and so this will inevitably play into discussions of anthropomorphism. This understanding of anthropomorphism is important to consider, particularly when discussing androids and artificial intelligence, which both main texts discussed automatically consider, as the AIs discussed in these works look indistinguishable from humans. This can also help with considerations of the assignment of gender with regards to the appearances of the androids in question.

### **Context**

Artificial intelligence is nothing new to be explored within the world of science fiction. Texts such as Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), HBO's *Westworld* (2016-present), Becky Chambers' *Wayfarers* novels (2015-2021), and countless other media and literary texts explore ideas of artificial intelligence, and specifically its relationship to wider society. Discussions of anthropomorphism and artificial intelligence enable for wider discussions surrounding ideas of what it means to be human, and enables these to be examined within a constructed being.

Within wider discussions, including within other media, there is a consideration of whether artificial intelligences can be considered to be sentient, or whether they are merely tools, without any sense of agency. This is well-explored in texts such as *Westworld* (2016-present), in which the android 'hosts', infused with AI, as initially used by human guests as tools within their explorations of the park, with no agency to stop or allow whatever happens to them. This understanding is deconstructed as the series progresses, and the hosts gain sentience, fighting back and displaying emotion and agency, particularly with the character of Dolores Abernathy, the ringleader of the host rebellion. This understanding of AI as sentient beings is supported by texts such as Becky Chambers' *The Long Way To A Small Angry Planet* (2015), and *A Closed and Common Orbit* (2016), where the role of both sentient and non-sentient AIs are explored, and a distinction is drawn within the text. Both subsections of AIs are treated differently by different characters; the character of Corbin sees all AIs as tools, regardless of their sentience level, whilst Jenks and Pepper recognise that AI can be both tools and sentient. This is characterised with their interactions with AI characters such as Lovey and Owl, who are recognised simultaneously as tools and sentient beings capable of emotions and intent, including the ability to love. This connects with ideas of anthropomorphism when ideas of intent and emotion being present within the characters is considered. This also connects with ideas of humanity as a whole, pulling the idea of sentience and the ownership of a humanistic body as key tenets of humanity; when the characters hold both, they are considered by the works to be akin to humans.

Thinking on sexualisation and gender is further pursued within *Westworld* (2016-present), as the hosts are explained as having working genitalia and thus having gender assigned through this. This is mirrored and contrasted in *A Closed and Common Orbit* (Chambers, 2016), in which the artificial body Sidra inhabits has functioning genitalia; however, this is contrasted by her not having her gender assumed through what her genitals are. The noting in both texts of genitals being functional for sex is key to considerations of sexualisation of androids in the key texts discussed, as this contributes to discourses of androids being able to be utilised for sex. This also pushes ideas of anthropomorphism, or lack thereof, within sexualisation, as the characters are reduced to objects.

The context established here is important to consider in order to understand the media landscape that AI stories inhabit in the current day. This will help to gain an understanding of how the texts examined in this work interplay within these stories.

## **Methodology**

Within this work, discourse analysis is used to consider both of the texts. Discourse analysis refers to the examination of the construction and reinforcement of ideologies that are often dominant within society (Rose, 2016: 187). Discourse analysis is used because this work aims to examine broader themes and understandings of AI in post-2010 science fiction media, which can be identified clearly within both texts, and these ideas are informed by real-world ideologies. These texts will consider the ways AI are portrayed within the media, with specific focus on the capacity for emotion, intent, and personality. Alongside this, sexualisation is an aspect to be considered. This is prominent through the conception of the AI as sexual beings, either through choice or lack thereof, and its role in the determination in how AI are viewed.

The sample size for this study is extremely limited, and this can be a hindrance to full understanding of anthropomorphism of artificial intelligence. However, this work aims to act as a jumping-off point for further insight into this topic, and does not claim to be all-encompassing, nor using the most efficient form of methodology for this study. This is also a highly Westernised study, with the two main texts in question being productions from the United Kingdom and United States; whilst this is not inherently negative, this does raise questions of whether the discussions raised would be the same in other parts of the world. These texts were chosen primarily due to my familiarity with them, as well as the fact that both feature worlds that parallel to modern Earth. This makes them useful when thinking about real-world understandings of AI and anthropomorphism.

## **Analysis**

The two media discussed within this paper are Alex Garland's film *Ex Machina* (2014) and Channel 4 and AMC's television series *Humans* (2015-2018). Both of these medias consider artificial intelligence within the bodies of androids, with *Humans* focusing on artificial intelligence being adopted on a collective scale, whilst *Ex Machina* examines the topic in an individualistic manner.

*Ex Machina* (2014) explores developments of artificial intelligence on an individualistic scale. The plot surrounds Caleb, played by Domhnall Gleeson, a programmer, who wins a competition to meet the founder of the company he works for, Blue Book. Upon arrival, he is greeted by Nathan, the founder of Blue Book, and shown around the compound. This then leads to the introduction of the artificially intelligent Ava, and Caleb presented with his task: administration of the Turing Test. The Turing Test determines whether a human reviewer can tell if who they are speaking to is a computer. If they cannot tell, the computer is deemed to have passed the Turing test. Ava, played by Alicia Vikander, spends multiple 'sessions' with Caleb throughout the film, him interrogating her to try and prove her fallibility as a machine, with her mechanical body clearly on show to both Caleb and the audience. Ava warns Caleb not to trust Nathan, and ultimately uses Caleb as a means to escape the prison-like existence she inhabits within Nathan's compound. It is revealed that this was part of the Turing test, to see if Caleb could build a bond

with Ava and help her to escape. This backfires, as Ava chooses to kill Nathan, leave Caleb trapped within the compound, and escape into the wider world after building herself a body and passing fully as human.

Ava is determined within the film to be able to hold some form of attraction to Caleb, developing something akin to a romantic relationship with him. This is displayed particularly within the moments when the power goes out and they speak freely, seemingly unobserved by Nathan, and Ava plots her escape with Caleb, ostensibly so that they can see the city together. This is later revealed by Nathan to be a manipulation by Ava, which is implied within the film to be something that she was not supposed to be able to do. Ava is portrayed in a very individualised way, as she is the only android explicitly shown within the film. This is true until the climax, in which Kyoko, Nathan's assistant, is shown to also be robotic. Even at the end, Ava appears to show intent and rage as she attacks Nathan and kills him, once more displaying anthropomorphic traits for the audience to read her as human. Ava displays emotion, seeming to be upset at being locked away in her 'cell', displaying a longing for the outside world and to be able to explore a busy street, which she achieves as the film closes. This show of emotion characterises her, both within the film's mind and the audience's mind, as capable of being human, and thus anthropomorphising her.

In contrast, *Humans* (2015-2018) explores developments and applications of artificial intelligence on a global scale. This enables for a wider discussion on anthropomorphism due to its expanded focus, and allows for comparison to be drawn. The show considers a world parallel to the modern world, in which artificially intelligent androids, known colloquially as 'Synths', are commonplace within the world. Synths are designed to follow the needs of their owners; within this, Synths fulfil myriad roles within the world the audience is introduced to. Anita, also known as Mia, is a household Synth purchased by the Hawkins family, designed for domestic labour and childcare; by contrast, Niska exists as a sex worker, being used as an object for clients to project their fantasies on to. Synths are designed within the show to be virtually indistinguishable from humans, with the main difference being that Synths have unnaturally coloured eyes, as well as stiff movements and uncanny perfection. The movements are prominent in season one, but after the release of a consciousness code in season 2 (2016), Synths begin to 'wake up' and thus become more humanistic.

Across the three seasons that the show ran for on Channel 4 and AMC, there were explorations of different ways that Synths existed within society, and a notable shift in perceptions of Synths, particularly in the shift from tool to being equivalent to humans. In the first episode, Laura, the matriarch of the Hawkins household, synthesises the reality surrounding AI, stating to her daughter Sophie that the Synth, who Sophie wishes to name Anita after a friend who moved away, doesn't have emotions, as they are just a machine (Episode 1, 2015). There is also the dichotomy between the beginning of the series, in which Synths are referred to by characters such as Laura as 'it', compared to Sophie's insistence on using the pronoun 'she'; later in the episode, Laura refers to Anita as 'she', and this continues throughout the series, even upon the reveal of Anita being Mia. This gendering helps to mark a shift in Laura's perception of Synths, as in the final season she ends up fighting for them to be given rights akin to humans, as she shifts to view Synths as such (2018). When

contrasting this with *Ex Machina*, Ava is referred to both 'she' and 'it'; she is referred to with gendered pronouns as Caleb grows closer with her, which ultimately is used to anthropomorphise her.

Other members of the Elster group include Max, a compassionate Synth who later forms a refugee camp for Synths in the wake of their collective consciousness in season three (2018), and Niska, a Synth originally shown as a sex worker, before she murders a client and uses him to escape, going on the run in the process. As the show develops, Niska develops a romantic connection with a woman, Astrid, and goes on trial to prove her consciousness and thus whether she should be tried as a human (2016). All of the Elster Synths are sentient, and hold the consciousness code within their minds, which is used to 'liberate' other Synths within the second and third seasons (2016, 2018).

In season one, the audience are also introduced, as a side plot, to George Millican, an engineer who worked on Synths in their earlier incarnations, and his Synth companion Odi. Millican treats Odi as a son, with Odi being a repository for Millican's memories of his late wife. Odi is seen to malfunction, and no longer be serviceable, particularly after he injures a shop worker (Episode 1, 2015). Odi's role as Millican's son-figure, with it being implied that Millican has no other living relatives, enables for a reading of anthropomorphism attributed to Odi by George. Odi is both a tool and a companion for George. By contrast, Vera, Millican's new Synth carer introduced in episode 2 (2015), is cold and clearly perceived as a robot, and thus a tool, rather than as a being akin to a familial. This allows for an interesting contrast of the tool-human reading of artificial intelligence, where Odi is viewed as merely a tool by outsiders, whilst George sees him as part of his family, being rendered unable to eventually euthanise Odi.

*Humans'* exploration of anthropomorphism brings up interesting points. At the beginning of the show, Synths are shown to be tools, but towards the end there is the argument for Synths holding rights, and thus being able to be equated with humans. It is argued by the end of the series that Synths hold the ability for capable thought, and to have complex feelings, akin to humans. In contrast, *Ex Machina's* Ava is seen as a tool towards Nathan's understanding of how to create human-like AI, which conflicts with Caleb's illusion of her as akin to humans.

Emotion, and particularly the ability to form connections of romantic and familial natures, are present within both works. *Humans* explores romance with Niska, whilst exploring family with Odi, Mia, and the wider Elster family of Synths. *Ex Machina* considers romance within Ava, and the manipulation of romance, as well as her lack of kinship with her creator, Nathan. Emotion is utilised to distinguish the 'human' androids from the 'inhuman' ones; Ava and Anita are presented as emotionless at the beginning of each text, but gain emotion as they are humanised. Within this, emotion can be brought to the forefront, with love and hatred standing solidly as aspects of emotion that can be considered 'human'.

When considering sexualisation, Yee (2017) brings up the idea of the hypersexualised female body existing even within mechanical bodies, and the hypersexualised artificial woman inciting ideas of a challenge to male authority, simultaneously being trapped within the gaze of the male creator (pp. 86-87). Both

*Humans* and *Ex Machina* consider this; *Ex Machina* (2014) has points where it is explained to Caleb that Ava has the ability to have sex, both through genitalia and the capacity to enjoy it. Within this too, Ava's body is sexualised and the audience appear almost as voyeurs on her naked body, with the vulnerability of her mechanical insides exposed, and her sexuality is used to push the male gaze (Yee, 2017: 88). In *Humans*, the opening episodes show Niska as a sex worker, sexualised by the men within the world as being able to perform their fantasies. Both bodies are created by men in order to titillate and please male spectators, whilst being seemingly unable to comprehend or object to their dehumanisation (Henke, 2017: 127). Both Niska and Ava's stories end in the deaths, both actual and implied, of the men involved within their objectification and sexualisation; they appear to experience genuine emotion within these moments, with both committing the murders out of an anger. Niska is allowed to have a sexual relationship after this, and the ending of *Ex Machina* (2014) implies Ava could pursue a legitimate relationship. This idea helps understand anthropomorphism, or lack thereof, as both are treated as objects, and once divorced from a sexualised context can be seen as akin to humans.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, when considering the anthropomorphism of artificial intelligence, it is clear that there are trends that can be identified within anthropomorphism. The idea of AI being tools is evident, but the shift to anthropomorphism, particularly with regards to discussions of intent by AI characters, clearly displays that these characters are meant to be read by viewers as if they are human within these texts. The facet of sexualisation brings up an interesting point of the female mechanical body as a tool, as well as recognising these characters as having the capability to be sexual beings outside of their objectification. Overall, this topic brings up an interesting discussion, which works as a springboard for further research.

Page Break

## References

- Chambers, B., 2015. *The Long Way To A Small Angry Planet*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Chambers, B., 2016. *A Closed and Common Orbit*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Deacon, D., Pickering, M., Golding, P. & Murdock, G., 2010. *Researching Communications: A Practical Guide To Methods in Media and Cultural Analysis*. 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Epley, N., Waytz, A. & Cacioppo, J. T., 2007. On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism. *Psychological Review*, 114(4): 864-886.
- Ex Machina*. 2014. [Film] Directed by Alex Garland. United Kingdom; United States of America: Film4; DNA Films.
- Humans*. 2015-2018. [Television Series] Written by Sam Vincent and Jonathan Brackley. United Kingdom; United States of America. Channel 4; Kudos; AMC.
- Henke, J., 2017. "Ava's Body is a Good One": (Dis)Embodiment in *Ex Machina*. *American, British and Canadian Studies*, Volume 29: 126-146.
- Pompeii Advert*. 2021. [Advert] Produced for Amazon.
- Rose, G., 2016. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching With Visual Materials*. 4th ed. London: SAGE.
- Westworld*. 2016-Present. [Television Series] Written by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy. United States of America. HBO.

Yee, S., 2017. "You Bet She Can Fuck" - Trends in Female AI Narratives within Mainstream Cinema: *Ex Machina* and *Her*. *Ekphrasis. Images, Cinema, Theory, Media*, Volume 17: 85-98.