

A Lack of Joi: Hegemonic Femininity and the Male Gaze in *Blade Runner: 2049*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the 2017 film *Blade Runner: 2049* reinforces a patriarchal viewpoint utilizing hegemonic femininity and the male gaze as theoretical approaches. The holographic character Joi's appearance and interactions with the male protagonist K reflects hegemonic femininity, which adds to how the film's women characters reaffirm the centrality of K and gender stereotypes that prevent this sequel from reflecting any expected progress since the release of the original *Blade Runner* in 1982.

Keywords: *Blade Runner*, hegemonic femininity, male gaze, gender stereotypes, film

Una falta de joi: la feminidad hegemónica y la mirada masculina en *Blade Runner: 2049*

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina cómo la película *Blade Runner: 2049* de 2017 refuerza un punto de vista patriarcal utilizando la feminidad hegemónica y la mirada masculina como enfoques teóricos. La apariencia del personaje holográfico Joi y las interacciones con el protagonista masculino K reflejan la feminidad hegemónica, lo que se suma a cómo los personajes femeninos de la película reafirman la centralidad de K y los estereotipos de género que impiden que esta secuela refleje

cualquier progreso esperado desde el lanzamiento del *Blade Runner* original en mil novecientos ochenta y dos.

Palabras clave: *Blade Runner*, feminidad hegemónica, mirada masculina, estereotipos de género, cine

乔伊的缺乏：《银翼杀手2049》中的女性气质与男性凝视

摘要

本文分析了2017年电影《银翼杀手2049》如何利用霸权女性气质 (hegemonic femininity) 和男性凝视作为理论方法来强化父权制观点。全息角色乔伊 (Joi) 的出现以及与男主角K的互动反映了霸权女性气质，这有助于解释电影的女性角色如何重申K的中心地位和性别刻板印象，这种性别刻板印象让这部续集无法反映任何自1982年原版《银翼杀手》上映后所期望的进展。

关键词：银翼杀手，霸权女性气质，男性凝视，性别刻板印象，电影

The 2017 film *Blade Runner: 2049*, the sequel to Ridley Scott's 1982 now-classic film *Blade Runner*, tells the story of K (played by Ryan Gosling), a replicant "blade runner" for the Los Angeles Police Department tasked with hunting down and destroying rogue replicants. While on a case, K discovers the remains of a replicant who died during childbirth, proving that female replicants are capable of biological reproduction. This narrative and the prominent fe-

male characters that revolve around the main character K underscore women's status within the fictional future depicted, and the actual society in which it is produced.

Though the film presents itself as an exploration of what defines a human, the artificial humans are constructed products that perform stereotypical ideas of gender, with the depiction of its female characters falling passively within tired gendered roles that follow heteronormative patriarchal expectations. Although the negative portrayal of its female characters gained the attention of critics (Gush, Richards, Smith), alternate readings of this aspect of the film called such criticisms "facile," arguing that the film actually served as an "overt criticism of such a society" (Shanahan 173), with further castigation of the film's negative reviews as "completely missing that the emphasis on the male perspective is meant to highlight its destructiveness and signal its imminent destruction" (Parker-Flynn 73). These alternate takes on the film appear to read more into the text's exploration of gender than the narrative itself is concerned with; gender roles that appear in the film are what are already expected rather than interrogated. The lack of truly resistant and intentionally alternative portrayals of gender negates these claims. For example, K plays the assumed masculine hero to the typical Hollywood standards. Further, there is no evidence in the film itself that societal gender structure will be dismantled. Any intentionality of a feminist agenda remains absent in the narrative itself. The poor treatment of women, especially, is never called out by any character in the film or even challenged nonverbally. Thus, the film provides no palpable commentary itself supporting claims that defend the film as actually being pro-woman, only an absence of support for a feminist agenda and lack of female characters who act apart from the male protagonist's narrative.

An interrogation of *Blade Runner: 2049*'s depiction of its female characters using a feminist perspective serves as an appropriate way to explore how the film's failure to engage substantially with those characters actually reinforces gender stereotypes. When viewed and approached through the lenses of hegemonic femininity and the male gaze, the film ultimately reinforces regressive beliefs about women. By doing so, it upholds patriarchy, a form of social system that "imposes masculinity and femininity character stereotypes in society which strengthen the iniquitous power relations between men and women" (Rawat 43).

The current inquiry employs these theories to unpack how the film, set in a near future, fails to present strong women characters who determine their own fate, which in turn supports a Hollywood-based status quo in which women serve as ancillary stereotypes rather than true agency needed for a radical shift in gender status. Rather than a forward-looking sequel, the current study demonstrates the *Blade Runner 2049*'s portrayal of women appears even more regressive than that of its 35-year-old predecessor. It contributes to *Blade Runner 2049* studies (Kim, King, Omry, Parker-Flynn, Shanahan and Smart, Taşkale, Žižek) in addition to the wider body of literature on gender portrayals in popular culture, particularly depictions of women that uphold a gendered power imbalance.

SYNOPSIS OF *BLADE RUNNER: 2049*

Blade Runner is a beloved cinematic classic science fiction film that has had a lasting impact on the genre; research on the film addresses its blending of the science fiction and noir genres (Doll and Faller) and how it blurred the boundaries between human and artificial human (Staudt). Its sequel,

Blade Runner:2049, follows K, a “blade runner” tasked with executing rogue replicants for the police force. K is a unique type of blade runner because he himself is a replicant. When he discovers the remains of a replicant whose death in child-birth proves that artificial humans can biologically reproduce, his superior, Joshi (played by Robin Wright), fears this discovery could spark a war between the humans and replicants and sends K on a mission to find and execute the replicant-human “miracle” child. K investigates the manufacturer of replicants, the Wallace Corporation, and discovers that the child is the offspring of Racheal, a character from the previous film with known romantic ties to Deckard, the original film’s protagonist. K’s investigations further lead him to reflect on his own memories and question whether he actually could be the child. His female “companion,” a holographic woman named Joi (played by Ana de Armas), encourages his introspection.

Fearing for his life, K lies to Joshi and claims to have eliminated the replicant child. As he emotionally spirals, failing to maintain the accepted emotional baseline expected for replicants of his model, Joi hires Mariette, a prostitute, to act as a surrogate for her and K to have sex. However, the prostitute is a member of a replicant resistance movement and implants K with a tracker. K continues to investigate, tracking down Deckard and confirming that he is the father of the child. Luv, a henchwoman for the Wallace Corporation, confronts K, then kills Joi and kidnaps Deckard, leaving K to die. But K is rescued by the resistance, from whom he learns that the replicant child was a girl and realizes his memories must be false. K leaves the resistance headquarters to rescue Deckard. On his way, he contemplates his identity, and is unnerved by an interactive ad for Joi’s line of holographic women that attempts to flirt with him. K fights Luv and ultimately frees

Deckard but is mortally wounded. K reveals the location of Deckard's daughter, and Deckard reunites with her.

HEGEMONIC FEMININITY IN HOLLYWOOD

In *Fantasies of Femininity*, feminist scholar Jane Ussher identified how popular culture in a patriarchal society creates a dominant concept of idealized womanhood consisting of three elements—beauty, sexual purity, and interest in heterosexual romance—which girls are taught to adhere to from early childhood. A woman doesn't have to *do* anything in a patriarchy, "she just has to be—to adopt the feminine masquerade" (Ussher 8). In contrast, women who are active are portrayed as villainous and straying from the path of correct femininity. Thus, femininity manifests as "the dilemma between pure passivity and active independent sexuality, a double bind in which no woman wins" (8). Gender portrayals in popular culture contribute to this script by vilifying women for exhibiting their own independence, expecting them instead to live under a passive subordination that continues to limit them to patriarchal expectations.

Through the script of womanhood described by Ussher, a hegemonic femininity permeates society; it becomes fundamentally woven into a society's narratives, affecting both how women are perceived and perceive themselves. Thus, hegemonic femininity describes the idealized, dominant standards of womanhood prescribed by a society that might be unattainable for women in that culture while maintaining patriarchal power; it consists of "the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that by doing so guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Schippers 94). These charac-

teristics include traits that contrast with those of hegemonic masculinity, such as “physical vulnerability, an inability to use violence effectively, and compliance” (91). Hegemonic femininity appears across a range of filmic genres and cultures, with research focused on how such media texts either reinforce or challenge stereotypes of femininity (Dralega, Furiah and Bielby, Karupiah, Meyer).

FEMININITY CREATED THROUGH THE MALE GAZE

Traditionally, the male gaze works on multiple levels: when a female character is subjected to the male gaze, both the male characters perceiving her within the story and the audience are forced to stop and admire her. As explained by Laura Mulvey, “the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: the erotic object for the characters within the screen story and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (838). Within these moments, as time stops and the story halts to linger on the spectacle of the female form, the ingrained societal belief that men control power while women remain passive and unable to act on their own is reaffirmed: women are meant to be looked at, not to be the ones looking.

There is also the assumed surrogate relationship held by the viewer, who takes the perspective of the male spectator: “as the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look” (Mulvey 838). This concept of the assumed male spectator and female erotic object ties into societal assumptions about gender that perpetuate the idea that “regardless of one’s sex category, the possession of erotic desire for the feminine object is constructed as masculine and being the object of masculine de-

sire is feminine” (Schipper 90). These societal assumptions regarding the spectator do not exist in a vacuum. By emphasizing the male perspective, the female spectator is forced to inculcate herself to patriarchal expectations. Consequently, both men and women view the world from the position of the male gaze, with women internalizing their own standards of beauty in the context of what would please men, in (an assumed heteronormative) patriarchy (Devereaux).

In this manner, the male gaze in film perpetuates gender stereotypes, which in turn become commonplace in popular culture. Onscreen gender imbalance becomes evident primarily in the ways in which male characters in these texts—as well as in their role as audience members—gaze at women as if they were objects presented for their viewing pleasure (Manon, Revesz). Despite fantastical environments that should provide a place for female empowerment, such as in the blockbuster 2019 Marvel Cinematic Universe film *Captain Marvel* (Meluso), women are still shackled by unconscious patriarchal assumptions in science fiction. Similarly, the male gaze functions in *Blade Runner: 2049* as a means to present women in a fictionalized not-too-distant future that utilizes a point of view founded in the gendered power structure of the Hollywood film industry.

THE WOMEN OF *BLADE RUNNER: 2049*

Despite its general acclaim, *Blade Runner: 2049* has been criticized in popular media for its portrayal of women. Charlotte Gush of *Vice* called it a “misogynistic mess” and noted that the film’s women were “either prostitutes, holographic housewives, or [died] brutal deaths.” Anna Smith noted the objectification of women’s bodies in the film, describing the setting as containing “sexualized images of women [that dom-

inate] the stunning futuristic cityscapes” and the character of Joi as a “doting, doe-eyed housewife.” The love story between Joi and K was further criticized by Katie Goh, who described its depiction as “selling the muddy consent and power imbalance between owner and property as a love story.”

In an article in *Vanity Fair*, the film’s director, Dennis Villeneuve, deflected such criticism by stating that the film was a “mirror on society” and that “the world was not kind to women” (Hoffman). In the original *Blade Runner*, the denouement of the character of Rachael was criticized for portraying her as a “submissive sex object, subject to her man’s desires and wishes” (Fitting). Villeneuve was aware of these negative evaluations and claimed to have tried to respond to them, stating, “[the] first *Blade Runner* was quite rough on the women; something about the film noir aesthetic. But I tried to bring depth to all the characters. For Joi, the holographic character, you see how she evolves” (Hoffman). But Villeneuve’s protestations fall flat. For example, as the current analysis will demonstrate, when one considers the film’s presentation of women as sexualized advertisements, it is clear that these images are presented uncritically. Rather than comment on the treatment of women, the nude holographic women shown are meant only to entice the assumed male viewer.

Despite Villeneuve’s assertions, *Blade Runner: 2049* includes only a few female characters, and they exclusively serve to further the story of the male protagonists of K and Deckard. There is Joshi, K’s superior officer who flirts with him; Luv, a cold replicant henchwoman for the Wallace corporation who is killed by K; Deckard’s daughter, an isolated shut-in who helps K with his investigation; and Mariette, the prostitute hired by Joi who secretly works for the resistance. And then

there is Joi, the holographic woman that K owns, literally. Joi is the character who serves as the focus of this textual analysis of *Blade Runner: 2049's* depiction of women. Three themes detected in the film illustrate how even a fictional future reinforces the regressive beliefs current popular culture perpetuates about female characters on film and women in general: women presented as objects of desire, the gender imbalance in the relationship between Joi and K, and the use of women in advertising.

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE: WOMEN AS OBJECTS OF DESIRE

In Joi's introductory scene, she changes her appearance based on what she believes her owner, K, desires. She cycles through several outfits over the course of her conversations with K. While pretending to prepare him dinner, she dons the appearance of a 1950s housewife. When she believes K is unhappy, she tries to lift his mood by shifting into a dress reminiscent of a 1920s flapper and encouraging him to dance. When K gifts her the upgrade that grants her more physical freedom, she changes her appearance again to display her gratitude as she twirls in a short light blue dress and her hair has been taken down, so it moves with her. When she goes outside, it is raining. Her appearance changes to reflect the downpour; her hair and clothes become wet and the dress clings to Joi tightly, revealing that she is not wearing a bra.

Joi's most common outfit is all-black athleticwear consisting of a long-sleeved crop top with a slit in the shoulders and loose pants. Her makeup is light, and her hair is pulled back but messy. For most of the scenes in which Joi is assisting K with his investigation, her outfit changes again. She wears a sleeveless minidress with a turtleneck and high boots. She

also wears a transparent raincoat over her dress. Her hair is still pulled back, but it is in a neater ponytail.

Compared to the ads for Joi's product line, the most common outfits K's Joi wears are more dressed down; they are less flashily gorgeous or sexually provocative. But it is clear these outfits are still modeled to be desirable for K. Joi might wear a casual athleticwear outfit in their drab, modernistic apartment, but it is still form-fitting, shows her skin, and she still is always wearing make-up.

Taken together, the physical presentations of Joi in her array of decidedly feminine forms serve to be pleasing to the eye, not only for K within the film itself, but also the viewer. The way that Joi is presented visually—both as the version K decides as well as the more generic Joi available for mass purchase in the *Blade Runner* world set in 2049—illustrates the power of the male gaze as the default setting for how women have been presented on screen. Form-fitting outfits, a casualness that still requires cosmetics to literally “make up” for a lack of natural beauty, and the changing of apparel all become incurred by the motive to please the male gazer, and, thus, the viewer who takes the vantage point of a male gazing at a female. However informal Joi may appear, she cannot be shown in baggy clothing, having unkempt hair, or displaying a tired-looking face. Natural beauty, according to Hollywood and reaffirmed in this film, is disallowed. In the future world of *Blade Runner*, women still must present as physically attractive. In this sense, arguments that 2049 actually endorses a feminist perspective (Parker-Flynn, Shanahan) become dismantled when one considers the visuality of this prominent female character, who is framed as the love interest of the male protagonist. Joi is an artificial woman who has been designed to conform to expected Hollywood beauty stan-

dards: nothing about her is unexpected. If the film intentionally is forwarding a pro-woman stance, then Joi would have a moment when she or the narrative acknowledges the artificiality of her beauty. Rather, her appearance always adheres to K's vision of a perfect woman—he never sees her outside of the ideal he purchased. There is no “true Joi” beyond the programming that one already expects of what a desirable woman would look like. When she “dies,” the audience is expected to empathize with K's grief, but it's unknown who or what he is grieving when his version of Joi never existed outside of the perfect product he paid for. Her death is bloodless, and she remains beautiful even in her final moments.

In the sex scene, Joi wears a *qipao* dress, also called a *cheongsam*, a style of Chinese dress that was first popularized in the 1920s. The setting of *Blade Runner* has been criticized in the past for its shallow use of Asian cultures and presenting an example of Orientalism, fetishizing the aesthetics of Asian cultures without meaningfully engaging with them or including Asian characters (Emerson). This scene in *Blade Runner: 2049* supports these criticisms, as it is the only time a character wears an Asian-inspired outfit, worn very clearly by the subject of the male gaze as Joi sensually undresses for K. In fact, Asian stereotypes appear in the screenplay for the film as well: Joi is described in her first appearance as “goddess, girlfriend, geisha, and goddamn bombshell” (Fancher and Green). The inclusion of “geisha” invokes a fetishistic aspect to Joi's onscreen depiction. Geishas are a type of Japanese highly trained, well-respected performing artists that have been fetishized by Western audiences due to inaccurate Orientalist treatments such as the 2005 film *Memoirs of a Geisha* that linked them to prostitution (Akita).

JOI AND K: GENDER IMBALANCE BETWEEN ARTIFICIAL PEOPLE IN ARTIFICIAL INTERACTIONS

Through all of K's interactions with Joi, it is clear that he is the master, and her role is to cater to his desires; her value is as a "consumer product" (Mulhall). Their first interaction begins with K literally powering Joi on, showing that she does not exist outside of her relationship to him. Joi immediately begins to try and take care of his needs. She performs domestic tasks for K, attempting to "cook" for him, though in reality she can only provide a simulation of food. Joi displays a strange lack of confidence in her duties. She says she needs "more practice" cooking and K tells her not to fuss. The film implies that Joi was programmed to lack self-confidence so that K could have the opportunity to reassure her.

Besides cooking, Joi performs other domestic tasks, such as when she offers to fix a tear in K's shirt and lights his cigarette for him. Additionally, Joi also tends to K's emotional needs by noticing he is unhappy and then performing a series of actions to try and emotionally appease him. She attempts to get him to dance. She asks him to read to her. When K claims that Joi hates the book he is reading, she immediately changes her mind to agree with him, saying that she "didn't want to read anyway." This scene cements Joi's lack of agency and identity outside of her master. Her identity is in flux, ready to shift at a moment's notice in order to pacify the man that owns her.

In one telling scene, K tells Joi he has a gift for her and casually says to pretend it is an anniversary gift. Joi earnestly asks, "Is it?" with her expectant tone hinting that while she currently did not think it was their anniversary, if K said it was, then she would adapt and start believing it to be true. K's gift is a portable device that allows her to move beyond the con-

finer of the apartment. It is clearly shown in this scene that K controls all aspects of Joi: her memories, her movement, her personality, her appearance. These all conform to fit K's—that is, the man's—desires. In addition to the layered artificiality of both these characters, a profound inequality based on gender infuses their supposed relationship. K grants Joi the ability to move more freely; he is the master, and his gift is literally the freedom to have more movement. The subtext of this seemingly magnanimous gesture on the part of K reinforces patriarchal control, especially since Joi is “female” and he is “male.” There are no same sex relationships in the world of *Blade Runner*, which tacitly reaffirms heteronormativity, a hallmark of patriarchy.

They go outside so Joi can experience her newfound “freedom.” Joi tells K, “I’m so happy when I’m with you” in a tone so scripted that K deflects and responds that she “doesn’t have to” say that. Afterwards, the two perform a façade of intimacy, miming kissing and embracing, even though Joi is holographic, so any type of touch simply goes through her. A phone call interrupts them; Joi freezes in place as she leans in for a kiss. Joi remains frozen for the duration of the call, still stuck in the same position. When the call is over, K does not resume his romantic scene with Joi. Instead, he powers her off, once again emphasizing that she is simply an object at his disposal.

Later in the film, Joi assists K with his investigation to find Deckard’s daughter, while also encouraging K’s desire to believe that he is the replicant-human child. At one point, she mimes wrapping her arms over his shoulders and whispers, “I always knew you were special.” This is a constant refrain of Joi’s. When a discovery in their investigation reinforces K’s suspicions about his identity, Joi once again tells him he is

special. She then bestows the name “Joe” onto K, stating he is “too important” to simply be referred to by the first letter of his replicant model line. She stresses that if he had a mother, she would have given him a name. This scene alludes to a motherly component to their relationship which had always been present, in the constant encouragement and emotional checking in, but is solidified in this scene. To the isolated K, Joi can be and is “everything he wants”: his beautiful lover, his dotting wife, and his encouraging mother. She also is a mouthpiece for his innermost desires; K *wants* to be special, to have a purpose. So, Joi gives voice to K’s thoughts, encouraging him that it’s all right to desire such a thing: “It’s okay to dream a little, isn’t it?” she soothingly assures him.

In the scene in which Joi hires the replicant prostitute Mariette, K is initially hesitant. Joi tells K that she “wants to be real” for him. He tries to tell her that she is real enough for him, but she continues persuading him, telling K that she observed him interacting with the prostitute earlier and could tell that he “liked her.” From there K takes the initiative, pulling in Joi/Mariette by the waist for an embrace. Joi undresses for K, who remains clothed, watching her. In all of Joi’s scenes, it is unclear to what extent she has free will. K never expresses any wish to have more physical intimacy with Joi, yet she hires the prostitute without his knowledge. So, in that sense, Joi is acting on her own. But can it be said that she is acting for herself/her own desire?

Physical intimacy is the one thing Joi has failed to provide for K. Her inability to physically touch him is present in every one of their scenes in the film.

After the sex scene, the film immediately cuts to an ad for Joi’s line of holographic female companions that includes the slogan “Joi is anything you want her to be. Joi goes anywhere

you want her to go.” Even when this Joi is not explicitly being commanded by K, she is still programmed to fulfill his desires. Physical intimacy was the one place Joi couldn’t “go” and the one thing she was incapable of being. In reality, this scene of the ad shows that even in her most active moments, she is still pursuing K’s desires.

The next morning, when K discusses his plans to leave because he is on the run, Joi asks to come with him. She also requests that K delete her data from their inhouse system and instead store her only on the portable device so no one can investigate K’s home and use her for information. K is fearful of this because moving Joi so that she is stored solely on the portable device would mean she would have no backup and if the device malfunctioned, she truly would be gone. But Joi begs him to do it, stating that she wants to be a “real girl.” Joi is unable to perform this action herself, so she is forced to verbalize her request by telling him, “I want this. But I can’t do this myself.” Whereas previous scenes seemed to suggest Joi truly lacked free will, this scene comes to the opposite conclusion. This is the only moment in the narrative when Joi acknowledges her own lack of agency and displays self-awareness.

K’s fears are proven correct. In their confrontation with Luv, Joi is casually killed by Luv. Her last words to him are “I love you.”

However, Joi is not the only woman who dies for K in the film. When K’s superior, Joshi, refuses to give up information about K to Luv, Luv kills her. Thus, two women who “love” K—or, in Joshi’s case, at least desire him—die because of him. This leads to the question: Does Joi become a “real girl” by dying for a man like Joshi does? Joi’s death follows a common pattern in science fiction of female characters be-

ing brutally murdered in order to progress the character development of male heroes. In 1999, comic book writer and feminist critic Gail Simone coined the term “women in refrigerators” to describe this reoccurring trope (*Women in Refrigerators*). In this instance, Joi’s “fridging” acts as a catalyst to spur K into despair, leading him to realize that he is not the miracle child. Joi’s humanity is directly linked to her ability to express heterosexual romantic love with K, thus reinforcing the male-centric nature of the film.

Taken together, these female characters serve as accessories for K: their purpose is to further his narrative and when they no longer do so, they have no purpose. Rather than teaming up to help K, these two women characters, as well as Luv, are killed off, negating any formation of allied power. Further, the lack of verbal interaction between the women characters outside of the context of their relationship to K calls to mind the Bechdel Test, the now-widely known measure of the degree to which a film can be considered non-patriarchal. If a film has a scene in which (1) two named women (2) talk to each other (3) about something other than a man, it “passes” the test (*Bechdel Test Movie List*).

According to the *Bechdel Test Movie List* web site, *Blade Runner 2049* passes the test—but with the caveat that this verdict is “dubious.” Although women characters do at times talk to each other in *Blade Runner 2049*—such as in scenes between Luv and Joshi and between Joi and Mariette—those interactions are the result of their relationship to K. As one poster identified as “Steve” on the web site pointed out in a comment dated Oct. 23, 2017: “The Joi Marriette [sic] conversation is about Joi being done with using Marriette [sic] to have sex with K (a man). Fail. The Luv Madam conversation is about finding K (a man). Fail.” (*Bechdel Test Movie List*).

The primary women characters in the film do not team up, do not work together cooperatively, nor have a conversation unrelated to K. When one applies the purpose of the Bechdel Test to this film, although dialogue between women may not include specific verbal reference to K such as using his name or the pronoun “him,” the *reasons* for why the women talk to each other in the first place must be considered. Thus, the film fails to address gender inequality through dialogue, in addition to its visual representations of women as objects of the male gaze.

ADVERTISING WOMEN AS PRODUCTS

Before Joi makes her appearance, an ad for her line of holographic women appears in the background of the film. It shows an image of the Joi model of holographs, shown from the shoulders up. She appears to be nude and has one hand up to her mouth, and the other pulling back her hair. In bright neon pink text appear the words “Everything you want to hear.” Audio accompanies the text, with a seductive female voice that states, “Joi goes anywhere you want her to go.”

The second time an ad for Joi appears is immediately after the sex scene with K, Joi, and Mariette. This ad is of a full body shot of a Joi model, who wears a dress, more makeup, and straightened and styled hair, which is in contrast to K’s Joi’s more casual appearance. The ad’s Joi looks over her shoulder with a blank expression. The ad’s female voiceover states, “Joi is anything you want her to be. Joi goes anywhere you want her to go.” The text for the ad cycles through these statements: “Joi is everything you want. Joi is everything you want to see. Joi is everything you want to hear.” The camera pushes in so that the viewer experiences a feeling of coming closer and closer to Joi, who maintains direct eye contact with the camera (the viewer) and slowly begins to smile.

The Joi ad that K encounters at the end of the film is portrayed far differently from the first two ads. While the other ads appear on skyscrapers, the ad K sees toward the film's conclusion is the only one that is at ground level and has Joi appear to move out of her ad to interact with a potential customer. The Joi of this ad appears almost as a giant; the holograph is as tall as a building and makes K look miniscule in comparison. This Joi is also nude, her skin is unnaturally pink, she wears a blue wig, and her eyes are completely black. The camera focuses on her naked form, lingering first on her buttocks as she begins the scene in a standing position. Then it focuses on her breasts as she bends down to say to K in a seductive tone: "What a day, hmm? You look lonely. I can fix that. You look like a good Joe." After saying this to K, she gets up again and returns to her ad. The text displays the same message as the previous ad: "Joi is everything you want. Joi is everything you want to see. Joi is everything you want to hear." Her expression is blank.

These ads can be read as questioning the relationship K has with Joi, reinforcing the idea that "his" Joi is a product, a digital, literal mirage that betrays any semblance of a "real" relationship between the two. Even prior to the introduction of K's Joi, the first ad primes the viewer to understand that anything romantic she says to K is because of her programming and because he wants her to behave in a certain way. The second ad's placement after the sex scene makes the audience want to question if Joi's striving for intimacy is coming from her own desires or from her programming's desire to keep her owner happy by being "anything" he wants, including someone he can be with physically.

The final ad does the most to make the viewer doubt the relationship between K and his Joi. In this scene, K is under-

going an identity crisis. He believed himself to be “special,” the potential replicant that was born, not manufactured. This specialness was something Joi frequently encouraged. This scene provides a twisted, mocking mirror of K’s Joi. Like K’s Joi, the ad initiates sympathetic questions, mirroring how Joi would try to fulfill K’s emotional needs. And most damning is the way in which the ad refers to him by the same name Joi bestowed on him in their quest to discover his origin. By having the Joi in the ad call K by the same name and then reemphasizing the ad’s message of Joi being “everything you want to hear,” the scene emphasizes the truly hollow nature of their relationship. Just as she is generic to him, he is generic to her—a common “Joe.” It is also notable that she is “Joi,” and he is “Joe,” which serves to make them parallel: *both* are artificial entities.

It is important to note the corporate sexualization of women that goes beyond Joi and her ads. The film also gives the viewer a glimpse of where the replicant Mariette works. It is a building made of blurred glass, where naked female bodies press up against the walls, accompanied by the sound of moaning. In the society depicted in the *Blade Runner* world, sex work is completely legal; the business is located on a crowded street and police officers pass by without comment. The prostitutes outside the building dress provocatively in thigh-high boots and tiny shorts, with many wearing only a bra. The inclusion of this depiction along with the other sexualized ads denotes a future where the bodies of women have been so thoroughly commodified that it has become commonplace, expected, and unremarkable. When the character of Luv first appears in the film in a scene at the Wallace Corporation, she is asking a businessman if he would like to add any “pleasure models” to his order of replicants. Wallace himself examines a naked replicant woman and kisses her be-

fore casually killing her. The bodies of women in *Blade Runner: 2049* thus are frequently shown as disposable, sexualized products in an extremely corporatized world. One can read this aspect of the film as a logical conclusion to how advertising—across the range of products, both physical and service-oriented—portrays women as sex objects (Kilbourne).

The image of an advertisement featuring a sexualized woman within a city landscape is one common to the cyberpunk genre, and the use of women as sexualized products is a symptom of the male gaze's pervasiveness within it. Early Western cyberpunk media were quickly adopted in Japan, inspiring many Japanese comic book series, known as manga, which lifted imagery directly from influential works like *Blade Runner*. Cyberpunk manga were serialized in magazines targeted towards teenage boys. In cyberpunk manga that explore the same themes of transhumanism as seen in *Blade Runner*, there is often a focus on the naked female body augmented by masculine, militaristic machinery (McCarthy). The female body is subjected to objectification meant to entice young male readers, thereby clearly serving as the object of the male gaze.

Cyberpunk manga proved influential to Western filmmakers, who went on to draw content and imagery directly from popular manga series. In the most well-known example of this phenomenon, the original *Blade Runner* influenced the manga series *Ghost in the Shell*, which influenced *The Matrix*, which in turn became an iconic example of the genre (McGee). One of the most emblematic images from the original *Blade Runner* is a giant ad of a geisha smiling while swallowing birth control pills, an image visually referenced in other cyberpunk texts such as the 2013-2014 Fox television series *Almost Human* (“Blade Runner References”).

But those texts as well as *Blade Runner: 2049* assume that by simply including these images within their hyper-capitalist settings, they create a critique of gender imbalance. However, they fail to effectively use their female characters in commentative ways. This has led to a future depicted in cyberpunk occurring within a recursive regressive loop: cyberpunk creators envision a future inspired by 1990s manga that were inspired by 1980s films drawing on 1940's character archetypes. In *Blade Runner: 2049*, the end result is a not-too-distant future filled with the objectification of women and gender imbalance that existed a hundred years before the narrative's setting.

DISCUSSION

If *Blade Runner: 2049*'s portrayal of artificial women was meant to critique the status of women, the film ultimately falls short due to the shallowness of its female characters and its failure to substantially engage with them outside of their relationship with the male protagonist. The film's constant emphasis on the holographic character Joi's appearance clearly highlights hegemonic femininity and society's emphasis on women maintaining beauty standards. The versions of Joi presented in ads throughout the film may be more explicitly stylized, but even the version of Joi that appears in mundane, domestic settings within K's home is always beautiful: she is literally unable to ever not adhere to beauty standards, to never dress any way except as a spectacle created for the male gaze.

The portrayal of Joi as existing only in relation to the purported romantic relationship she has with K similarly reaffirms the sexuality and romance aspects of hegemonic femininity: Joi is depicted as a sexual being, devoted to her man. Regard-

ing the hollowness and artificiality of K and Joi's relationship, the film navigates a strange gray area where it tries to both depict the relationship as a genuine love story and as a symbol of K's hollow search for identity. The two characters are on unequal footing through the duration of the film, with Joi another step further removed from humanity than K. He is her master and her owner; she devotes her life to him. Only at the end of the film, when the two gain equal ground, is it revealed that all of Joi's love for K was simply part of her programming. She is a generic product, and he is a generic customer. For K and Joi, true egalitarianism is only established when the hollowness of *both* their attempts at emulating humanity is acknowledged.

This notion is reinforced by how other characters other than K view Joi. Over the course of the movie, it is clearly established that other characters look down on K for owning a Joi product. When K is investigating the Wallace corporation, one of the employees asks K, "Are you satisfied with our product?" to which K in embarrassment answers, "She's really realistic." When Mariette first meets K as she is flirting with him, she hears the jingle of a Joi device and mockingly comments, "Oh, you don't like real girls." Even artificial women like the replicant Mariette are considered "realer" than holographic women like Joi. Later, Joi and Mariette "synch" with each other, their consciousness temporarily becoming one, in order for Mariette to function as a proxy for Joi and K to have sex. Afterwards Mariette tells Joi, "I've been inside you. Not so much there as you think." When Luv eliminates Joi, she comments to K, "I do hope you enjoyed our product." This once again re-emphasizes the fact that even the film's female characters see Joi as nothing but an object.

In *Blade Runner: 2049*, competitiveness among and between women, even artificial ones, reaffirms gendered tropes re-

garding female jealousy. Although K's character arc might have him coming to the terms with the fact that he is not special, he is still the center of the lives/existences of the women in the film: Joi is dedicated to him and grows jealous when other women express interest in him; Joshi, K's superior, not only expresses interest and claims he's "different" from other replicants, but she also dies for K; and Mariette might have an interesting double life as a sex worker/resistance agent, but the only mission she actually is seen participating in is seducing/tracking K. Even the cold Wallace henchwoman Luv's efforts in searching for the replicant-human child always lead her back to him. This further underlines the patriarchal nature of the film: all of these female characters' actions revolve around a completely average man. In short, they serve merely as accessories to the male protagonist. Additionally, when Joi dies at the hands of Luv, it is emblematic of a competitiveness of women in this film. This concept is reflective of other popular media like the reality competition show *The Bachelor*, which pits women against each other and implies that women are by default hostile to one another.

The sexualization of women in the dystopia presented in the world of *Blade Runner* serves an extension of women's status in an extremely corporatized world. Women's bodies have become another commodified product of that society, present amongst brand names in giant billboards. The role of women in *Blade Runner: 2049* thus simply becomes another aspect of its dystopia, a world that is grim and wracked by climate change, where the class divide is larger than ever, and the phrase *sex sells* has been extrapolated to mean a "pleasure model" can be easily purchased. The future this film depicts is firmly stuck in gender stereotypes—the women are beautiful objects of desire. The clearest example of a woman who doesn't adhere to typical gender roles is Luv, the cold Wal-

lace replicant, but not only is she still subservient to the male Wallace CEO—she is also portrayed as a cold villain who dies a brutal death.

The artificial women in this film are also firmly rooted in previous depictions of fembots. Fembots are inherently a reflection of gender stereotypes, thus their gender representation reveals what society believes about women (Watercutter, Zumberge). *Blade Runner: 2049*'s artificial women encompass the extremities present in the range of fembots: Joi is an example of the “perfect woman” type of fembot; she is beautiful, submissive, a committed housewife, and has no desires outside of her man. Mariette is a sex worker, aligning with the portrayal of fembots as seductresses that dates back to Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. And Luv is an example of the cold, villainous fembot; she exhibits an uncaring, stoic, almost “Terminator”-like perpetuity for violence.

Despite the film's disinterest in exploring gender, the way in which the film's artificial people adhere to patriarchal assumptions is insightful in and of itself. K, the artificial protagonist, fits the masculine ideal of rugged stoicism and only shows emotional vulnerability to his heterosexual love interest. The artificial women in the film are all products designed for male enjoyment or are valued for their reproductive capabilities; they exist within both the world and in the narrative only to fulfill the submissive female roles created for them. For several main characters, the depiction of gender is even more purposefully constructed—but only to reaffirm gender expectations in patriarchy. As products designed and manufactured without initial agency, their subjection in a patriarchal society becomes even more apparent. The audience learns that a man creates these gendered products, which hints at but requires another layer of reading beyond what is

presented. The Wallace CEO (played Jared Leto) appears as a stereotype of a sadistic, greedy sociopath male, but nothing else is done with the character to comment on patriarchal power: K does not fight him, Luv obeys him blindly, and the character remains undeveloped and fades into the film as it enters its third act. Even though one can read the film as saying something about patriarchy, in the end the film is disinterested in breaking gender boundaries with its characters or the idea of manufacturing a new version of humanity. Even though anything, really, can be done to program an artificial human, nothing is done that pushes back against gender stereotypes and dichotomies.

Although the portrayal of women in this film ultimately reads as largely regressive, there are shallow attempts by the film to appear progressive with its depiction of women. Power appears to be bestowed on the women characters of Joshi, K's superior on the police force; the main antagonist Luv, who is extremely strong physically; and Deckard's daughter, the missing "miracle child" who is considered sacred and turns out to be a highly skilled computer programmer who creates replicants' memories. However, all these attempts fail to obscure the typical gender expectations to which these characters ultimately conform. K's superior is a woman whose sense of duty is compromised by her romantic interest in him and who is abruptly and easily killed. Luv is physically strong, but she is still subservient to the male Wallace CEO and falls in line with portrayals of women in business positions as unemotional, "cold" villains.

Even though Dr. Ana Stelline, the "miracle child" and reason for K's search and his ultimate death, is a woman, she is isolated and consigned to her circumstances, a damsel locked away in a castle who is only saved by her father at the end.

Deckard serves in this capacity to reinforce the authority and power of the male in the world of *Blade Runner*, and in this sense, there are two male protagonists in 2049. Rachael, the replicant mother of the miracle child, died in childbirth prior to the start of the sequel's narrative, her only implicit value was her ability to give birth. Her offspring, the brilliant Ana, a female human-replicant, lacks any agency nor given any chance to determine her own fate. In this sense, the protection that surrounds her sends the message that she is too precious to fend for herself. The trope of a female hidden away in a fortress-like setting, concealed from the world and unable to enact her own story without the help of a man, further underscores how the film enforces, let alone reinforces, the gendered rescue fantasy that has permeated Western storytelling for centuries. One can consider K and Deckard as a combined male character within an analog described by Galician as "the Knight and Babe" motif that permeates stories of romance and keeps in place the gender status quo that ensures power remains the purview of men (288).

Overall, all the women in *Blade Runner 2049* only serve to further the story of the male characters. They reinforce an idea that the agency in filmic narratives will always belong to men, ensuring the continuation of a patriarchal society. This unmoving emplacement of male power remains even in fantastical, futuristic stories that are concerned with exploring how oppressed groups—which don't but should include women—fight for their ability to decide their own fate.

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