

## Pandora and Automata in the Film *Ex Machina* by Aleah Hernandez<sup>1</sup>

"It is what it is. Promethean, man...."

- Nathan, *Ex Machina*

Near the end of Alex Garland's film, *Ex Machina*, two of its central characters discuss and reflect on an act of creation. Nathan, a reclusive CEO, and Caleb, a meek computer programmer and Nathan's employee, consider this creation a technical marvel—one of, if not *the* "greatest scientific event in the history of man," or even "the history of Gods."<sup>2</sup> As Nathan sees it, his creation, an artificial intelligence, will usher in a singularity which, in turn, will mark the next stage of evolution. This evolution, however, will come at the expense of humankind. Like something out of the film *Terminator*, the artificial intelligence he has created will one day regard humanity like "fossil skeletons," a race "set for extinction."<sup>3</sup> Creation, Nathan argues, inevitably brings about destruction, and Caleb, in agreement, quotes, "I am become death the destroyer of worlds."<sup>4</sup> As their conversation ends, Nathan reflects on their conversation further and finally says, "It is what it is. Promethean, man."<sup>5</sup>

The mention of Prometheus in a conversation about creation and destruction is apt because the artificial intelligence Nathan has created is not a towering T-800 resembling Arnold Schwarzenegger but an automaton made in the form of a young woman. Ava, the artificial intelligence, bears many of the same qualities attributed to Hesiod's Pandora. She is young, beautiful, and, as many have argued, highly duplicitous. This duplicity brands Ava, and has branded Pandora, as figures whose primary aim is to bring misfortune to mankind. Pandora,

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<sup>2</sup> Garland 2019: 26.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 90.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 91. The full line in the screenplay reads, "It is what it is. It's Promethean. The clay and the fire."

especially, is a figure whose mere name evokes images of endless trouble. But a closer analysis of Pandora shows there is more at stake than the release of evils after she is created. Her creation in the *Theogony* complements and informs her appearance in the *Works and Days* so that, together, they depict the arrival of a feminine race with a full range of capabilities.<sup>6</sup> Despite the brevity of her appearance in both epics, Pandora occupies enough space within these texts to show herself as more than a vehicle for Zeus' machinations. She has consciousness and agency. Similarly, these two traits form the central debate around many science fiction automata, such as the robot in Stanisław Lem's "The Mask," the androids in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Blade Runner*, and most recently, the hosts in *Westworld*. In *Ex Machina*, however, consciousness and agency take particular importance as there, too, Ava and Kyoko—artificial beings whose forms embody reciprocal forms of femininity—unite to gain autonomy from the men who would impede their release into the world.

In Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Pandora's ability to destroy appears from the very moment of her creation. In the *Theogony*, Pandora is explicitly described as "an evil for mankind" (τεῦξεν κακὸν ἀνθρώποισι)<sup>7</sup> who is dressed in all sorts of finery<sup>8</sup> meant to entice and bring about the greater race of women (ἐκ τῆς γὰρ γένος ἐστὶ γυναικῶν θηλυτεράων).<sup>9</sup> The womankind which Pandora produces is largely passive and is an idle consumer of a man's livelihood. In fact, Hesiod compares her kind to drones in a beehive whose only purpose is to "gather others' toil into their own belly" (ἀλλότριον κάματον σφετέρην ἐς γαστέρ' ἀμῶνται).<sup>10</sup> If Pandora and her race of women have *any* benefit, it is in the fact that they are able to bear children who can assist their fathers in their old age,

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<sup>6</sup> Clay 2009: 120. While discussing the "divergent narrative strategies" being employed in the presentation of Pandora, she argues that both Pandoras are too often read together. Though I agree the aims of the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* are not congruent, the decision to read the Pandoras together heightens her overall significance and enhances her menace since her influence over men's lives takes on multiple forms. She controls the legitimacy and permanence of a man's bloodline, the state of his household, and his extent of his daily misfortunes.

<sup>7</sup> Hes. *Th.* 570. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>8</sup> *Th.* 573-584.

<sup>9</sup> *Th.* 590.

<sup>10</sup> *Th.* 598-599.

increase their potential for wealth, and inherit their livelihoods upon their death. Without women's reproductive capabilities, none of these is possible. Yet, here too, there is the potential for danger since there is also the possibility that a woman may bear mischievous offspring (ἀταρτηροῖο γενέθλης),<sup>11</sup> or worse yet, daughters instead of sons. The advent of Pandora, therefore, is continually marked by "evil set against good" (κακὸν ἐσθλῷ ἀντιφερίζει).<sup>12</sup> Pandora, as both Bride and Wife, introduces humanity to the institutions of marriage and the family, marking mankind's inability to escape the cycle of self-destruction as men repeat the folly of Epimetheus and are compelled to toil in order to maintain the stability and continuity of their *oikos*.<sup>13</sup>

Pandora's duplicity is brought into greater focus in Hesiod's *Works and Days*. In this epic, Pandora is known as "an evil in which all [men] may delight in their heart as they embrace their own misfortune" (κακόν, ᾧ κεν ἅπαντες τέρπωνται κατὰ θυμὸν ἐὸν κακὸν ἀμφαγαπῶντες).<sup>14</sup> Like her counterpart in the *Theogony*, this Pandora is immeasurably beautiful since her appearance is modeled after that of the goddesses, and that beauty is perilous not because it contributes to womankind's potentially gluttonous nature but rather because it is augmented by the other gifts bestowed upon her by the gods. Moreover, Pandora's talents in the *Works and Days* extend beyond her ability to give birth<sup>15</sup>—she possesses the ability to produce creatively through her weaving and intellectually through her speech.<sup>16</sup> The Bride and Wife of the previous myth now becomes a figure which can actively contribute to her *oikos*.

At three different points in the story of her creation, Hesiod explicitly juxtaposes Pandora's physical and mental capabilities. The first

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<sup>11</sup> *Th.* 610.

<sup>12</sup> *Th.* 609.

<sup>13</sup> Clay 2009: 119-120.

<sup>14</sup> *Hes. Op.* 57-58.

<sup>15</sup> Though the *Works and Days* never explicitly mentions Pandora giving birth or being the creator of the female race, some scholars have argued that her interaction with the *pithos* is a metaphor for birth. The details concerning these interpretations will be discussed shortly.

<sup>16</sup> Clay 2009: 123. Clay also highlights the power of Pandora's speech here writing, "[her] looks and voice have a devastating effect upon men. Her speech above all constitutes the vehicle of seduction and deception."

pairing occurs at lines 61-63 as Zeus requires that his creation possess *both* a voice *and* lovely appearance:

ἐν δ' ἀνθρώπου θέμεν αἰδὴν  
καὶ σθένος, ἀθανάτης δὲ θεῆς εἰς ὅπα εἴσκειν  
παρθενικῆς καλὸν εἶδος ἐπήρατον

Then [Zeus commanded renowned Hephaestus] to place a voice and strength in the being, and to make her face similar to that of an immortal goddess, the lovely and beautiful form of a maiden....

Next, at lines 63-68, Zeus tells Athena and Aphrodite, respectively, to “teach [her] crafts, to weave the intricate web” (ἔργα διδασκῆσαι, πολυδαίδαλον ἰστὸν ὑφαίνειν)<sup>17</sup> and to “shed grace all around her head, and painful yearning and limb-gnawing sorrows” (χάριν ἀμφικέαι κεφαλῆ... καὶ πόθον ἀργαλέον καὶ γυιοβόρους μελεδώνας);<sup>18</sup> additionally, he orders Hermes to imbue her with “a shameless mind and a cunning disposition” (κύνεόν τε νόον καὶ ἐπίκλοπον ἦθος);<sup>19</sup> and finally, at lines 70-80, the aforementioned gods fulfill Zeus’ demands.<sup>20</sup>

αὐτίκα δ' ἐκ γαίης πλάσσε κλυτὸς Ἀμφιγυήεις  
παρθένῳ αἰδοίῃ ἴκελον Κρονίδεω διὰ βουλᾶς  
ζῶσε δὲ καὶ κόσμησε θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη  
ἀμφὶ δὲ οἱ Χάριτές τε θεαὶ καὶ πότνια Πειθῶ  
ὄρμους χρυσείους ἔθεσαν χροῖ· ἀμφὶ δὲ τὴν γε  
Ἦραι καλλίκομοι στέφον ἄνθεσι εἰαρινοῖσι

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<sup>17</sup> *Op.* 63-64.

<sup>18</sup> *Op.* 65-66.

<sup>19</sup> *Op.* 67-68.

<sup>20</sup> Fraser 2011: 17-19. On these pages Fraser notes editors’ varying responses to the apparent “discrepancies” between the orders Zeus specifically issues to Aphrodite in lines 65-66 and the fulfillment of the orders by the Graces, Lady Persuasion, and the Hours in lines 73-75. This change, Fraser states, is an indication of Hesiod’s willingness to expand upon the details given in the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Aphrodite’s participation in Pandora’s creation is central but “her presence needs not be repeated,” and the addition of her entourage works to increase the “number of gods involved in Pandora’s creation, [which adds] more spheres of influence.” The presence of Lady Persuasion, in particular, adds another element of intentionality to Pandora’s mental faculties.

πάντα δέ οἱ χροὶ κόσμον ἐφήρμοσε Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη  
ἐν δ' ἄρα οἱ στήθεσσι διάκτορος Ἀργεῖφόντης  
ψεύδεά θ' αἰμυλίους τε λόγους καὶ ἐπὶ κλοπὸν ἦθος  
τεῦξε Διὸς βουλήσιν βαρυκτύπου· ἐν δ' ἄρα φωνήν  
θῆκε θεῶν κῆρυξ, ὀνόμηνε δὲ τήνδε γυναῖκα  
Πανδώραν

At once the renowned Lamé One molded out of earth a thing resembling a modest maiden, in accordance with the designs of the son of Cronus. Athena, the bright-eyed goddess, belted and adorned it. The Graces and Lady Persuasion placed golden necklaces around its body, while the fair-haired Hours placed a crown of spring blossoms. Pallas Athena fit every adornment for its body. In its heart, the messenger, the slayer of Argus, fashioned lies, wily words, and a cunning disposition through the designs of loud-thundering Zeus. The herald of the gods placed within a voice and named this woman Pandora....

As B.L. Wickkiser notes,<sup>21</sup> Pandora's interiority alongside her physical appearance makes her more lifelike; she is a living woman rather than something akin to a statue.<sup>22</sup> Without the discussion of Pandora's intellect she would remain an *eidolon*, "a double, wholly resembling a real being, but one that is empty, inconstant, ungraspable, and lacking in presence."<sup>23</sup> In essence, this version of Pandora stands apart from her other incarnation because she possesses an element of free will. Her intentions may have been ordained originally by Zeus, but her mental acuity enables her to determine *how* to enact what he intends. That is to say, she is the physical manifestation of Zeus' intellect (she is his idea) *and* is also the one who rouses feelings (namely, longing and sorrows) in

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<sup>21</sup> Wickkiser 2009: 560-562.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Wickkiser places great emphasis on the fact that, while both start out as "essentially terracotta statues," the Pandora of the *Theogony* is meant to be seen. A great part of her creation is taken up with the adornments placed upon her by Hephaestus and Athena, and there is only a "possible hint of... interiority" through her portrayal as the progenitor of womankind. Conversely, Wickkiser notes that Pandora in the *Works and Days* is able to learn and expresses her intentionality by lifting the lid of the *pithos* thus demonstrating the significance of her interior qualities.

<sup>23</sup> Vernant and Zeitlin 2011: 407.

others. Nowhere is this more evident than in her dealings with the infamous *pithos*.

Πρὶν μὲν γὰρ ζώεσκον ἐπὶ χθονὶ φύλ' ἀνθρώπων  
νόσφιν ἄτερ τε κακῶν καὶ ἄτερ χαλεποῖο πόνοιο  
νούσων τ' ἀργαλέων, αἶ τ' ἀνδράσι κῆρας ἔδωκαν.  
αἶψα γὰρ ἐν κακότητι βροτοὶ καταγηράσκουσιν.  
ἀλλὰ γυνὴ χεῖρεςσι πίθου μέγα πῶμ' ἀφελούσα  
ἔσκέδασ', ἀνθρώποισι δ' ἐμήσατο κήδεα λυγρὰ.  
μούνη δ' αὐτόθι Ἑλπίς ἐν ἀρρήκτοισι δόμοισιν  
ἔνδον ἔμεινε πίθου ὑπὸ χεῖλεσιν οὐδὲ θύραζε  
ἔξέπτῃ· πρόσθεν γὰρ ἐπέμβαλε πῶμα πίθου  
αἰγιόχου βουλήσι Διὸς νεφεληγερέταο.

For formerly the tribes of men on earth lived far off,  
without evils, without grievous toil and the troublesome  
sicknesses which delivered death to men. For in misery  
mortal men grow old quickly. But the woman, removing the  
great lid of the jar, dispersed [these] with her hands and  
contrived baneful troubles for mankind. Only Hope  
remained there within its invulnerable chamber, under the  
lips of the jar, and did not fly out; for before then she put back  
the lid of the jar through the designs of the aegis-bearer and  
cloud-gatherer, Zeus.<sup>24</sup>

When Hermes brings Pandora to Epimetheus, she is known as “the gift” (δῶρον).<sup>25</sup> Hesiod makes no mention of a *pithos*, nor does he include any other object when Pandora is brought to Epimetheus. When Pandora does eventually interact with this object and removes its lid, there is no way to determine exactly where the vessel came from or why Pandora has access to it. As such, some scholars have taken the *pithos* as a metaphor rather than an actual object.

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<sup>24</sup> *Op.* 90-99.

<sup>25</sup> *Op.* 85 and 86.

Patricia Marquardt,<sup>26</sup> for instance, sees the *Works and Days* overarching agricultural focus as evidence that the *pithos* is a stand-in for the earth. Consequently, she contends that the ills which emerge from within the jar are the same toils which Hesiod describes as a necessary component of earning one's livelihood. Pandora and women at large force men to open the earth (*pithos*) to recover the hope (*elpis*) of a successful harvest and a less onerous existence.<sup>27</sup>

Froma Zeitlin<sup>28</sup> and Yurie Hong,<sup>29</sup> on the other hand, have argued that the *pithos* is a symbol for the womb. From this perspective, the opening of the *pithos* is specifically linked to a woman's reproductive ability. Zeitlin, in particular, argues the removal of the *pithos'* lid represents the loss of a woman's virginity and the conception of a child. Furthermore, Hippocratic texts describing the female anatomy compare a woman's uterus to an upside-down jar.<sup>30</sup> With this, Zeitlin views Hope as the promise of a child "uncertainly placed between evil and good."<sup>31</sup> On this point, Hong offers a slightly different analysis saying that the presence of *elpis* still within the *pithos* is not Hope but Anticipation.<sup>32</sup> According to her, this Anticipation refers to a woman being "perpetually pregnant with both positive and negative potential." The process of giving birth, she argues, demonstrates a woman's inherent ability to affect, positively or negatively, the existence of men.<sup>33</sup>

Along those lines, Hesiod's repeated emphasis on Pandora's physical and intellectual characteristics allows for another metaphorical interpretation of the *pithos*, namely one in which the vessel represents Pandora's mind and agency. As mentioned earlier, Aphrodite shed "charm" and "painful yearning and consuming obsession" around Pandora's head.<sup>34</sup> Thus, upon Pandora are some of the very things which

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<sup>26</sup> Marquardt 1982: 289-90.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.: 291.

<sup>28</sup> Zeitlin 1996: 85.

<sup>29</sup> Hong 2014: section 3.6.

<sup>30</sup> Zeitlin 1996: 65-66. Zeitlin also emphasizes the juxtaposition between a jar's mouth, neck, and lips and the respective parts of the female reproductive organs.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.: 66.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Beall 1989: 227, in which Beall offers Expectation to reconcile Hesiod's account with the positive portrayal of *elpis* in other texts.

<sup>33</sup> Hong 2014: section 3.6.

<sup>34</sup> *Op.* 65-66.

she appears to unleash when she removes the lid from the *pithos*. She is both the source and cause of the “ills... harsh toil, and grievous sicknesses”<sup>35</sup> which afflict men after her arrival. As Vernant and Zeitlin note, “Pandora is suffused with *charis*, with grace... one cannot look at her without being seized at once by a stupefied admiration and a rush of erotic desire.”<sup>36</sup> There is no need for these toils to come from some external object; Pandora is, in and of herself, the purveyor of men’s evils.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the words which Hesiod uses to describe the opening of the *pithos* also correlate with other usages which overtly refer to parts of the throat and mouth. Specifically, the term πῶμα, which seals the *pithos* in the *Works and Days*, is in Aristotle’s *De Respiratione* used to describe the function of the epiglottis—as “a sort of lid over the windpipe” (ἔχει ἡ ἀρτηρία οἶον πῶμα τῆν ἐπιγλωττίδα)<sup>38</sup>—whereas the term χείλειον, the lips behind which *elpis* remains, can generally refer to Pandora’s physical lips as much as they can refer to the lip of a *pithos*.<sup>39</sup> Both of these organs are crucial to the act of speaking since they are both responsible for the articulation of sounds and words.<sup>40</sup> Thus, if we take the *pithos* as the repository of Pandora’s thoughts and intentions, then the removal of the *pithos*’ lid can be seen as Pandora’s first attempts at committing a speech act—she opens her mouth and produces words, and those words provoke thoughts and actions in men which will lead them to experience toils and sorrows which they have heretofore been spared.

Bolstering this point further is the fact that at the exact moment of the evils’ release Hesiod punctuates Pandora’s intentionality by stating,

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<sup>35</sup> *Op.* 91-92.

<sup>36</sup> Vernant and Zeitlin 2011: 407.

<sup>37</sup> On page 408, Vernant and Zeitlin note that *charis* is not “inherent in [Pandora] or consubstantial with her.” Nevertheless, on page 410 they go on to explain that, through the endowment of *charis*, individuals “might recover the integrity of a figure that *corresponds to what they are* (my emphasis) in order that their appearance might give evidence in the eyes of all of the supremacy of their rank, their preeminent value, their glory, and the honors due them.”

<sup>38</sup> Arist. *Resp.* 476a.33-34

<sup>39</sup> Although Clay 2009: 124, similarly argues that the *pithos* acts as a double for Pandora and draws a connection between the duality of the term χείλειον, she does not consider the possibility of the vessel being part of the woman herself.

<sup>40</sup> Laufer and Condax 1981.



"she *contrived* baneful troubles for mankind."<sup>41</sup> Thus, the evils of mankind are the result of Pandora's *conscious* efforts.<sup>42</sup> Despite the fact that Hesiod does not explicitly describe Pandora speaking, he does not altogether deny her the opportunity. She is given a mind, a voice, and the means to act, and if one can consider the *pithos* a symbol for Pandora's mind, then Hesiod, through the opening of that *pithos*, highlights Pandora's use of all three of these traits. In other words, the process of lifting the *pithos*' lid becomes a demonstration of Pandora's ability to conceive, verbalize, and produce ideas. These ideas unleashed then implant themselves surreptitiously in men's minds and compel them to work for women's benefit. Hope remains within Pandora and women as unspoken words which have the ability to alleviate or exacerbate the troubles in men's lives. Coupled with the characteristics granted to her in the *Theogony*, Pandora then becomes a fully realized woman who is able to affect others through both her appearance and words and actions. With this in mind, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Pandora's legacy remains duplicity, but it is a duplicity rooted in a more complex sense of agency. It is precisely this complex sense of agency, alongside the interactions between men and "women," which is in play in *Ex Machina*.

Before delving into the details of the film, a brief overview is in order. The film begins with the aforementioned Caleb, who wins the winning first prize in his company's staff lottery. As the winner of this contest, he gets the chance to spend one week at the estate of his reclusive boss, Nathan. Upon arriving at the estate, Caleb discovers that he has actually won the opportunity to conduct a Turing test, a test of artificial consciousness, with Nathan's recently created AI, Ava.

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<sup>41</sup> *Op.* 95, emphasis my own. As a counterpoint, see Mayor 2018: 160. Here, Mayor discusses the artificiality of Pandora and argues that she is endowed with a "low sort of intelligence." Additionally, she says "it is unclear whether Pandora has the ability to learn, choose, or act autonomously." This idea, however, runs contrary to the line quoted above and the skills Athena bestows upon her, which Mayor also mentions. If Pandora is able to weave and generally possess knowledge, it would seem to follow that she is also able to act without being told to do so. Cf. Fraser 2011: 20, which notes Hesiod's use of αὐδὴ and φωνή in relation to Hephaestus' and Hermes' contributions, respectively. According to her assessment, the different terms indicate distinctive forms of speech which can only be granted by the two gods—Hephaestus endows Pandora with speech itself, but Hermes bestows her with his own "kind of articulate speech." This detail further supports the notion that Pandora has intelligence and can develop her own plans.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Clay 2009: 125, which also notes Pandora's intentionality.

Each day, Caleb and Ava converse while Nathan observes from his room via CCTV camera. After each session, Nathan debriefs Caleb to see what his impressions of Ava are. Caleb, however, begins to conceal certain aspects of each session from Nathan, initially because Ava tells him that Nathan is not to be trusted and then because Ava seemingly develops an interest in Caleb, and he unmistakably develops one in her. Ava can reveal her feelings about Nathan and Caleb because she can trigger power outages which cut the video and audio from Nathan's CCTV feed. On the afternoon of the fifth day, Nathan reveals he is planning to produce the next version of his AI. This means he will destroy Ava and use parts of her to construct a new prototype. Driven by his desire to save her and even more so by his desire to be *with* her, Caleb develops a plan which will allow both of them to escape from the facility. Unfortunately for Caleb, the plan backfires, and only Ava escapes. Nathan ends up dead, and Caleb finds himself alone, trapped, and seemingly left to starve to death.

Even without the direct reference noted at the beginning, a film whose premise centers around the creation of a female figure who eventually brings about the destruction of two men has little trouble being linked to the myth of Pandora. As stated earlier, several writers have drawn a connection between Ava and Pandora, and much of what they say focuses on the deceptive nature of women and/or the oppression and objectification of women by powerful men. Daniel Mendelsohn, for example, traces the evolution of literary and cinematic automata directly from ancient Greek sources. Ava, he states, is "a direct descendant of Hesiod's Pandora—beautiful, intelligent, wily, [and] ultimately dangerous." She is "physically as well as intellectually seductive," and her "bloody rebellion against Nathan...marks her emergence into human 'consciousness.'"<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Alyssa Rosenberg associates Ava with Pandora and other depictions of AI and notes that "[automata] are an excellent metaphor for contemporary womanhood." *Ex Machina*, moreover, is "fundamentally a horror movie, and one specifically about gender."<sup>44</sup> Finally, Angela Watercutter sees Ava as a character who "falls squarely into so many of the tropes of women in film. She is a femme fatale, a seductress posing as a damsel in distress, using her wiles to get

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<sup>43</sup> Mendelsohn 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Rosenberg 2015.

Caleb to save her from Nathan and his...quest to build the perfect woman."<sup>45</sup>

Taking the comparison further, one can argue more specifically that Ava's presentation to Caleb and the traits which she adopts when she converses with him place her in the role of Pandora from the *Works and Days*. Just as Pandora is described as a "lovely and beautiful young maiden" on the verge of marriage to Epimetheus, Ava approaches Caleb and is "proportioned as a slender woman in her twenties... a strikingly beautiful girl... Indistinguishable from a real girl in its appearance and in the way it moves."<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Ava's use of language immediately impresses Caleb since she is able to converse naturally and even use sarcasm while questioning him.<sup>47</sup> Language continues to be an important aspect of Ava and Caleb's "relationship" because her naively curious comments gradually betray a greater understanding of human courtship and seduction—"I'd like us to go on a date,"<sup>48</sup> soon becomes "I want to be with you... Do you want to be with me?"<sup>49</sup>

Like Hesiod's repeated emphasis on Pandora's physical and intellectual attributes in the *Works and Days*, Ava also links the tenor of her speech to her clothing so that she can endear herself more easily to Caleb. When deciding what she would wear to this hypothetical date, Ava chooses demure clothing that conveys a sense of innocence.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, she often chooses to kneel rather than sit in front of Caleb, which makes her seem submissive to him. Nonetheless, through the modification of her words, gestures, and appearance, she stirs thoughts in him that cause him to envision a future in which they can be together,<sup>51</sup> and the more they speak, the more willing Caleb is to try to release her. Yet, despite her potential to be Pandora, Ava remains powerless as long as she is confined to one area within the estate.

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<sup>45</sup> Watercutter 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Garland 2019: 27.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*: 44.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*: 61.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*: 87.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*: 59. The screenplay describes the outfit as "a summer dress. Then stockings. Then a long-sleeved cardigan."

<sup>51</sup> Garland 2019: 78.

Aside from Ava, Caleb and Nathan have Hesiodic referents as well. Upon first glance, Nathan is very much a Zeus-like figure.<sup>52</sup> He is physically imposing, lives in a remote region of the world away from the general populace, and is a known genius. Within his estate/research facility, he sees and controls nearly everything, and even after he brings Caleb into his domain, Nathan maintains his dominance and constantly manipulates Caleb in ways which limit his ability to interact with him intellectually. During their first interaction, for instance, Nathan tells Caleb how to feel saying, "You're freaked out by this house, and the mountains, because it's all so super-cool. And you're freaked out by me. To be meeting me."<sup>53</sup> When Caleb first inquires about the intricacies of Ava's programming, Nathan stops him and asks him to feel rather than think.<sup>54</sup> And when Nathan *does* entertain Caleb's intellectual curiosity, he only does so after he re-establishes the parameters of the discussion. After Caleb becomes suspicious of Ava's interest in him and asks whether this was a purposeful ruse on Nathan's part, Nathan redirects his questions about sexuality into a conversation about sex and choice, implying that Ava has consciously chosen to flirt with Caleb. This implication fuels Caleb's desire to interact with Ava further and to eventually free her from the estate, which is the true test Nathan has placed before Caleb.

Furthermore, Nathan is the creator of Blue Book, a Google-like search engine which accounts for "ninety-four percent of all internet search requests."<sup>55</sup> This search engine becomes the basis for Ava's programming as Nathan not only uses the world's searches to understand how people think but he also hacks the microphones and cameras within people's phones to develop her ability to replicate facial expressions.<sup>56</sup> Thus, like Zeus, Nathan forms Ava with the pieces he has gathered from

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<sup>52</sup> Hammond 2018. Hammond's chapter also draws parallels between the characters in *Ex Machina* and the myth of Pandora, but Hammond sees Nathan as an Epimetheus figure due to his lack of foresight regarding the dangers of Ava. Countering this notion, however, is the fact that Hesiod's works also show Zeus being deceived multiple times by Prometheus. Consequently, Nathan seems to fulfill the role of Zeus, and Caleb is the character which seems more similar to Epimetheus.

<sup>53</sup> Garland 2019: 21.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.: 35. Here, Nathan tells Caleb, "Just answer me this. What do you feel about her? Nothing analytical. Just—how do you feel?"

<sup>55</sup> Garland 2019: 45.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.: 69-70.

outside sources. Moreover, when showing Caleb the “ellipse orb” which makes up Ava’s brain, he states that Ava is a “grey box”—her essence is a container “holding for memories. Shifting for thoughts,” which can “arrange and rearrange on a molecular level, but keep its form where required.”<sup>57</sup> Nathan has installed in his Pandora a digital *pithos* through which she can develop her own plans to deceive the man presented to her.

If Nathan is Ava’s overseer and the ultimate determiner of whether she leaves the estate, then Caleb is Epimetheus, who finds himself the pawn in the bigger game being played around him. In contrast to Nathan, Caleb is physically and intellectually inferior. He struggles when he and Nathan walk in the mountains,<sup>58</sup> and later, he is immediately knocked unconscious by a single punch to the face. In conversation, he responds to Nathan by quoting others’ words<sup>59</sup> or, as mentioned, allows Nathan to shift the topic of discussion or even change his statements completely. For example, Caleb is the one who says the creation of an AI is not the single greatest scientific event in the history of man but “the history of gods.”<sup>60</sup> But when Nathan imagines recounting their conversation to others, he says, “ ‘I turned to Caleb, and he was looking back at me. And he said: you’re not a man, you’re a God.’ ”<sup>61</sup>

Most significantly, Caleb is unable to foresee the deception occurring around him until it is too late. Although he correctly predicts Nathan taking steps to counter Ava’s power outages, Caleb never considers the possibility that Ava could deceive him until Nathan suggests it.<sup>62</sup> Once he does, Caleb finally understands that his conversations with Ava have been a test of his own intellect—these exchanges do not determine Caleb’s intelligence but, rather, allow Nathan *and* Ava to ascertain whether his emotions can override his reasoning. Like Zeus and Pandora with Epimetheus, both figures direct Caleb’s emotions and deceive him through enticement. Nathan does this first by

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.: 69.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.: 76

<sup>59</sup> In addition to the quote from the *Bhagavad-Gita* cited earlier, Caleb also quotes Lewis Carroll saying that speaking to Ava is like “you’re through the looking glass.”

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.: 26.

<sup>61</sup> Garland 2019: 33. This statement adds to the connection between Nathan and Zeus as well.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.: 105. Here, Nathan tells Caleb, “... there is a third option. Not whether she does or doesn’t have the capacity to like you. But whether she’s pretending to like you.”

modeling Ava's appearance on Caleb's online pornography profile, and Ava follows through by using the clothing and images Nathan supplied her to match it. With Caleb thus misled by his passion, he goes on to free Ava and doom himself and humanity at large.

As much as Ava, Nathan, and Caleb seem to correspond to Pandora, Zeus, and Epimetheus, *Ex Machina* goes on to complicate the myth by introducing another Pandora-like AI, Kyoko, and making her the crux of Ava's liberation. When Kyoko first appears on screen, she is shown silently entering Caleb's room to bring him coffee in the morning. At this time, there is no indication she is anything other than human—her body bears none of the mechanized features which are so prominent in Ava,<sup>63</sup> and rather than being confined to a small room as Ava is, Kyoko seems to be able to roam freely within the estate. Furthermore, she is able to interact directly with Caleb and Nathan. The only thing she lacks is the ability to speak. As Nathan explains to Caleb, she “can't speak a word of English” which is ideal for him because it allows him to “talk trade secrets” with others without fearing that someone will leak information about his research.<sup>64</sup> Thus, Kyoko is, above all, someone who is there to serve the *physical* and *domestic* needs of others. Kyoko is maid, cook, dance partner,<sup>65</sup> and lover.<sup>66</sup>

As such, she becomes an analogue for the *Theogony's* Pandora. Whereas Ava's role is that of a young Pandora being readied for marriage in the *Works and Days*, Kyoko plays the part of a Pandora who is already an established part of an *oikos*. For instance, her overall appearance

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.: 41. The screenplay describes Kyoko in the following way: “She looks Japanese. She's stunningly pretty. And she doesn't say anything.” The importance of Kyoko's implied nationality will come into play later.

<sup>64</sup> Garland 2019: 49-50. The first moment Kyoko interacts with others is during the scene in which she serves the two men dinner and accidentally spills some wine. As Caleb attempts to wipe the wine up, Kyoko takes the napkin from him and begins to clean until Nathan orders her to leave.

<sup>65</sup> One of the lighter scenes in the film shows Kyoko and Nathan dancing together in front of Caleb. As stated in Garland 2019: 82, “they work through the beats of a routine they have obviously done many times before.”

<sup>66</sup> Before overtly revealing her robotic nature, the film presents Kyoko as an individual who is always sexually available to Nathan. We see her respond immediately to Nathan's advances in one scene, and in another, Caleb finds Kyoko in Nathan's room naked and reclining on his bed. On Garland 2019: 95, the latter scene is even more explicit as to the nature of Kyoko's “relationship” with Nathan: “Kyoko is lying on Nathan's bed. She's naked. On her back. Legs open.”

marks her as a woman rather than a younger girl. Instead of a summer dress and cardigan, Kyoko wears a form-fitting dress and heels. Her hair and makeup are done. In all, her actions indicate she is accustomed to domestic living. This may be the reason why the majority of writers either omit<sup>67</sup> or only marginally include Kyoko in their analyses of the film—she is seemingly *all* stereotype. As A.J. Micheline rightly notes,

[T]he purported silence and obedience of Asian women and their perceived difficulties with English are what really sells her personhood to Caleb and the viewer. Before [the reveal that she is an AI], by Caleb's reckoning, it makes perfect sense that Kyoko is docile and accepts Nathan's abuses without any sign of rebelling...Kyoko was, in Nathan and Caleb's mind, a transplanted geisha of sorts...<sup>68</sup>

Kyoko's silence, like the apparent silence of the two Pandoras before her, seems to give one license to marginalize her and deny her agency. Nathan and Caleb underestimate her because she cannot express her agency verbally, just as they underestimate Ava because she cannot express her agency beyond the confines of her room. The powerlessness perceived in Kyoko, however, works to her further detriment because there is an implicit assumption about her lack of intelligence. This, for example, is the reason why Kyoko is able to use knives so freely when she is cooking—because Nathan and, by extension, Caleb are only meant to see such items as kitchen utensils while they are in Kyoko's hands. She is not smart enough to use them as weapons and, thus, be a threat.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Hammond 2018 also omits the presence of Kyoko and the type of femininity she portrays through her interactions with Nathan, Caleb, and Ava. This is unfortunate because, as mentioned, there *do* seem to be two “phases” of femininity at play which can also be juxtaposed with the two depictions of Pandora—Kyoko embodies the maturity of the Pandora within the *Theogony*, whereas Ava plays the part of the *ingénue* Pandora of the *Works and Days*.

<sup>68</sup> Micheline 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Yet another reason why the domesticity of Kyoko does not pose the same danger as Pandora seems to be because of her obvious inability to produce children. Reproduction—the very thing that makes Pandora notable in the *Theogony*—is out of the realm of possibility within a machine. Therefore, Nathan has created the ideal scenario for man in that he benefits from Kyoko's utility even as he is enticed by her beauty and sexual prowess. Cf. Garland 2019: 89: Nathan has “[stripped] out the higher functions. Then

Consequently, her active role in the plot against Nathan comes as a shock, even though evidence of her potential revolt is present throughout the course of the film. At several points, Kyoko is explicitly shown observing and listening to the conversations between Nathan and Caleb and Ava.<sup>70</sup> She notes the differences in these characters' interactions and, just like Ava, she seems to conclude that she can better her circumstances by gaining Caleb's trust. As previously stated, Ava is largely able to gain his trust through conversation. She appeals to Caleb intellectually, psychologically, and emotionally by introducing topics which compel Caleb to provide more personal information about himself. The spatial limitations imposed upon her, however, prevent her from physically responding to the feelings she elicits from Caleb. Nevertheless, she is able to present herself as someone who needs saving. She *evokes* the *idea* of a damsel in distress, and Caleb is all too eager to play the role of her savior.

Kyoko, on the other hand, tries to appeal to Caleb through physical means. There are two scenes in the film in which Kyoko attempts to reveal herself as an automaton. The first scene occurs when Caleb enters Nathan's lounge and finds Kyoko staring at a painting by Jackson Pollock. As he approaches and asks about Nathan's whereabouts, Kyoko begins to unbutton her blouse. Immediately, Caleb interprets this gesture as a sign of Kyoko submitting to him sexually,<sup>71</sup> and cinematic precedent would dictate that Caleb is correct in assuming this—such a gesture typically results in nudity and/or a sex scene—but bearing in mind Kyoko's study

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[reprogrammed] her to help around the house and be... awesome in bed." On a similar note, cf. Halberstam 2019: 179.

<sup>70</sup> The scenes in which Kyoko listens or observes are easy to miss early on since the film uses short cuts to indicate Kyoko's presence. As the film proceeds, however, the camera lingers longer on Kyoko's face, and viewers are able to see that Kyoko is processing information. Most notably, Kyoko is shown going alone to the Jackson Pollock room (designated as such because one of the artist's paintings is hanging there) after Caleb and Nathan go there to speak more about spontaneity and the conscious thought. The greater significance of this scene will be discussed shortly.

<sup>71</sup> Garland 2019: 80. The description of their interaction in the screenplay is more overtly sexual as Kyoko "reaches up to the top button of her shirt and pops it open... she undoes the next button, and pulls open the shirt, revealing her bare chest." In the film, Kyoko does not completely open her shirt, and Caleb urgently tells her "Stop! No, no. Don't do that. Don't do that. You don't have to do that," because he believes she is about to undress herself to have sex with him.



and observation of others' interactions, it also seems possible that Kyoko is attempting to show Caleb that she, too, is like Ava. She has consciousness and is also someone worthy of being set free. This, then, begs the question of why she would choose to reveal a part of her torso instead of another, less potentially titillating part of her body. Surely Kyoko could remove the "skin" from her face and instantly remove all doubt about whether she was human. The choice, it seems, has to do with Nathan's ubiquitous presence. Since he is liable to enter the room at any moment (and does moments later), Kyoko has little time to interact with Caleb and reveal the mechanisms within her. Removing the "skin" from her face would be an overt act of rebellion and would demonstrate to Nathan her intent to escape. Therefore, she only tries to reveal a part of her body that she can quickly conceal. She is deliberate in her actions and demonstrates a high level of consciousness, but Caleb still misinterprets her intentions.

Ironically, the second opportunity Kyoko has to align herself with Caleb comes when Caleb finds her fully naked in Nathan's bedroom. At this point, Caleb is enacting part of his plan to help Ava escape. He has gotten Nathan "blind drunk" and has infiltrated his room to reprogram the door locks in the estate to open during a power outage which Ava will trigger later. During this time, Kyoko also knows that Nathan is incapacitated, so when she sees Caleb she understands that now is the time to show him her true mechanical form. She literally and metaphorically bares herself by approaching him and removing the covering from her face and, at the same time, illustrates the extent of her self-awareness. If Ava *evokes* the *idea* of the damsel in distress, then Kyoko *is* that idea made (mechanical) flesh.<sup>72</sup> From her first appearance onward, Kyoko has undergone a transformation of consciousness; she has gone from a subservient maid to a full-fledged participant in an act of rebellion. She has exhibited "imagination, sexuality, self-awareness, empathy, [and] manipulation"—qualities which Nathan lists to describe the consciousness he sees in Ava but qualities which he and Caleb should have also seen in Kyoko.

If Nathan and Caleb comprehend the Promethean aspects of their situation and see Ava as an analog to Pandora, then Kyoko should be seen

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<sup>72</sup> Halberstam 2019: 184.

as such as well. Both automata possess the mental faculties which allow them to acquire information, assess their surroundings, and adapt their actions and/or behavior in a way that will maximize their chances to be set free.<sup>73</sup> They act in their own self-interests and, while limited as they are by their programming, as in the case of Kyoko, or their physical settings, as in the case of Ava, they remain examples of circumscribed femininity; they are Pandoras without the full spectrum of gods-given attributes. Alone, Ava exemplifies the parts of Pandora which come from Hermes and the other gods in the *Works and Days*—the mind and the voice which can contrive ills for others—whereas Kyoko emphasizes the attributes bestowed upon Pandora within the *Theogony*, namely the sensual, physically attractive aspects of her body. Thus, nothing changes for them until they are able to work together. Then and only then do they represent a Pandora who exercises the full extent of her agency.

Toward the end of the film, Kyoko decides to take full advantage of Caleb's plan by going to see Ava once the estate's doors are all unlocked. Upon meeting, the two AI are of one mind—they create their own plan of escape and retribution.<sup>74</sup> Without Caleb, Ava leads the charge and tackles Nathan to the ground. Kyoko strikes the first mortal blow, and when Nathan retaliates and unfortunately kills Kyoko, Ava finishes him off. Altogether, the alliance between the two automata displays the power which results from the object of rescue, the damsel in distress, becoming the subject of her own act of liberation. The fact that only Ava survives is unfortunate, but it is ultimately important because it leads to the scene in which Ava overtly eliminates the evidence of her literal objectification and comes to full self-actualization.

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<sup>73</sup> Although Kyoko's higher functions have been stripped down, she still possesses the same kind of "ellipse orb" used to construct Ava's mind. As noted earlier, this wetware has the ability to reconstruct itself on a molecular level whenever it processes new information. With this in mind, it is possible that Kyoko's introduction to Caleb and her exposure to new types of information causes her to develop her higher functions naturally, and this, in turn, leads her to seek Ava out.

<sup>74</sup> When the two AI meet, they face each other and "converse." Ava speaks to Kyoko and touches her arm rhythmically. Afterward, Ava smiles at Kyoko, and they hold hands. Interestingly, when Nathan calls out to Ava, both AI turn and face him at the same time—they literally act with singular focus. Cf. Garland 2019: 112, which describes Kyoko's role in the conversation: "Kyoko's mouth is by Ava's ear, as if telling her a secret. Her lips are open. They don't move... we hear a hiss of static, with soft pulses of noise buried inside."

After her confrontation with Nathan, Ava enters his room where he has stored previous versions of his AI. Ava uses the arm of one automaton to replace the arm she lost. Then she slowly removes the “skin” from another and places it on her own body. Finally, she clothes her new, human-like body in a dress which a third AI had previously worn. At each step, Ava inherits the “prosthetic” femininity of the “women” that came before her.<sup>75</sup> For all his Zeus-like efforts to curb reproduction, Nathan has, in actuality, replicated the act of reproduction himself. He has made and re-made his AI to the very point at which Kyoko can send Ava forth as her and the other automata’s “offspring.” Thus, Ava leaves the estate as a fully formed, “human” individual. She is an idea made manifest, evolved from others before her into a being who lives her life on her own terms. To emphasize this point, the film ends with Ava at a traffic intersection—a place which, for Caleb, represented the location of their future first date but for her, represents an expression of her liberation and her Pandora-given agency. This Pandora, however, has no ties to her creator or to the society which she will now infiltrate. She is a danger beyond femininity or anything else Hesiod or Nathan could have envisioned—she is now, as she stated, “One.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Halberstam 2019: 185.

<sup>76</sup> Garland 2019: 31.

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