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To be real for you: acousmatic cyborgs, asexuality, and becoming human

Introduction

Near the climactic centre of *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), the artificially intelligent hologram Joi (Ana de Armas) tells K (Ryan Gosling) "I want to be real for you" before revealing that she has hired a surrogate (Mackenzie Davis) to act as her body so the two can have sex. K tells Joi "you are real for me," but Joi syncs over the surrogate's body. In a similar scene from *Her* (2013), the bodiless AI operating system Samantha (Scarlett Johansson) also seeks out a surrogate (Portia Doubleday) to help her fulfil her desire to be real for Theo (Joaquin Phoenix). Taken together, these two strikingly similar scenes reveal something telling about the way active, embodied sexuality and humanity are connected in both film and the broader cultural logics that surround it.

In cinema, the cyborg is often used as a vehicle for expressing anxieties about the instability of humanity as a position. By definition, cyborgs are technology that approaches or appropriates humanity in some way. Because cyborgs exist in a contested state between human and machine, they are a useful starting point for considering both how we confer humanity, in general, and the role sexuality and desire play in that process. In sci-fi cinema, it is common for

cyborgs to become more human by demonstrating an ability for social and emotional learning — this work is often done through the imposition of (especially hetero)sexual attraction and desire. At the same time, robotic, mechanical rationality is associated with inhumanity that is often described (in the critical literature) as being "asexual." Expressive sexuality characterizes the human, while cold rationality (called asexuality) is associated with the inhuman.

Although this "asexuality" is not an explicit reference to an identity or orientation, other scholars currently working in the field of asexuality studies have also taken up the broad association between asexuality and inhumanity. Asexually-identified individuals are viewed as either inhuman or improperly developed humans. In this way, they happen to occupy the same position as cyborgs in film who are not-quite human, but who might be humanized through the development and display of sexual attraction and desire. Much like cyborgs, individuals who identify as asexual might be put on the path to humanity if they can develop more normative sexualities. Importantly, this perceived need for correction attests to the threat asexuality poses to conventional conceptions of sexuality, which is ultimately much like the threat cyborgs pose to humanity. Corrective approaches assume that asexuals and cyborgs can both be humanized through development of human characteristics, like the establishment of clearly defined, normative sexual attraction and desire. However, even in the most successful cases, cyborgs in cinema must do this by simulating humanity before experiencing it as real, which in turn reveals that what was taken to be an essential and innate human characteristic was only ever part of a mechanical process. This ultimately exposes sexuality (and possibly humanity along with it) as a technological effect itself.

So, living in technologically-mediated society threatens our sense of self as internally coherent, stable, and individually possessed. This threat is then located in the figure of the cyborg who, by not being fully human, indicates the boundaries we use to establish our definitions of self. Although attempts to address this threat through the imposition of sexuality ultimately fail, they reveal that sexuality and sexual attraction, and humanity along with them, are mechanical effects rather than innately based human characteristics. This is important because, once this mechanical function is made evident, we can begin

to reconceive of sexuality and its affiliation with humanity in ways that might allow us to rethink the self. While sex might be experienced as potentially reparative of lost or incomplete humanity, as it is for cyborgs, there might be better, less anxiety-ridden ways to think about it and the position of subjecthood as well. Perhaps it is possible to reconceive the positive value associated with achieving humanity. If becoming fully human, or "real" as it is labelled in the two films I'll discuss, depends on normalization through sexuality, then perhaps it is better to take the positioning of asexuality at the boundaries of humanity as a starting point for queering what it means to be a self.

In this paper I will analyse those two very similar sex scenes described above. *Blade Runner 2049* and *Her* are recent entries in the cyborg cinema tradition that demonstrate the familiar practice of humanising cyborgs through the imposition of sexuality. Like their predecessors, both films attempt to address anxieties about cyborgs and their relationship to humanity by normalising cyborg figures in sexual relationships. The two films are notably different from previous examples because they feature cyborgs who are primarily bodiless voices, or acousmêtres. Because of the associations with what it means to be human that are attached to both voice and body, this difference makes them potentially instructive for our understandings of the links connecting humanity and sexuality.

Literature Review

To conduct my analysis, I rely on an expansive definition of 'cyborg' drawn from both criticism of sci-fi cinema and feminist theory. In *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity,* Sue Short (2005: 11) specifies that, in cinema, a cyborg is 'a combination of humanity and technology'. Although some more rigid definitions of the term 'cyborg' maintain that the combination of humanity and technology must occur at a physical level (like a human being with a cybernetic arm), Short's definition includes beings constructed from both mechanical and organic material (as in the previous case) *as well as* purely mechanical beings that attain a degree of humanity, which they might do by developing consciousness. For example, Short (2005: 12) recognizes that although the

replicants of *Blade Runner* are technically androids, they are positioned as cyborgs in their context because of their ability to question and disturb the boundary between humans and machines.[1] In 'Automating gender: postmodern feminism in the age of the intelligent machine', Jack Halberstam (1991: 439) defines cyborgs even more simply as 'thinking machines'. While developed for different contexts, both definitions place the cyborg in the overlap between technology and humanity. They also particularly emphasize the role of thought or consciousness in defining humanity, suggesting that the 'human' component of any cyborg is less dependent on the presence of organic flesh and more determined by their ability to demonstrate 'human' thinking and consciousness.

In her analysis, Short also summarizes the history of academic criticism that focuses on the figure of the cyborg in sci-fi cinema and its role in revealing the cultural logics surrounding what it means to be human. Specifically, Short is interested in how the cyborg in cinema prompts us to ask what makes us human, how we are to be differentiated from machines, and even how 'human' — as in 'individual,' 'spontaneous,' 'free,' and 'natural' — anyone can be (2005: 11). Short is not alone in pursuing this focus. Indeed, much of the academic writing on science fiction cinema takes up this question.[2] This attention to the influence cyborgs exert on our understandings of what it means to be human is reflective of a larger fear that there might ultimately be no material basis for distinguishing between humans and non-humans, a fact which, in turn, reveals 'human' itself to be an empty category.

Critics agree that the source of this anxiety is not so much the prospect that we will be overpowered by machines, but that we will be replaced by cyborgs in our relationships with both ourselves and others.[3] So, the cyborg represents a threat

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[1] This expansion of the term "cyborg" is upheld in further criticism of sci-fi cinema, like Forest Pyle's (1993) 'Making cyborgs, making humans', which takes up analysis of *Blade Runner*'s replicants as cyborgs.

[2] Including Samantha Holland's (1995) 'Descartes goes to Hollywood: mind, body, and gender in contemporary cyborg cinema' and Forest Pyle's (1993) 'Making Cyborgs, Making Humans'.

[3] Halberstam identifies the two major anxieties incited by cyborgs as the fear that first "computers may be taught to simulate human thought" and second robots will take jobs from humans (1991, p. 439). Holland echoes these fears that human beings will be *replaced* by, and that we are *becoming* machines" (1995, pp. 159-60). Finally, in 'The Robot in the western mind', Mark Crispin Miller writes that "the robot would 'take over' not like a mere human conqueror, making threats and giving orders, but like a vampire, incorporating all our qualities into itself. Our strengths and energies drain into it, leaving us weak; it grows as we shrivel" (1988, p. 287).

to humans' social and economic livelihoods as well as our sense of individual being, both of which depend on establishing clear boundaries between human and machine. This threat reveals itself as a central preoccupation of many films featuring cyborgs, as well as science-fiction cinema taken more broadly.[4] More specifically, Vivian Sobchack (1990: 113) argues that 'all science fiction films [are] about space travel' in that they are invested in 'the passage across known and marked boundaries that give identity to the world and to ourselves'. Along these lines, I would add that, where our definitions of the human are concerned, all science fiction films are actually (also) about cyborgs. Sobchak (1990: 113-14) argues the potential for re-negotiation of known boundaries represented in science-fiction cinema is both threatening and exhilarating, and this is true for the role cyborgs play as well. Even if their presence throws our relationships with ourselves and others into question, there is a thrilling pleasure in continually approaching this question.

If the possibility of boundary crossing represented in the cyborg is potentially thrilling as well as anxiety-provoking, it is appropriate that some theorists express hope that the cyborg as a figure creates crucial space to rethink narrow definitions of humanity and the categories we have used to define it.[5] For example, Halberstam (1991: 439-40) argues that, rather than merely reproducing traditional binaries that align men with thought and reason, and women with body and emotion, cyborgs potentially 'provide new ground upon which to argue that gender and its representations are technological productions'. Ultimately, Halberstam concludes the cyborg's influence reveals that, rather than being a stable entity that pre-exists technology's intrusion, 'the body may in fact be, both

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[4] Focusing on *Blade Runner* and the *Terminator* series specifically, Pyle argues that cinematic cyborgs "not only reflect upon the threats to humanity posed by unchecked technological developments," they also "raise even more probing questions about the consequences of our definitions of the human" and "demonstrate that when we make cyborgs — at least when we make them in movies — we make and, on occasion, unmake our conceptions of ourselves" (1993, pp. 227-28).

[5] Among these critics are Donna Haraway, whose 1985 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s' I do not engage with substantially here because it addresses the cyborg as a broader metaphor for being rather than as a figure used in sci-fi cinema and/or fiction. Haraway's manifesto also treats the question of the cyborg as already closed. She can place hope in cyborg being because she pronounces that it is "is outside salvation history" (66). Although Haraway's will to imagine the cyborg as an alternative is invigorating, representations of cyborgs in cinema do not bear out this vision of the cyborg's existence beyond the borders currently used to define humanity. Instead, at least in cinema, attempts to imagine cyborg being are still very much implicated in prevailing constructions of humanity.

materially and libidinally, a product of technology' (1991: 444). Similarly, Pyle (1993, pp. 234-35) argues that the real threat posed by 'the cyborgs' in *Blade Runner* is not the end of humanity through extinction, but the instability they introduce into the definition of humanity. Furthermore, Pyle argues that *Blade Runner* 'tends to undo that opposition' between humans and machines 'not by extending humanity to the replicants [...] but by disclosing the distinction to be unviable' (1993: 235). In cinema, then, the cyborg is a mechanical figure that approaches the qualities of humanity and, by doing so, suggests first that there are no grounds for differentiating humanity from its artificially produced counterparts, and second that the criteria we use to determine the 'human' are themselves technologically produced.

Although cyborgs, particularly as they are represented in science-fiction cinema, might present an opportunity to radically rethink otherwise taken for granted conceptions of humanity and embodiment, many theorists contend that cyborg bodies, particularly those coded as feminine, reinforce conventional understandings of the body and humanity rather than destabilizing them. Mary Ann Doane (2000: 110) might initially agree with Halberstam when she writes that science fiction has the power to trouble 'the concept of the 'body', which 'has traditionally denoted the finite, a material limit that is absolute'. However, she ultimately finds that instead of undoing rigid concepts of the body, sci-fi more often upholds pre-existing conventions — particularly those related to defining 'the feminine' (Doane, 2000: 110). This assessment is supported in the work of Holland (1995) and Short (2005) who also agree that, while boundary crossing is an exciting prospect introduced in sci-fi, the figure of the cyborg in cinema is used to bolster existing logics of 'the human' — especially those related to gender and sexuality — more often than it troubles them.

Whether it is ultimately a space for destabilizing and radically rethinking conventional understandings of humanity and embodiment or reasserting and defending them, because it is invested in exploring and troubling the boundary between human and non-human, sci-fi cinema offers a space for delineating the norms that we use to determine humanity. That is, analysis of sci-fi's treatment of humans and their cyborg others reveals the criteria used to establish definitions of humanity. In the process of becoming human, by which they either

present a threat to the definition of stable humanity or fortify otherwise unstable norms, cyborgs reveal assumptions about what it means to be human.

Humanising Cyborgs

Perhaps most significantly, cyborgs demonstrate their journey towards humanity by beginning to learn.[6] This process often takes the form of emotional learning in which the cyborg develops either romantic or familial feelings for one of the human characters. Short suggests that this kind of emotional learning that is demonstrated through 'the use of romantic sub-plots and "family values"' narratives indicates 'an essential human spirit' (2005: 51, 165). In fact, Short argues that cyborg cinema alleviates the anxieties incited by the instability of the boundary separating humans and cyborgs by 'humanising' all its potentially "alienated subjects," with 'romantic and familial denouements' and 'a false sense of closure as heterosexual coupling and the strengthening of family ties' (2005: 64). Holland comes to a similar conclusion, noting that the use of emotion in cyborg films reveals 'a central difference between humans and machines: that is, human desire' (1995: 163). Even Halberstam, who argues so strongly that the cyborg figure offers expansive space to reconceive established notions of the gendered human body, maintains desire as a constitutive criterion for the human subject (1991). For all these critics, there is a clear connection between the experience of desire expressed as sexual attraction — and consummated through (often hetero)sexual sex and the creation of families — and the definition of humanity. In these perspectives, to be human is to experience and consummate sexual desire.

While the process of learning about and developing emotions and (especially sexual) desire are ways in which cyborgs are potentially humanised in sci-fi, mechanical rationality and competence are described as 'asexual' so that asexuality becomes associated with inhumanity.[7] Most notably, perhaps,

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[6] Pyle notes that "there would seem to be nothing more human than 'learning' — particularly a moral and ethical learning" (1993, p. 230).

[7] Holland observes that this breakdown occurs along typically gendered lines, writing that "certainly, the male/masculine-coded are decidedly *a*sexual: the Terminators have no conception of sexual desire, and RoboCop is on several occasions reminded he can no longer be 'a proper husband' to his/Murphy's wife" because of his cyborg status (1995, p. 164).

Sobchack (1991) contends that while sexuality and desire are evenly denied to all rationally-acting, human characters in sci-fi, it is a feature that actually renders the characters inhuman and therefore more capable of completing their mechanical tasks.[8] In Sobchak's analysis of sci-fi cinema, an inhuman 'rational and asexual functioning subject', embodied by the 'narratively active' hero, is opposed to 'an irrational, potent, sexual object' (1991: 107). In science-fiction, asexuality, associated with the absence of sexual desire and human emotion, is associated with characteristics that are marked as inhuman or machine-like, including rationality, competence, and even machine-produced uniformity.

Although Holland and Sobchak both use the term 'asexual' as a descriptor rather than in reference to an identity category, this kind of association between asexuality and inhumanity is also notable for scholars currently developing the field of asexuality studies, which focuses on asexually-identified individuals and groups.[9] Asexuality as an identity, as defined by the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), describes a 'person [who] does not experience sexual attraction — they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way' ('Overview').[10] Much of the scholarship conducted on asexuality, particularly those contained in the anthology *Asexualities: feminist and queer perspectives,* notes the association between asexuality as an identity and either a lack of humanity or a less-than-human status. Jacinthe Flore (2014: 17) argues that medico-scientific approaches to human sexuality pressupose 'a hidden, yet discoverable innate sexual desire' discernible at the core of every human subject, ultimately revealing an assumption that 'to be human is to be sexual'. Kristian Kahn (2014) and Megan Milks (2014) each separately track the associations between asexuality and

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[8] Sobchak observes first the "visual and narrative 'coding' of women in the science fiction film as not only peripheral but also asexual" and later that "the male heroes who dominate all science fiction films are also remarkably asexual" (1990, p. 105, 107). For example, she argues that "Ripley in *Alien* [...] is no more a sexual being than are *2001*'s Bowman or Poole. [...] Ripley, indeed, is hardly female (and considered by her shipmates as hardly human)" (Sobchak, 1990, p. 106).

[9] Up to this point, I have been relying primarily on scholarship from film and media studies, but I now shift focus to the field of asexuality studies which draws on a broad range of disciplines in both the social sciences and humanities. It is useful and important to attend to this range because, despite differences in methodological approaches, the same association between asexuality and inhumanity continually emerges.

[10] While it is descriptive of a large and varied community that exceeds and predates AVEN, asexuality as an identity is still most broadly defined by an absence of sexual attraction.

immaturity, which ultimately align asexuality with improperly developed or underdeveloped states of humanity. Each of these analyses indicates a commonly held assumption that the experience of sexual attraction is foundational to the definition of humanity. Through this assumption, asexuality is positioned as either inhuman or improperly human. Importantly, just as critics note that cyborgs are put on a path to humanity when they demonstrate an ability to feel emotion and sexual desires, individuals who identify as asexual are placed on a similar progression and aligned with the original inhumanity of cyborgs in the process.[11]

Being associated with inhumanity frequently becomes the basis for correction, whether through medical intervention, as Flore (2014: 17-19) observes, or imposition of normative social order that will reunite asexual individuals with normatively-defined progressions towards mature humanity (Milks, 2014: 106). This need for correction potentially speaks to the definitional threat that asexuality as an identity might pose to normative understandings of sexuality. That is, if sexuality ceases to be indispensable to the definition of humanity, then normative sexuality is questioned in much the same way that the concept of humanity is troubled by the intrusion of cyborgs. Similarly, just as individuals who identify as asexual can be corrected through medical or social mediations, cyborgs, who might otherwise be identified with asexuality and inhumanity, can be shepherded towards humanity through interventions that produce experiences of sexual attraction and desire.[12]

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[11] I am not engaged in analysis of films that represent cyborgs as themselves asexually-identified or oriented, but Marc Francis (2016, p. 29) usefully notes that the inclusion of characters represented as asexual singles in films also troubles 'the larger legitimating sexual and romantic order of things' visible in both societal and narrative structures. Although he emphasizes that the films he focuses on do not 'condemn the asexual single', he does observe the ways they 'cast doubt on how such a person could thrive' (31).

[12] Rachel from *Blade Runner* is presented as an exemplary figure for this journey towards humanity. Doane (2000, p. 118) argues that just as "Deckard animates the photograph" of Rachel and her mother "with his gaze," "it is ultimately his desire that constitutes Rachel's only subjectivity, in the present tense". In 'Ramble city: postmodernism and *blade runner*', (1990, p. 188) Guiliana Bruno contends that Rachel "is the most perfect replicant because she does not know whether she is one or not," with the result that she simulates humanity by "actually producing in [herself] some of the characteristics one wants to simulate".

Humanising the Acousmatic Cyborg

To further consider how this process of correction towards humanity is dramatized in sci-fi cinema, I will turn now to an analysis of two recent films in the cyborg cinema tradition, *Blade Runner 2049* and *Her*. Though their tones and approaches are very different from one another, both foreground an environment in which the manifestations of capital production have rendered human, or nearly human, individuals as unexceptional, disconnected masses. In both films, artificial intelligences mediate the loss of personal identity and intimate connection that is presented as the result of fully industrialized, consumer-driven societies. Simultaneously, the artificial intelligences, and the technological advances they suggest, also seem to be the source of this loss of human identity. In this way, both films express an anxiety that is congruent with previous films in the cyborg cinema cycle, especially as they have been analysed by a variety of critics. Both films also follow the precedent set by earlier films and attempt to address this anxiety by normalizing their cyborgs in heterosexual relationships with their protagonists.

The two films are notably different from previous instances because they feature cyborgs who are primarily bodiless voices, or acousmêtres. Michel Chion (1995: 9) identifies 'the cinema's invention of the *acousmêtre*', which is 'the situation in which we don't see the person we hear, as his [*sic*] voice comes from the centre of the image'. Chion develops the term "*acousmêtre*" from "acousmatic," which describes 'a sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen' (1995: 18). Examples of acousmêtres include Hal from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a mother's voice (to a baby inside a womb), and most notably God in Christianity. The AI in these films — Samantha in *Her* and Joi in *Blade Runner 2049* — interact with their operators primarily as disembodied human voices. Although Joi does take a visualized form early on, Samantha never does. The fact that they are voices first is important, though. Chion and Mladen Dolar (2006) both discuss the relationship between the voice and the suggestion of humanity, ultimately concluding that the voice is taken as a promise that its producer possesses interior subjectivity. Because Joi and Samantha are primarily characterized by their voices, they are implied as possessors of hidden, interior

subjectivities who can produce meaning from this place. They are mechanical beings that suggest the possession of an individual human-like subjectivity through their ability to make speech. So, this is, in some ways, their most cyborg-like feature — they appropriate humanity in the form of human speech and consciousness.

As acousmêtres, Samantha and Joi are also endowed with certain powers that are associated with this position — including 'the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power' (Chion, 1995: 24). Chion argues that in its possession of these powers, the acousmêtre becomes an all-powerful authority figure. (This is not hard to imagine if we remember that God is an acousmêtre. Basically, since they can't be located they are effectively omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent.) As either partial or complete acousmêtres, Joi and Samantha are positioned as cyborgs in that they are approaching humanity as possessors of human voices which, in turn, hint at the existence of human consciousnesses but bound to technology because they do not have human bodies. It is this configuration as bodiless voices that also confers the superhuman powers that are typical of cyborgs, in this case the powers of the acousmêtre. Through the operation of these powers, Joi and Samantha can address their protagonists' anxieties. The AI of *Her* and *Blade Runner 2049* act in maternal, god-like, or analyst-adjacent roles, using their powers as acousmêtres to help their operators re-discover the humanity they lost to their technologically-advanced, consumer-driven cultures. Their acousmatic powers, however, are also a source of anxiety, particularly for the characters of *Her*. The cyborg, which approaches the conditions of humanity but remains both not-quite and more-than human, and the complete acousmêtre, which is simultaneously unlocatable and always on the verge of appearing, represents the blurring of otherwise stable boundaries between humans and technology and humans and higher powers. Their positioning at the boundaries hint that their operators' subject positions and identities are similarly unstable.

Both films attempt to address this threat of uncertainty represented in the acousmatic cyborg by stabilizing them as embodied humans through a process Chion would call 'de-acousmatization'. In this process, the acousmêtre's voice is assigned to a locatable physical source and, as a result, it loses its superhuman

powers. Interestingly, in his description of 'de-acousmatization', Chion reiterates links between fulfilled sexuality and the definition of humanity — calling the acousmatic voice 'virginal' and the process of putting it into a body 'a striptease'. It's important that de-acousmatization exists as an implied possibility in all films featuring acousmêtres, and that the presence of an acousmêtre '[creates] this desire to go and see who's speaking' and thereby attach the voice to a body (Chion, 1995: 22, 141). Both Joi and Samantha express desires 'to be real for' their operators, and these desires culminate in scenes where the acousmêtres — Joi and Samantha — hire surrogates that will allow them to have sex with their operators. If this process makes them 'real', then real humanity is conferred through occupying a human body that is having sex.

But in both films, the process of de-acousmatizing does not work. During Joi's sex scene, the film cuts to an advertisement for Joi the product (instead of showing the action, which is only implied) (*Blade runner 2049*, 2017). Instead of successful de-acousmatization into a human body, the cut to advertisement suggests that Joi stabilizes herself as only a product. If she is a product, then she can only be 'realistic' (as she is described by her producers, the Wallace Corporation) and never real. While she might be allowed to 'be real' in the space of the sexual encounter, afterwards she is re-confirmed as only artificial. Samantha's de-acousmatization through sex via surrogate also fails — in her case it's when her operator Theo can't say 'I love you' to the surrogate's face and thereby emphasizes the known fact that the body in front of him is, of course, not actually Samantha (*Her*, 2013). Although embodied sex promises to stabilize these acousmatic cyborgs as fully human, whether for themselves or for their operators, the attempts fail to make them real.

This failure ultimately indicates an incongruity between voice and body that, in turn, calls conceptions of subjectivity into question. Chion writes that, 'the sound film […] is dualistic' in that the soundtrack which appears to cohere with the image is nevertheless separate from it (1995: 125). While 'cinema does its best to restitch' the voice and body 'together at the seam', it instead reveals 'precisely that it doesn't hang together; it's decidedly not a seamless match' (1995: 125). For Chion, this split in cinema is suggestive of how we misunderstand 'becoming human' as a 'coming to consciousness' through which 'all the child has

to do is put together the elements', like voice and body, 'given to him separately and out of order' (1995, p. 126). In fact, he argues, 'what we have here is an entirely *structural operation* (related to the structuring of the subject in language) of grafting the non-localized voice onto a particular body that is assigned symbolically to the voice as its source', which 'leaves a scar' that cinema attempts to address 'via the operation called synchronization' that would 'reunify the body and the voice' (1995: 126). Similarly, both Joi and Samantha attempt to become 'real', which means to be embodied, by synchronizing their voices with surrogate bodies. However, this ultimately fails because 'the more you think about synchronization, the more aware you can become […] of the arbitrariness of this convention, which tries to present as a unity something that from the outset *doesn't stick together*' (1995: 126). Rather than de-acousmatizing and stabilizing as 'real' humans, Joi and Samantha only further emphasize the incongruities between themselves and the characteristics we understand as necessary to becoming human. The fact that the voice cannot synchronize to the body, and that attempts to make it do so only accentuate the artifice of the relationship between voice and body, suggests in turn that the unfathomable human subjectivity that is implied in having a voice is purely structural as well. Rather than securing potentially threatening AI as human, the failures of de-acousmatization in *Her* and *Blade Runner 2049* finally indicate the inherent instability of humanity as a position.

Like the voice, which hints at the presence of an interior subjectivity hidden within a body, sexuality (consolidated as an unstoppable and active sexual attraction) is taken to be such a fundamental proof of humanity that the act of conferring sexuality is enough to humanize figures that otherwise simultaneously exceed and lack what is necessary to achieve that status. So, when de-acousmatization fails, it also confirms that intimate relations, including sex, which are otherwise taken to be indispensable signs of humanity, are ultimately mechanical operations that, rather than being unique, are replicable. Even further, it suggests that these operations are replicated in ways that can never be entirely convincing and, for this reason, destabilize what they intend to make coherent.

Conclusion

All of this is potentially useful because it might help us recognize that the position of humanity has not been destroyed by the interjection of otherness (whether in the form of a cyborg or an asexually-identified individual or occupants of many other positions) but was always unattainable in the first place because it maintained itself, in part, through the exclusion of otherness. Subjecthood was always splintered and only ever appeared coherent because it erased or ignored its fractures. From this perspective, becoming fully human might not be entirely positive or even particularly attainable, especially for those who are already positioned as less than human. It might also be useful to rethink the role of sexuality, sexual attraction, and sex, especially as it is made to serve the purpose of defining humanity and humanizing otherwise inhuman figures. The position of humanity is uninhabitable and inhospitable on a grand scale, and we must resist attempts to defend against this knowledge or regulate it away. Instead of trying to normalize the threat to our being that is represented by the kind of lives that refuse to cohere with established concepts of humanity, we must engage with the experience of the threat and its suggestion that those things that make us human are not, in fact, very human after all.

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