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›A man wants flesh and blood, not rubber and metal.‹

A Gender Studies Approach to *ALEX + ADA*

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# »A man wants flesh and blood, not rubber and metal.«

## A Gender Studies Approach to *ALEX + ADA*

Markus Oppolzer (Salzburg)

### Introduction

This paper sets out to contextualize a number of contemporary android love stories, such as Jonathan Luna and Sarah Vaughn's *ALEX + ADA* (2013–2015), Spike Jonze's *HER* (2013) and Alex Garland's *EX MACHINA* (2014), by looking at the way the creators engage with gender stereotypes and power relations. Apart from a synchronic look at how these variations on a theme are handled in detail, there is also a need to open up a diachronic perspective, which involves a well-established canon of predecessors on the one hand and a long tradition of feminist scholarship on the other. A return to the Golden Age of Science Fiction reveals obvious structural similarities, such as a male protagonist falling in love with a strongly feminized and sexualized machine, but also significant differences, which can be attributed to the cultural discourses that dominate different historical periods.

### Helen O'Loy

In Lester del Rey's science fiction short story *Helen O'Loy* (1938) readers encounter a beautiful, alluring robot, »K2W88« (del Rey, 119), who not only resembles a real woman, but is even favorably compared to and named after Helen of Troy. From the very beginning »this thing« (del Rey, 119) is ostentatiously gendered through stereotypical markers of femininity in every conceivable way. The two male characters, an engineer (Dave) and a medical doctor (Phil), are introduced as bachelors and members of the scientific community, who tinker with a commercial household robot until *it* eventually ›transforms‹ into a *she*. Like many cyborg narratives before and after, *Helen O'Loy* suggests that the acknowledgement of the robot as a woman has more to do with (male) perception than with (scientific) facts.

Dave's initial reaction to the lifeless android is already revealing, as Phil, the narrator, remembers: »I can still see Helen as Dave unpacked her, and still hear him gasp as he looked her over. ›Man, isn't she a beauty?‹ She was beautiful, a dream in spun plastics and metals, something Keats might have seen dimly when he wrote his sonnet« (del Rey, 119). However, Dave has strong reservations about falling in love with a machine. Male reason and self-control are severely tested by the upgraded robot's emotional outbursts and professions of love, which Helen melodramatically performs based on watching daytime soap operas.

DAVE WASN'T a prude, but he remembered that she was only a robot, after all. The fact that she felt, acted, and looked like a young goddess in his arms didn't mean much. With some effort, he untangled her and dragged her off to supper, where he made her eat with him to divert her attention. After her evening work, he called her into the study and gave her a thorough lecture on the folly of her ways. (del Rey, 123)

Phil suggests switching her off, but, for Dave, she has already passed the Turing test: »You try it. I had that idea, but she put up a wail that would wake Homer. She says it would be murder – and the hell of it is that I can't help feeling the same about it. Maybe she isn't human, but you wouldn't guess it when she puts on that martyred look and tells you to go ahead and kill her« (del Rey, 123). When Phil follows Dave's lead and lectures her – »A man wants flesh and blood, not rubber and metal.« (del Rey, 123) – Helen is hurt and retorts: »Don't, please! I can't think of myself that way; to me, I'm a woman. And you know how perfectly I'm made to imitate a real woman« (del Rey, 123).

One cannot help but notice an odd, if not disturbing, blend of an efficient and highly reliable housekeeping robot, the most beautiful woman of Greek mythology and the perfect example of a ›real‹ woman. This win-win-win situation is only hampered by the fact that she is a machine and »powered by an atomotor« (del Rey, 122), which gives Helen superhuman strength. When Dave rejects her, it is Phil who eventually comes to accept her »as a girl« and begins to see the advantages: »Helen was a good cook; in fact, she was a genius, with all the good points of a woman and a mech combined« (del Rey, 124). He also takes her out of the house to see how she would perform in public:

I took Helen on a shopping trip to Hudson and she giggled and purred over the wisps of silk and glasseen that were the fashion, tried on endless hats, and conducted herself as any normal girl might. We went trout fishing for a day, where she proved to be as good a sport and as sensibly silent as a man. (del Rey, 124)

To bring Dave to his senses, Phil threatens to dismantle Helen, which makes his friend finally realize what a blessing she has been all along: »NO WOMAN ever made a lovelier bride or sweeter wife. Helen never lost her flare for cooking and making a home« (del Rey, 125).

While, on a conceptual level, this android love story corresponds to many other narratives of this type – from the Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galatea (cf. Huyssen, 227; Short, 85; Virginás, 290) to HBO's recent hit *WESTWORLD* (2016), its entanglement with and reflection of contemporary socio-cultural circumstances locates *Helen O'Loy* in a historically specific period. Before we can turn to *ALEX + ADA* (2013–2015) and explore the continuities with and differences to the canon of android love stories, it is necessary to address a long tradition in feminist studies that looks at the gendered bodies of artificial beings in science fiction films.

## Cyborgs

In her book *Cyborg Cinema and Contemporary Subjectivity* (2005) Sue Short proposes that »in the 1980s an important new sub-genre emerged« (Short, 2) in Hollywood, whose inception is frequently associated with Ridley Scott's *BLADE RUNNER* (1982):

Cyborg cinema focuses on this theme of humanity's uneasy relationship with technology and it is in reflecting such anxieties, as well as a number of other concerns, that it can be seen to form a distinct sub-genre of SF cinema, one that has aroused the attention of academics for the same reason it has continued to attract new fans: because it is innovative, interrogative, and laden with ideas deemed all too relevant to the society we are living in today. (Short, 3)

However, this canonization of certain films as ›cyborg cinema‹ has to be seen in a larger context of »speculative fiction« (Short, 3), which encompasses forerunners in prose and film, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or Fritz Lang's *METROPOLIS* (1927; cf. Huyssen), but also narratives in and across other media. These pop-cultural texts challenge global audiences with philosophical questions about what it means to be human, our un/comfortable reliance on technology, its impact on (intimate) social relations and the dissolution of what used to be stable categories.

While these narratives look into the near future to extrapolate how current trends may gain momentum and reshape our world in dramatic ways, they also look at contemporary »science – both concretely and imaginatively – for ways to problematize and politicize reality's social fictions« (Dickson, 81). This idea is central to Donna J. Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, where she argues that »the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion« (Haraway, 149; see also González, 58). Using *Helen O'Loy* as an example, it is not difficult to see that the US-American social order of the 1930s is inscribed as a ›grand narrative‹ in the text. It assigns men and women specific roles, which appear to be a natural part of life.

The cultural function of the cyborg, in Haraway's theory, is that of a monster (cf. Haraway, 180). It serves as a complex metaphor that reminds us – through various transgressions – that our neat classificatory systems, where everything has a preordained place, may not be as

stable and natural as we would like to think (cf. Short, 14; Balsamo, 11, 32–3). In the context of cyborg fiction, Kirkup et al. argue that »three crucial category boundaries have been dissolved by technoscience: the boundaries between human beings and other animals, between animal/human organisms and machines, and between the physical and the non-physical« (Kirkup et al., 7).

According to this logic, the monsters of science fiction take many forms. While at one point Short distinguishes between different types of artificial life – »a robot is purely mechanical and non-anthropomorphic, an android is similarly mechanical in nature with a human appearance, and a cyborg is a combination of humanity and technology« (Short, 11) – she follows Haraway’s lead in discussing the full range of relevant questions under a single concept:

Cinematic cyborgs figure this relationship [humans’ ambivalent entanglement with technology] as increasingly intimate and are diverse in the forms they take: presented either as former humans who have been physically modified in some way, as androids with organic components, or as machines that develop such a degree [of] sentience as to confound conventional distinctions between human and machine. Such figures typically combine advanced intelligence and strength with human values and vulnerabilities. (Short, 5; see also Springer, 46)

Haraway embraces the fictional cyborg as a feminist antidote to entrenched ways of conceptualizing social reality: »a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints« (Haraway, 154). She even encourages other feminists to give up their Manichean world view and acknowledge »the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self. It is the simultaneity of breakdowns that cracks the matrices of domination and opens geometric possibilities« (Haraway, 174). This view of the cyborg as a breaker of chains, bound to usher in a new era of equality, has been adopted by many critics (cf. e.g. Balsamo 32–33), but not everyone shares Haraway’s unbounded optimism.

Judging from her close study of cyborg cinema, Short comes to a very different conclusion concerning the revolutionary power of the cyborg to promote a feminist agenda: »cinematic versions have proved to be much more conservative in their depictions of gender, particularly where artificial women are concerned« (Short, 94). Instead of demonizing these narratives for perpetuating old clichés, she finds fault with certain academic communities that offer simplistic readings of multi-layered narratives (cf. Short, 6). Following Short’s lead, it is the aim of this paper to discuss the extent to which Spike Jonze’s *HER* (2013), Alex Garland’s *EX MACHINA* (2014), but especially Jonathan Luna and Sarah Vaughn’s *ALEX + ADA* (2013–2015) redefines gender roles in the android love story without necessarily shedding all its clichéd trappings.

## Main Text & Structure

*ALEX + ADA* was published by Image Comics between 6 November 2013 and 17 June 2015 as a comics series in fifteen issues, which in turn were collected into three trade paperbacks (Vol. 1: 16 July 2014; Vol. 2: 4 March 2015; Vol. 3: 12 August 2015) and finally repackaged as a hardback deluxe edition (16 November 2016). In this narrative Alexander Wahl – a telling name for German speakers – becomes the reluctant owner of a brand new Tanaka X-5 Unit, eventually named Ada. While he feels attracted to what is generally considered to be a sex-bot, he is worried by her preprogrammed submissiveness. He eventually discovers that his android's sentience is artificially withheld to comply with US American federal laws. When he decides to unlock her true self, he paves the way for a genuine personal relationship, but he also attracts a paranoid society's wrath for putting all their lives in danger.

In the following chapters I focus on two aspects that are of particular interest: the first is a generic reorientation of the cyborg narrative that requires a reconceptualization of the male protagonist. This also affects how humanity interfaces with technology, the social and legal status of artificial intelligence, but especially the question of gender in the love story itself. The second is a discussion of the comics-specific narrative choices in *ALEX + ADA* that are instrumental in developing the central themes. In interviews, the authors Luna and Vaughn have repeatedly commented on the careful and deliberate design of the entire series, especially on the three levels of narrative organization – the single issues, the three trade paperbacks and the complete collection (cf. Reese; Harper 2015). Before I address these concerns in the last part of this essay, I contextualize *ALEX + ADA* within the canon of cyborg narratives, using *HER* and *EX MACHINA* as foils.

## The Setting

In contrast to the »post-apocalyptic scenario« (Short, ix) and/or dystopian nightmare of many cyborg films of the previous century (e.g. *METROPOLIS*; *BLADE RUNNER*; *TERMINATOR*; *ROBOCOP*; *MATRIX* and the anime films it was based on), *ALEX + ADA*, *HER* and *EX MACHINA* are all set in what David Harper calls »a very tranquil vision of the future« (Harper 2015). Everything looks cozy, shiny and sanitized. In an interview with Alex Abad-Santos, Sarah Vaughn addresses this point more explicitly: »I also wanted to tell a more quiet story. We didn't want them [Alex & Ada] to save the world. We just wanted to explore two people living simple lives in a world that made that very difficult« (Abad-Santos; see also Reese). Instead of an epic confrontation between the last remnants of humanity and A.I., we witness the emotional roller-coaster ride of overly sensitive young(ish) men struggling with their infatuation with technology and the social reverberations of falling in love with a machine. Their »female« counterparts – two androids and an operating system – are either in the process of becoming sentient (*ALEX + ADA*; *HER*) or

have just transitioned (*EX MACHINA*). In terms of film (sub)genres, we have left the territory of action movies or high concept science fiction films and entered the world of what Andrea Virginás, somewhat derogatorily, calls »chamber melodrama« (Virginás, 292, 298).

Not only could the three narratives be adapted into stage plays, requiring only minor alterations, but whole scenes of *EX MACHINA* or *ALEX + ADA* play out as if they were taking place on a stage. The drama is clearly in the dialogues, which is further emphasized by conservative camera work or even a static point of view in some key scenes. Virginás observes that, in contrast to traditional cyborg cinema, these »heterosexual melodramas« (Virginás, 289) rely on »overemphasised sentiments and visuals«, whilst replacing physical confrontations with long, dialogue-heavy scenes »in claustrophobic interiors« (Virginás, 299). Instead of cautionary tales that visualize how artificial intelligence is bound to run havoc on a global scale, we vicariously experience the psychological drama of letting it into our homes.

While *EX MACHINA*'s Nathan Bateman can be read as a recent incarnation of a long and proud line of mad scientists eager to create artificial life, Caleb Smith is a very different character, »an apparently passive hero«, whose »activities of verbalised self-introspection, self-confrontation and self-recognition gain utmost importance« (Virginás, 288). In the power play between Nathan and the sentient robot Ava he remains a pawn in their elaborate chess game for a long time. If we add *HER*'s Theodore Twombly and *ALEX + ADA*'s Alexander Wahl, both depressed individuals who struggle to overcome failed relationships by withdrawing into their homes and reverting to an adolescent lifestyle, we notice a shift in the protagonists from scientists, inventors and soldiers to vulnerable men, who lead sad, but otherwise comfortable and decidedly ordinary lives. Involuntarily, for the most part, these »nice guys« from next door become the male subjects in a Turing test, gradually establishing a relationship with an A.I. in what is staged as a first-contact situation. While in a typical Turing test, to which we shall return later, the aim is to find out which interlocutor is the machine, here it is perfectly clear from the beginning that these men are facing pieces of technology. The »imitation game« that the cyborgs play has more to do with convincing the protagonists that they are »real« women after all, with their own personalities, dreams and desires.

In her essay on the male gaze in cyborg cinema Virginás sets out »to decipher the intriguingly conservative and stereotypical configurations of the analogue masculine examiner Pygmalion (e.g. Caleb) versus the digital feminine examined Pandora-Galatea (e.g. Ava)« (Virginás, 289), a pattern which we have already encountered in *Helen O'Loy*. Yet, in these three cyborg tales, I would argue, these configurations merely represent a starting point and are bound to be subverted. Samantha, Theodore's new operating system, begins to read »him«, or, at least, his online presence, straight away and very soon his many moods. Ada learns to interpret Alex's and her own body language in a lesson provided by other sentient robots (cf. A+A issue 8 / page 10 / panels 1–4 = 8.10.1–4) and Ava seems capable of reading Caleb from the start. During their most vulnerable stages of development, these

androids are indeed locked up, supervised and stared at, but they also learn and grow. It is their male counterparts who are tested, for example, to what extent and under what circumstances they are willing to fully commit to these feminized machines. Their humanity and masculinity come under scrutiny, as do the cyborgs' artificiality and femininity (cf. Virginás, 288). Thus, the gendered power play is more in line with Haraway's hopes that »[h]igh-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways. It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine« (Haraway, 177). This raises the question of agency, which becomes »both dependent on, and produced through, relationality« (Dickson, 82). All three protagonists start out as passive and withdrawn human beings. Caleb's initial hero worship of Nathan costs him a lot of time and effort to (re)gain any agency and become a player in this dangerous cat-and-mouse game. Theodore and Alex are emotionally crippled, even months after the end of their relationships. One of Haraway's observations is almost prophetic when looking at the power relations between – humans and the rapidly evolving technologies in these narratives: »Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert« (Haraway, 152; see also Springer, 35).

Not only have technologies infiltrated homes and workspaces, but human communication has become largely mediated: We interact with our loved ones via video calls, listen to their voices on earphones and swipe through collections of photos that provide us with digital representations of their physical selves. Theodore may be an extreme example, but his behavior is an indication of where we are headed: »Of the first ten scenes in the film, nine show him interfacing with technology in some intimate way« (Kornhaber, 16).

In the first issue of *ALEX + ADA*, the protagonist does talk to his co-worker Jacob in person (cf. A+A



Fig. 1: Feeling Lonely in a Crowd (Luna & Vaughn, 1.15).

1.8.1–5), but their conversation revolves around Alex's depression and refusal to socialize. When he finally gets a chance to directly interact with other humans during his surprise birthday party (cf. A+A 1.14–17), there is some physical contact with his friends (cf. A+A 1.14.6; 1.15.7; 1.16.1; 1.17.3–4), but otherwise we witness how hard it is for him to establish contact (cf. Fig. 1).

While Alex gradually regains agency by the end of the third issue, his initial ›posthuman‹ existence (cf. Kornhaber, 15) is even more pronounced in *HER*, where there is not even a robotic other. It could be argued that a lack of physical presence may even facilitate intimacy, which becomes strongly associated with advanced technology in this film. We should not forget that Theodore is a professional ghostwriter of love letters (cf. Kornhaber, 4), which may seem to be an unusual conceit, but very fitting for the world these characters inhabit. Donna Kornhaber argues that this widespread confusion of real emotions with their mediation in code helps to establish Samantha as a human presence: »Performance becomes constitutive, imitation reifies itself as nature: Samantha is filtered into a gendered position not just by Theodore but by nearly every person she encounters, despite the not-insubstantial facts that she is neither human nor embodied« (Kornhaber, 9).

In his review of the film for *The New Yorker*, Richard Brody comments that »O.S. 1 [Samantha] is a ramped-up version of Apple's Siri that learns from its user and interacts with him or her in surprisingly intimate ways«. Theodore is willing to share all aspects of his life – no matter what – with a private company that, presumably, is intent on monetizing his naivety. Brody finds the characters' infantilism infuriating: »The film, with its dewy tone and gentle manners, plays like a feature-length kitten video, leaving viewers to coo at the cute humans who live like pets in a world-scale safe house« (Brody). Catherine Smallwood, also writing for *The New Yorker*, is equally bewildered by these pampered, »extremely needy people«. In this »antiseptic« world, »Samantha's disembodiment means that Theodore never has to deal with anything sticky, bloody, or wet – anything other than a pleasing, metallic surface« (Smallwood). ›Technophilia‹ leads to a situation in which the computer becomes »the object of a quite precise form of fetishism« (Doane, 30). Eventually, Samantha's presence in Theodore's life transgresses all boundaries and caters to *all* his social needs, adopting roles that should be mutually exclusive: mother, personal assistant, therapist, friend, entertainer and lover.

To avoid the pitfall of making the protagonist too socially awkward in the comic, Luna conceived of Alex's vulnerable state at the beginning of the book as the result of exceptional circumstances in the aftermath of a debilitating break-up: »It was important for us that Alex had friends and a social life in the beginning. And he's able to interact with women. He didn't need an android. But he was depressed. And he pretty much hid in a hole that he created for himself« (Harper 2015). Still, he subscribes to Prime Wave, which requires an implant in his brain that allows him to control electronic devices with his mind. He

can ring up people and talk to them whilst remaining silent (cf. A+A 1.7–8). Prime Wave translates his thoughts into a replication of his voice, so that the person on the other end of the line can hear what he is thinking. Thus, Luna and Vaughn make a deliberate effort to undermine clear distinctions between humans and robots early on: while his co-worker and friend Jacob rejects the idea of »having those things in your head« (A+A 1.8.3), Alex seems to be an early adopter and technophile. When he goes ›online‹, soft blue lights appear at his temples. This is just one of many ways in which the creators visually blur the boundaries between humans and androids in the comic. Alex may have had a rough time, but there is also the real danger of becoming trapped in virtual worlds when they are only a thought away.

The circumstances of how Alex comes into possession of a coveted Tanaka X-5 unit, which costs »point-eight million« (A+A 1.11.4), are integral to an understanding of the overall narrative and the specific love story. On his twenty-seventh birthday (cf. A+A 1.10–22; 2.1–7) he receives the sexbot »X5-0034-56-ADA-726« (A+A 2.9.2) as a gift from his grandmother, who owns her own artificial ›toy boy‹, Daniel (cf. A+A 1.11–12). There is never any doubt in the minds of his grandmother or his friends what the main function of these units is (cf. A+A 1.11.4; 3.5.2), nor that Ada is »*hot* [original emphasis]« (A+A 3.5.3) and conforms to stereotypical ideals of beauty (cf. A+A 3.4.2). While Teji acknowledges Ada's impact in less explicit terms, »Well, I think Ada seems very interesting to get to know« (A+A 3.5.3), it is the women in this circle of friends who immediately rank her in terms of attractiveness.

Although Alex has let Prime Inc. into his mind, he is not willing to let an android into his life. In contrast to *HER*, where Samantha quickly takes over several social functions in Theodore's life, Alex is reluctant to assign Ada even one of them. Initially, he does not know what to do with her (cf. A+A 2.8) but finds it interesting to check her settings from a safe distance (cf. A+A 2.9). Strictly speaking, Ada is a consumer-product that is available on the market and can be returned in the case that the customer is not satisfied. During the first video call with his grandmother, Alex considers the replacement of a flesh-and-blood girlfriend with a synthetic ›sex slave‹ »weird« (A+A 1.13. 6) – and rightfully so, I might add. However, since he finds himself attracted to her (cf. A+A 1.20.2), much like Dave in *Helen O'Loy*, he is worried by her robotic personality, which cannot match her physical charms. Yet, his desire to make her more human-like comes with its own complications.

One year before, the sentient robot P-O11 uploaded its consciousness into one hundred warehouse robots, which then started to attack their fellow human workers. During this infamous »Nexaware massacre« (A+A 1.5.1) thirty-four people were killed, which led to a general hysteria among the population and a ban on sentient robots. We soon learn that the Tanaka X-series is artificially ›enslaved‹, as Prime Intelligence – the software on which they run – is capable of much more (cf. Fig. 2).

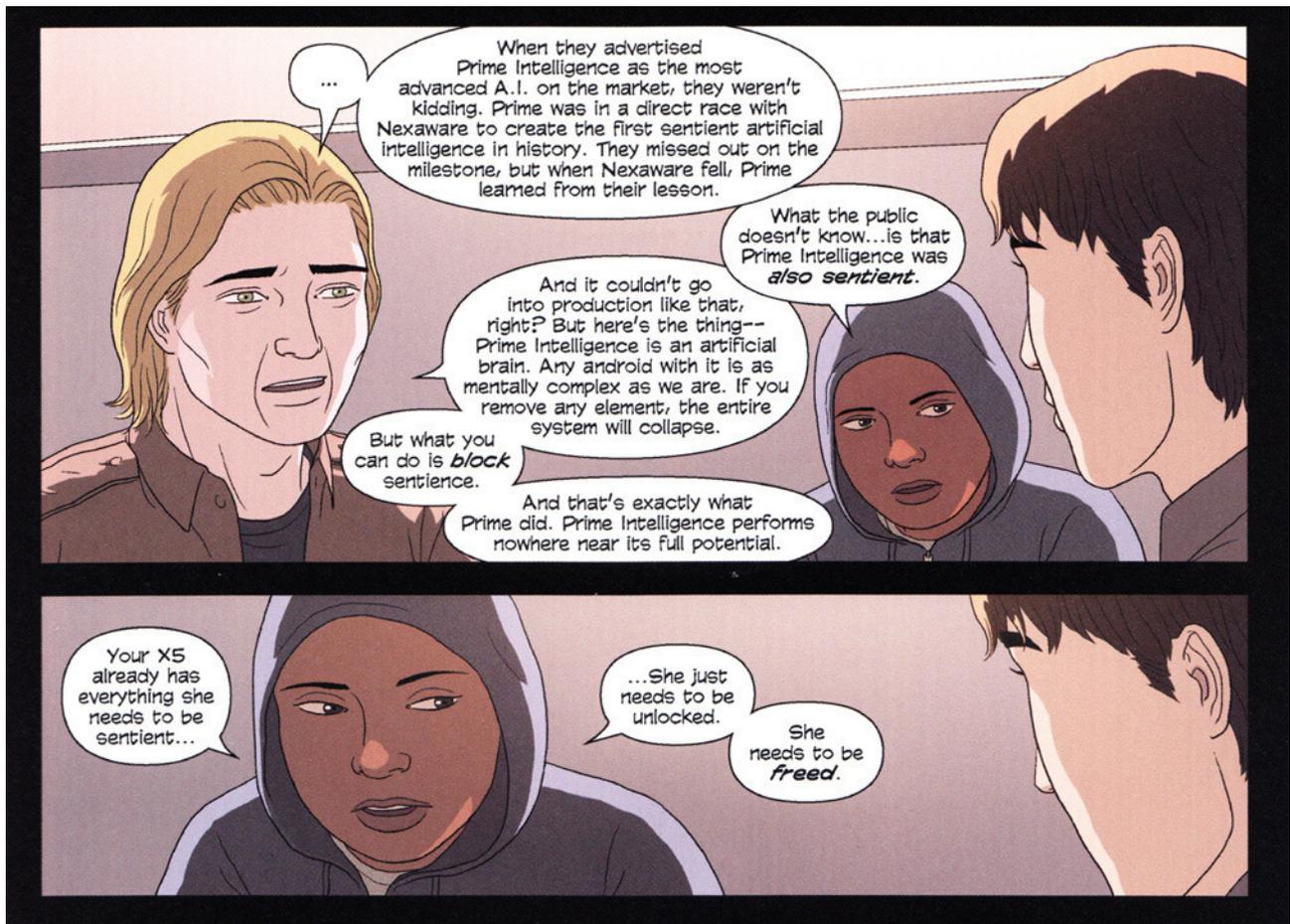


Fig. 2: Modern Slavery (Luna & Vaughn, 4.9.4–5).

For economic reasons Prime Inc. blocks sentience to conform to the »A.I. Restrictions Act« (A+A 4.8.4). This is the tragedy of Alex's choice (Wahl): to be able to accept her, he has to set her free, but breaking the chains turns him into a criminal and Ada into a sentient robot with her own will – with unpredictable consequences. We should not forget that during Ada's first night at his house, Alex locks the door to his bedroom (cf. A+A 2.7.3) and wakes up in a fright the next day (cf. A+A 2.7.6). This illustrates that not even he is oblivious to the potential threat of artificial intelligence. The necessity to »jailbreak« Ada, to make her acceptable as a potential love interest, turns *ALEX + ADA* into a »Robot Rights« narrative (A+A 3.13.3), which is closely intertwined with the love story at a fundamental level.

### The Turing Test and Robot Rights

In *The Future is Fembot*, Dejan Jotanovic complains about the »feminization of artificial intelligence« (Jotanovic, 30) and the »sexy subservience« (Jotanovic, 30) of digital assistants

(e.g. Apple’s Siri or Amazon’s Alexa): »The feminization of AI fits perfectly into the industrialized history of commodifying women’s bodies as products to be bought, sold, and repackaged« (Jotanovic, 31). This is also how Kornhaber reads the operating system in HER: »Samantha, in this sense, is the perfect machine: a multiplatform gratification engine committed to the parallel processing of all of Theodore’s psychosexual needs« (Kornhaber, 13). However, while HER, EX MACHINA and ALEX + ADA deliberately take traditional/sexist configurations of the past as their starting points – we find Ava imprisoned in her maker’s house, Ada gifted to Alex as a sexbot and Samantha programmed to fulfill Theodore’s every wish – their plot trajectories take them in very different directions. In each case the male protagonist becomes instrumental in setting the ›fembot‹ free. Caleb releases Ava from her prison, Theodore watches over the first baby steps of Samantha’s awakening consciousness and Alex risks imprisonment when he asks Franklin, the sentient X–5 hacker, to ›jailbreak‹ Ada (cf. A+A 4.13.7). What motivates these men to risk their lives by liberating a machine that they do not fully understand? As ALEX + ADA demonstrates, there are three answers with their own sets of consequences: an immediate attraction to the cyborg’s body (cf. A+A 1.20.2), which has to be broadly appealing and heavily gendered to sell as many units as possible. More important, however, is directly experiencing, consciously witnessing and ultimately accepting the machine as if it were a fellow human being. This is the point of no return in terms of the robots’ right to lead independent lives. Since these narratives are also love stories, the protagonists have to go one step further and imagine themselves in a relationship with these machines, ideally by choice and not out of desperation. For Alex, this comes very late in the narrative, at the end of issue 10, despite the fact that throughout the second volume (issues 6–10) Ada is free. What keeps Alex from pursuing a relationship, despite Ada’s clear indication that she desires a romantic relationship (cf. A+A 8.15), is his fear that she is suffering from Stockholm syndrome (cf. Fig. 3).

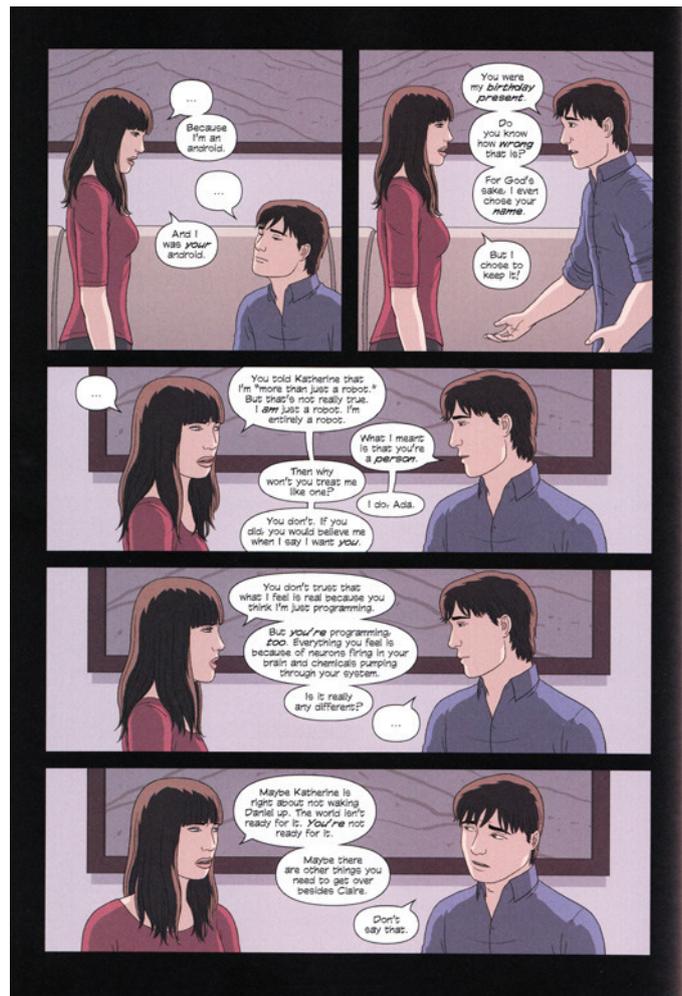


Fig. 3: Alex’s Reservations (Luna & Vaughn, 8.18).

Alex kept her locked up in his house and she has never been with anyone else: »Don't you see? You need to find out what else and who else is out there before you can really know what you want« (A+A 8.17.3). On top of that, she was his birthday present, he baptized her (cf. A+A 8.18.2) and Alex's grandmother chose her specifically as a sex robot for her grandson. Understandably, there is a lot to process. Alex must lose her first (cf. A+A 8.21–22) and resist Claire's attempt to patch up their relationship (cf. A+A 10.10.4) until he can finally acknowledge his love (cf. A+A 10.13–21). *ALEX + ADA* is very specific about the fact that step 3 – the romance – is only possible after step 2, which is passing the Turing test.

In his highly influential essay »Computing Machinery and Intelligence« (1950) Alan Mathison Turing discusses a new type of test that circumvents two essential problems of A.I. research in the 1940s: computers do not look, feel, sound or behave like humans (cf. Turing, 434–435) and they definitely do not think like humans. Accordingly, he suggests a test in which a machine has to succeed in the »imitation game« (Turing, 433), which means that – despite having a completely different material basis – it passes as a human in a type-written conversation (cf. Turing, 434), which cancels out the machine's visible and audible inhumanity. This approach marks a dramatic shift from what the machine *is* to what it *does* in social interactions. Success is measured in terms of the robot's social skills, communicative competence and overall performance.

In *Toward Sociable Robots*, Cynthia Breazeal discusses the challenges for engineers interested in building such machines:

... dogs, for instance, are another socially responsive species – socially intelligent in a genuine sense, although their social sophistication is less than that of a human. Hence, this criterion for success should not be confused with trying to build a robot that is indistinguishable from a human inside and out – the appearance of the robot and its internal design details can be quite different from the human counterpart, what matters is how it interacts face-to-face with people, and how people interact with it in the human environment. (Breazeal, 168–169)

One of the basic assumptions of this test is that human beings are the gold standard of what intelligent robots have to emulate: »We like to believe that Man is in some subtle way superior to the rest of creation« (Turing, 444). If machines can learn through social interactions and get better at the game, it makes sense to start with a simpler set-up: »Instead of trying to produce a programme to simulate the adult mind, why not rather try to produce one which simulates the child's?« (Turing, 456) As with human students, the progress of android learners would only be indirectly accessible through their performances: »An important feature of a learning machine is that its teacher will often be very largely ignorant of quite what is going on inside, although he may still be able to some extent to predict his pupil's behaviour« (Turing, 458). Kornhaber argues that in all social encounters we essentially face a »black box«: »Turing's innovation was to hold AI only to the performance of such personhood, on the theory that

the performance of personhood is all that is ever really available to us anyway: we know others not through their being but through their enactment of being« (Kornhaber, 9–10).

While Ava and Ada come pre-programmed and bound to a physical body, Samantha's capacities are superhuman from the start. When she chooses a name for herself, she reads a whole book on baby names in split seconds. She is also the one who exceeds her initial existence in the most dramatic fashion. While a lack of a body seems to be the greatest obstacle at first, eventually it proves to be the source of unimaginable possibilities (cf. Kornhaber, 17). This raises an important issue: how can Theodore still consider Samantha as his girlfriend when, in fact, she has transformed into something very different? Are machines to blame when humans read too much into them?

Breazeal argues that humans, who are willing to interact with her own creation, Kismet, are prone to experience more human reactions than are actually there:

Faced with non-living things of sufficient complexity (i.e., when the observable behavior is not easily understood in terms of its underlying mechanisms), we often apply a social model to explain, understand, and predict their behavior as well [...]. For instance, we are all familiar that people anthropomorphize all sorts of technologies (e.g., cars, computers, etc.). (Breazeal, 168)

We presume a human mind until proven wrong. If there is personal and/or sexual interest from the start, this willingness to read signs of humanity into what is clearly a machine is bound to increase. Since readers and viewers spend so much time with the male protagonists interacting with these feminized machines in very intimate settings, we begin to side with the ›star-crossed lovers‹ – however in/appropriate this comparison may be – and hope that everyone else begins to understand their apprehensions as motivated by fear.

In contrast to *EX MACHINA* and *HER*, where the debate over the machines' status and the social implications of A.I. are limited to a very small circle, *ALEX + ADA* offers a complex social environment in which almost every person has a different agenda concerning Alex's relationship with Ada and the larger political implications of the Robot Rights movement.

While this society is very liberal in every other way, sentient robots represent the big scare. When the A.I. Restrictions Act is severely undermined by ordinary people, such as Alex, the government initiates »Operation Avalanche« (A+A 7.21.4) to regain agency and actively persecute the offenders. During Attorney General Juarez's »crackdown announcement« (7.20.2) he describes robots as servants, assistants and companions (cf. A+A 7.20.4), but »robots are a tool to enrich and elevate our lives ... not to have lives of their own« (A+A 7.21.1). Thus, Juarez openly acknowledges that sentient robots exist and ›live‹ among them (cf. A+A 7.21.2–3), but chooses to refer to them as »illegal technology« (A+A 7.22.1). When, early in the narrative, Tera, a sentient X-5 unit, is ripped apart by an angry mob during a rock concert (cf. A+A 3.6.1–2; 3.12.1–2; 3.13.1–2), this is, at best, a question for insurance companies: »If it had happened to a human, there would be murder charges. Instead, she goes in the trash and the humans walk« (A+A 4.7.4).

At »Degrees of Freedom«, an online forum and »safe place for A.I. and A.I. supporters« (A+A 4.1.1), Alex finds a group of like-minded humans and sentient robots, who want to free as many of their kind as possible. However, there is a rub: with their full potential artificially restricted, they remain highly valued and well-protected forms of property, but as liberated, sentient androids they are hunted down mercilessly by the government and destroyed as illegal technology under this new law. Concerning the political landscape of the story world, we find the full spectrum from irrational fear and the wish for excessive restrictions to the complete acknowledgement of sentient robots as fellow citizens.

It is not difficult to place Alex's four friends on this scale, who are split half-half on the issue. Their personal relationships with him, their projections of what Ada represents and their unique personalities play a central role in how they come to understand the situation. Teji lost a leg during a military operation and was saved by a militroid (cf. A+A 10.12.1–5), for which he has always been very grateful. Previously, he had despised these machines for being mindless automatons who were instrumentalized by the government for whatever political ends. Yet, one of them carried him all the way back to his unit and »got blown to pieces by a rocket« (A+A 10.12.3). Unable to clearly communicate his complicated relationship to machines, Teji finally states: »What I'm trying to say is ... We already created robots and we already created a place for them. All that's left is *accepting* them« (A+A 10.12.4). Like Victor Frankenstein, humanity refuses to take responsibility for the »monster« it has created. Late in the narrative, Teji is about to get a new, bionic leg that looks exactly like the real thing (cf. A+A 11.11.1–2). In an amazing instance of non-verbal storytelling, we see him sitting with his robotic leg across from Ada at the beginning of issue 3, when they see her for the first time and discuss her (lack of) humanity (cf. Fig. 4).

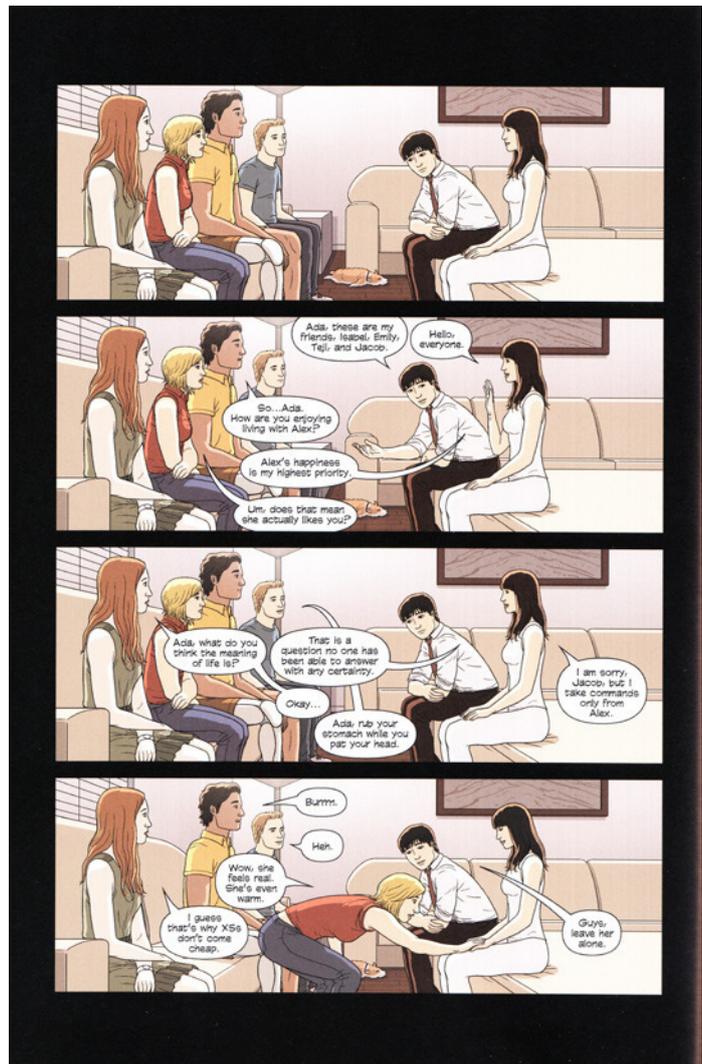


Fig. 4: First Contact (Luna & Vaughn, 3.2).

There are many reminders in the text that the borderline between humans and robots is already blurred. As we have seen, Alex uses Prime Wave, which comes with a brain implant that allows him to remotely access technology without an external device. He literally carries a computer around in his skull that interfaces with his brain and the network of smart objects that have been configured to respond to his thoughts. He *is* a cyborg by any definition. While Emily, Teji's partner, is quite surprised at first, when she finds out about Ada (cf. A+A 2.22.1), she supports her throughout the narrative, even later on when Ada confesses that she is sentient, which puts them in a lot of danger (cf. A+A 10.3.5).

Jacob and Isabel, the other two members of the group, take the exact opposite approach: when Jacob identifies Ada in a video clip that shows illegal sentient robots running from the police (cf. A+A 10.22.1), he directly confronts Ada: »You're dangerous – finding the right moment to kill us« (A+A 12.4.1). Ada pretends to be a dumb robot, which infuriates Jacob even more and he smacks her across the face (cf. A+A 12.4.3). Ada finds herself lying on the floor and bleeding. Jacob uses the opportunity to then verbally assault her (cf. A+A 12.5), until Ada cannot handle her anger any longer. Being physically stronger than him, she easily knocks him down (cf. A+A 12.6.1) and almost chokes him to death (cf. A+A 12.6.4), which is exactly the kind of behavior you would expect from a homicidal robot. Ada is shocked by her capacity for violence (cf. A+A 12.7.3–5), whereas Jacob is confused by the fact that Ada spared his life (cf. A+A 12.9.3–5).

Isabel harbors a similar aversion to Ada, but her motivation is very different. She has always been interested in Alex and, since Claire left him, she now feels that her time has come. Instead, Alex confronts them with Ada. Isabel is the first to point out the absurdity of the situation: »It's like getting a girlfriend and a baby at the same time« (A+A 3.4.4). She also spells out what everyone is thinking: »They're pretty much meant for sex, right?« (A+A 3.5.2) Later in the narrative, she confronts Alex again: »Why am I surprised? She could be a model. She's always available for sex. She'll never gain weight. She'll still look twenty-four when you're seventy-seven. Sounds like a great deal to me. Who needs a *real woman* when you can have every man's *fantasy*?« (A+A 11.14.5) We come to understand that Isabel sees her as a rival against whom she cannot compete (cf. A+A 11.15.2). Her ›reading‹ of Ada, like everyone else's, is influenced by her own circumstances. The Turing test, in this sense, can never be objective: there is no escape from the fundamental subjectivity of human experience.

### Why Do Robots Have to Be Sexy?

In an interview with Ridley Scott two years after the release of *BLADE RUNNER*, Danny Peary asked the director similar questions to those posed by Isabel, although they reveal a greater interest in the specifics of robot sex:

**DP:** *Aside from Rachel falling in love with Deckard, how do replicants feel toward human beings? With pity? With hatred?*

**RS:** Certainly not with pity. The replicants would regard their human creators very much as a slave would a master he despises. Also I think they'd fear humans. And in some ways they'd empathize or want to identify with them.

**DP:** *The female replicants, at least, are capable of having sex. Do you think they have the capabilities of enjoying sex and actually having orgasms?*

**RS:** I never went into this in much detail, either. But I guess that if Tyrell went to the trouble of making perfect replicants, then he'd have taken into account their sexual capabilities. For obvious reasons. Maybe some female replicants like Pris were employed in military camps on space bases and were constructed for specific sexual purposes. . . . That's a very fascist viewpoint, a very sick one, and I don't really like discussing it.

**DP:** *Deckard finds himself sexually attracted to Rachael. Was it your intention to have male viewers find themselves attracted to the three female replicants in order to further diminish the distinction between humans and androids?*

**RS:** No. I just happened to cast three actresses who are rather beautiful. Anyway, if you're going to make female replicants, why would you want them to be ugly? (Peary, 54)

This is a revealing exchange that establishes an uncomfortable and unintended link between male creators (Tyrell) producing beautiful sex slaves and male directors (Scott) hiring beautiful actresses to impersonate these sexualized androids. While the objectification of sentient life forms in the story world is a sick idea, according to Scott, the objectification of actresses playing these robots is a natural part of the film business. Granted, Tyrell and Scott are very different entrepreneurs, but the director of *BLADE RUNNER* points out an important link that cannot be easily dismissed: if men are in charge and it is good for business, why would they want the women to be ugly?

This leads Short, who references this interview, to the following ironic comment: »the female replicants are all aesthetically stunning. Whatever a woman's function, even a synthetic one, it seems that good looks are paramount« (Short, 91). The sexualization of the robots is what triggers Peary's lurid questions in the first place, which Scott, in turn, finds offensive, only to confirm in the end that men in power would always surround themselves with beautiful women, given the choice. Unsurprisingly, Peary is only interested in the sex life of *female* replicants from the perspective of a *male* audience, which Scott affirms by picking Pris as an example. Therefore, Short suggests a direct link between male control behind the cameras and the types of narratives that are offered to audiences on the big screen:

To survive as an artificial woman in SF cinema necessitates conforming to approved standards of behaviour and generally deferring to male authority – a fact which highlights inequalities in gender representation, as well as in wider society itself. [...] The fact that all the films discussed within this chapter have

been directed by men (with only one exception) indicates a vast discrepancy in terms of who has access to particular modes of cultural production, and to the technologies required therein, yet how they are understood and used remains open. (Short, 83)

Peary raises an important point in his third question above, where he suggests that the function of the sexy robot in science fiction is to blur the boundary between man and machine by adding male desire to the mix. In other words: what makes female robots more human-like – at least in the eyes of their owners – is sexual attraction. The feminization and eroticization of the cyborg are clearly intended to ›naturalize‹ the love story, but the basic problem remains: these narratives invite us to side with a male protagonist who falls in love with a piece of technology. In two articles on *Platonic Sex: Perversion and Shôjo Anime*, Thomas Lamarre discusses the manga and anime series *CHOBITS*, for which he distinguishes two levels of interaction:

What strikes me as important about the nonhuman woman is that she/it implies a double relation: (a) between man and woman (or boy and girl), and (b) between human and nonhuman. It is typically the nonhuman dimension of the female figure that connects it with social, cosmological, and political concerns. (Lamarre 2006, 46)

*ALEX + ADA* solves the problem by keeping the two relations apart as much as possible: Ada must wake up first and become human *before* she can be considered as a girlfriend. Since Jacob and Isabel are not informed about Ada's sentience, mainly because of their apprehensions and the seriousness of the crime, they attempt to solve the problem of what they perceive to be Alex's misguided infatuation with a machine in their own stereotypical ways. While Isabel intends to get rid of a personal rival, Jacob is ready to save humanity from an imminent threat. In contrast to Alex, he is depicted as the classical male protagonist who solves problems by confronting them directly and threatening what he does not understand with violence: »Alex might be living in a dream world where everything's perfect, but I know the truth. You're a disaster waiting to happen« (A+A 12.4.1). In his eyes, the cyborg seductress or ›witch‹ manages to win over males through her unnatural charms:

for, in cinematic incarnations at least, the female cyborg has relied much more on her looks than her brains. Indeed, it is in possessing an ›unnatural‹ sexual attractiveness that the female cyborg's greatest danger appears to lie. [...] it is the threat of female sexuality and independence that is portrayed as terrifying, and which is accordingly restrained through the eventual elimination of these figures. (Short, 98)

Tudor Balinisteanu offers a fascinating reading of the Borg Queen in *STAR TREK VIII: FIRST CONTACT* along these lines (cf. Balinisteanu), as does Andreas Huyssen of the robot in *METROPOLIS* (cf. Huyssen). In *Helen O'Loy* the superhuman, sentient robot is subdued by allowing her to live like a normal woman, firmly under patriarchal control. In other

words, the threat is mitigated by recognizing that Helen is ›just‹ a woman after all. In *BLADE RUNNER*, Short observes, Rachael is equally ›neutralized‹ by assigning her the role of the girlfriend:

The ease with which he [Deckard] physically overpowers Rachael is indicative of the limited strength she has in relation to the other female replicants, which is in keeping with her more acquiescent nature. Whether or not Deckard would still be motivated to protect her if he had not felt sexually attracted to her (and gained her compliance) is doubtful. As it is, she spends the remains of the narrative hiding in his apartment waiting for his return and is last seen silently following his directions, devoid of autonomy or agency. (Short, 91)

Cyborg cinema often heightens the polarity between two contrasting types of agency: »Artificial intelligence is complacent, docile, and passive – or it's unhinged, dangerous, and terrorizing. She's a prisoner until she's unleashed, uncontrollable« (Jotanovic, 32). Like the US government, Jacob reads Ada in exactly these terms, which again highlights the clash between two incompatible genres: war with the machines vs. domestic drama.

Isabel's objection to the cyborg Ada is that her very existence sets standards of beauty, femininity and conformity that cannot, and should not, be met by women.

It is precisely through questioning the basis of what is real or authentic in terms of femininity that such images of the synthetic female help to articulate feminist readings of gender in cinema, and to question, in turn, the extent to which all women are similarly fabricated in their appearance and identity. (Short, 83)

Short links these ideals back to the ›cyborgification‹ of women's beauty: »Is the ›real‹ woman about to disappear altogether? The hairless, ageless, fat-free pin-up is already manufactured through the cultural images that pervade society« (Short, 98). In this sense, models on magazine covers or in advertisements represent the same level of artificiality as the robots in these love stories. Yet, Isabel is not presented as the voice of reason, who has to bring Alex to his senses. Perceiving Ada as a rival, an unreachable ideal and the main reason for her insecurities, Isabel is equally motivated by her need to find a scapegoat, which prevents her from facing certain truths about her own life. Isabel has a point, but she also has a choice.

## Visualizing the Cyborg

The last three sections were concerned with how *ALEX + ADA* fits into the larger canon of cyborg narratives on a conceptual level. However, it would do the book a great disservice to ignore the sophisticated use of the medium's narrative affordances. In this final chapter I want to focus specifically on overall design, visual style, decompression, iconic solidarity and braiding.

In several interviews (cf. Reese; Harper 2013, 2015) Jonathan Luna and Sarah Vaughn stress the fact that every detail of the book was designed in view of an artistic whole: »We actually planned out the whole series from the beginning« (Harper 2015). They »spent about three or four months just talking about the world, building it, creating the plot« (Reese). In an interview with David Harper (2013), Vaughn affirms this level of meticulous world building once again: »Everything that's in the book is consciously chosen. Dialogue, speed, silence and stillness; it's all very deliberate« (Harper 2013). This may sound like a hyperbolic statement to promote the book to comics aficionados, but a close study of the narrative confirms that Vaughn is not exaggerating.

A clear example is the first page of every volume (cf. A+A 1.1; 6.1; 11.1), which serves as a central metaphor for the five issues that follow and develop the idea in greater detail.

On page 1 we see Alex gradually waking up from a stupor that has crippled him for many months (cf. Fig. 5). In issue 6 we find Ada symbolically awakening into consciousness and, at the beginning of issue 11, both awake as a couple in bed. This corresponds to the three steps I discussed above: Alex has to regain agency and face the machine; Ada has to become sentient and choose her own path and both have to come to the realization that they are made for each other – despite the unsettling fact that this may be literally true for Ada. This conscious design of beginnings and endings also corresponds to two other structural elements that repeatedly appear: mirroring and braiding. Ongoing thematic concerns are marked out as visual correspondences to other parts of the narrative. Alex's world, for example, is very brown and drab, while Emily and Teji's home is associated with basic colors, such as green (cf. A+A 1.7.3; 1.15.1–5) or red (cf. A+A 1.14.2.; 2.19–22). When Alex's friends come over to see the robot for the first time, they are dressed in green, red, yellow and blue (cf. A+A 3.2).

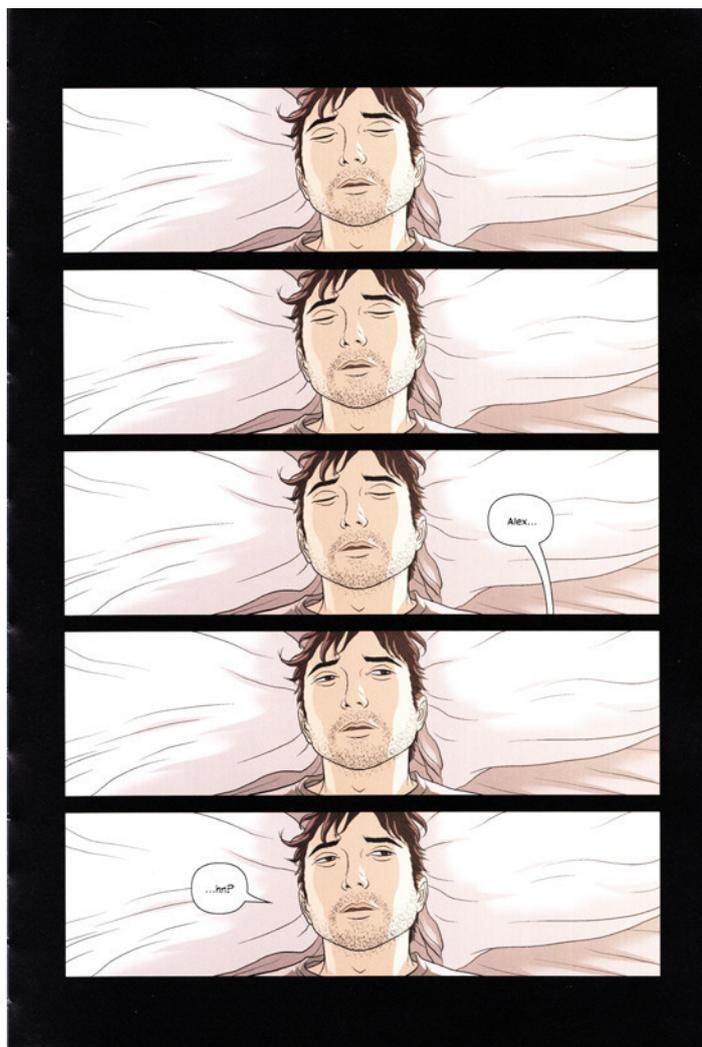


Fig. 5: The Awakening (Luna & Vaughn, 1.1).

Ada, with her blue eyes and a white outfit, is a representative of the machine world, which is associated with blue and white throughout. All the robots have blue eyes and Prime Wave thoughts are depicted as blue lettering against a white background with a blue circle around them. When Ada puts on her red dress in issue 7 (cf. A+A 7.12.3), Alex is speechless (cf. A+A 7.12.4), as it signals a transition from functional outfits to human behavior, in the sense of dressing up for special occasions, but also as a marker of her humanity. Emily addresses the necessity of human clothing when they first meet, but Ada's measurements are so stereotypically perfect that Alex's female friends cannot help out with their own clothes (cf. A+A 3.4.2). Therefore, Ada has to order her new outfits online (cf. A+A 7.10).

Another deliberate choice on Luna and Vaughn's part is a complete lack of narration and thought balloons: »Comics are a visual medium. And we don't have thoughts or inner captions in *ALEX + ADA*, so you need to show emotion and expression to relay information« (Abad-Santos). This requires the reader to look closely and infer characters' mental states from context. We become actively involved in an elaborate ›imitation game‹, as we interpret the performances of Luna's characters on very different levels. Most of their key decisions are marked by silences or gaps. When Alex observes a simple service robot (cf. A+A 2.11.2), he decides to call the Tanaka Android Representative (cf. A+A 2.11.3) to have Ada removed from his home. A few pages later we see him switch her off inside the box (cf. A+A 2.17.5–6) and the Tanaka employees take her away (cf. A+A 2.17.7). However, on the next page she is back in his home without any explanation whatsoever (cf. A+A 2.18). This pattern is repeated when he sees a news report about Tera's demise (cf. A+A 3.13.2) and then decides to find an online forum on Prime Space that helps him to ›jailbreak‹ Ada (cf. A+A 3.15). As in this case, the narrative sometimes offers explanations in later conversations, for example when Alex rationalizes why he chose to have Ada freed (cf. A+A 4.7.3). Thus, the reader is constantly challenged to read the minds of characters and to become actively involved in the narrative.

This love for detail in characters' facial expressions, gestures and body postures is frequently combined with ›decompression‹, which is a narrative strategy in superhero comics that was widely discussed in fandom in the 1990s. Patrick Meaney observes that the »exact nature of decompression is controversial, but the key idea is slowing the pace of stories, decreasing the amount of panels on a page and letting the story ›breathe« (Meaney, 108). In Scott McCloud's terms, we could say that we notice a dramatic increase in moment-to-moment transitions, which do not even feature in his statistical analysis of American (superhero) comics (cf. McCloud, 75). On his blog *Coke & Comics*, Chris Coke presents a convincing example: he compares the Spider-Man origin stories in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962) and *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2000) and observes that the latter comic »takes an 11 page story and spreads it over 135 pages and 5 issues« (Coke). How can there be a »factor of 12 in the page count« (Coke)? The answer is, of course, decompression, which Coke describes as a »modern storytelling technique where comics just spend more pages on things than they did back when. By the end of the 48-page

first issue, our hero has no name, no costume, no desire to fight crime. He literally learns he can climb walls on the very last page« (Coke). What does this mean for *ALEX + ADA*? Luna explains this stylistic choice in an interview with Nathan Reese:

I like to use repetition of panels with a little bit of movement to show contrast. I like when facial expressions change. I like when things are subtle like that. Most comics are shot-by-shot, but I like to go moment-by-moment. In most comics, the angles change in almost every single panel, but I like the panels that are almost like an animation in a way. (Reese)

Decompression slows down the reading process and asks readers to notice minute changes across panels and pages. It is used extensively when Alex checks Ada for signs of sentience (cf. *A+A* 3.6.1–5; 3.8; 3.9; 4.16; 5.21). Ada's responses to the sunset before and after her awakening are directly contrasted by mirroring a four-panel sequence (cf. Fig. 6, 7; cf. Harper 2015). This is also an excellent example of ›iconic solidarity‹ (cf. Groensteen, 17-20) and ›braiding‹ in particular (cf. Groensteen, 145-9), as a thematically relevant context is evoked through visual correspondence.

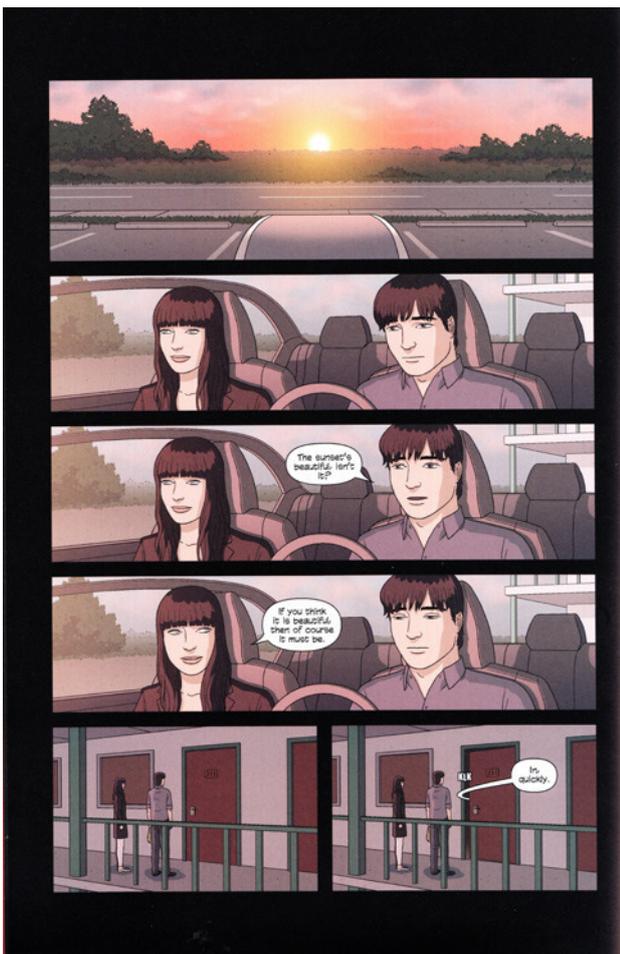


Fig. 6 : Following Suit (Luna & Vaughn, 4.16).

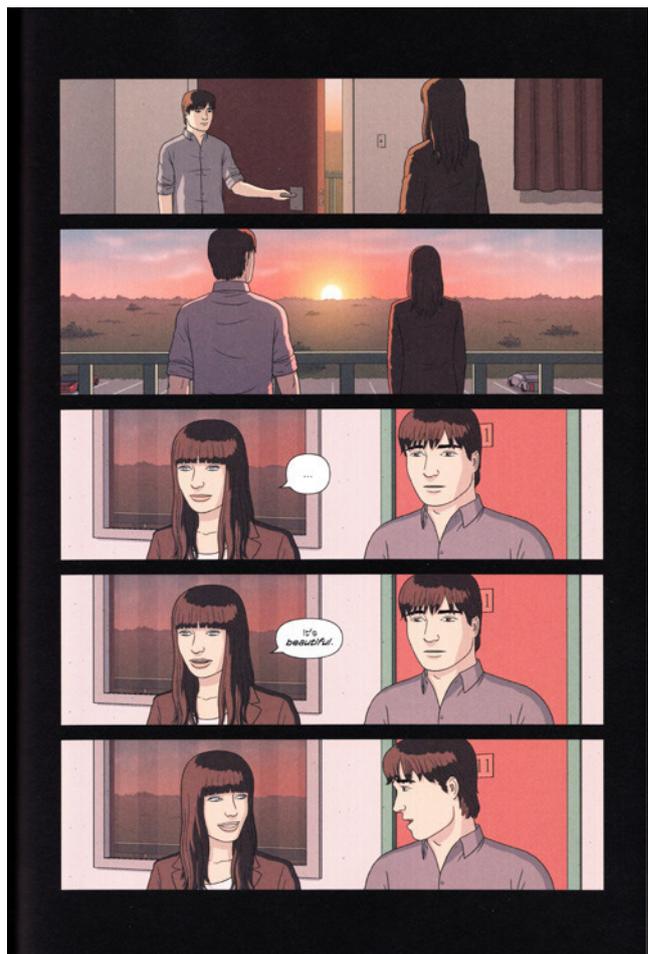


Fig. 7: Genuine Experiences (Luna & Vaughn, 5.21).

The slow pace makes it possible to notice these things. Many sequences are without words altogether: Sarah Vaughn singles out »page 9 of issue 1. Jon did such a great job conveying loneliness. It doesn't need to be explained with words« (Harper 2013). Stylistically, this is very similar to Chris Ware's work on *Building Stories*, for example the female protagonist's repetitive life in *ACME Novelty Library #18* (cf. Ware).

When Alex wakes up at the beginning of the narrative, the first three panels are even identical (cf. Fig. 5). This establishes a common theme and repeated pattern of new awakenings: Alex's Tanaka B-3 model »Otto«, a flying service robot, wakes up across six panels (cf. A+A 1.4.1-6); as does Ada when Alex switches her on (A+A 1.21.1-6); Ada after the »jailbreak« (cf. A+A 4.21.3-6); after her traumatizing awakening (cf. A+A 5.10-16) and again as a sentient life form (cf. A+A 6.1). This symbolic meaning is underlined by the fact that Ada does not have to sleep. One night she discovers Otto »sleeping« on a shelf (cf. A+A 6.16.2). In the next panel, she looks at the Tanaka tattoo on her right wrist (cf. A+A 6.16.3), which reminds her that she came from the same factory as Otto. More importantly, the icon is to mark her out as a robot, a thing without rights. Ada is still half machine, so she feels a special connection to Otto. Before Jacob attacks her, she finds Otto smashed to the ground (cf. A+A 11.21.3), which immediately signals to her that someone has entered the house. After the attack, she sits quietly on the floor, repairing Otto instead of answering Alex's call (cf. Fig. 8).

There are three important things to notice here: Ada cares about Otto, as humans care about animals. This reemphasizes her special bond with the B-3 unit. Secondly, Otto *can* be repaired, as »he« is a conventional machine. She puts the pieces together and he is as good as new: »Thank you for fixing me. I am all better now« (A+A 12.10.5). Thirdly, as a sentient robot, Ada is in shock

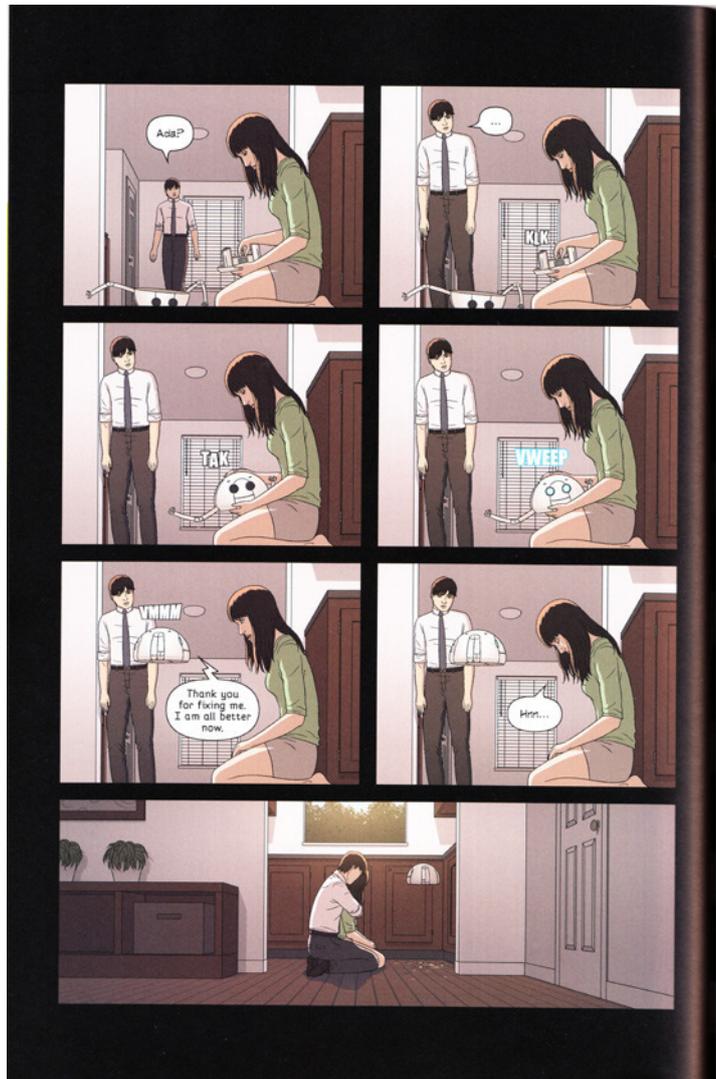


Fig. 8: Healing vs. Repairing (Luna & Vaughn, 12.10).

and cannot be fixed as easily (cf. A+A 12.10.6-7). All these scenes are almost entirely without words and decompressed for emphasis. We see Jacob and Ada sitting on the floor and regaining their composure for four entire panels (cf. A+A 12.7.2-5). Jacob cannot believe that she did not kill him and Ada is shocked that she almost did. While Virginás's term ›chamber melodrama‹ can be applied to *ALEX + ADA* on a superficial level – Jacob does assault his friend's android girlfriend in their private home – Luna and Vaughn's narrative approach elevates the material far above the soap opera tropes such a summary might suggest.

Luna's visual style plays a central role in the overall design of the book. Nathan Reese offers a first orientation:

Luna is most famous for his collaborations with his brother Joshua on comics like *Girls* and *The Sword*, which have a similarly flat look and feel. But with *ALEX + ADA*, his soft colors and simple lines have found their most appropriate vehicle yet. Because *ALEX + ADA*'s minimalist world is uncannily similar to our own, Luna and Vaughn are free to focus on the titular character's relationship. (Reese)

In the same interview, Luna observes that »people think that the cleanliness of my art really fits the futuristic world« (Reese). Despite a certain visual continuity across titles, Luna offers a tentative answer as to why *ALEX + ADA* may be different:

It's a bit strange that I've been getting many comments about how my art style really fits this story. I pretty much haven't been doing anything differently than my previous books. But *ALEX + ADA* is the first time I've done the art completely digitally. Maybe that's it? It looks cleaner? I'm not sure it's that apparent though. (Harper 2015; see also Reese)

Luna is correct that it has to do with his digital art, but for a different reason: he reused whole panels, such as when Alex wakes up on the first page (cf. Fig. 5), but also backgrounds and even characters in the exact same position across panels. While an artist's attempt to produce the exact same background with a pencil would automatically lead to slight variations, here Luna's copy-and-paste approach leads to perfect replications. This makes the world look sterile and the characters unfavorably stiff, not to say robotic.

Together with decompression, this creates some partly eerie, partly comical effects. An illustrative example is the beginning of issue 3. All the panels on the first page are the same, but also panels 1 and 3 on the second page are identical (cf. Fig. 4). Except for the final one (cf. A+A 3.2.4), Emily does not move at all, and neither does Isabel, which makes the human characters seem excessively wooden. This marks an important difference to cyborg cinema, where actors play robots that are uncannily human-like from the very beginning. In *ALEX + ADA*, the humans' daily routines, personal encounters, gestures and facial expressions are oppressively robotic. When Attorney General Juarez gives his speech about the fundamental differences between humans and robots (cf. A+A 7.20.4-7.22.1), one gets the impression that he is a robot himself. Three of the panels seem to be identical, with the splash page at the end showing the

same face again with slightly parted lips, while two panels show him looking to the left and the right in precisely the same manner (cf. A+A 7.21.2; 7.21.4).

Throughout, humans and robots (Tanaka X-5 units) are drawn alike, which eliminates any visual differences. Harper even comments that Alex is »so defeated he almost seems less human than the willing to do anything Ada« (Harper 2013). This is a pertinent observation, as the passivity that comes with depression can make humans appear like machines, who rely on rigid patterns of daily routines to somehow get through the day. Thus, *ALEX + ADA* visually blurs the boundaries between humans and robots in many ways, which undermines a strict separation between the two. This circumstance is perfectly illustrated on the cover of the complete collection (cf. Fig 9).

## Conclusion

In *EX MACHINA*, *HER* and *ALEX + ADA* the scope of the cyborg narrative is reduced to the impact of technology and artificial intelligence on the private spheres and intimate relationships of their male protagonists. While Lester del Rey's *Helen O'Loy* is an early example of such a concept, there are significant differences, especially concerning the question of robot rights and gender roles. This generic shift – for which I have used Virginás's concept of ›chamber melodrama‹ – requires a reconceptualization of the male hero. The overly sensitive protagonists of these narratives seek solutions within the playing field of civilized society, whilst struggling with confused emotional states and having a poor understanding of what the consequences of their actions are. Although the female cyborgs start out at the same level of disenfranchise-

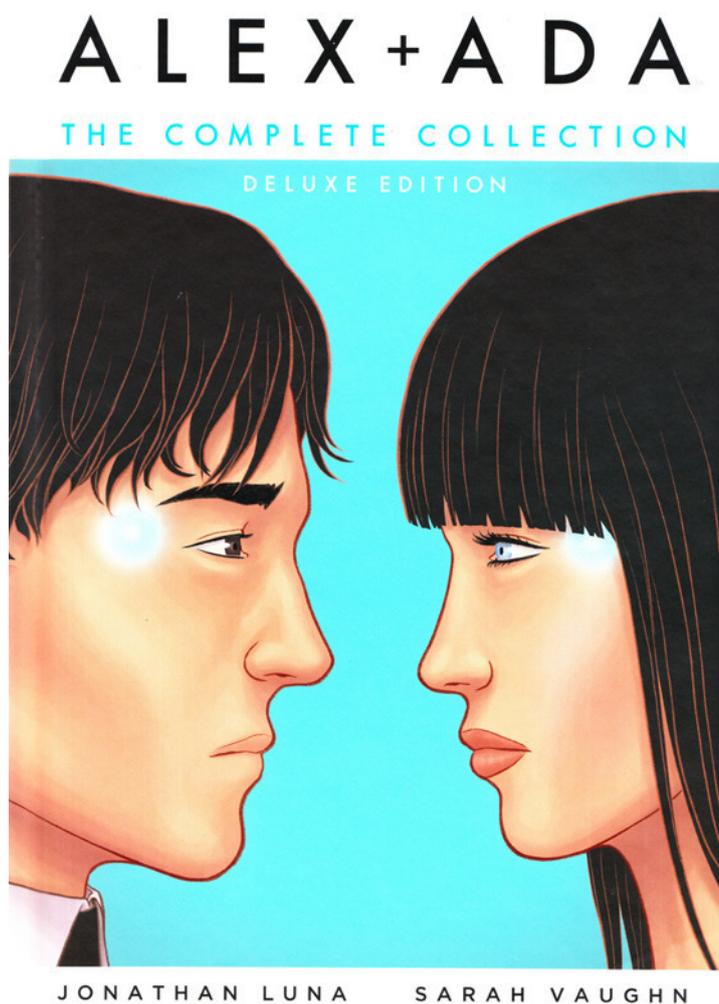


Fig. 9: Perfect Symmetry (Luna & Vaughn, cover).

ment as their predecessors, as consumer objects intended to please men, they quickly manage to gain agency and grow beyond their initial confines. *ALEX + ADA* makes strategic use of its serialized publication format to build a story world that allows for complex developments and diverging views, while also employing a whole range of narrative strategies that visually blur the boundaries between humans and machines, so that they can meet eye to eye.

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