

Techno-Embodied Performativity in Dystopian Imagination: Gendered Androids in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last*

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Abstract: This article examines gendered androids in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* as sites of techno-embodied performativity, situating them within debates on posthuman corporeality and queer media potential. It draws on Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra to interrogate the hyperreal perfection of synthetic femininity, Judith Butler's theory of performativity to reveal gender as a programmed construct, and Paul B. Preciado's notion of pharmacopornography to expose how technocapitalism transforms bodies into sites of extraction and control. On the one hand, the article analyzes artificial female figures as instruments of power, ranging from hyperfeminine constructs that reinforce patriarchal norms to seductive, ambiguous bodies that sustain capitalist logics. On the other hand, it argues that these mechanical characters also function as sites of resistance: while reproducing normative gender scripts, they expose the constructedness of gendered identity. Furthermore, the article contends that moments of failure open up possibilities for post-gender readings, positioning androids as proto-queer entities that unsettle the boundaries between subjecthood and objecthood and contribute to broader debates on embodiment, desire, and control under algorithmic governance.

Keywords: gender, robots, feminism, techno-embodiment, post-gender

Introduction

When a robot performs gender better than a human, what remains of the body as we know it? In an era of deepfakes, AI-generated influencers, sexbots, and social robots, cultural representations of such creations become a mirror of contemporary anxieties about gender and technology. The 2004 film *The Stepford Wives*¹ and Margaret Atwood's novel *The Heart Goes Last*² (2015) depict synthetic women as Flusserian technical images—media that do not merely represent but actively reconstruct reality and gendered embodiment.

Human-like robots' physical appearance usually suggests gender, race, or age.³ Moreover, robot design significantly influences our expectations of and interactions with machines, depending on their form and features.⁴ For example, when it comes to gender, Jennifer Rhee argues that AI has long been intertwined with reproductive labor and care, an association that persistently shapes how robots are imagined.⁵ Historically tied to feminized reproductive and care labor, this association has produced female-coded robots, particularly in domains such as domestic service, care, and emotional assistance. These robots are frequently designed with feminine traits, such as soft voices, gentle movements, and submissive behavior, mimicking gendered archetypes. For this reason, Samantha (*Her*⁶, 2013) is designed to be emotionally attuned, reinforcing stereotypes of women as caregivers. In other representations, female robots are often emotionally manipulative (Ava in *Ex Machina*⁷, 2014); they perform household chores

¹ Frank Oz, dir., *The Stepford Wives* (Paramount Pictures, 2004).

² Margaret Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last* (London: Virago Press, 2016).

³ Robert Sparrow, Eliana Horn, and Friederike Eyssel, "Do Robots Have Sex? A Prolegomenon," *International Journal of Social Robotics* 15, no. 11 (2023): 1707–23.

⁴ Christoph Bartneck, Dana Kulic, Elizabeth A. Croft, and Susana Zoghbi, "Measurement Instruments for the Anthropomorphism, Animacy, Likeability, Perceived Intelligence, and Perceived Safety of Robots," *International Journal of Social Robotics* 1, no. 1 (2009): 71–78.

⁵ Jennifer Rhee, *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

⁶ Spike Jonze, dir., *Her* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2013).

⁷ Alex Garland, dir., *Ex Machina* (Universal Pictures, 2014).

(Rosie the Robot Maid in *The Jetsons*⁸, 1962–1988; Alice in *Subservience*⁹, 2024) or are programmed for sexualized roles (Kyoko in *Ex Machina*, 2014). All these robots not only mirror societal norms and anxieties about femininity and gender but also consolidate power structures, shaping how we act, perceive ourselves and others, and understand the world around us.

This article argues that representations of android bodies in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* trace a shift from explicit patriarchal control of femininity to more differentiated biopolitical and capitalist regimes of bodily governance, while simultaneously opening space for queer and post-gender reconfigurations of subjectivity. Robotic figures thus function both as instruments of domination and as sites where normative gender and power structures begin to destabilize. The first part analyzes hyperfeminine androids in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* to show how their programmed traits materialize patriarchal fantasies of controlled femininity. The second part examines *The Heart Goes Last* as a system in which technology no longer merely reinforces traditional gender roles but operates as a corporate mechanism for managing and regulating all bodies. In this way, the article traces a movement from direct patriarchal coercion in *Stepford* to more sophisticated and systemic forms of capitalist control in Atwood's dystopian world. The final part reorients the analysis toward the queer potential of mechanical figures, arguing that malfunction and systemic failure emerge as modes of resistance to dominant power structures. This comparative approach traces how representations of techno-corporeality evolve from explicit gender enforcement to subtler systems of bodily governance, mirroring real-world transitions from industrial to digital capitalism.

⁸ William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, dirs., *The Jetsons* (Hanna-Barbera Productions, 1962–1988).

⁹ Scott Dale, dir., *Subservience* (Millennium Media, 2024).

This analysis is grounded in the intersection of three critical perspectives: Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra,¹⁰ Paul B. Preciado's queer biopolitical framework,¹¹ and Judith Butler's theory of performativity.¹² Informed by media theory, particularly Vilém Flusser's insights into programmed technical images,¹³ the androids in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* are read not as mere characters but as ideological carriers. Their behaviors and aesthetics materialize through programmed design decisions that construct, rather than reflect, social norms. Baudrillard's simulacra theory radicalizes this perspective, exposing the robots' "perfection" as a hyperreal simulation that erases the very possibility of authentic gender.

Programmed Patriarchy: Hyperfeminine Androids as Gender Simulacra

In the realm of gendered technology, hyperfeminine androids do not simply imitate women but actively reproduce patriarchal norms. They function as simulacra of idealized femininity—perfect copies that replace complex, lived womanhood. In *The Stepford Wives*, independent women are systematically replaced by their husbands with obedient android doubles. In *The Heart Goes Last*, Charmaine and other residents live in the privatized town of Consilience, where daily life, work assignments, and housing are strictly regulated, and everyone is expected to conform to assigned gendered social roles. In both narratives, femininity is engineered to please, serve, and conform, reducing gendered identity to a controllable aesthetic of docility and desire. Whether imposed through mechanical replication or enforced through social and economic programming, this manufactured femininity obscures the power relations it sustains. This section adopts a comparative reading of both texts to examine how gender is

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

¹¹ Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013).

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹³ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

operationalized through technological bodies and controlled social environments. Taken together, these narratives frame hyperfeminine androids not as technological novelties that challenge existing social order, but as gender simulacra designed to stabilize patriarchal and capitalist control.

In *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf exposes how mass media reduces women to impossible ideals, transforming beauty into a tool of control.¹⁴ However, with the development and proliferation of social robots, these manufactured standards take on a new material form, in which androids materialize patriarchal fantasies as three-dimensional, functional simulacra. In other words, unlike Wolf's two-dimensional magazine images, androids embody patriarchal ideals in embodied, functional forms. This materialization of patriarchal standards recalls historical patterns of female commodification, linking contemporary androids to longstanding logics of ownership and objectification.

According to Marxist theory, the origins of female subordination may be traced to the rise of private property, which enabled the exploitation of biological differences between the sexes. As Gera Lerner suggests, the patriarchal system that emerged over four thousand years ago in the Ancient Near East rendered women "a resource, acquired by men much as the land was acquired by men."¹⁵ Patriarchy turned women into tradable commodities, much like land and property, and the synthetic females in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* render this logic literal. Since these hyperfeminine robots can be purchased, their engineered bodies function not only as objects of desire but also as assets intended for ownership. Atwood foreshadows this problem even before the narrative begins, in the epigraphs preceding the novel:

¹⁴ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).

¹⁵ Gera Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 212.

...with wonderful craftsmanship he sculpted a gleaming white ivory statue... It appeared to be a real living girl, poised on the brink of motion but modestly holding back—so artful did his artistry conceal itself... He kissed her, convinced himself that she kissed him back, spoke to her, embraced her...¹⁶

By quoting the story of Pygmalion, Atwood lays bare the illusion at the core of robots' programmed femininity. Their perceived perfection masks the same old exchange value. Just as the statue's "artful" craftsmanship conceals its inert submission, androids like those in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* perform idealized womanhood while remaining fundamentally transactional. Technology does not overturn patriarchy here; it simply repackages it. Women—whether the statue kissed into life or robots—remain commodities, now refined by algorithms rather than myth, yet still subjected to male ownership. Atwood's epigraph thus signals a dystopia in which the female body, whether flesh or machine, continues to be acquired, appraised, and animated by male desire.

The perpetuation of patriarchal ideals presented in these two texts, however, is not limited to programmed submission; it is also encoded in visual form and spatial design. Both *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* inscribe patriarchal control through the aesthetics of the 1950s, reconstructing not only gendered appearances but also domestic architectures, spatial arrangements, and modes of everyday life characteristic of the period. The 1950s aesthetic is weaponized because it evokes a time when patriarchal norms were openly normalized and aestheticized as ideals of social order. As Thomas Barrie explains, postwar television systematically promoted a white, middle-class fantasy in which "the father [was] the breadwinner and mother [...] a nurturing stay-at-home mom" through sitcoms that rendered

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*. (Epigraph; no page number)

suburban conformity natural and desirable.¹⁷ Just as vintage sitcoms used the suburban home as a supporting structure to normalize hierarchy, these dystopias deploy 1950s design as active propaganda. They do not merely nostalgically recall the era but reinstate its most coercive values through environmental design, endlessly replaying what Barrie calls “established common cultural ground” while erasing alternatives.

Before entering Stepford, the women live with relative autonomy; they pursue their own careers, opinions, and relationships, often in tension with societal expectations. Their neighborhoods appear ordinary, imperfect, and sometimes messy, reflecting lives shaped by negotiation, choice, and small acts of resistance. Similarly, in *The Heart Goes Last*, Charmaine and Stan move from a precarious and disordered existence outside Consilience, shaped by economic collapse and social breakdown, where survival often requires improvisation and moral compromise. Their homes, routines, and clothing are dictated by circumstance rather than ideology.

Once they arrive in Stepford or Consilience, however, the social order associated with the 1950s asserts itself. In Stepford, men dominate the public sphere: they work, make household decisions, and socialize outside the home, while women are confined to domestic roles and programmed to embody perfect, submissive housewives. Although women are permitted to socialize with one another, the scope of their interactions is narrowly regulated, limited to book discussions, recipe exchanges, and the planning of domestic and social events. Women who resist or fail to conform are replaced with androids, ensuring that the town maintains its idealized hierarchy and that independence or dissent has no place. It soon becomes clear that every woman eventually fails to meet these expectations and is subsequently replaced. Similarly, in

¹⁷ Thomas Barrie, *House and Home: Cultural Context, Ontological Roles* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 142.

Consilience, men occupy technical and managerial positions, while women, like Charmaine, perform domestic and caregiving labor, including knitting, cooking, gardening, doing laundry, and assisting at the hospital as caregivers. The Consilience project is hailed as “the revolutionary new venture,”¹⁸ yet, as in Stepford, the allocation of labor and mechanisms of social control reproduce 1950s ideals, rendering gender conformity visible, unquestioned, and inescapable.

This regime of control extends beyond tasks and routines to the visual regulation of women’s bodies, where appearance becomes a key site of ideological inscription. As Mark J. O’Connell argues in *Forma ex Machina: Fashioning Gender, Control, and Identity in the Representation of Female Robots in Science Fiction*, the design of artificial women is never incidental.¹⁹ Clothing, bodily silhouettes, and even color palettes operate as semiotic cues that signal social roles, regulate behavior, and stabilize hierarchical orders. As he explains, the design and costuming of robotic women function as powerful instruments of gendered conditioning, reinforcing specific ideals and ideologies through deliberate aesthetic choices.

This logic is also characteristic of Stepford and Consilience, where clothing both reflects and enforces gendered expectations, albeit in different ways. In Stepford, women wear floral dresses, aprons, and pearls, visually signaling their domestic roles. In contrast, men wear suits or casual work attire that emphasize authority and participation in the public sphere. In Consilience, by contrast, residents are required to wear bright pastel colors such as pink and blue, intended to evoke the feeling of a happy new beginning. Atwood describes these colors as “springlike,” comparing them to nature’s renewal after winter.²⁰ Here, winter represents life outside

¹⁸ Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, 141.

¹⁹ Mark J. O’Connell, *Forma Ex Machina: Fashioning Gender, Control, and Identity in the Representation of Female Robots in Science Fiction* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.13850974>.

²⁰ Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, 141.

Consilience—marked by dirt, decay, and moral compromise—while the pastel aesthetic promises a manufactured rebirth. A similar logic operates in *The Stepford Wives*, where the robot wives' floral dresses and pristine kitchens produce an illusion of perpetual spring: gleaming surfaces and cheerful obedience obscure the “winter” of women's autonomy, masking the loss of freedom behind an aesthetic of order and charm. In both cases, pastel palettes and carefully curated domestic spaces create an atmosphere of optimism while subtly enforcing conformity.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the secret facility within the Consilience project produces sexbots modeled on mechanical replicas of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. Atwood's decision to replicate Monroe and Presley in mechanized form signals the enduring cultural hegemony of mid-twentieth-century beauty standards, while also underscoring how contemporary robotic representations reproduce and reactivate these idealized forms. By translating Monroe and Presley into programmable bodies, Atwood reveals how idealized images of gender are stabilized through repetition and technical reproducibility. These robotic bodies do not merely reference cultural icons; they function as regulatory templates that discipline desire, visibility, and bodily value. In this sense, the sexbots demonstrate how technocapitalism preserves aesthetic authority by transforming cultural memory into operational design.

In conclusion, *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* demonstrate how hyperfeminine androids and meticulously curated environments function as instruments of patriarchal control. By rendering gender performative, visible, and endlessly replicable, both texts expose the mechanisms through which authority, conformity, and aesthetic ideals are maintained. These works underscore that domination is not only social but also materially and visually embodied, setting the stage for a closer examination of how robotic bodies operate as sites of both power and resistance.

The Body as Power Interface: The Biopolitics of Robotic Bodies

While *The Stepford Wives* reveals patriarchal control through the literal replacement of female organic bodies with programmed replicas, *The Heart Goes Last* demonstrates a more sophisticated neoliberal bodily regime. In this evolution, robotic bodies become part of a mechanism of control that Preciado describes as pharmacopornographic capitalism—a system in which biotechnology, desire, and institutional power converge to regulate bodies at the molecular level. Here, Atwood’s novel illustrates how technocapitalism extends beyond patriarchal coercion to absorb all bodies, organic and mechanical alike, into its logic of extraction.

Preciado characterizes the pharmacopornographic era as a twenty-first-century regime in which biotechnology, digital media, and global capitalism collaborate to govern bodies and desires at microscopic scales.²¹ Unlike traditional disciplinary power, this system operates through molecular engineering (hormones, antidepressants, genetic modification) and the industrial standardization of pleasure (pornography, gender norms, and sexual identities). It transforms intimacy into a marketable resource and biological life into patented intellectual property. He describes this shift through the pharmaceutical industry’s control of reproduction, demonstrating how capitalism has moved from exploiting labor to shaping subjectivity itself. I argue that Atwood’s sex robots literalize this logic. These androids are not merely gendered puppets or (sex) toys but nodes within a system that commodifies arousal (pharmaco), harvests organs (porno), and renders life itself a corporate asset.

Pharmacopornography reveals how modern power no longer commands “obey” but instead whispers “choose, consume, and optimize.” The Consilience facility produces Monroe and Presley models—ready-made replicas of idealized femininity and masculinity. Yet customers

²¹ Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 25.

can also customize their robots, selecting every detail of their companions, from physical features to behavioral traits. This produces a revealing paradox: while customization appears to express individual freedom, it in fact enables more sophisticated forms of control through the intensification and manipulation of desire. Hyperpersonalization thus achieves what overt coercion cannot—a subject who self-regulates, pursuing corporate-curated ideals while believing themselves to be autonomous.

As Preciado argues, while pornography historically functioned as an external technology regulating male sexuality, the mid-twentieth century witnessed a shift toward internal control, as the pharmaceutical industry began to manipulate arousal directly through chemicals and prosthetics.²² This movement from visual stimulation to biochemical intervention reflects the broader expansion of the pharmacopornographic regime into bodily governance. However, as *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* demonstrate, robotic bodies extend this logic even further. In *The Stepford Wives*, men replace their wives with androids, yet this control proves double-edged: the men themselves become entangled in the same regime, their desires and behaviors shaped by the system they enforce. *The Heart Goes Last*, by contrast, reveals a deeper form of neoliberal technocapitalist exploitation. Here, robots are no longer substitutes for human partners but fully commodified vessels engineered for optimized pleasure. Unlike pharmaceutical or pornographic control, which still operates through organic bodies, robots represent the ultimate realization of this logic. They do not merely discipline desire but replace the body itself with a consumable, upgradable product. The mechanized body thus becomes not only a site of control but also a manufactured asset within capitalism's ongoing cycle of extraction.

²² Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 29.

For Atwood, however, the body—organic or not—emerges as the primary site of control. Like pharmacopornography, which transforms choice into an instrument of governance, *The Heart Goes Last* demonstrates how, within a biopolitical regime, even the most intimate spheres of life—sexuality, desire, and pleasure—are stripped of autonomy. The novel dismantles the illusion of the body as a private domain, revealing how power penetrates the most personal aspects of existence. First, the Consilience project presents itself as a utopian alternative to capitalist instability, yet it imposes what Michel Foucault identifies as the “Victorian paradigm of sexual control,” in which seventeenth-century repression gave way to nineteenth-century regulatory mechanisms that confined sex to procreative utility while eliminating nonproductive forms of pleasure.²³

After moving into their new house in Consilience, Stan and Charmaine realize how much effort has been invested in the complete containment of inappropriate sexual acts. As Stan recounts:

Music and movies are available on the same network [Consilience network], although, to avoid overexcitement, there is no pornography or undue violence, and no rock or hip-hop. However, there is no limitation on string quartets, Bing Crosby, Doris Day, the Mills Brothers, or show tunes from vintage Hollywood musicals.²⁴

If anything threatened the vision of a pure and flawless society, it was immediately removed from social life. Furthermore, as Foucault argues, “wherever there was the chance they [unnecessary pleasures] might appear, devices of surveillance were installed.”²⁵ Consilience replicates this regime with disturbing precision, installing hidden cameras throughout the city,

²³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 42.

²⁴ Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, 43.

²⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 42.

including in private residences and intimate spaces. The system remains constantly vigilant, ready to detect even the slightest sign of indecency.

At the same time, however, sex and sexuality are central to the narrative. Although married, Stan and Charmaine remain oriented toward fantasies of others: she begins an affair with a man who embodies her most hidden and socially unspeakable desires, while he becomes obsessed with a woman, he has never met but believes personifies his deepest desires. Initially, these private indulgences and transgressions appear to express agency, as their affairs seem to function as acts of liberation and their fantasies as self-directed desires. Yet it becomes clear that their sexuality is not personal but political, with each encounter surveilled and manipulated to reinforce biopower's hold.

Ironically, even their involvement in the anti-capitalist plot intended to dismantle Consilience reveals their lack of agency. Stan and Charmaine are selected to destroy the system rather than choosing to rebel. The novel's focus on sex is therefore deliberate: without mechanisms of control, pleasure itself loses meaning. Just as hyperpersonalized androids disguise coercion as choice, Stan and Charmaine's seemingly liberated desires follow a script they did not write. Atwood's biopolitical regime does not merely regulate bodies; it appropriates desire itself, rendering intimacy a site of governance.

The centrality of sex in *The Heart Goes Last* stems from its dual nature as both a site of capitalist extraction and an unstable force that resists total control—what Preciado calls *potentia gaudendi*. As he explains, this term refers to the capacity for pleasure as an inherently unstable force that cannot be owned, stored, or fully commodified.²⁶ In both narratives, the robots are, at their core, sexbots. Stepford's androids embody patriarchal fantasies of docile, perpetually

²⁶ Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 43.

available pleasure. They are devoted mothers and housewives, yet their subjectivity is reduced to a logic of sexual availability and service. In one notable scene in *The Stepford Wives*, the size of the robots' breasts can be adjusted by remote control, as casually as adjusting a thermostat. In *The Heart Goes Last*, robotic bodies literalize pharmacopornographic capitalism's drive to commodify arousal, intimacy, and even the biological matter underpinning them—organs, hormones, and neural responses. Yet sex's narrative urgency lies in its paradoxical status. As Preciado notes, *potentia gaudendi* is inherently fugitive. This is why technocapitalism's attempts to mechanize it—through programmable androids, algorithmic desire, or harvested organs—are both obsessive and ultimately doomed. Sex's value to capitalism depends precisely on its uncontainability.

In *The Stepford Wives*, the men's violent replacement of women with robots exposes not only patriarchal control but also a profound anxiety in the face of desire's instability. Replacing the organic body with a programmed one attempts to stabilize female desire by rendering it predictable and consumable. Yet the androids' uncanny perfection undermines this fantasy; their inhuman compliance reveals the void at the heart of patriarchal desire. *The Heart Goes Last* extends this logic into a fully systematized regime, in which sex robots function as nodes within a broader apparatus that monetizes intimacy, affect, and biological life itself. At the same time, the novel's proliferation of black markets, rogue desires, organ trafficking, and acts of rebellion—from Consilience's inhabitants to Joycelyn, the program's co-director—demonstrates that *potentia gaudendi* continually escapes institutional capture. The narrative centers on sex because it represents the ultimate contested terrain. For Preciado, *potentia gaudendi* functions as a form of labor that is both abstract (datafied, circulated) and irreducibly material. The existence of robots as sexbots does not resolve this tension; rather, it intensifies it, exposing the limits of

capitalism's attempt to convert life's most volatile energies into profit. At the same time, these failures of capture open a space for rethinking embodiment, desire, and gender beyond the logics that seek to regulate them.

Posthumanist Hopes for a Post-gender Future: Can Robots Be Queer?

Posthumanist visions of a post-gender future often collide with the stubborn materiality of design. It is difficult to imagine a robot that resembles, as Atwood describes, “a pretty blond girl in a red and white polka-dot bikini and a pin-up pose, hands clasped around one drawn-up knee, the foot in a slingback red high heel,” undoing the very categories it hyper-performs and consolidates.²⁷ The fantasy of a post-gender future, in which gender no longer burdens the body, falters when synthetic bodies are designed to satisfy rather than challenge the male gaze. Even in parody, the machine's design reveals a deeper truth: posthumanism's radical potential is often flattened into a marketable aesthetic, where liberation becomes just another product feature. As Ania Malinowska explains:

The sexbot industry promotes a serious gender bias in terms of target clients and the construction of robotic subjects. [...] Also, the very design of (ro)bots reflects limited understanding of gender dynamics in relation to culturally progressing standards. The traditionally understood variations of male and female, rendered by means of stereotypical looks (for sex robots), behavior, language, responses, and function in the intimate/romantic relationship, prove little understanding of the cultural landscape as well as the (ro)botic subject.²⁸

A fundamental contradiction plagues gendered robotics: while posthumanism promises liberation from biological constraints, commercial implementations reinforce traditional norms.

²⁷ Atwood, *The Heart Goes Last*, 242–43.

²⁸ Ania Malinowska, “Sexbots and Posthuman Love,” in *International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media and Communication* (Wiley, 2020), 4.

The sexbot industry's stereotypical designs thus reflect not a lack of creativity but a calculated alignment with market demands, privileging familiarity over innovation.

Nevertheless, as this article has argued, even robotic bodies that are gendered through processes of naturalization within existing social norms retain the potential for queer reinterpretation and subversion. While gendered robot design may consolidate cultural stereotypes, it simultaneously exposes their artificiality. If gender is, as Judith Butler's theory of performativity suggests, a repeated cultural performance rather than an innate truth, then robotic bodies—unburdened by biological essentialism—paradoxically reveal gender as a purely social construct.²⁹ When a machine performs femininity or masculinity through programmed gestures and engineered proportions, it denaturalizes what is often mistaken for biological necessity. Moreover, the plasticity of robotic embodiment—its capacity for change in visual and vocal features—creates opportunities for destabilization. If gender is fundamentally constructed, robotic bodies demonstrate how easily it can be reconfigured, transforming what appears fixed in biological organisms into something openly programmable. As Roy Schwartzman notes, while the gendered cyborg exposes gender as constructed, science fiction frequently reinscribes traditional hierarchies by confining female-coded figures to objectified or diminished forms of subjectivity.³⁰

In *The Stepford Wives*, husbands replace their wives with mechanical copies, and in *The Heart Goes Last*, the CEO of Consilience desires Charmaine but ultimately commissions a passive mechanical replica instead of pursuing a relationship with her. This reliance on robotic substitution reveals that the fantasy of ideal femininity requires artificial construction. The

²⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

³⁰ Roy Schwartzman, "Engendered Machines in Science Fiction Film," *Studies in Popular Culture* 22, no. 1 (1999): 75–87.

cultural ideal of femininity is so unattainable that only programmed machines can sustain it. Real women, with their autonomy, complexity, and imperfections, inevitably fail to perform it precisely because they are human. These narratives expose how patriarchal desire depends on control and predictability—qualities that only machines can fully guarantee. By eliminating the unpredictability of real women, male characters eliminate the possibility of resistance. In both cases, femininity is not celebrated but manufactured.

Nevertheless, glitches inevitably emerge that expose these mechanisms through moments of malfunction, when even programmed machines cannot sustain normative performances. We see this, for example, in the Stepford wives' frozen smiles during power surges or in sentences repeated in loops, both of which betray their artificiality. These glitches do not merely undermine the robots themselves but also the systems that produced them, revealing that no iteration of gender, however engineered, can fully erase its own constructedness.

In 2014, Francesca Ferrando surveyed over one hundred students and researchers to examine how gender shapes perceptions of robots, cyborgs, and artificial intelligence.³¹ The results revealed a marked tendency to imagine such entities through a masculine or neutral lens, with virtually no association with femininity. Yet this absence does not signal genderless neutrality; rather, it reflects deeply embedded cultural biases. As Ferrando argues, even in the absence of biological sex, robots are interpreted through human gender frameworks—a logic clearly visible in both Stepford's hyperfeminized androids and Atwood's sexualized machinic bodies. As she writes, "even if sex will have no biological or physiological significance for robots, gender—its cultural apotheosis—will still be valuable for humans (at least in the near

³¹ Francesca Ferrando, "Is the Post-Human a Post-Woman? Cyborgs, Robots, Artificial Intelligence and the Futures of Gender: A Case Study," *European Journal of Futures Research* 2, no. 1 (2014), 9.

future), to relate more easily with our robotic significant others.”³² She titles her article “Is the Post-Human a Post-Woman?”, yet by “post-gender” Ferrando does not mean a utopian erasure of gender categories, as the term is often misunderstood. Instead, she aligns with thinkers such as Donna Haraway in suggesting that gender is not a fixed identity but a relational and performative process. In this sense, “post-gender” refers to a condition in which gender is no longer tied to biology or binary structures but is open to fluidity, multiplicity, and transformation.

Although robots do not possess biological sex, humans continue to rely on gender categories to better identify with them, communicate, and form attachments. This suggests that gender functions as a cultural and communicative code, detached from the physical body, thereby opening significant potential for queer interpretations. It creates space to move beyond the gender binary—there is no necessity to assign robots as “he” or “she”—and enables experimentation with identity independent of biological embodiment. Ferrando further notes that robots are, at once, “the other, the same, and the chimeras” that, although “constructed from human knowledge and categories [...] transcend them both.”³³

Ania Malinowska introduces the concept of silicon gender to examine how gender is produced in relation to robotic beings and their material form. She defines silicon gender not as an additional identity within the gender spectrum, nor as a metaphor for queer or non-binary gender. Rather, she explicitly frames it as an ontological condition rather than an identity category.³⁴ Silicon gender does not belong to the sex/gender system; it exists and operates outside it. The term names a mode of embodiment grounded in machinic materiality rather than

³² Ferrando, “Is the Post-Human a Post-Woman?” 9.

³³ Ferrando, “Is the Post-Human a Post-Woman?” 16.

³⁴ Ania Malinowska, “The Silicon Gender: Technological Species and the Transgression of Model Sexes,” *Postcollectivity: Situated Knowledge and Practice* 284 (2024): 224–35.

flesh, offering a framework through which the robotic figures in Stepford and Atwood's novel can be understood not as failed women or exaggerated stereotypes, but as entities that expose the limits of the human sex/gender system itself.

Drawing on Samani et al.'s notion of robot culture, which understands robots as mediators of new modes of cohabitation and social codes, Malinowska examines the cultural dynamics that emerge as artificial entities become embedded in everyday life.³⁵ In these hybrid environments, where non-organic agents increasingly participate in human communities, traditional gender categories are both reproduced and challenged. This framework resists binary thinking by foregrounding the fluidity and constructedness of gender identities.

Importantly, Malinowska draws on Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology to argue that the robotic subject introduces a fundamental disorientation into our understanding of gender. By entering a world organized around organic, human-centered categories—particularly binary, sexed bodies—robots become unfamiliar elements that disrupt established spatial and social arrangements. When robotic beings enter these relational networks without clear gender coordinates, they unsettle the familiar lines of identity and embodiment. This disorientation, rather than constituting a failure of categorization, becomes a productive force: it destabilizes inherited models of gender, opens space for alternative orientations, and invites new forms of identification no longer confined to the binary logic of sexed embodiment. In robot cultures, gender thus becomes a communicative tool rather than a biological fact, enabling alternative, trans-organic expressions of identity that exceed the conventional human model.

Read through the lens of silicon gender, *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* stage

³⁵ Hooman Samani et al., "Cultural Robotics: The Culture of Robotics and Robotics in Culture," *International Journal of Advanced Robotic Systems* 10, no. 12 (2013): 1–10.

moments in which gender loses its orienting function once it is fully transferred onto machinic bodies. In *The Stepford Wives*, the android wives do not simply exaggerate normative femininity; they embody a form of gender that no longer belongs to a living subject. Femininity appears here as a technical property of the machine—stable, repeatable, and detached from lived experience—producing a sense of unease precisely because it operates without relational negotiation or the possibility of failure. This is where gender becomes disorienting: it remains legible yet no longer organizes social relations in the way human gender does. A comparable disorientation operates in *The Heart Goes Last*, where sexbots modeled on idealized cultural icons circulate alongside human bodies. These figures cannot be fully situated within existing gender categories, as their gender functions as an interface rather than an identity, mediating desire without reciprocity or agency. In both narratives, robotic bodies reveal what Malinowska conceptualizes as silicon gender: an ontological condition in which gender is grounded in machinic materiality rather than organic embodiment. Rather than pointing toward a utopian post-gender future, these moments expose the instability of gender itself when detached from human corporeality, opening a speculative space in which gender appears as a contingent, reprogrammable system rather than a natural or inevitable structure.

Conclusion

The gendered androids of *The Stepford Wives* and *The Heart Goes Last* expose the paradox at the core of techno-embodiment: even as they replicate oppressive norms, their very artifice destabilizes the categories they perform. These narratives demonstrate that robotic bodies are never neutral; they materialize the ideologies of their creators, whether rooted in patriarchal nostalgia or capitalist extraction. Yet their failures also illuminate the constructedness of gender itself, offering glimpses of a posthuman future in which identity might be reconfigured beyond

binary constraints.

This tension reflects broader challenges in theorizing robotic subjectivity. Just as critical race theory and posthumanism grapple with whether to transcend or reclaim identity categories, queer robotic futures demand a dual approach: first, deconstructing the anthropomorphic frameworks that reproduce gender hierarchies, and second, embracing the radical potential of synthetic bodies to redefine relationality. As Rosi Braidotti reminds us, posthuman ethics requires neither nostalgia for humanism nor uncritical techno-optimism, but a commitment to new networks of care that recognize and sustain difference—whether biological, mechanical, or hybrid.³⁶

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³⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

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