

# A Different Kind of Something: The Human Drive Towards Self-Obliteration in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* and *Annihilation*

Tristan Boisvert-Larouche

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**A Different Kind of Something:  
The Human Drive Towards Self-Obliteration  
in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* and *Annihilation***

Tristan Boisvert-Larouche

In his directorial debut *Ex Machina* (2015) and his second film *Annihilation* (2018), Alex Garland explores the relationship between destruction and creation—the movement toward human extinction and a transformation into something else. In both films, Garland explores the line between humanity's evolution and its extinction, between its next step and its last, presenting characters whose drive towards self-obliteration leads to the creation of something entirely beyond the human. This momentum toward self-obliteration recalls Freud's discussions of the death drive, where part of the human psyche seeks relief from the tensions of life in the inertia of an inorganic state. In *Ex Machina* this takes the form of tech CEO and mad-scientist Nathan's creation of an android called Ava. In the latter film, the titular "annihilation" and subsequent becoming-other-than-human are precipitated not by terrestrial artificial intelligence, but by the alien "Shimmer," an ever-expanding impact site where a meteor fell to Earth. The team of scientists who explore the site—cellular biology professor Lena, expedition leader Dr. Ventress, paramedic Anya, geomorphologist Cassie, and physicist Josie—experience the complete destruction of their original, material selves. Meanwhile Lena, the only member who escapes, only does so as a completely different, nonhuman being. As these summaries suggest, *Ex Machina* and *Annihilation* vary widely in both story and scope, and yet at their core they are both meditations on this human drive towards self-obliteration and its almost apocalyptic implications.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and throughout his career, Freud would try to make sense of what he described as a dynamic dance of drives: "One group of instincts [life drives] rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group [death drives] jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey" (Freud 1955a, 41). While in some ways at odds, death and life instincts share more than first might appear, as Freud believed that the tendency of mental life is "to reduce, to keep constant, or to remove internal tension" (1955a, 55-56). In the case of the death drive, he

conjectures that one is propelled backward toward a quietness reserved for inorganic matter or a primordial state before life began. The possibility of a death drive first began to reveal itself to Freud in studies of dreams. He had observed that the “dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (1955a, 13). The unconscious repetition of these horrific experiences seemed incompatible with instinctive pleasure-seeking and the life-drives alone.

Death, dreams, sex and their entanglement share a prominent place in Garland’s work, which is populated by characters who unconsciously seek a kind of self-obliteration. In *Annihilation*, Lena, the protagonist and the latest addition to the expedition party venturing into the Shimmer, is plagued by dreams and flashbacks which force her to relive her past mistakes and their consequences, unconsciously repeating her traumatic experiences. A year prior to the events of the film, Lena cheated on her husband Kane with her colleague Daniel. Kane later discovered the affair, and as a result, volunteered to join one of the earlier groups sent to investigate the Shimmer, a mission from which they never returned. Lena has never managed to get over the disappearance of her husband, as shown when she declines an invitation to a garden party, instead seeking refuge in the past: “I’m going to paint our bed . . . the bedroom” (0:04:45-0:04:50). Even though a year has elapsed since Kane left for the Shimmer, Lena remains unable to separate herself from the remnants of her relationship. The act of repainting the bedroom, a site of sexual intimacy, is a complicated gesture. Her stumbling use of the term “our” and the very nature of repainting as a covering-over suggests that she is at once pushing forward and living in a past coloured with sexual guilt. Later that day, her husband mysteriously comes back, gravely ill, eventually leading Lena to enter the Shimmer in order to find a way to help him. As she penetrates the area’s glimmering wall, an act itself carrying sexual connotations, we are met with the memory of her affair with Daniel. This flashback, like all the others, takes place in the married couple’s bedroom, a simultaneously erotic and self-destructive reminder of the past. At the end of the film, in a parallel setpiece loaded with metaphorical significance, Lena and dr. Ventress meet again beneath the lighthouse, in a cave formed by the meteor impact that originally gave birth to the Shimmer. They exchange a few sentences before Dr. Ventress vaporises into a shimmering fractal cloud. As Lena looks inside the cloud, it absorbs a drop of her blood, metamorphosing the cloud into an alien mimic—a being whose only directive seems to be the imitation of Lena, its mother. Lena fights with the alien entity, eventually handing it an unpinned phosphorus grenade which

explodes in its hands, setting them both on fire. After this, the mimic sets everything ablaze around it, as if compelled to do so. As in the bedroom dreamscape and its conflicted imagery, it is as if the Shimmer were reflecting Lena's own drive for destruction, to burn it all down.

Yet, paradoxically, even in those self-destructive moments, the seeds of pleasure-seeking and the need for attachment, are perceptible. After all, we have learned of the supposed aims of her affair. What ends in destruction started as a need for sexual fulfilment but also intimacy. In one of her flashbacks, after having slept with Daniel, she tells him that it was a mistake, to which he responds, "You spend more time away from your husband than with him. You can't talk to him about work and he won't talk to you about his. And there is a clear physical and intellectual connection between us." Eventually Lena reveals that Kane discovered their affair and asks Daniel to leave, prompting him to say, "You know it's not me you hate. It's yourself." She responds that she hates him, too (1:08:50-1:10:20). Even though she knows that Kane has found out about their affair, Lena continues to meet with Daniel. Her drive towards the intimacy that she has lost in her marriage has the opposite effect of eroding her relationship with Kane even further. Thus, if the lighthouse carries with it broader implications of borders and unknown expanses that lead to annihilation, the bedroom becomes for Lena, in a sense, a more personal, intimate symbol of the concurrence and mutual implication of the drives. Most of the memories elicited by the Shimmer take place within the confines of her bedroom; her unconscious compulsively revisits the birthplace of her transgression and by the same token, of her trauma. In the same way that the mimic's creation is followed by destruction at the lighthouse, Lena's affair with Daniel is followed by the destruction of her marriage and her eventual entry into the shimmer; the cyclical relationship of the drives causes a constant series of undoings.

In *Ex Machina*, this dance between compulsive creation and destruction, sex and death is evidenced in the actions of another scientist. Nathan is the founder of Bluebook, the most popular search engine in *Ex Machina*'s fictional universe, and also the secret creator of Ava, an incredibly advanced android and seductive femme fatale of sorts. Shortly after meeting Ava, Caleb, the man tasked with establishing the android Ava's consciousness, questions the need for attributing highly sexualized qualities to an artificial intelligence. Nathan retorts: "And to answer your real question, you bet she can fuck" (0:46:50-0:47:05). Nathan's blunt response is in part prompted by the fact that (unbeknownst to Caleb) Ava has been designed to mirror Caleb's pornographic preferences, collected by Nathan from Caleb's Bluebook searches. More

importantly, perhaps, Nathan seems to be projecting his own reduction of androids to mere sexual objects. Nathan seems to want to surround himself with such creations. We learn that the initial prototype for Ava wasn't designed to mimic human sexuality. And later on in the film, Nathan's housekeeper Kyoko, whom we learn is also an android, begins to undress herself in front of Caleb, unprompted, hinting that her programming renders her at least in part a sexbot. Nathan's compulsion to create and recreate new prototypes seems inspired by a desire for sexual fulfilment, domination and, concurrently, destruction. He is in some ways a negative image of Lena's simultaneous drive towards destruction as well as intimacy and connection. We learn that Nathan has obsessively updated his line of androids, ostensibly in an attempt to produce an improved version; yet even though Ava passes the test, affirming her acquisition of consciousness, Nathan is still bent on destroying her, as he had her predecessors. Similar to *Annihilation's* mimic, Ava represents a creation born of erotic and destructive impulses which goes on to incite further annihilation—of both the creation as well as the creator and their world.

It is noteworthy that Nathan's repeated destruction of his creations reflect his own self-destructive impulses; Nathan's alcoholism keeps him in a cyclical dynamic that alternates between drinking and health-focused sobriety. When they first meet, Nathan explains to Caleb that “[w]hen [he] has a heavy night, [he] compensate[s] the next morning” (0:06:35-0:06:45). The conflicting movement towards health and life together with destruction that we see in his drinking habits is externalised in Nathan's compulsive creation of androids. He creates something that will outlast his material form—that will extend his life and legacy—but will simultaneously be goaded to destroy him and the world at large. In this way, both Nathan's replicated androids and Lena's alien mimic are versions of the “double”—the very emblem of the paradoxical drives at work. As Freud (1919) says, drawing from Otto Rank's definition, “From having been an assurance of immortality, it [the double] becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (1955b, 235). In the case of both Lena and Nathan, their efforts to create new paths for themselves are part of a process during which their organisms' every intrinsic characteristic is annihilated, where everything that makes someone *someone* on a human scale is obliterated. It is the ultimate act of simultaneous destruction and creation. In the wake of the death drive comes a new, ahuman state of being—in *Ex Machina*, the birth of the hard drive (or more accurately “wet ware” as Ava's fluid brain is described), and in *Annihilation*, an entity so radically other than human that it may no longer be earthly.

When Caleb questions Nathan about his motivations, the latter answers, “the arrival of strong artificial intelligence has been inevitable for decades.” He

does not “see Ava as a decision, just [as] an evolution.” He describes how “Ava doesn’t exist in isolation any more than [Caleb] or [himself]. She’s part of a continuum,” and he finishes with the speculation that “[o]ne day the AI’s are gonna look back on us the same way we look at fossil skeletons in the plains of Africa. An upright ape, living in the dust, with crude language and tools. All set for extinction” (1:04:30-1:06:45). Despite his paradoxical use of the term “evolution,” Nathan knows that the creation of Ava or her successors is going to lead to his own destruction and, potentially, of all humanity’s, yet he proceeds with it nonetheless. He sees his place as part of a middle and not an end, but his speculation about eventual extinction suggests otherwise. In short, his terms, like his motives, are conflicted. The creation of Ava represents the planned obsolescence of himself, and by extension of the human, purposefully done with the knowledge that it is, in some way, an act of self-replacement. As he tries to drag Ava back to her cell after her escape from his odd combination of home, lab, and prison, Nathan stabs himself by walking backwards into a knife held by Kyoko. It is an act of suicide: he stabs himself both physically, by walking backwards into the blade, and speculatively, by creating the android holding it.

While Nathan’s self-obliteration happens by means of human-created advanced technology, in *Annihilation*, this process goes beyond humanity’s abilities and conventional material understanding. In the film’s final act, Lena joins Dr. Ventress inside the cave underneath the lighthouse where the two have a short discussion about the Shimmer, before the latter disintegrates into a torrent of energy coming from inside her body, her last words being: “It’s inside of me now [. . .] It’s unlike us. It’s *not* like us. I don’t know what it wants. Or if it wants. But it will grow, until it encompasses everything. Our bodies and our minds will be fragmented into their smallest parts until not one part remains. Annihilation” (1:32:00-1:32:55). While the vaporisation of Dr. Ventress’s body seems to be the manifestation of this annihilation, it began a long time before this moment; for her and anyone who penetrates the confines of the Shimmer, there is no longer an “I” or even an “us.” Earlier when Lena, after entering the anomaly, studies her blood cells under a microscope, she observes the same kind of shimmering cells that would emerge from Dr. Ventress’s dematerialization to form the alien mimic. Later on, the group discovers that the bear that killed their team member, Cassie, could speak with her voice as if it had absorbed part of her. In another scene, when only Lena and Josie are left, the latter disappears into a flower bush, willingly letting herself be taken by the Shimmer. Every member of the team begins a process of self-obliteration when they breach the barrier of the Shimmer and journey towards its centre, linking

their will to discover to a simultaneous will to be assimilated. They press onward even as the mutations become more extreme as they march forward, and they mutate into other forms. In the end, only Lena will complete the process, the others simply assimilating into the shimmering anomaly. In the film's climactic scene, after fighting the alien mimic without success, Lena puts an unpinned phosphorus grenade in its hands. At that moment, the mimic ceases to imitate her. As the grenade is about to explode, the mimic and Lena become identical, physically and in their "smallest parts," as Ventress notes above; for that short moment, their cells are the same, they are the same being. Moments before the explosion, Lena leaves the lighthouse, the mimic staying behind. The grenade detonates and the mimic begins the destruction of everything around it. Lena leaves the remainder of her humanity behind in the lighthouse in the form of the mimic she created, and which will destroy itself and everything around it.

The aftermath of the self-obliteration of Nathan in *Ex Machina* and Lena in *Annihilation* is something radically other than the human. Neither dead nor alive in relation to the human conception of those ideas, they or their creations are something beyond human forms and drives—indeed, beyond the human entirely. The android Ava is both inorganic and self-perpetual; she represents the obsolescence of humanity. Leaving Nathan's corpse behind, leaving the human behind, she is an entirely nonhuman being. In the same way, Lena leaves her humanity behind in the burning lighthouse, materially having become something else entirely (though still superficially resembling her human form). When she is finally reunited with Kane, she asks him if he truly is Kane, to which he replies, "I don't think so" (1:47:00-1:47:30). He then asks the same question, which she does not answer, possibly uncertain of the answer herself. They hug, and their irises glitter; they have become a different kind of something. They have gone past the distinction between organic and inorganic, for the Shimmer does not seem to follow our understanding of reality. It creates trees made of glass, plants with human genetic material; it deconstructs the most basic structure of a living being to create another one, a being never seen before, a being that is ahuman.

In some ways, these films could be said to portray the so-called "next stage of human evolution" as an extension of us, as something in which part of us remains; even Nathan considers his androids as part of humanity's continuum. And in both films, the radically other, ahuman forms represented by Ava and the new Lena still at least resemble the human. Yet, I would argue that Garland's work resists portraying these new forms as evolved or hybrid; rather, the films portray these beings as a cut or break from prior forms, as humanity's end point in a sense. While Lena and Nathan's drive towards self-

obliteration is a human one, an intrinsic quality of their humanity, it disappears as they reach this new state drastically disconnected from the human. While they retain human appearances, Ava and Lena are, in that regard, a lot more similar to the alien creature in John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), than they are to us. Garland's films suggest that as humans strive towards ideas of a more advanced human state, the line between evolution and extinction is getting nearer since, to become something else entirely, we might need to disappear completely.<sup>1</sup>

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**Tristan Boisvert-Larouche** is a Visual Arts student at Dawson College. He is interested in the intersections between visual arts, performance arts, music and literature and their use as an introspective exploration of the human condition. He aims to create art that explores queer identity, mental illness and class inequality through the combination of storytelling and social activism. He aspires to create a video game from scratch, from the coding to the art, story and music.

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