

# Disarticulating the Artificial Female\*

Allison de Fren  
Connecticut College  
Center for Arts & Technology  
New London, CT 06320  
1-213-361-5123  
adefren@conncoll.edu

The fantasy of bringing to life the perfect artificially constructed female dates back to the myth of Pygmalion, most familiar in the work of Ovid. Part of his *Metamorphoses*—a collection of classic myths all with the common theme of transformation—the Roman poet describes a protean world in which all things are rendered digital in the hands of the gods. Pygmalion prays to the goddess Venus to bring to life Galatea, the woman that he has carved from ivory who is so perfect that he has fallen in love with her. Venus grants his wish and Galatea becomes flesh; she and Pygmalion are married and the two live happily ever after.

Whether real or imaginary, the artificial female has, since Galatea, generally been read as the embodiment of a Pygmalionesque desire for either perfection or perfect verisimilitude, in relation to which she falls into one of two camps—“failed” and “successful” or utopic and dystopic—reflective of a binary attitude not only towards women as either virgins or whores, but towards technology as either a symbol of human progress or destruction (See Huyssen 1986: 65-81). Michelle E. Bloom, for example, in her essay “Pygmalionesque Delusions and Illusions of Movement,” traces “pygmalionesque desire” from the “‘happily-ever-after’ formula of Ovid’s version” of the myth through its failure within the literature of the nineteenth century (in which female androids are common, but happy endings are rare) to its metamorphosis “at the end of the century into ‘illusions of movement’ made possible by the advent of cinema” (Bloom 2000: 291). As she notes, her primary interest is in the “longstanding human desire for the animation of the inanimate” for which cinema is a privileged site: “even when the Pygmalion paradigm fails in film, the medium itself succeeds in creating the illusion of movement” (Bloom 2000: 292). Bloom’s thoughtful essay, however, glosses the “failed Galateas” of nineteenth century literature, as well as the femme-fatale androids and exploding fembots that became a common trope within twentieth century cinema, leaving the reader to wonder why “pygmalionesque desire” is so often thwarted.

In contrast, this paper focuses specifically on those Galateas, more properly understood as resistant rather than failed, who eschew verisimilitude and perfection and whose “mechanicity” is foregrounded. Such beings express a different set of desires than “successful Galateas,” for they remain a borderline site suspended between contradictory states—the human and technological, animate and inanimate, perfection and imperfection, fantasy and reality. I will attempt to shed light on this contradictory state by focusing, in particular, on an internet fetish community that collectively fantasizes about mechanical humans. While some members of the group call themselves technosexuals, most refer to

the fetish as ASFR, an acronym for alt.sex.fetish.robots, named after the now-defunct Usenet newsgroup where members originally congregated on-line. Although today A.S.F.R. tends to be associated most strongly with men who fantasize about robots, it is, in fact, a blanket designation for a range of different fetishes, which includes sexual attraction to mannequins, dolls, and sculpture, and even more so to real people acting like mannequins, puppets, wind-up dolls, or robots, or being frozen like statues or hypnotized. While all of these fetishes were explored on the original newsgroup, many of their fans later splintered off and founded websites geared to their specific interests. They do, however, still consider themselves to be “ASFRian” and acknowledge their point of common interest: the thematic of programmatic control—whether imagined as hypnotism, magic, a puppet master, or artificial intelligence—of a human object. When taken in this sense alone, A.S.F.R. strikes the imagination as a technological elaboration of standard BDSM (bondage-domination-sado-masochism) fantasies, in which one person dominates another for sexual pleasure. ASFRians are, in fact, sensitive to this interpretation of their fetish, as well as the perception that it represents the reification of normative gender ideals; for when many first hear about the fetish—myself included—they imagine that, for ASFRians, desire is contingent on replacing a human subject with a vacant Stepford Wife or Husband, who mindlessly fulfills the orders of its master, both sexual and domestic. Indeed, it is this common assumption about their fetish that, according to ASFRians, necessitates its obscurity and keeps its members highly closeted in comparison to fetishes like the Furies and Plushies (those who eroticize anthropomorphic and stuffed animals and animal costumes, respectively), who hold dozens of public conventions each year throughout the world. My own experiences, however, have led me to believe that not only is ASFRian fantasy more complex than the desire simply to dominate or objectify, but that it has something to teach us about representations of gendered robots within popular culture.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 2001, I made a documentary short about the group, which can be viewed at: <<http://www.ifilm.com/ifilmdetail/2408202>>.

While it is somewhat difficult to generalize about the community (other than the fact that, with a small number of exceptions, it is predominantly male),<sup>2</sup> the group itself makes a distinction between two (somewhat oppositional) tendencies, the first indicating the desire for a robot that is entirely artificial (“built”) and the second devoted to the metamorphosis between the human and the robotic (“transformation”). There are, nevertheless, certain kinds of images and erotic practices that appeal to both groups and that appear repeatedly in relation to the fetish. For example, scenarios in which a real person is acting the part of a robot would likely be of interest to both groups, albeit for different reasons. Indeed, the majority of the ASFRians that I interviewed described their earliest fetishistic experiences as occurring while watching actors and actresses playing robots on such science fiction television shows as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64), *Outer Limits* (1963-65), and *Star Trek* (1966-69). Moreover, the primary indicators of mechanicity on such shows, which include silver and gold costuming and mechanical behavioral mannerisms like robotic speech, stilted movement, and repetitive motion, often enacted within moments of transition (such as when a robot is booted up, shut down, or programmed) are equally exciting to both groups. A large part of ASFRian activity revolves around the recreation in private of both the costuming and performances of these actor robots, giving the fetish a kind of do-it-yourself quality, on which Katherine Gates comments in her book *Deviant Desires*. Gates places A.S.F.R. alongside slash fandom as a group that appropriates science-fiction effects in homemade productions to their own erotic ends; ASFRians often write their own stories, create their own pictures, and construct their own robot costumes using shiny materials like latex, PVC, and Lycra to which they attach toys that “blink, bobble, and glow” in order to create the illusion of circuitry.

The emphasis on mechanicity complicates the relationship between ASFRian fantasy and the reality of artificial companions that achieve human verisimilitude; in fact, the state of tension and liminality—whether between the robotic and human or between control and loss of control, appearance and interior, motion and stasis—seems to have greater relevance to the fetish than the robot per se. As Gates notes, unmasking is a key aspect of the fetish, and many of the most exciting fantasies involve the sudden revelation of artificiality either through robotic malfunction—in which a human/robot gets caught in a repeat loop—or disassembly—in which a panel opens or a part is removed to reveal the circuitry beneath the semblance of humanity. While the latter is difficult to perform, ASFRians either search television and film for such moments (which they then list obsessively on their websites) or they produce disassembly images themselves in the manner of ASFRian artist Kishin, who either renders them from scratch in a 3D program or adds exposed circuitry to figures from erotic magazines using Photoshop, a practice that some call “rasterbation.” When I asked Kishin what it was about such imagery that he most enjoyed, he replied, “It’s something about the contrast between the cold hard steel and the circuits and the wiring and the smooth skin and the soft flesh.” The “come shot” for Kishin occurs when a female robot reaches up “to remove the

mask that *is* her face” because “it’s like a revelation of who she really is” (personal communication, 24 July 2001, see figure 1).



**Figure 1. Kishin: "Who She Really Is"**

The question is: who is she (really)? In his essay “Fetishism” (1927), Freud tells us that in all cases, a fetish is “a substitute for the woman’s (mother’s) phallus, which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego” (Freud 1963: 205-206). It embodies an ambivalence, a double attitude towards female castration for which a compromise is struck by which the absent phallus is conjured elsewhere, a new point of erotic fixation that serves as both an acknowledgement and denial, “a sort of permanent memorial” that may manifest itself in a single part, like a foot, which the fetishist then worships, or a set of opposing attitudes that involve both hostility and reverence, such as “the Chinese custom of first mutilating a woman’s foot and then revering it” (1963: 209). The ASFRian fetish object is, however, less a “permanent memorial” than a vacillating sign; it is, to use Freud’s analogy, like mutilating one foot while keeping the other whole, an ongoing reminder that a deformation has occurred. To the extent that it attempts to assuage the ambivalence around an absence via a displaced presence, it also repetitively restages the exchange between presence and absence at this alternate location, re-enacting the trauma by which it was, theoretically, constituted. In this sense, it smacks of the compulsion to repeat that Freud links to the “death instinct.” Indeed, there is a distinct similarity between the hiding and revealing of the mechanical interior of the robot female in ASFRian fantasy and the compulsive throwing away and retrieving of the wooden spool by the child in the game *fort/da*, described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961: 13-14).<sup>3</sup> There is, moreover, a correspondence between

<sup>2</sup> While a notable portion of the community is homosexual, all of the members with whom I communicated, are male and heterosexual, and so my descriptions should be considered most representative of their proclivities.

<sup>3</sup> Freud describes a game, invented by his infant grandson for managing anxiety around the absence of his mother, which involves throwing away and retrieving a spool attached to a string while repeating “Fort!” and “Da!” (Gone! and There!).

repetition compulsion and what is being revealed—the “who she really is” of ASFRian fantasy—that is bound up less in technology per se than in automatism, the revelation of a force (imagined as programming by ASFRians) beyond the rational mind or conscious will that controls behavior, and that is brought to the fore in moments of robotic unveiling or breakdown. Gates argues that the automatism at the heart of the fetish is a metaphor for sexuality itself: “the sense that we have no control over it; that we respond mechanically to stimuli; and that our sexual programming makes us helpless. Fetishes, especially, are a kind of hard-wired sexual subroutine” (Gates 2000: 228). In this sense, A.S.F.R.—as an erotics of automatism—is a fetish whose object is, in part, a revelation of the compulsive mechanism of fetishism itself.

Read more generally, however, A.S.F.R. not only points to the slippage between the subject and object of fetishism, but to the ways in which the circuit between them is wired with both biological and cultural contact points, the exposure of which is potentially denaturalizing (for the object) and self-revelatory (for the subject). For example, while many ASFRians are fascinated by the film *The Stepford Wives* (1975; remade 2004), for many its primary interest resides less in the idea of the perfect housewife than in those scenes in which the Wives break down or become caught in a repeat loop—scenes beneath which foreboding music plays and that are intended to evoke horror. These are moments of vertiginous rupture that not only offer a glimpse of the robotic programming beneath the ideal exterior of the Wives, but also that throw into relief the cultural norms through which such ideals are constructed. Indeed, in the film, such scenes serve as feminist commentary on the extent to which real women (and men) have been socially programmed, and a connection is made in the original film between the domestic scripting of women and television advertising; many of the Stepford Wives speak as though they’re actresses in commercials for household products.

It is, perhaps, of no small significance that ASFRians get particular pleasure out of scenes in which normative gender roles, as shaped by media imagery and embodied by the female android, are short-circuited. Most of the ASFRians that I interviewed came of age in the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s, and while their fetish is a product of sf television shows, it is also a reaction to a historical and cultural moment in which mass consciousness was shaped by the centralizing force of television programming and advertising. Indeed, if the media in general, and television in particular, tend to codify normative social rules and behaviors, then science fiction stands out as a site at which the normal rules are suspended and other worlds are imagined that, in many cases, serve as a critique of and an alternative to the conventions of our own world. Although one might apply the stereotype of the sf geek to many ASFRians, the shared attributes that stood out in the men I interviewed were a high degree of sensitivity and self-consciousness coupled with social awkwardness and difficulty reading social cues.<sup>4</sup> Puberty was, for these men, an unusually

fraught time during which they felt both confused by and compelled to conform to the rules not only of social engagement, but also political correctness. Interestingly, many of the ASFRians that I interviewed considered themselves to be feminists—after all, many had come of age at the height of second wave feminism—but they expressed confusion about how to reconcile the way they were raised—i.e., “to respect women”—with their sexual impulses.

The female robot is, to some extent, a way out of the quandary: she represents the promise of a simplified playing field in which the rules of the game are programmed in advance, thus sidestepping social politics and eliminating the anxiety of making social mistakes. Within that simplified playing field, however, ASFRians imagine endless concatenations of possible moves, the erotic locus of which are moments of tension and rupture between opposite states—the human and the artificial, control and loss of control, exterior and interior. Such rupture is, I would argue, both a metaphor for and a condensation of the eruptive effects of adolescent desire on the socially-regulated body; it is a re-enactment of the tension between biological and social programming, between the chaotic flux of inner experience and the unified and controlled self as mandated by the social order. And it’s in this sense that, I believe, that ASFR has something to tell us about the roles that robotic bodies play in the popular imaginary. One can, for example, see similar themes expressed in the FOX television show *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008-2009).

In this latest installment of the Terminator franchise, the future savior of humanity, John Connor is a teenager living in Southern California with his mother Sarah. Like many teenagers he is in a state of perpetual sullenness, which is only exacerbated by the fact that he has to help his mother Sarah stop the robotic apocalypse that they both know is currently in the works. Serving as his protector is a young female android named Cameron (a play on James Cameron, the creator of the *Terminator* series) who, like the T-800 model in the film *Terminator 2* (1991), has been sent back to the present by John’s future self, and who is being passed off as John’s sister. Although the series is largely dour in tone, much of both the humor and human interest, particularly of the first season of the show, is created by Cameron’s often failed attempts to act the part of a typical SoCal high-schooler as she keeps an eye on John. As well as helping to defamiliarize the kind of scenes of American teenagers that many other shows take for granted, Cameron both embodies the difficulties of navigating the social minefield of adolescence, as well as the fantasy of invulnerability (she is impervious to embarrassment and physically indomitable). She is, then, a figure of both desire and identification, as well as dissimulation, an enabling device for producing a rupture in the visual and narrative field. Such rupture is most potent in those scenes in which Cameron’s beautiful appearance is penetrated through the exteriorization of her technological components—whether through violence or dissection, the latter usually conducted in order to fix something

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<sup>4</sup> It occurred to me more than once that A.S.F.R. might be related to a mild form of Asperger Syndrome. I was, therefore, not surprised when I read a passage in Katherine Gates’s book in which she explains the appeal of the android Data on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (whom she claims has gotten more erotic mail than any other *Star Trek* character, Spock coming in second) for a female ASFRian she interviewed by referencing

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the autistic slaughterhouse designer and author of *Thinking in Pictures*, Temple Grandin, who also “feels close to him [Data] in his clumsy efforts to perform like a human, and in his urge to sort out the mystifyingly inconsistent rules of human social behavior” (Gates 2000: 228).

that has gone awry, and often with John acting as surgeon—which are emphasized in the show’s promotional materials (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Promotional Poster for TERMINATOR: SARAH CONNOR CHRONICLES

As in ASFRian fantasy, such scenes of dissimulation are enacted repetitively and emotionally and erotically charged for the same reason that they’re often uncomfortable, because they represent a return of the repressed, and I would add on a reminder of the mechanism of repression. And while Freud offers one interpretation, I would propose that what is returning in such scenes is everything about the body that we’re trained either to control or deny: its emotional impulses, its desires, its decay, its mortality. At the most basic level, the robot is a reminder of death, and while such *memento mori* are often performed by bodies caught between animacy and inanimacy, wholeness and partiality, they’re ultimately a reminder of our humanity, which is what makes them so compelling. Indeed, in *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, such scenes serve as a reminder of the future death of humanity, of which Cameron is both harbinger and intermediary, which—like the “death instinct” itself—continue to drive the series (and the franchise) both forwards and backwards.

## 1. REFERENCES

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