

FETISHIZING THE FEMBOT: SEX, TECHNOLOGY AND THE PERFECT WOMAN

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the fembot, or female robot, as a cultural site of complex signification in Western society. As a combination of woman and machine, the fembot functions as a metaphor for male desire and fear. I will explore the fembot archetype through film and advertising, analyze the relationship between women and machines, and attempt to understand the common themes that have become tied to the fembot: sex, technology, fetishism, death, dismemberment, and comedy.

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Woman was not yet made. The story (absurd enough!) is that Jupiter (Zeus) made her, and sent her to Prometheus and his brother, to punish them for their presumption in stealing fire from heaven; and man, for accepting the gift. The first woman was named Pandora. She was made in heaven, every god contributing something to perfect her. Venus gave her beauty, Mercury persuasion, Apollo music, etc. Thus equipped, she was conveyed to earth, and presented to Epimetheus, who gladly accepted her, though cautioned by his brother to beware of Jupiter and his gifts. Epimetheus had in his house a jar, in which were kept certain noxious articles for which, in fitting man for his new abode, he had had no occasion. Pandora was seized with an eager curiosity to know what this jar contained; and one day she slipped off the cover and looked in. Forthwith there escaped a multitude of plagues for hapless man,- such as gout, rheumatism, and colic for his body, and envy, spite, and revenge for his mind,- and scattered themselves far and wide. Pandora hastened to replace the lid! but, alas! the whole contents of the jar had escaped, one thing only excepted, which lay at the bottom, and that was hope. So we see at this day, whatever evils are abroad, hope never entirely leaves us; and while we have that, no amount of other ills can make us completely wretched.

...

Pygmalion saw so much to blame in women that he came at last to abhor the sex, and resolved to live unmarried. He was a sculptor, and had made with wonderful skill a statue of ivory, so beautiful that no living woman came anywhere near it. It was indeed the perfect semblance of a maiden that seemed to be alive, and only prevented from moving by modesty. His art was so perfect that it concealed itself and its product looked like the workmanship of nature. Pygmalion admired his own work, and at last fell in love with the counterfeit creation. Oftentimes he laid his hand upon it as if to assure himself whether it were living or not, and could not even then believe that it was only ivory. He caressed it, and gave it presents such as young girls love,--bright shells and polished stones, little birds and flowers of various hues, beads and amber. He put raiment on its limbs, and jewels on its fingers, and a necklace about its neck. To the ears he hung earrings and strings of pearls upon the breast. Her dress became her, and she looked not less charming than when untired. He laid her on a couch spread with cloths of Tyrian dye, and called her his wife, and put her head upon a pillow of the softest feathers, as if she could enjoy their softness.

The festival of Venus was at hand--a festival celebrated with great pomp at Cyprus. Victims were offered, the altars smoked, and the odor of incense filled the air. When Pygmalion had performed his part in the solemnities, he stood before the altar and timidly said, "Ye gods, who can do all things, give me, I pray you, for my wife"--he dared not say "my ivory virgin," but said instead--"one like my ivory virgin." Venus, who was present at the festival, heard him and knew the thought he would have uttered; and as an omen of her favor, caused the flame on the altar to shoot up thrice in a fiery point into the air. When he returned home, he went to see his statue, and leaning over the couch, gave a kiss to the mouth. It seemed to be warm. He pressed its lips again, he laid his hand upon the limbs; the ivory felt soft to his touch and yielded to his fingers like the wax of Hymettus.

While he stands astonished and glad, though doubting, and fears he may be mistaken, again and again with a lover's ardor he touches the object of his hopes. It was indeed alive! The veins when pressed yielded to the finger and again resumed their roundness. Then at last the votary of Venus found words to thank the goddess, and pressed his lips upon lips as real as his own. The virgin felt the kisses and blushed, and opening her timid eyes to the light, fixed them at the same moment on her lover. Venus blessed the nuptials she had formed, and from this union Paphos was born, from whom the city, sacred to Venus, received its name.

--From Bulfinch's Mythology: Of Greece and Rome with Eastern and Norse Legends (1962).

Introduction

Creation, destruction, control, desire, worship, and lust—such are the characteristics of an age-old myth that has renewed itself time and time again. The artificial woman continues to be a figure in the wish fulfillment sagas of Western culture, an archetype of a collective unconscious that refuses to give up the belief that perfection is within reach, if only we keep trying. This ideal woman is not human-born, but must rather be a man-made creation. She is infused with only the most desired feminine qualities—a perfect compilation of what every man wants (or thinks he wants): beauty, sex appeal, obedience, adoration, efficiency, and the ability to satisfy. The ancient myths of Prometheus and Pandora, Pygmalion and his statue-wife (often referred to as Galatea), frame this passionate obsession with the artificial woman. The myth of Pandora reveals a pattern that is repeated time and time again throughout narratives of the past and present. Through her we become acquainted with the tale of a man creating a beautiful woman as a weapon—the original Trojan horse—meant to distract and cause the downfall of his enemy. Pygmalion, on the other hand, creates a woman for his own personal pleasure. Dissatisfied with human women, he seeks to fulfill his desires with one of his own making, one he can form to his own specifications and, most importantly, one he can

control. The tale ends happily, cementing forever in our minds a model fantasy—telling readers or listeners that if they want the perfect woman, they must create her with their own hands, lest they end up with one who is ugly, disobedient, or otherwise abhorrent. These two myths have endured for centuries, recurring through literature, film, art, and through technological attempts to perfect the science of unnatural creation. From Coppelius, to the popularity of automata, to *Star Trek*, the artificial woman is most currently incarnated in our societal fascination with the robot.

With the recent film adaptation of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* and the 2004 remake of Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*, it becomes clear that the human fascination with robots has not waned and is only increasing as technological progress brings the quest for manufactured and mechanized life forms closer to fruition. From ancient civilizations to modern subcultures, the Greek myth of Pygmalion to the contemporary website "alt.sex.fetish.robots" (henceforth ASFR)¹, the theme of unnatural creation and the fetishization of artificial life forms have persisted in many forms, and are present in the ever-multiplying facets of popular culture and discourse in many parts of the world. The notion of the human body as machine, combined with Descartes' proposal "that the human and the animal body could be understood to be governed by the same mechanistic principles," started a wave of projects influenced by these philosophical traditions (Grenville 14). Descartes' mind-body dichotomy suggested that, "where animals were simply machines, *humans were machines with minds*" (Grenville 14) (my italics). From the seventeenth century onward, the function of the human body in mechanical terms has been explored through the construction of automata, later alluded to in the work of the

¹ Alt.sex.fetish.robots (ASFR), is a robot fetishist website and newsgroup that no longer exists. Its acronym, "ASFR" has since been adopted and is now used to refer to the growing online robot fetishist community in general.

Futurists and the works of Marcel Duchamp (Grenville 18-19). The popularity of automata and what we now come to call robots coincided with the rise of Western industrialization in the nineteenth century, though in fact it is believed that the world's first primitive robots existed in seventeenth century Japan (*Bizarre* 51). As robots were being created in science, with each wave of projects "improving" as technology advanced, a parallel idea was discussed and played out in fiction. A complex of cultural signification, the fembot functions as a point from which to examine anxiety, fear and desire in an increasingly consumerist society. An artificial woman created by man, a hybrid of woman and machine, a machine in the form of a woman, and ultimately a representation of the female body, the fembot constantly reappears in popular culture and especially in film. Why is the fembot simultaneously evil and seductive? How is she fetishized as a woman who is also a machine, or as a machine that is also a woman? What does the fembot archetype suggest, represent or express? Why does she feature so prominently in all areas of popular culture?

In our advanced stages of exploring, creating and writing about artificial intelligence, the term "robot" has become insufficient to attempts to describe the varying types of human-like technological machinery in existence. With so many creations in science, academia, science fiction, and fantasy, there is no definitive authority arbitrating the exact differences between robots, androids, cyborgs, and even computers—though many scholars, writers, fans and scientists have their own opinions on what characteristics are differentiating. For my purposes, these differences are inconsequential. Robots, androids and cyborgs all have one thing in common: they are all to some degree a fusion of human and machine. Whether a robot is a machine built to

look like a human, or an android is a computer with synthetic skin, or a cyborg has a human brain implanted into an electronic body—all represent attempts to achieve the best of both human and technological worlds. In one way or another, they are attempts to mimic, replace, or augment human beings technologically as well as mechanically. While the creation of artificial life forms has generated considerable discourse, scientific research, and fantasy fiction, the creation of artificial *women* seems to have produced its own particular niche with a devoted following, a huge collection of mythology and cultural products, and has perhaps fueled the fire for the many attempts humans have made to master technology.

For the purposes of this study, I have chosen the term “fembot” to describe the female robot/android/cyborg/replicant I will discuss. *Fembot*, an acronym for female robot, is rumored to have been coined for an episode of the television show *The Bionic Woman* that first aired in 1976 (Internet Movie Database, “Trivia for Austin Powers” par. 6). The term has been used in various other film and television programs between then and now, and has been most recently popularized by its use in the *Austin Powers* movies, three of which have been made to date. Since the advent of *Austin Powers*, the meaning of “fembot” has expanded to include any (human) woman who is deemed to be fake, mechanical in her actions and behavior, in possession of a “uniformity in attitude” or otherwise unoriginal in her thoughts and ideas (Taylor, par. 9). When Salon.com writer Charles Taylor accuses American conservative Ann Coulter of being conformist in a recent article, he uses the word “fembot” to describe her (Taylor, par.1). I have opted to use the term because it is recognizable as both a term that describes a female robot and one that functions as a metaphor with which to describe women.

It appears that Pandora and Pygmalion are as relevant to twentieth and twenty-first century sensibilities as they were in ancient Greece. The two myths are often expressed in the nature of the fembot fetish. On the one hand, the fembot represents a woman who causes the downfall of mankind by opening Pandora's box, just as Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. On the other hand, she represents the ultimate male fantasy—a perfect woman who can serve, satisfy and fulfill a man's every desire. One could say that both Pandora and Galatea are fembots that men constantly aspire to possess in for their beauty and virtue; Pandora is the fembot gone wrong, and Galatea is the fembot that upholds the ideal.

According to Claudia Springer, “mechanical objects have been imbued with male or female sexual characteristics for centuries” (9). Though Donna Haraway claims that we now live in a “post-gender world” (150), we cannot get away from determinedly gendering our robots, androids and cyborgs. Even when a gender is not specifically assigned to a machine, it takes on a gender because neutral is always implicitly male. “[T]he urge to assign a gender to machines persists,” Springer points out, and while masculine traits are assigned as well as feminine traits, it is the feminine that stands out because it is markedly *not* neutral (9). In the quest to perfect a mechanized human, the female seems to have been overwhelmingly preferred to the male when gendering a robot. My focus will be on the attempts to forge the best combination of women and technology, woman and machine, in the form of a fembot. In gendering machines, robots, cyborgs and androids, the fembot emerges as an archetypal figure that represents the marked endowment of feminine traits on an otherwise male/neutral mechanical body. Or is it rather a mechanization and “robotization” of women? In the following section, I

will examine the complex relationship between women and machines, which often entertains the simultaneous transfer of both feminine and mechanical traits.

Women, Machines, and Industrialization

Though quite commonly present in science fiction and fantasy, the idea of the fembot is not as farfetched as it seems, for women have had a longstanding relationship with machine technology since industrialization. Barbarella and the “Orgasmatron,” Kiss Me and Dr. Breedlove’s “Sex Machine,” and *Star Trek*’s iconic Borg Queen did not appear spontaneously. While fembots themselves have been slaving away and trying to make men happy in films, novels, television and more, women have moved closer to becoming them in real life than we think. The historical tendency to both gender machines and mechanize women expresses some complex relationships and similarities, especially in terms of women’s role in Western industrialization and female representation in advertising. When Descartes suggested that humans were machines with minds, he was referring to men—to the masculine universal in a Western patriarchal society. Within the mind/body dichotomy women have tended to be aligned with the body, while men have been aligned with the mind. As Anne Cranny-Francis points out,

In terms of the polarities or dualities of Western metaphysics, women have traditionally been envisaged in a set of equivalences (such as male/female is equal to mind/body) so that the human/machine interrelation configured through a female body is not mind/machine, but body/machine (155).

Women, traditionally associated with childbearing, housework, physical beauty, clothing, ornamentation, and sexuality, have had their identities shaped by their bodies and have only recently fought to have their minds recognized. The way that the reproductive function of the female body has been emphasized as fundamental to a woman’s identity is in itself enough to provide evidence for why the female/body alignment exists. As Mary Ann Doane points out, “where the men’s bodies are analogous to machines, the woman’s

body literally becomes a machine” (24). Whether the female body is metaphorically a baby-making machine, a domestic housekeeping-machine, or an industrial machine, the ways in which women have been positioned in relation to actual machines are specific to their gender.

The propensity towards a feminine body/machine construct is particularly evident in many discourses relating to North American industrialization and the triumph of capitalism. It also reveals itself very strongly in advertising and the discourse surrounding consumer culture. The subtext linking women and machines as interchangeable becomes increasingly noticeable as the connection between machine and female body is progressively reinforced. Officially, American industrialization occurred anywhere between 1780 and 1820 (Cowan 69), and the decades that followed changed the face of modernity. A complex historical process that was brought on by capitalism, industrialization determined the course for the future—it was the “revolution” of modernity. The production of factories, railroads, steamboats and more, introduced machines into the lives of people everywhere. New technologies encouraged rapid economic growth as the production and consumption of commodities increased exponentially. The speed and efficiency with which goods could now be manufactured accelerated the pace of economic and social change. As machines became increasingly integrated into working life, men—who were still the primary wage earners and factory workers—became disillusioned and threatened by the effects. Stuart Chase, writing in the early 1920s, discusses in his book *Men and Machines* (1929) how industrialization and machines have affected the lives of men. Chase expresses his sentiments about what he calls “The Machine Age”—an era during which men are enslaved by machines, and

lives became dependent on all things mechanical and electric. He speaks of independence and personal liberty in his case against machines, both concepts that were denied to women for a long period of time, so it is entirely likely that his argument speaks of and to men. Of particular concern to him is the loss of a man's ability to create things with his own hands, and subsequently his self-sufficiency and personal agency. Chase sees the relationship between men and machines as one that is "debilitating" to men, resulting in a loss of freedom:

As machinery becomes more automatic—and that is the law of its development—the situation grows worse. Man without a working hand becomes...a different and a lower organism. He loses independence and self-reliance; he is readily subjected to regimentation and discipline. His sense of personal liberty is aborted; his sensibilities blunted and debased. His only standards are for "qualities which are aesthetically bad but mechanically unavoidable." He becomes a watcher and a listener, rather than a creator—a second-hand man. (Chase 13)

Indeed, Chase accuses machines of threatening masculinity and American values of independence, agency, and self-sufficiency. As work becomes facilitated by mechanization, the people formerly employed to do that work become obsolete. Chase perceives a direct correlation between the rise of the machine and the loss of manhood, where the machine has taken the position of a "first-hand man." For him, this is a blow to the ego that reduces men's intelligence and ability to judge and perceive for themselves. Here, men become analogous to machines as one replaces the other, and their use value becomes equivalent. The automated machine takes precedence over human labor.

Sherwood Anderson, another prominent American writer, complains in his book *Perhaps Women* (1931), published two years after Chase's book, that this loss of power is also a loss of power over women:

Something a bit queer has happened to man. The age has moved too fast for him. Science has succeeded in killing most of the old mystery. Who dare question the assertion? The machine has taken from us the work of our hands. Work kept men healthy and strong. It was good to feel things being done by our hands. The ability to do things to materials with our hands and our heads *gave us a certain power over women* that is being lost. (Anderson 41-42) (my italics)

It is clear that both Chase and Anderson, writing almost at the same time, believe that men are somehow disabled by machines. While Chase makes little or no mention of women in his book, Anderson goes further to argue that machines somehow leach men of their power over women, that it was man's ability to do things with his hands *and* head that made him different from—or perhaps better than—women. This implies that women were unable to use their heads and hands to work, that females did not have the ability to make intelligent decisions or perform tasks that required mental and physical dexterity.

As Katherine Stubbs points out in her examination of the discourse surrounding the mechanization of women, Anderson suggests that “women are somehow closely linked to the problem of the machine age,” and that women are “closely linked to the machines that he sees” (Stubbs 143). One of the other metaphors Anderson draws in his writing is one between women and the factory machines. He asks the reader questions such as “Will you love factory girls as you love automobiles?” (Anderson 17). He describes the beauty of the machinery, and watches the women weavers at a textile plant at work. They too, do the loom dance alongside their machines: “The dance of the looms is a crazy dance. It is jerky, abrupt, mechanical. It would be interesting to see some dancer do a loom dance on the stage. A new kind of music would have to be found for it,” Anderson reflects (34). Like a dancer's body, the machine is perfectly coordinated and always moving. Anderson goes on to explain why he feels threatened by

these dancing structures, and why men are at a disadvantage in what he calls the

“Woman’s Age”:

The machines are beautiful with a cold kind of classic beauty, but they are beautiful. In motion they become gorgeous things. I have stood sometimes for two or three hours in some big factory looking at the machines in motion. As I stand looking at them my body begins to tremble. The machines make me feel too small. They are too complex and beautiful for me. My manhood cannot stand up against them yet. They do things too well. They do too much.

I have to keep telling myself over and over, “wait,” I have to keep telling myself, “remember men made these machines.” (Anderson 45)

These stunning machines overpower him, and his language reminds us of beautiful, powerful women. Because Anderson likens the machine to a dancing woman, this subsequent description of his fear of the machine alludes to a fear of women. When he says, “In the factories the men employees seem to feel smaller than the women,” he is really arguing that women have a natural affinity with the machines, which in grace, movement, and steely beauty, are so like their own bodies (Anderson 48). It is not a huge leap for Anderson to make, given that his description of machines is purely physical, and like women (he implies), they have no minds of their own. Like Chase, Anderson believes that machines cause men to lose their power, independence, and even their virility. He almost makes machines interchangeable with women in their parallel characteristics of complexity, beauty, and ability to cause men to tremble. Stubbs summarizes: “Men lose their manhood to machines and to women or, in what amounts to the same thing, to the machines that are women” (144). Anderson believes that men will become “spiritually impotent” and subsequently “physically impotent” after spending time at the factory with not much else to do but control the machines (102). Stubbs argues that in Anderson’s terms, “control over the machine becomes control over the woman,” and that

By equating the female with the machine, [Anderson] is able to imagine a way in which he might manage and control both, relegating women to the “mere meaningless mechanical process” above which he wishes to elevate himself. (Stubbs 144)

By seeking to control the machine and regain power, Anderson and the men he speaks for seek to control the female body, and by default, women. In imagining the machines and weaving looms as beautiful, steely women, he feminizes the machine. But by seeking to control the “female” machines, Anderson mechanizes the female.

The premise of Anderson’s entire book rests on the idea that machines, like women, have taken over. Because a mechanized factory alleviates much of the work of men, women are able to enter the work force and tend to the machines just as well as the men. The women can dance with the looms because no specialized skill is particularly needed. Indeed, by as early as the 1890s, women were operating machines in factories and mills (Wosk 1). According to Ruth Schwartz Cowan, both proponents and opponents of industrialization “agreed that factory work was not manly work: if there had to be factories, then at least let us only employ women and children in them since women and children do not also have to carry the responsibilities of citizenship” (207-208). Men were needed to invent machines, build factories, and put their political education and virtues of citizenship to use (Cowan 207). Machine tenders and operators were increasingly female, especially in major industries such as textiles and manufactured clothing. The work of men’s hands was “taken over,” their power lost, and in the attempt to counter that threat, men like Anderson feminized the machine while simultaneously mechanizing women. As Laura Scott Holliday points out, “in the throes of industrialization, as technology began to be seen as more of a threat to human life, it was transcoded with the feminine” (109). Chase and Anderson expressed a general male

feeling of inadequacy introduced by the rise of machines, and like many others, point to a parallel between the machine and the social changes it has brought to traditional gender roles.

From Woman and Machine to Fembot in Advertising

The relationship between women and machines became even more interconnected as industrialization spread out into more localized and domestic spheres. In this section, I will focus on the growing interchangeability of women and machines as it is played out in advertising. While I make references to the feminization of machines and the mechanization of women, I am by no means establishing a dichotomy nor am I polarizing the two. Many examples lean towards a stronger feminization of machines, while others suggest a mechanization of women, but it is the *association* of women and machines that I particularly wish to emphasize.

As more women entered the job-market as time went on, they became tied to machines such as typewriters, telephone switchboards, and sewing machines. No longer restricted to the huge steam- and water-powered contraptions commonly found in industrial factories, women became associated with machines as homes and offices became equipped with new technology. While positions involving the management of machines and their operators were made available to men, certain jobs such as typing, telephone operating, and other clerical jobs became associated with women, and thus were feminized. As Ellen Lupton notes, secretaries up until the year 1990 were 99 percent female (48). Really remarkable is women's relationships to machines in the home; just as machines (and women) replaced "men's work" in the factories, machines were created to replace "women's work" in the domestic sphere of house and home. A huge percentage of the consumer goods that were being produced in the factories were being made for home use, and while men left the house to work for wages, their wives became responsible for buying, using, cleaning, and maintaining consumer goods

(Lupton 8). Household duties such as laundry, cooking, and cleaning changed drastically as domestic appliances became necessities in every home. As dishwashers, refrigerators, clothes washers and fancy oven ranges became readily available on the market, the work that once was done laboriously by hand could now be done by the simple push of a button. Or so it seemed. Because of their close association with women in the household, these types of appliances and machines were radically feminized. Because women did most of the chores, as well as most of the shopping for the household, advertisers targeted them with ad campaigns that produced an ideology, famously exposed by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), wherein “truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for” (Friedan 16). The suburban housewife was the dream image of young American women, the envy of women all over the world, and most importantly, “*freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery...of her grandmother*” (Friedan 18) (my italics). Women were told through advertising and media, and by “experts”

[H]ow to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents. (Friedan 15)

The way to success in all of these areas, of course, was through the purchase of consumer products—a great deal of them household appliances. Messages about how to succeed as the model housewife propagated through cleverly worded advertising. An advertisement for General Electric from 1938 features a happy bride and groom gazing at a sparkling white refrigerator, while the slogan above them reads, “The One You’ve Always

Wanted!” (Lupton 7). This clearly associates an appliance with a happy marriage, and suggests that the purchase of the former will lead to the latter. A 1950 advertisement for a Sunbeam Automatic Coffeemaster boasts that it “is your assurance of a Perfect Cup of Coffee EVERY TIME” while the face of a happy man is reflected in the shiny surface of the coffeepot held by a slim, manicured hand—clearly the wife’s hand (Lupton 8). Being a housewife was supposed to be easy and fulfilling, as long as one had the right tools. Lupton points out that “advertisers promised women new leisure time by endowing appliances with the magical power to do “all the work” of housekeeping—the machine poses as an electric servant or a substitute self with a mechanical body and brain” (19). Machines can replace women, and thus the two are made equal. She illustrates this with a 1946 ad for Bendix automatic washers, featuring a young housewife perching leisurely on a stool next to a washing machine. The accompanying text reads, “It’s Wonderful! – how my BENDIX does all the work of washing! –because it washes, rinses, damp-dries—even cleans itself, empties and shuts off—all automatically” (Lupton 19). Another advertisement from 1961 for an electric cooker features a woman typing, with the slogan “To think I cook a meal while I’m typing!” (Ad Nauseum 23). Through a collection of ads in her book, *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office* (1993), Lupton brings to light the longstanding relationship between women and their domestic household appliances:

Advertising and design have compared machines to living things by picturing them as extensions, substitutes, metaphors, or erotic mates for the human body. Women, in their roles as consumers and workers, have been wed to technology; meanwhile, the design and promotion of machines have borrowed physical and emotional attributes from women, making domestic appliances and office equipment into glamorous but hard-working brides themselves. (Lupton 11)

Lupton demonstrates how women have been juxtaposed with machines in print advertisements from the 1940s to the 1970s, by referring to the many advertisements that use the promise of love, happiness and leisure time as key selling points for appliances. In a 1942 advertisement for Proctor-Silex, the slogan is “Love, Honor...and Crisper Toast!” pictured above the images of a bride kissing her groom and the toaster in question (Lupton 5). The ad links the marriage vow with an automatic toaster, “wedding” the targeted woman to the toaster. It implies that through the purchase of the toaster, the bride will be honoring her wedding vows, and by bringing that appliance with her as part of the marriage, she will guarantee the success of that union. The toaster will help her to become a better wife and bride. Another Proctor-Silex ad from 1949 also positions the image of a bride next to an image of the Proctor Automatic Pop-Up Toaster (Lupton 2-3). An ad for Toastmaster places a wedding ring next to a toaster, with a bunch of calla lilies in the background (Lupton 6). All of these advertisements use bridal imagery along with the image of the actual product to sell appliances to women. It is in this manner that women are “wed to technology.” The machine is feminized in the sense that it is given the attributes of a good, “hard-working bride”: the ability to make perfect toast, the ability to make perfect coffee, and the ability to contribute to a happy and successful marriage and home. It is strongly associated with “the woman’s domain” of housekeeping and wifedom, and it is inextricably attached to the woman herself. The woman and the machine are brought to the marriage together. Women purchased these machines believing that these “electric servants” and “substitute selves” would alleviate their tasks and laborious chores. Slogans such as “A Washer That Follows Directions For You” (Lupton 26) and “Breakfast with the family while clothes wash super clean”

(Lupton 19) illustrate the replacement of women and their work by washers, dryers, dishwashers and oven-ranges. In taking the woman's place in the home, these electric servants became substitute women, thus feminizing the machine while at the same time mechanizing women.

While Lupton's collection of advertisements stops in the 1970's, the kind of relationship between women and their household appliances she articulates is still present in advertising today. Recent major ad campaigns for KitchenAid, General Electric and Whirlpool continue to illustrate the connection between women and machines in the household, some as a feminization of the machine, and others more alarmingly as a mechanization of women. In a television commercial for KitchenAid appliances, a woman's voice is heard as doors open into a spotless, modern kitchen.² The camera swoops in, revealing nothing but an architecturally stunning range of counters, cabinets, and of course, a set of stainless steel appliances. "I was born in a culinary kingdom," the female voiceover begins, "among castles of steel and legendary powers." The camera closes in on a large, shining refrigerator. "Here, in the perfect climate, I rise while chocolate becomes velvet" the voice continues as the camera focuses on a cake rising in a spotless oven. "Now, high upon a gleaming pedestal, all will cheer my arrival." The cake, complete with spun sugar accoutrements, twirls on a shapely stand as the camera caresses each KitchenAid machine, rotating around the kitchen (KitchenAid). Though the voiceover is female, it becomes clear that she personifies the cake and not a housewife, mother, or working woman. The choice of a female voice, however, does indicate the alliance women have with household appliances and all things to do with the

² The advertisement can be viewed online at
<http://www.kitchenaid.ca/english/promotions/tv_commercials.php#>

kitchen. The fact that it is a female voice, but that the viewer does not see a woman in the kitchen, only emphasizes the absence of that woman. In fact, humans are conspicuously absent from the entire commercial, signifying that no human or woman is required to perform any work. KitchenAid proclaims that a cake can bake itself, and that the appliances have completely replaced the woman who prior to this had been required to do the cooking or oversee the machines at work. Here, in the year 2005, the machines are represented as having completely taken over the woman's role in the home. This commercial, along with the rapidly approaching reality of "smart kitchens" equipped with machines like the "Beyond Microwave," which "scans the barcode on packaged goods and cooks it to perfection," showcase the current wave of substitute women (Greengard, par. 8).

In the spring of 2000, Whirlpool Home Appliances launched a new ad campaign called "Just Imagine."³ These television advertisements feature "five ethereal female figures who use water, fire or air to take control of their environments"—the "Household Goddesses" (Hodl 51). As Julie Wosk describes in her book *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age*, the goddess figure is actually an archetype when it comes to advertising machines:

two familiar female archetypes – the alluring siren and the lofty goddess – played an important role in promoting new machines. These emblematic female figures were often used to celebrate and also to sell the new products of a burgeoning industrial age. The goddess archetype helped lend an aura of dignity, legitimacy, and stability to a world of rapid mechanization and technological change. Much less unsettling than women cyclists in their knickerbockers, these towering goddesses and sexy sirens cast not only technology but also women in comfortably familiar terms". (Wosk 17)

³ The latest group of television commercials in this ad campaign can be viewed online at <<http://www.whirlpoolappliances.ca/english/promotions/tvcommercials.php>>. However, it is worth keeping in mind that while Whirlpool has kept the Goddess theme, these commercials capture only a glimpse of the visual imagery prevalent in the first group of the "Just Imagine" campaign.

While goddesses historically were used to promote machines by association, these Whirlpool goddesses actually *embody* the appliances they are promoting. Wosk illustrates how the goddess was used to connote certain meanings and bring the right “aura” to a machine, but Whirlpool takes the age-old archetype and actually creates an even more intimate relationship between women and machines. A blue-tinged, icy woman promotes Whirlpool’s Conquest refrigerators, while a woman dressed in silken robes promotes the Catalyst washer. According to the manager of brand communications at Whirlpool, these “goddesses” are designed to “personify female empowerment in the 21st century” (Layton, qtd. in Hodl 51). Whirlpool claims these “Household Goddesses” are empowered because they possess the ability to “use water, fire, or air to take control of their environments” and because they are also women who “take pride in their home and make the primary buying decisions for their families” (Layton, qtd. in Hodl 51). In fact, these females personify the appliances, and are actually physically connected to the machines in the commercials. It is rather ironic that the company proclaims that the goddesses personify female empowerment, when they appear to be confined to their respective appliances like a genie is to his or her bottle. While the company claims that the campaign is targeted to appeal to “modern, dynamic and confident women,” and that the goddesses show “strong females in control of their environments who can be made even stronger through the latest Whirlpool technology,” they are really reinforcing the fact that “women’s work”—and especially women’s “mechanical” work—is the woman personified (Hodl 51). Women *are* the appliances and they *are* the latest technology, and in becoming the machines, are mechanized—making the transition from woman to fembot all the more likely.

The third and last example of contemporary “domestic” advertising is an ad campaign by General Electric for their Profile line of home appliances. A series of advertisements most commonly seen in print, these ads also mechanize the woman. The one I find most interesting is titled “Superb marries supersonic” (Fig. 1). This text is featured prominently at the top of the one-page ad and the photograph underneath pictures a modern kitchen with a double oven featured front and center. Standing next to the oven is a man dressed in a chef’s outfit, holding a platter of food, and arm-in-arm with him is a woman dressed in what looks like a suit of metal, holding a helmet. At first glance, one sees a professional chef standing next to what could really be a fembot. Clearly General Electric means to highlight the sensitivity and power of their ranges. Reinforcement of heterosexuality aside, why is it that “superb” is a man and “supersonic” is a woman? Again, technology or the machine is embodied and personified by a woman, and the skill and flair attributed to a man. Furthermore, the man is flanked on both sides by machines—on the left by the double ovens, and on the right by the woman in a metal suit. This calculated display of symmetry on the part of the company draws the viewer’s eyes to the woman and the oven, allowing him or her to make the connection right away. Immediately next to the woman is an assortment of other metal objects, tools and vessels, while on “his side” are fruit, vegetables, bread and other products needing “superb” skill. This advertisement reinforces the traditional equivalence of male/mind and female/body; the woman connotes technology and mechanical prowess through her body encased in metal, while the man connotes genius and creativity through the plate of food he is holding—the product of his masterful talent. This example both feminizes the machine and mechanizes the woman because it associates the ovens with the woman,

while at the same time the woman is encased in metal. There is thus a transfer of qualities in both directions. Out of the contemporary advertising examples I have given, General Electric's contribution is the closest to the actualization of a fembot.

Marshall McLuhan puts forth another argument that attests to the unlikely relationship between women and machines. In his famed publication, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1968), he comments on the mechanization of women and particularly of their bodies in consumer culture. McLuhan identifies a strong tendency to align women with machines that goes beyond the selling of appliances to women consumers. While he uncovers a feminization of the machine in car advertisements, his most striking observations lie in his analyses of how advertising in general increasingly constructs women's bodies as machines in the language of commodities. McLuhan illustrates how car advertisements have feminized the machine by endowing cars with feminine qualities, describing a Buick ad that "insist[s] on the car as a date with a dream, a dream with "Dynaflow Drive," "quiet-voiced life," "satiny smoothness," "big billowy tires," and "under its bonnet, 150 Fireball horsepower wait the touch of a toe...." (84). But on the flip side he also asks, "Did you notice the Model-T bodies of the women in that revived 1930 movie last night?" (93). He maintains that women have been persuaded to treat their body parts like the replaceable parts of a machine, that ads such as those by the Gotham Hosiery company present women's body parts on a pedestal and indoctrinate them with meaning:

Some people have heard of "Ideas with legs," but everybody today has been brought up on pictures like these, which would rather appear to be "legs with ideas." Legs today have been indoctrinated. They are self-conscious. They speak. They have huge audiences. They are taken on dates. And in varying degrees the ad agencies have extended this specialist treatment to every other segment of the feminine anatomy. (McLuhan 98)

McLuhan argues that through advertising, women are coached to industrialize their appearance and standardize their beauty—just like machines that are reproduced in factories. “The eyes, the lips, the mouth, the hair, all are done in a certain typed way. Their faces look like slabs of concrete” (DeMille, qtd. in McLuhan 96). In what McLuhan calls the “Love-Goddess Assembly Line” of Western consumer culture, “we seem to demand...that love goddesses be all alike” (96). It is the girls who are “Maxfactorized, streamlined, synthetic blondes” and “recognizable parts of a vast machine” who are also the most desirable and intoxicating “dates” (McLuhan 96). This extends to contemporary Western culture as well. The current North American visual landscape is peppered with images of women and models that are virtually indistinguishable from one another. Recent ads for companies such as Hugo Boss, Lancome, Calvin Klein, Cover Girl, and Estee Lauder—one could name almost any corporation—indicate a common preference for women with blonde hair, bow-shaped lips, long legs, size 36C breasts, and large, double-lidded eyes. This is a “fembot-ization” that passes almost unnoticed in mainstream society because it is so common and so strongly ideological.

Yet more obvious examples of both feminizing the machine and mechanizing woman exist in advertising, showing a gradual and increasing pull towards the interchangeability of woman and machine. As McLuhan pointed out, women have been fed an ideology that privileges female body parts and treats them like machine parts. Where fembots’ body parts are physically reproduced, women’s body parts are visually reproduced. The body part that is focused on in the following two advertisements is the woman’s mid-section or torso. In the three images of the female torso that appear

between the two ads, the stomach or waist is exposed, tanned, toned, hairless, and wrinkle- and cellulite-free. “Replaceable parts” that came straight off the “Love-Goddess Assembly Line,” these torsos are also each intrinsically tied to a specific machine. In the ad for the electronics company Nokia, the female mid-section is strategically juxtaposed with the electronic device being featured (Fig. 2). On the first page, a woman’s torso is placed slightly under an acoustic guitar, with the Nokia Music Stand, a cellular phone, in the foreground. Remarkable about this positioning is the fact that all three of these images mimic each other’s shape. It is immediately noticeable that the woman’s body is just like the body of an acoustic guitar, and both are just like the Nokia phone. Even though the viewer is alerted to the fact that the phone has musical features through its name, the Nokia Music stand, he or she is also given a visual map. The guitar signifies music while the female body signifies a physical shape, and the two merge together to symbolize a sexy phone that has something to do with music. Because the phone is placed in the foreground, and the body and guitar placed behind it, the viewer is led to assume that the cellular phone is the sum of its parts—a female torso and an acoustic guitar. Advertised on the second page is a Nokia 6800 phone that has word processing abilities (Fig. 3). Here, the female torso is on its side to mimic the horizontal design of the phone, while at the same time the phone appears to mimic the shape of the female body. Using the same laws of logic as the previous page, this page uses the female torso and a letter with a pen to signify the note-taking abilities of the phone and the physical model of the phone itself. In this advertising narrative, the female body becomes the machine.

In an advertisement for the online edition of *Playboy* magazine, the female body literally *is* the machine. The ad features two women standing next to each other with only their midsections visible (the slightest bit of their chins and lips are shown, but the focal point is still the torso (Fig. 4). The caption reads, “Push all the right buttons. Cyber.playboy.com / Playboy. The most powerful brand in the world.” On one woman’s stomach the Playboy logo is placed so that her navel is the “dot” in what is interpreted as “Playboy dot com.” The famous bunny symbol is placed to the left of the navel, and “com” is placed to the right, so that the woman becomes the computer interface upon which the viewer can “point and click.” Here, the woman’s navel is also the button on a machine, and the viewer is invited to “Push all the right buttons.” Again, the female body is made out to be a machine, and the two are made equal—the woman *is* the machine and the machine *is* the woman. The woman is metaphorically a fembot in the sense that she has become a machine in a female body—the body is only the interface. It thus becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the difference between the feminization of the machine and the mechanization of the woman.

Advertising is really the foundation of industrialization; it is the medium through which the relationship that was cultivated with such rigor during our technological modernization is played out. Initially a vehicle for merely informing consumers about products, advertising has invaded our cultural space, becoming the primary “discourse through and about objects,” constructing a seemingly universal relationship between people and their things (Jhally, *Codes of Advertising* 1). It translates our dreams and desires, mediated now by objects, “like a fantasy factory, taking our desire for human social contact and reconceiving it, reconceptualizing it, connecting it with the world of

commodities, and then translating it into a form that can be communicated” (Jhally, “Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse” 32). It is linked directly to the feminization of machines and the mechanization of women as writers such as Chase, Anderson, McLuhan and others have argued. The juxtaposition of women and machines in advertising is very much a reflection of how we relate as humans to objects as well as with one another, and it reveals the ways in which female identity has been shaped by others throughout the past century. Judith Williamson argues that advertisements provide us with “a structure in which we, and those [consumer] goods, are interchangeable” (13). She maintains that once a connection has been made between two symbols, “we begin to translate the other way and in fact to skip translating altogether” (Williamson 12). Therefore, women and machines become interchangeable. The characteristics that surround a discourse of feminizing the machine is easily transferred and translated to, and interconnected with, the mechanization of the woman and vice versa. One cannot exist independently of the other, and in the discourse of woman and machine, one learns just as much about the ways in which women are represented and treated as the ways in which machines are represented and treated. Clearly, the evolution of the fembot and its current state of existence is the result of a long history of placing women on the same level as machines and a calculated effort to align them both as desirable objects.

Fembots on the Big Screen

Of all the media in which fembots have been represented, film seems to have dominated. Film appears to be preferred particularly for exploring and indulging in a “fembot” fantasy because it is inherently visual, and the fantasy relies heavily on seeing the fembot in action. Film, unlike a long-running television series or an epic science fiction novel, allows the fembot motif to be played out and resolved within a single unit. It is through film that the familiar tale of a man or mad scientist creating a female robot is followed. This familiar narrative alludes to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1831), a work of literature that has itself spawned over fifty film interpretations. Not only does film provide the viewing public with a popular and accessible format that allows the fembot to be easily visualized and assigned a place within the narrative, but it also plays a key role in the experience and actions of serious robot fetishists. ASFR members are often introduced to their fembot fetishes through the experience of viewing films and of seeing a robotized woman on-screen.

As classic film theorists such as Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey have argued, cinema is a medium that privileges fetishism as a form of viewing. Because film is “naturally” fetishistic, a medium that is inherently voyeuristic, and because it is also popular with actual robot fetishists, I find it a fitting medium through which to examine a cultural fetishization of the fembot (Metz 63). The idea that men can create mechanical female companions for themselves seems to be so popular that the theme resonates as we progress into a more technologically advanced era. Although fembots currently exist in fantasy more so than reality, their actualization in the “real” world is not so far away. In fact, technological developments that bring us closer to the reality of actually creating

artificial companions for ourselves appear in the news quite regularly. One can even purchase simple prototypes, although these models are nowhere near what one sees in film—they are still discernibly doll-like and would never pass for a human both in appearance and in terms of function. For \$60 000 in US funds, one can now purchase a “Valerie” android, a fembot that is human in appearance and is programmed for domestic work, complete with software, tether, and choice of eye and hair color or a custom face (Willis). Just recently, Kim Jong-Hwan of the ITRC-Intelligent Robot Research Centre, a South Korean professor, developed a series of artificial chromosomes that will enable robots to feel, reason and desire (Watts).

Not surprisingly, the fembot fantasy has found its way into the realm of sexual fetish communities, where a small online subculture of robot fetishists has developed. Indeed, it is not uncommon for a film such as *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* (1965) or *Cherry 2000* (1987) to play a part in a young ASFR member’s first sexual awakening. Film is integral to the robot fetish community and many contemporary robot fetishists can list hundreds of films that feature women robots. Cinema has become a privileged site for exploring the deep-seated desires and fears associated with the fembot. In fact, Mary Ann Doane remarks that cinematic genre science fiction particularly privileges technophilia—the love of technology—and it is often the case that it is a woman “who becomes the model of the perfect machine” as well as the scapegoat for a displaced anxiety (20-21). These fetishists are primarily male, and engage in many robot-themed activities, including role-playing, fiction writing, and modifying existing pornography. One of the most central topics of discussion for those who are sexually aroused by robots is of course the long list of films that feature fembots, mechanical

women, and artificially constructed women. Robot fetishists tend to focus on specific scenes in these films, and are less interested in the plot. Their interests lie in the kinds of motion, mobility, hypnosis, domination/submission situations, and posing that robots tend to exhibit and/or experience. However, there exists a running theme in many films that does not appear to have come to the attention of fembot enthusiasts. While fembot films have scenes of immobilization in common, they also have recurring plot motifs in common. Most fembot characters in film appear to be created at the hands of a male protagonist or a male scientist—mad or not—and exist to serve a specific purpose in an undeniably patriarchal manner. For the purposes of my analysis, I will be referring to examples from *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* (Norman Taurog, 1965), its sequel *Dr. Goldfoot and the Girl Bombs* (Mario Bava, 1966), *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *Weird Science* (John Hughes, 1985), *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (Jay Roach, 1997) and its two sequels *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (Jay Roach, 1999) and *Austin Powers: Goldmember* (Jay Roach, 2002), *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Jonathan Mostow, 2003) and both versions of *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975 and Frank Oz, 2004). False Maria (or the *Der Maschinen-Menschin* as she is called), the Robot in *Metropolis*, was created to sow discord among the working class, T-X in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* was programmed to kill, Pris in *Blade Runner* is used as bait to draw a much needed contact out of his shell, and the women of *The Stepford Wives* were created to provide domestic servitude and sexual favors without complaint. Many of these fembots come to no good; most are destroyed or fail to survive. If they do survive, they are often left to continue with their nefarious deeds, and thus leave the viewer with a sense of horror—as is the

case in the 1975 adaptation of *The Stepford Wives*, where the human women are killed and replaced by fembots in a dystopic community. These fembots are always created to be erotic, sexually desirable to men, and are used as bait, a distraction, or a temptation. A female robot's sexuality is thus always central to her creation, and she uses it or is programmed to use it to achieve her (or her master's) usually sinister goals. In *Austin Powers: The International Spy of Mystery*, the fembots in Dr. Evil's lair are placed strategically to distract Austin Powers from his attempt to capture his enemy. Dressed in flimsy baby-doll lingerie, they seductively draw him into their arms before bringing out the machine guns—cleverly concealed in their breasts. While women and machines have a long history together, often seeming to have a “natural” alliance and a complex relationship, they literally combine on the cinematic screen in the form of the fembot. Even though I have illustrated many ways in which women and machines are aligned and interconnected within a Western, industrialized consumer culture, the fembot is still largely a creature of the human imagination. As a technological and futuristic dream, the fembot is, not surprisingly, most often found in science fiction and visually realized in science fiction film. Cinema offers a wealth of possibilities for visualizing the fembot, and many fembot films have been produced, each providing its own interpretation of what it means to be a woman and a machine. While there are hundreds of science fiction films containing fembots in them, the films I have chosen to use as my examples have the following characteristic in common: all involve the creation of the fembot as a means to an end and as an object of desire. With the exception of *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine*, they are also some of the most mainstream fembot films in North America. *Metropolis* is the earliest, and has subsequently become a longtime subject of scholarly

film discourse. Directed by Fritz Lang, and featuring a dystopic society of the future, *Metropolis* sets a precedent for the fembot films that follow in the 20th century. *Blade Runner*, based loosely on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is also often discussed in film studies, and is a vision of the future that questions what it means to be human. *Terminator 3* is the third of a series of action movies, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and featuring the first female terminator in the series—likely the most physically powerful fembot of all these examples. The two interpretations of *The Stepford Wives*, based on Ira Levin's satirical novel of the same name, features a dystopic suburban community where men turn their wives into fembots. The novel and the earlier film interpretation reflect the feminist movement occurring in America at the time, and build a narrative based on horror and suspense. The recent remake of the film is a more humorous parody of the gender norms that initiated the feminist movement, but it updates the story and makes it well worth making a comparison between the two versions. Both *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* and *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, along with their respective sequels, are spy spoofs and use the fembot as comic relief and part of the parody. These films are part of a larger group of spoof movies within the fembot films, but are the most well known in mainstream American popular culture as well as ASFR communities.

The following chapters will examine the themes of fetishism, death, and dismemberment in relation to the fembots in these films. These particular themes characterize the fembot's place in each film, and seem to attach themselves to her representation. A classic example is one of the most well-known fembots in film history, Maria the Robot from Fritz Lang's "unshakeable dialectic of the class struggle,"

Metropolis (Eggebrecht, qtd. in Huyssen 221). A fusion of the virginal Maria and Rotwang's robot prototype, Maria the Robot looks just as beautiful as her human namesake, but is sexual, evil, and destructive. She is one of the earliest fembots to appear on the big screen, and her story is the first of many that parallel the Pandora myth. Andreas Huyssen has written one of the most classic works about Maria, an essay titled "The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*," where he concludes that the machine-woman represents man's fear of overt female sexuality and technology. Huyssen poses the following question, "Why indeed does the robot...appear with the body features of a woman?" (224). For really, as he notes himself, while the attempt to construct human automata has existed for centuries, people have preferred machine-women to machine-men, and this is especially noticeable in later history and in present day popular culture (Huyssen 226). At first glance, one might assume, and rightly so, that the fembot is just another aspect of a patriarchal tendency to sexually objectify women. But is it not that simple. Huyssen argues that women, nature, and machines have become "a mesh of significations which all [have] one thing in common: otherness," and by their existence threaten male authority and control, raising fear and anxiety (226). As in any attempt to make use of technology, the men of *Metropolis* expect robot Maria to solve their problems. Ironically, she becomes the point of blame for those problems instead. At the end of *Metropolis* the now evil robot Maria is burned at the stake, banishing all traces of the "unleashed force of female sexuality," restoring peace and order to the city (Huyssen 232). The robot Maria functions as the scapegoat for all the ills of the city, and it is because she is a machine that she takes on this role, and it is also because she is a woman that she can redeem all evils in her death.

She is not human; she possesses an “otherness,” as Huyssen points out. Huyssen’s analysis of *Metropolis* sets a strong precedent for the themes of the fembot films I have selected. Marshall McLuhan remarks that there is a “widely occurring cluster image of sex, technology, and death which constitutes the mystery of the mechanical bride” (101). I will add one more term to the cluster, for in the films I will analyze, it is the cluster image of sex, technology, death and dismemberment that constitutes the mystery of the fembot. These terms do not only make up the key to the mystery, but they are also the themes that follow the fembot in every film. In the following section I will focus on the sex and technology components of the cluster, examining fembots as objects of a fetishistic desire.

Sex Machines and Fetishism

Made by men for men, the fembot serves no other purpose than to titillate, arouse, satiate, serve, please and perform the duties she has been programmed to perform. As a machine, the fembot is the techie's dream gadget, the quintessential toy, tool, and instant-gratifier. Like any other appliance or machine, the fembot serves a practical purpose and performs some sort of work. Rotwang created the robot prototype that became Robot Maria as a means of eventually replacing the human workers of Metropolis. Dr. Evil created his fembots to distract his enemies and ultimately riddle them with bullets. And the men of Stepford, Connecticut created their robot women to fulfill their sexual and domestic needs. The fembot is every heterosexual man's pin-up, a visual pleasure no different from any other woman represented in various kinds of media. She is gazed upon and sexually desired. In *Metropolis*, for example, Robot Maria is brought out before a group of men after Rotwang has finished creating her, to test whether people are able to tell if she is not human. The men, along with the camera, all look on as she rises on a stage, dressed in a costume. The men are simply mesmerized, and Robot Maria begins a sexy, erotic dance while topless. Clearly the men are fooled, and she passes the test as they stare and reach out to touch her. In the *Austin Powers* films, the fembot brigade is dressed in sexy baby-doll outfits and high heels, perched upon a rotating stage for all to look upon. In Frank Oz's adaptation of *The Stepford Wives*, every woman is perfectly groomed and coiffed, with large breasts, blonde hair, and make-up. Not only do the male characters drool with pleasure at the sight of them, but the viewers of the film are also invited to look and take pleasure in their appearance. All these fembots, however, are manufactured products of human skill, processing and

technology. As an object that looks like a woman, the fembot is like every other fembot, both a woman and a machine. Being both a woman and a machine makes the fembot figure both a sexual fetish object and a commodity fetish object—the ultimate object of desire. The term “sexual fetish” is most commonly ascribed to Sigmund Freud’s work, while the term “commodity fetish” is associated with Karl Marx and his classic work, *Capital* (1867). Laura Mulvey defines the main difference between the Freudian definition of fetish and the Marxian definition of fetish as follows: in the case of the former, value is over-inscribed onto a site of imagined lack through a substitute object, while in the case of the latter, the sign of value fails to inscribe itself on an actual object (*Fetishism and Curiosity* 2). The obvious similarity, however, lies in the fact that the fetish object—be it an object of sexual or commodity fetishism—functions as a sign, a semiotic site of displaced meaning. The filmic fembot functions as the ideal fetish object in which these two fetishisms converge, uniting sex and commodities in an intricate and complex relationship. As Despina Kakoudaki puts it, the fembot “arrives as an object/product that engages many fetishistic relations to technology, and to the unreal bodies of fantastic/fantasy women” (171). In addition to the sexual fetish and the commodity fetish, the fembot in film is subject to the cinematic gaze, which is in itself fetishistic. According to Christian Metz, cinema is inherently fetishistic due to the way it is constructed and the way it positions the spectator. Metz argues that the parameters of the cinematic screen fetishize the projected image, and that the spectator functions as a voyeur. His argument is based on his claim that the “screen aperture” forms a keyhole through which the spectator views the film, and that combined with the fact that the subject of the spectator’s voyeurism unaware that it is being spied upon, makes the

cinematic experience fetishistic (Metz 63-64). The way in which the cinematic screen frames the image through the keyhole effect also contributes to an insistent emphasis on what is seen and what is not seen:

The way the cinema, with its wandering framings (wandering like the look, like the caress), finds the means to reveal space has something to do with a kind of permanent undressing, a generalised strip-tease, a less direct but more perfected strip-tease, since it also makes it possible to dress space again, to remove from view what it has previously shown, to *take back* as well as to retain (like the child at the moment of the birth of a fetish, the child who has already seen, but whose look beats a rapid retreat): a strip-tease pierced with 'flash-backs', inverted sequences that then give new impetus to the forward movement. (Metz 77)

The characteristics of this cinematic "strip-tease," as Metz calls it, combined with the Freudian and Marxian fetishisms, position the fembot as a subject of a triple—or three-fold—fetish. Not only is the fembot both woman and machine and therefore a subject of sexual and commodity fetishism, but as a projected film image she is also subject to a kind of screen-fetishism.

According to Laura Mulvey, fetishism is the most semiotic of perversions (*Fetishism and Curiosity* xiv). It is a metaphor for the displacement of meaning behind representation, it is integral to the *process* of displacement of meaning behind representation, and the real world exists within its own representations (Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* xiv). As Mulvey points out, "both Freud and Marx use the concept of fetishism in an attempt to explain a refusal, or blockage, of the mind, or a phobic inability of the psyche, to understand a symbolic system of value, one within the social and the other within the psychoanalytic sphere" (*Fetishism and Curiosity* 2). The Freudian fetish refers to a disorder in which the subject ascribes excessive sexual significance to an inanimate object or a typically non-sexual body part, such as hair or the foot (Rycroft 57). Without this object or body part, the subject is incapable of sexual

excitement (Rycroft 57). The situation only becomes pathological when “the longing for the fetish passes beyond the point of being merely a necessary condition attached to the sexual object and actually *takes the place of* the normal aim, and, further, when the fetish becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the *sole* sexual object” (Freud, *Three Essays* 20). For Freud, fetish is a consequence of castration anxiety; the fetish object acts as a sign for the object that is thought to be missing—the maternal penis (Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* 5). According to Freud, “the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and—for reasons familiar to us—does not want to give up” (“Fetishism” 953). The little boy, traumatized by the perceived castration of his mother, fears the possibility of his own castration and forms an attachment to the penis. As a grown man, the fear of castration leads him to form an abnormal desire for a selected object—“his substitute for a genital,” to which is attached a sexual satisfaction (Freud, “Fetishism” 954). Mulvey argues that women on the cinematic screen become the substitute object. She argues that women connote what she calls “to-be-looked-at-ness,” which positions the female figure as icon and fetish object on the silver screen (“Visual Pleasure” 63). The female “connotes her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration,” and the male spectator therefore turns her into a fetish object so that she becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure 64-65). The point of overvaluation of the woman lies in her physical beauty and perfection on screen. Placing significance on and thereby fetishizing the woman can allow the male spectator to overlook her lack and symbolic representation of the castration threat to the point of relieving his anxiety. It is clear that from both Freud’s definition of fetishism and Mulvey’s subsequent application of the term to cinema that

the fetishist tends to be conceived of as male. In the case of the fembot, this works quite well, since she is created out of male desire for male pleasure. Her parent is almost without exception a man, whether it is Rotwang the inventor, Dr. Goldfoot, Dr. Evil, or any number of sane or mad scientists. She is invariably gazed upon by other men within the film, and gazed upon by spectators of the film.

Marx's "fetishism of the world of commodities," on the other hand, refers to a commodity's acquisition of exchange-value as soon as it is produced, the appearance of "self-generating value" that disavows the source of its value in labor power (Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* 4). In other words, the fact that private individuals produced the commodity is lost (Marx 165-166). The commodity fetish is the excessive value or significance placed on the object/commodity, when it really should be placed on the labor or "use-value." That these two fetishisms converge in the fembot is not at all unusual. The link between woman and commodity is almost more established than the relationship between woman and machine. As many scholars argue, the woman's body as commodity is an age-old concept that seems inescapably part of living in a patriarchal society. Jon Stratton points out that

Marx described commodities as things which 'lack the power to resist man'. He went on: 'If they are unwilling, he can use force; in other words, he can take possession of them.' [Rachel] Bowlby comments that 'the very imagery used of the relationship between commodities and buyers is one of seduction and rape'...Marx's metaphor expresses the close connection that was developing between women's bodies and commodities [in the early 20th century]. (48-49)

Luce Irigaray further remarks that

In our social order, women are 'products' used and exchanged by men. Their status is that of merchandise, 'commodities'....so women have to remain an 'infrastructure' unrecognized as such by our society and our culture. The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the

organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as 'subjects'. (Irigaray, qtd. in Doane, *The Desire to Desire* 23)

The difference between fembots and other objectified women in our extremely visual culture, however, lies in the fact that fembots *are* actual objects, and not women who are being *treated* like objects. Fembots are not one hundred percent human, nor are they given birth to naturally through the womb. The fembot is an object of a commodity fetish in the same way any other consumer product is. Always manufactured and created by humans, generally by a man, the fembot is a machine in the shape of a woman, a commodity fresh off a production line, packaged and ready to be marketed and used. If we note the motives behind the creation of fembots in many science-fiction films, more often than not they are the pet projects of a male scientist, and meant to be used as a tool, weapon, or handy convenience. This is true, for instance, in the 1960s beach party-era camp flick *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine*, where Dr. Goldfoot manufactures fembots by the dozen, using his "bikini machine." These fembots, identified numerically like electronics with a serial number, are "programmed" using yet another machine, and then sent off to perform the tasks for which they have been produced: to capture the fancy of a pre-determined wealthy man, obliterate any women rivals, marry him, and take off with all his money and assets—which, of course, go right back to Dr. Goldfoot. In the third installment of the *Terminator* films (2003), the female terminator known only as T-X—and the most advanced machine of all—is programmed to kill John Connor and his future wife. In film director John Hughes' teen-angst film *Weird Science* (1985), two awkward adolescents use a computer to create Lisa, for the purpose of relieving their sexual frustration and as a tool to help them miraculously become popular at school.

Like a brand-name pair of designer jeans, Lisa succeeds in helping the boys appear to be desirable and worthy of being included.

While the fembot seems to be a woman, another female character in an all-star cast, she is quite obviously and very literally an object. Dr. Goldfoot makes this very clear as he warns his assistant Igor, “Get your hands off the merchandise,” referring to his collection of bikini-clad fembots. A commodity, a consumer good, and a product—the fembot takes on all the characteristics of a gadget made to be sold and exchanged on the market. She has use-value, as opposed to commodity fetish, because she is produced to fulfill a need and to serve a practical purpose, as consumer goods are meant to do. However, if fembots were only produced to kill, perform housework, or whatever the purpose may be, there ought not to be a reason for creating her in woman-form. There are plenty of machines that do not look like human women, and why should T-X, for instance, be otherwise? As Raymond Williams fittingly states, “If we were sensibly materialist, in that part of our living in which we use things...[a] washing machine would be a useful machine to wash clothes, rather than an indication that we are forward looking or an object of envy to our neighbors” (Williams, qtd. in Jhally “Codes of Advertising” 3). Essentially, our things, possessions, and purchased products mean more to us than what they are used for, and the fembot is no different. She is endowed with a symbolic exchange-value in a system that thrives on creating signs and meaning—a true product of our time. Her exchange-value is the promise of love, sex, the fulfillment of desire, and adulation for the man in possession and control of her. A mere machine might not connote those things, but a machine that also appears to be a woman certainly does. The womanhood the fembot possesses can be seen in the commodity fetish as part of the

aesthetics of the commodity. Like object design and clever packaging, the fembot is a super-gadget in disguise. W. F. Haug comments that

the beautifully designed surface of the commodity becomes its package: not the simple wrapping for protection during transportation, but its real countenance, which the potential buyer is shown first instead of the body of the commodity and through which the commodity develops and changes its countenance. (Haug 50)

It is what the commodity appears to fulfill above and beyond its basic use-value that constitutes its status as fetish. The value assigned to the object based on its “beautifully designed surface” constitutes its exchange-value. The fembot’s womanly appearance is something extra, because her “packaging”—the machine’s woman form—has nothing to do with her actual use-value. It makes her appear to be more useful and more attractive, increasing her overall exchange-value. This excess value is what makes the commodity a fetish object. The fembot’s appearance reflects people’s desires, and helps the seller:

People are continually shown the unfulfilled aspects of their existence. The illusion ingratiates itself, promising satisfaction: it reads desires in one’s eyes, and brings them to the surface of the commodity. While the illusion with which commodities present themselves to the gaze, gives the people a sense of meaningfulness, it provides them with a language to interpret their existence and the world. Any other world, different from that provided by the commodities, is almost no longer accessible to them. (Haug 52)

In fembot films, the “*consumer*” of the fembot is the person who must face her—not the scientist or man that created her. For instance, the consumers in *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* are Craig Gamble and Todd Armstrong, the latter being the wealthy bachelor target. When fembot Number Eleven (or as she is later named, Diane) is being marketed to both of these men, they are unaware that she is anything but a fabulously seductive and attractive woman. She brings desire to her surface, and promises love and sexual satisfaction through her appearance—the part of the machine that signifies to Craig and Todd that possessing her will fulfill their need for love and sex. Yet that is not

what Number Eleven was created for. Her true use-value as a product of Dr. Goldfoot's labors lies in her ability to collect Todd's money and assets, and turn them over to Dr. Goldfoot. She does not truly deliver what she promises, because on her wedding night with Todd, he is left hanging with no sex and separate beds!

In a situation of general sexual repression, or at least of isolation, the use-value of mere sexual illusion lies in the satisfaction which voyeurism can provide. This satisfaction through a use-value, whose specific nature is as an illusion, can be called illusory satisfaction. The characteristics of this satisfaction through sexual illusion is that it simultaneously reproduces further demand alongside satisfaction, and produces a *compulsive fixation*. If guilt feelings and the angst they arouse block the way to the sexual object, then the commodity of sexual illusion acts as its replacement, mediating excitement and a certain satisfaction which might be difficult to develop in actual sensual and physical contact. (Haug 55) (my italics)

In the case of the fembot, however, what blocks the way to the sexual object is the limitations of the machine itself. While in some films, such as *The Stepford Wives*, the fembot can satisfy sexual arousal and desire like a sex doll, she is still projecting a sexual illusion because men think of her as a woman. Number Eleven, however, does arouse some sort of sexual frustration or angst, and it is her appearance that mediates excitement and replacement, for the promise of sex is enough to keep Todd Armstrong going.

As many scholars note, commodities are very easily sexualized. Haug points out that "it is not the sexual object which takes on the commodity form, but the tendency of all objects of use in commodity-form to assume a sexual form to some extent" (55). The fembot is inherently the object of a sexual fetish in her appearance as a woman, and in her appearance on the cinematic screen. As Metz argues, the cinematic screen frames the image being presented and renders it passive to the spectator's gaze. Images of women are particularly subject to this because, as John Berger puts it, "men act and women appear" (47). Women are represented in film, art, and other visual media in a way that

renders them passive and unable to reject a scopophilic gaze. And as subjects of the cinematic gaze and spectatorship, women function as the site of fetishism.

There are two main problems with fetishizing the fembot. If one adheres to Mulvey's analysis of men and women in film, then the fembot is arguably not really a woman. The fetishistic gaze of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is a shaky one, because while the fembot looks like a woman, she is not a "real" woman. There is no possibility of the fembot as mother or potential mother and therefore the possessor of a maternal penis, because she is a machine and has no reproductive capabilities. She passes as woman, and a female actor plays her on screen, maintaining only the illusion that she can possess a maternal penis. For the men who gaze upon her within the film, she acts as a true fetish object, but for the male spectators in the audience, who in one way or another know that she is really a machine, this fetish is more of a Marxian commodity fetish than a truly Freudian sexual fetish. But what of the female spectators and the female gaze? As John Berger famously states,

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (47)

Within the ASFR community, while there are very few female robot fetishists, the majority of the members being male, women fetishists *do* exist. Of the female robot fetishists who claim to be heterosexual, a select number of them do identify with fembots and in fact fantasize about being transformed into one. When we consider the fact that, socially and culturally, women have been placed in a position of interchangeability with machines, that "women's work" has increasingly been replaced by "electronic servants,"

from post-war to present day, the distance from woman to fembot is not all that far (Holliday 108). Cranny-Francis remarks that

The female androids and cyborgs that appear in fiction reinforce the cultural production of femininity as accessible sexuality rather than invulnerable authority, as use/object rather than user/subject. In other words, the female cyborg (or android) may have deconstructive potential for women who read the figure resistantly. (156)

She argues that it is possible that the female spectator forms a subversive relation to the fembot, that those who do read the figure resistantly, may in fact rebel or find a way to subvert the fembot. However, Cranny-Francis does not seem overly optimistic about that possibility. She goes on to suggest that narratives in which fembots (or as she prefers, “the female cyborg”) are involved are not attractive to women because they offer women “no semi-divine status” and “no romantic notion of crisis” (Cranny-Francis 156). “Rather they have confirmed the position of women as excluded from authority, as powerless, as primarily sexual beings, as of interest only in terms of their (sexual) use/value to men” (Cranny-Francis 156). While Cranny-Francis does not completely rule out the possibility of a female spectator exerting her own gaze on the fembot, she still concludes that it is the male gaze that dominates, ultimately rendering fembots as the surveyed female. Mary Ann Doane argues that women invoke their subjectivity when they consume and purchase commodities. She maintains that the “erasure of female subjectivity by the commodification of the female body” is never quite successful, simply because women have the ability to purchase (*The Desire to Desire* 23). This can be true of female spectators, because they are able to “consume” fembots by taking pleasure in looking at them on screen, but because the fembot is created for men, she is still coded for masculine desire and as a subject of the male gaze. Female spectators might be able

to appropriate that desire, but their subjectivity is still for the most part “erased.”

Furthermore, women characters within the film are *never* given the ability to purchase the commodity. The fembot is created *by men for men*, and women consumers are entirely absent from the films, leaving the only window of opportunity to the female cinematic spectators, who cannot desire the fembot in their own right.

It seems as though in the case of fembots, the commodity fetish utilizes the sexual fetish to further advance its own agenda. It also allows the sexual fetish to run its course and resolve itself easily and without guilt in the death of the fembot. If we take the position that a fembot is a consumer product, machine, and object, then its aesthetics take on the characteristics of the most commonplace sexual fetish, allowing the commodity fetish to thrive and create even more demand. For instance, in *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, the latest Terminator is called the T-X, and gendered female. In her introductory sequence, T-X steals a woman’s car and clothing, and speeds her way down the street to complete her tasks. As she spies a police car that has seen her speeding, the camera pans from her eyes to a nearby Victoria’s Secret billboard, featuring a “What is Sexy” slogan and a pair of breasts in a push-up bra. T-X immediately increases her own breast size, and puts on a provocative stance for the approaching cop. “I like your gun,” she says, suggestively. In doing so, she is able to avoid any trouble with the police and is quickly on her way again. T-X as a machine and commodity uses her exchange-value, which connotes sexuality and femininity, to her full advantage. Obviously her exchange-value is very much grounded in the same characteristics that make her an object of a sexual fetish, but it still draws upon what is conventionally thought of as male desire and reflects those desires in the commodity aesthetic. Other examples include Pris, the

“pleasure model” replicant in *Blade Runner* (1982) and her blatant use of sexuality to get close to J. F. Sebastian and further the advantage of the vengeful replicants; Dr. Goldfoot’s bikini babes and the fembots in *Austin Powers* who appropriate “womanly wiles” to get their way. This parallels the Pandora myth, where Pandora is sent to earth to distract Prometheus and his brother with her constructed feminine beauty, allowing her to follow through with her true motive of bringing on their downfall. Though Bulfinch does not disclose the fate of Pandora after she succeeds in releasing “a multitude of plagues for hapless man”, in film, once the fembot gets her way and fulfills her task, she is somehow eliminated.

The Fembot in Death and in Pieces

The inevitable fate of the fembot is usually death or dismemberment. In *Metropolis*, the robot Maria is ceremoniously burnt at the stake. In the *Austin Powers* trilogy, all of the fembots suffer an explosive and untimely death. In *Blade Runner*, Pris is killed violently along with the rest of the rebel replicants. Rachael, the only other fembot featured in that film, lives because she is the most “human” replicant in existence. T-X in *Terminator 3* dies many violent deaths. The fembots in *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine*, along with those in *The Stepford Wives* have hands or heads dismembered from their bodies, or have knives stuck in their stomachs. As the object of a sexual fetish, the fembot signifies the threat of castration, theoretically causing great male anxiety. Because in many cases, the fembot recurs constantly, obstructing the male protagonist’s quest and mission, reminding him that castration is possible, he must eliminate the threat of castration altogether by destroying the fembot. The fact that the fembot is a commodity allows her to be killed without guilt, remorse, or moral questioning. She is only symbolic of woman, and therefore not human, so it is acceptable to obliterate her, simultaneously eliminating any possible threat of technology. The fembot allows the male to act as he wishes to, without running into any problems. For example, Robot Maria in *Metropolis* is the most fetishized and gazed upon woman in the film, representing a threateningly overt female sexuality and an obstruction to peace and Freder’s reconciliation with his father. As Huyssen writes, “the fears and perceptual anxieties emanating from ever more powerful machines are recast and reconstructed in terms of the male fear of female sexuality, reflecting, in the Freudian account, the male’s castration anxiety” (226). In order to eliminate this fear, Robot Maria must be destroyed,

and so she ends up being burned at the stake, putting women's sexuality back where it should be—in the virginal, human Maria, and allowing the machine to be returned to “its rightful place in production” (Doane, “Technophilia” 25). T-X's death at the end of *Terminator 3* enables all fears of castration and the demise of mankind to be put to rest, because John Connor and his future bride are safe and therefore able to reproduce and save the world. The vamp is eliminated, giving the virgin her rightful place as wife and mother in the order of the universe. In the first *Austin Powers* movie, the fembots act as obstacles to Austin Powers' attempt to save the world from Dr. Evil. They stand in the way of his quest to capture Dr. Evil, using their sexuality to distract him. The fembots are also equipped with machine-gun breasts which are used to open fire, and they are only defeated and destroyed by Austin's “mojo”—a term used in the films to describe male sexuality or arousal. This threat of female sexuality must be countered and destroyed by the male penis, which is then able to assert and relieve itself of any fears of castration. There is no remorse, sadness, guilt, or any kind of consequences relating to the death of the fembot. The fembot becomes a small sacrifice for greater goals and the triumph of the male and women's rightful place as mother and/or virgin.

The death of a particular fembot also recurs throughout each film, for it seems that a single final death does not suffice. The fembot is often killed many times, as it is in *Terminator 3* (2003). T-X is crushed, shot at, run over, and magnetized several times throughout the film in what can only be described as a gratuitous display of obliterating the female body. Granted, Arnold Schwarzenegger's character is also thus treated in the film, and there are scores of both male and female humans that are killed by T-X. However, it is T-X's body that is repeatedly killed, resurrected, and killed several times

over, and given preferential treatment by the camera. While viewers of the film are not privy to the deaths of T-X's human targets—the camera cuts from the target to T-X shooting him or her in several cases, they are treated to many elaborate scenes where T-X is relentlessly annihilated. When T-X is being slowly disintegrated by an industrial-force magnet, the camera zooms in on her face and body as it slowly melts away. This occurs repeatedly in the car wrecks, the helicopter crash, and more. In the *Austin Powers* trilogy, the fembots die by explosion, one by one, to the joy and delight of Austin himself. The group of fembots in the first film combust one after the other, and in the beginning of the second film, Austin's bride, Vanessa, explodes in a "suicide" at the request of Dr. Evil, and in the third film, the Britney Spears fembot also meets an untimely end by what is now a running joke. Pris' death in *Blade Runner* is also extremely bloody, and is the result of many attempts on Decker's part. Of course, in this particular film, there are male replicants who are also killed in violent ways, but it is Pris' strong female sexuality that requires her death and not Rachael's. This repetition of the fembot death image only reinforces the urgency with which the male protagonist must eliminate the threat of castration.

One of the side benefits of killing fembots lies in the spectacle of seeing their bodies dismembered. Although it does not always result in death, dismemberment occurs in all of the fembot films to which I have referred, with the exception of *Metropolis*. It is one of the only ways the characters in the film and the spectators of the film can tell that the fembot is a machine. It is often one of the biggest giveaways for the hapless male that the woman he lusts after is not really a woman in the human sense. When McLuhan writes in *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* that women's bodies are

being treated like machines, he speaks metaphorically, referring to a general industrialization of culture and an approach to the female body in advertisements current to the time of his authorship. He draws a comparison between women's bodies and machines, industrialization, and the factory: "Noticed any spare parts lately?"... "'The walk,' 'the legs', 'the body', 'the hips,' 'the look,' 'the lips.' Did she fall off a wall? Call all the king's horses and men," he quips (McLuhan 98). The public has been indoctrinated to fetishize parts of the body, parts of a person—it is one's legs, hair, the swing of one's hips, and the right pair of nylons that make a difference in the world. In our world of commodities, the human body has been dismembered into tangible elements and objects of great importance. If one were to view the world through advertisements, it would seem to be a veritable factory of female body parts. However, when it comes to the fembot in film, this emphasis on the fragmented body literally and physically occurs, with the fembot's body as the primary site of dismemberment. Dismemberment is used in these films to draw attention to the fact that the fembot is a machine made of mechanical parts, and often serves as a gimmick for a comedic or horrific effect. For instance, in *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* (1965), Number Eleven's hand comes off when Dr. Goldfoot and Craig Gamble use her in a tug-of-war. The sight of the dismembered hand, which Gamble subsequently picks up, causes him to faint. The spectator's cue to laugh lies in Gamble's overly dramatic roll of the eyes and in the whimsical characteristics of the accompanying soundtrack. When the hand is given to Gamble's uncle to look at, he also faints for comedic effect. In *Terminator 3* (2003), the viewer is treated to frequent images of T-X's fragmented body—a hand here, an arm there, or a piece of her face, especially when she is being crushed by trucks and other

large vehicles. In the 1975 rendition of *The Stepford Wives*, Bobbie's robot body is not dismembered per se, but is severed by the knife Joanna sticks into her stomach. When Joanna's fembot replacement appears on-screen for the first time, the camera zooms in on her eyes, which are black and alien-looking. At the end of the film, when Joanna the robot finally prevails, signaling the death of the human Joanna, the camera once again focuses on her eyes. This time, the eyes are Joanna's—the human eyes that are so much more familiar and comforting to look at. Though the dismemberment does not appear on-screen, the narrative implies that the robot's false eyes were somehow replaced by Joanna's human ones. This implied dismemberment provides a sense of horror, especially as the uncanny quality of the robot's alien eyes immediately recalls Ike Mazzard's intense focus on Joanna's human eyes earlier in the film.

Not only does the death of the fembot eliminate the threat of male castration and the fear of overt female sexuality, but it also gives the narrative a tragic, yet thrilling element to the erotic charge that is already present in the sexual fetishization of the female body. McLuhan argues that death and destruction are often intermixed with sex, because sex can be boring on its own. With the element of danger and subsequently death introduced, sex becomes a more intense thrill (McLuhan 100). The display of death is a “metaphysical hunger to experience everything sexually, to pluck out the heart of the mystery for a super-thrill” (McLuhan 101). A spectacle of gratifying defeat, the death of the fembot is presented in a way that is almost relished by the camera. The camera takes pleasure in showing the spectator the explosions, obliterations, and crushings of the female body, and enables him or her to experience a more thrilling voyeurism. Death becomes yet another way in which the fembot ultimately serves the

male. In one (or several) blows she enables everything that is bad to disappear, and this is in addition to her primary function as an object of visual pleasure, fetishism, and subservience for the men in the film and for the spectator, who is conceived of as male. The dismemberment of the fembot helps to further the male cause, for it ultimately reminds those in the film and those watching the film that she is only an object and should be treated as such. The dismemberment of the fembot body occurs so readily because the fembot is not really human. Rosemary Jackson argues that “the many partial, dual, multiple and dismembered selves scattered throughout literary fantasies violate the most cherished of all human unities: the ‘unity’ of character,” which is “that definition of the self as a coherent, indivisible and continuous whole which has dominated Western thought for centuries” (82-83). The disintegration of the body is an assault on one’s subjectivity, and signifies a loss or fragmentation of identity (Jackson 88-89). Because the fembot is not conceived of as “self”—she is truly man’s “helpmate” or servant, and therefore less than human—her body is more easily subject to abuse. Not only is the dismemberment of her body—a female body at that—a tribute to the fembot’s inconsequential position as an easily replaceable commodity, but it is also a symbolic confirmation of the absence of female subjectivity in a patriarchal culture.

The Fembot in Comedy

A large number of fembot films fall into the category of comedy, spoof or parody. In this final section of my paper I will address the *Austin Powers* trilogy, *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* and its sequel, and both versions of *The Stepford Wives*—focusing on the ways in which humor and irony are used to draw attention away from the atrocities committed to women and their bodies in the narrative. Because of the way the fembot is positioned in these particular films, it is impossible to discuss the fembot without acknowledging the added factor of humor and irony. With the exception of the 1975 adaptation of *The Stepford Wives*, these films play up the role of the fembot for camp effect. Both the *Austin Powers* and *Dr. Goldfoot* films are in and of themselves spoofs and parodies of the 1960's spy genre. In fact, it is quite evident that the *Austin Powers* films were influenced significantly by both *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* and its sequel, *Dr. Goldfoot and the Girl Bombs*, thus making them parodies of other parodies. The 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives* is also a comedic take on the 1975 version, which was itself an ironic critique, based on Ira Levin's novel, of traditional gender roles. The presence of humor, in particular, is part of the illusion that masks the fembot film. All of these films use comedy and gag jokes for entertainment, making it difficult to be truly critical of the way fembots and women are utilized and treated. *Austin Powers* is supposed to make us laugh, *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* makes a mockery of the spy movies, and *The Stepford Wives* pokes fun at the hausfrau. The surface effect of entertainment value and comedy is an absolution of the negative representations, crude and rude jokes, blatant bigotry, and other “faux pas” a Westernized society would normally frown upon.

Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine and its Italian sequel, *Dr. Goldfoot and the Girl Bombs* are both truly campy spy parodies starring Vincent Price. Some would call them corny and silly because they are part of the “beach party” era films of the 1960’s. However, their apparent lightheartedness and silly gags in no way redeem the films of their disparaging representations of fembots and subsequently women’s bodies. Not only are the fembots subject to death and dismemberment, but they are also represented as nothing more than servants, chattel, and objects—nothing of worth. Female stereotypes are the butt of the joke, and the female body is subject to all sorts of torture. For example, Dr. Goldfoot’s hapless assistant Igor creates a fembot on his own, eager to show his skill in using the Bikini Machine. Due to his incompetence, however, he creates a “bad” specimen—a homely woman, her body completely concealed in black, with a voice like a man’s, and very masculine talents, such as the ability to perform martial arts. Dr. Goldfoot reprimands Igor for this “mistake,” while all the other “good” specimens are plainly in sight—shapely, beautiful, scantily clad in gold bikinis, and very obedient. The fact that upon its “birth” the “bad” fembot immediately pummels Igor to the ground is clearly meant to be a gag. Igor is shown to be bested by a fembot, and more importantly, a woman, who is stronger and more masculine than he is. The viewer is encouraged to laugh at this un-feminine fembot and at Igor’s inability to create a beautiful model. The creation of “woman” is entirely in male hands, and the connection is clearly made. In making the juxtaposition between a “bad” fembot specimen and a “good” fembot specimen, the viewer is told that Igor is the incompetent jester figure, while Dr. Goldfoot is the genius—the one who really knows how to create the perfect woman. Furthermore, because the fembot appears to be a woman, the distinction between a “good” and “bad”

fembot also carries through as a distinction between women. The visual opposition between the two kinds of fembots becomes an opposition between two kinds of women, and what the viewer sees is the negative physical treatment of a “bad woman” and the preference for the “good” woman.

When Number Eleven fails to retrieve all of her target husband’s money and assets, Dr. Goldfoot punishes her. She is shown undergoing two different types of punishment. In one, she is strapped to what looks like an electric chair, and her body is subjected to all kinds of electrocution and uncomfortable prodding. In the next, she is shown on her hands and knees, scrubbing the floor with a tiny brush. This torture is all a part of the game, and it is represented in an ironic way. Number Eleven is pushed and pulled in all directions, and the irony lies in the fact that in these scenes, there is no distinction between woman and robot. The viewer knows that she is a robot, but what he or she *sees* is a woman undergoing torture and physical pain. The fembot body, and indirectly the female body, is the subject and often the initiator of the physical gags in the film. Number Eleven’s body can be horribly treated because it has already been established that she is not even human, and because it is meant to be funny. The scenes of her torture become absorbed into the film and do not stand out as anything out of the ordinary or as anything particularly questionable. The fembot is a convenient vehicle for doing all sorts of things to women’s bodies without *actually* doing anything to a woman’s body. However, regardless of how the plot is set up, the visual impact remains.

In the *Austin Powers* trilogy, the exploding fembot is a running joke that has become one of the characteristic gags one expects to see. Though the films are rife with crude and even obscene gags, physical and toilet humor, and a general sense of

irreverence, those involving the fembots are more alarming than the others. While cleverly done and genuinely humorous, *Austin Powers* is just as guilty of trivializing and trespassing on the female body as *Dr. Goldfoot* is. The trilogy can be interpreted, as it often is, as a pointed and ironic send-up to James Bond movies and others in the spy genre, drawing attention to old-fashioned social mores and outdated sexism. *Austin Powers* pokes fun at the overt displays of machismo and the stereotypical female characters in the spy films of old by playing up exactly those elements in a camp effect. By drawing attention to the ridiculousness of those characteristics, *Austin Powers* criticizes them while making the audience laugh. The humor and silliness of this trilogy are vastly different from that of the two *Dr. Goldfoot* movies because it is remarkably self-aware and self-referential. However, by re-creating and perpetuating destructive and negative images of the female body, the film contributes to an overall visual discourse that is ultimately detrimental to women. The objectification of the fembots, the violent deaths they undergo, and the jokes that occur at their expense become ingrained in a viewer's memory, especially effective given the films' popularity as culture icons. The entire introductory sequence of *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, the second in the series, focuses on Austin Powers' discovery that his wife, Vanessa Kensington, is actually a fembot—a "kamikaze bride" sent from Dr. Evil to destroy him. This is almost a direct reference to *Dr. Goldfoot and the Girl Bombs*, where Dr. Goldfoot's newest version of the fembot is actually a bomb in woman form. He sends these to his enemies; the erotic appeal of the fembot allows her to get close to the enemy, and then when he kisses her, she explodes, destroying both herself and her target. The humor in the *Austin Powers* sequence (besides the expected strategic placement of objects in front of the

characters' breasts and genitalia) occurs when Austin picks up a remote control, attempting to turn on the television, but realizes that Vanessa can be controlled with the device. Just as he comes to the conclusion that she is a fembot and rips off her face to reveal wires and electronic parts, she explodes. This scene, while funny, also realizes a crucial part of the fembot fantasy—the ability for men to be able to control their women. Austin Powers plays with his fembot wife using a remote control, and Dr. Evil programs her to explode at the most opportune moment. The fact that it is entertaining to see a woman, even a “fake” woman, controlled, blown up, or driven to destruction by Austin’s “mojo,” indicates a desire to have power over the female body. The fact that none of this is cast as very disturbing is a testament to its embeddedness in both popular culture and a way of life. By making fun of women and the disposability of their bodies, such films continue to condone a disrespectful attitude towards them.

The Stepford Wives in both its adaptations also relies heavily on humor and irony in its representation of fembots. Based on a highly satirical novel of the same name, the film versions capture the essence of the quest for the perfect woman. The earlier version directed by Bryan Forbes is often viewed as a popularization of some of the most persistent concerns of the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and early 1970s (Silver 60). The adaptation closely follows the novel, which was written to satirize the anti-feminist attitudes that elicited the writing of Betty Friedan’s manifesto, *The Feminist Mystique* (1963). The film’s remake—directed by Frank Oz and starring Nicole Kidman, came out in 2004 and can be seen as a popularization and key-influencing factor of a 1950s retro aesthetic fashionable at the time. This newer version, although released during an era that considers itself to have moved forward significantly from Betty

Friedan's time, still takes on the same themes, but lacks the subtlety and tact of its predecessor with new scenes that make unnecessary jokes of women's bodies.

In both Forbes' and Oz's versions of *The Stepford Wives*, satire is used to elicit a fear that machines will eventually replace women and render them obsolete, warning the viewer not to let that happen. In narrating the story of a community of men who turn their wives into robots, *The Stepford Wives* derides the traditional roles women are assigned in a patriarchal society. Considered by Anna Krugovoy Silver to be a "science fiction rewrite" of *The Feminist Mystique*, both films are critical of the pressure on women to maintain perfect households and to be perfect wives and mothers (60). However, as science fiction and fantasy, the films also function as wish-fulfillment mechanisms for male spectators who, after taking in the fembot eye-candy, take pleasure in the visualization of a world in which female robots are allowed to co-exist with their male creators. In fact, the satirical, ironic and comedic characteristics of the films help to buffer and disguise the visual derision of women and their bodies. Women are turned into fembots for the superficial purpose of making a point, but in their tenure as fembots they are visually dissected, treated like lesser beings, and put to work like slaves. The guise of satire and comedy allow women and their bodies to be represented detrimentally with little admonishment or criticism.

In Forbes' and Oz's versions of *The Stepford Wives*, the camera is drawn to the woman's body, visually establishing a marked distinction between the human woman and the robot woman. In Forbes' film, the viewer is constantly treated to images of Joanna's body, which is without makeup or bra, and the buxom bodies of the other Stepford wives who are already robots. In the ending of the film, when Joanna meets her uncanny robot

double, the distinction is even clearer. The human Joanna is disheveled and dressed in slacks, while the robot Joanna is dressed in a transparent negligee with her noticeably larger breasts, tiny waist, and perfectly made up face and hair in full view. The viewer is invited to gaze upon the robot Joanna as the camera slowly moves from top to bottom in a seductive once-over of her semi-naked body. In Oz's version, the difference between the human women and the robot women are also similarly conveyed through the physical. The human Joanna has cropped, dark hair, and is always dressed in severe black clothing, while her robot peers are blonde, dressed in frilly skirts and dresses, and equipped with inflatable breasts. Though these distinctions are necessary as a part of the narrative, illustrating the drastic transformation from human to robot, they still invite the spectator to partake in the visual consumption of the female body. The newer version of *The Stepford Wives* is particularly guilty of inviting the spectator to visually consume the female body, for unlike its predecessor it is less of a horror movie and more of a comedy. It uses physical gags quite similar to those used in films like *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* and the *Austin Powers* trilogy. For example, in the scene where Joanna, Bobbie and Roger walk into Sarah Sunderson's home unbeknownst to the owners, Roger picks up the remote control that controls Sarah and unknowingly presses a button that increases and decreases the size of her breasts. This visual enlargement of the breasts is only visible to the viewer of the film, for none of the characters in the scene are privy to the show. This is quite obviously meant to be funny, for Sarah's body inflates like a cartoon character's, and then she falls down the stairs. In one of the scenes at the home of the Stepford Men's Association, Walter is first introduced to the idea of turning women into robots. One of the men calls forth his wife, gives her a plastic card, and asks for twenty

dollars. The woman sticks the card into her mouth, pulls it out, and then spits out twenty one-dollar bills. This representation of woman as an ATM machine is not only demeaning, but it is also nothing more than a gag, for it serves no other purpose than to allow the viewer to laugh at or take pleasure in the sight. It appears to serve a purpose in the plot, however, enabling Walter to experience the kind of technological capabilities the Stepford men possess, but its presence is neither in the novel nor in Forbes' adaptation and is not required to get the point across.

The fembot functions as a kind of vehicle that allows the visual representation of the female body on many levels. Because the fembot is not human, all kinds of things can be done to her body without consequence, and when it is done in the name of comedy or satire, a kind of deception occurs. Under the cloak of comedy and satire there appear to be no boundaries to what can be said or done. When tricks, gags and lascivious gazes are performed on the fembot in film, because it is funny or ironic, the viewer is encouraged to think nothing of it. *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* is "supposed" to be a parody of the spy genre, and so it is therefore necessary to treat fembots and women's bodies like chattel. Or, *Austin Powers* is a critical commentary on the ways in which masculinity and femininity have been constructed in James Bond films, and so it is necessary to exaggerate the ways in which women were represented there. *The Stepford Wives* examines "the plight of the dissatisfied middle-class housewife," parodies "the fetishization of housework," and focuses on "the constructedness and artificiality of female beauty," so its blatant sexualization of the female body and its crude depiction of the function of the female body are justified (Silver 60). All of these films perpetuate a distorted image of the female body. Each film plays with women's bodies as if they were

toys—blowing them up, subjecting them to torture, changing their physical attributes—all in the name of comedy and entertainment. Even though these films are critical of the cultural norms they poke fun at, by reproducing the same images they cement them further in the existing cultural discourse. The fembot acts as a stunt figure with which to do this, and thus, in her servitude, accomplishes yet another function.

Conclusion

As a complex site of multiple meanings, the fembot figure in film plays a crucial role in understanding human desire. More than anything, the fembot functions as an object of desire. The desire to be loved unconditionally, to be sexually satisfied, to have one's needs taken care of, to eliminate one's fears, to conquer the world, to be obeyed, and to be entertained—these are the male desires realized by the creation of fembots. As a machine in the shape of a woman's body, the fembot fuses the two things that are most fetishized in a Western, industrialized society—technology and the female body. By combining these, men transform women into objects over which they have full control. Like Pygmalion, who “saw so much to blame in women that he came at last to abhor the sex,” men created women of their dreams, infusing in them all the hopes and desires for a better life and future (Bulfinch). Yet like Pandora, these “false” women often disappoint.

In North America, under a patriarchal society, women are consistently taught to look a certain way, behave a certain way, and to be a certain way. The quest for the perfect woman is everywhere in Western culture. In her repeated appearances in popular culture and in film, the fembot acts as a metaphor for the greater problems in contemporary society. That the term “fembot” has expanded to encompass a greater meaning is in many ways indicative of how societal norms are perpetuated. An artificial woman that can be tailored to a man's preferences and needs, the fembot is also a reflection of the lengths to which women must go to meet a man's preferences and needs. The fembot is the ultimate ideal and the ultimate scapegoat at the same time, a site where sex, technology, and destruction interact, and a fetish object like no other. The fembot, a product of a sex-obsessed, consumer driven, and technology worshipping culture,

continues to thrive as we continue to search for happiness and fulfillment. Men continue to seek out the perfect woman, and women continue in their attempts to become that woman, for what men and women both desire the most is love.

While fembots exist in fantasy most of the time, they exist in other manifestations outside of film, fiction and art. The current craze for cosmetic surgery is fueled by a desire to preserve youth as well as attain a physical appearance that is considered beautiful by today's standards. Television programs such as *The Swan* churn out woman after woman with the same kinds of physical augmentations, molded to fit a standard of beauty that is uniform. Advertisements, magazines, and other products of a consumer culture constantly remind women that physical appearance is important, and that no sacrifice for beauty is too great. The popularity of media icons such as Martha Stewart and the proliferation of housekeeping-related television programs, magazines, and more are fueled by a desire to achieve a *Stepford*-like quality of domestic life and an orderly household. The increasing number of reality "makeover" shows on television reminds women that every aspect of their lives can be improved. And as pornography and a sex-obsessed culture continue to thrive, the demand for sex advice, *Cosmopolitan*-like magazines, and all kinds of "how-to" books encourage women to become the perfect sexual partner, telling them that what men really want is a young, sexy woman who will be a "maid in the living room, a cook in the kitchen, and a whore in the bedroom." The drive towards perfection is ultimately the pressure to conform, and when all the women of the world succeed in becoming the perfect woman, they will cease to be human and will remain mindless robots controlled by men.

The more elusive perfection remains, the more relentless the desire to achieve that perfection becomes. As science and technology continue to seek out the ideal prototype for artificial women that could very well make fembots available to mass consumers, women are continually encouraged to adhere to fembot-like behavior in their day-to-day lives. Science fiction often seems so farfetched and so distant from the ordinary and the everyday, but as a product of the human imagination it can often reveal the innermost desires and the secret fears of a seemingly conservative society. Many robot fetishists insist that their desire for robotic women is only a fantasy, and not something they would pursue in reality. They are also often embarrassed of their fetish and believe themselves to be a tiny minority in a world filled with “normal” people. But perhaps they are the only ones who admit to and recognize their desires. Until men and women acknowledge, understand, and confront their deepest fears and desires, the fembot will continue to appear on many levels—allowing women and their bodies to be interminably mechanized, sexualized, dismembered, abused, destroyed and held to impossible standards within the cultural discourse of Western civilization. The quest for the perfect woman is like searching for the Holy Grail—what is important is not whether or not the object exists, but rather the reasons that propel us to seek it out and the things we learn along the way.

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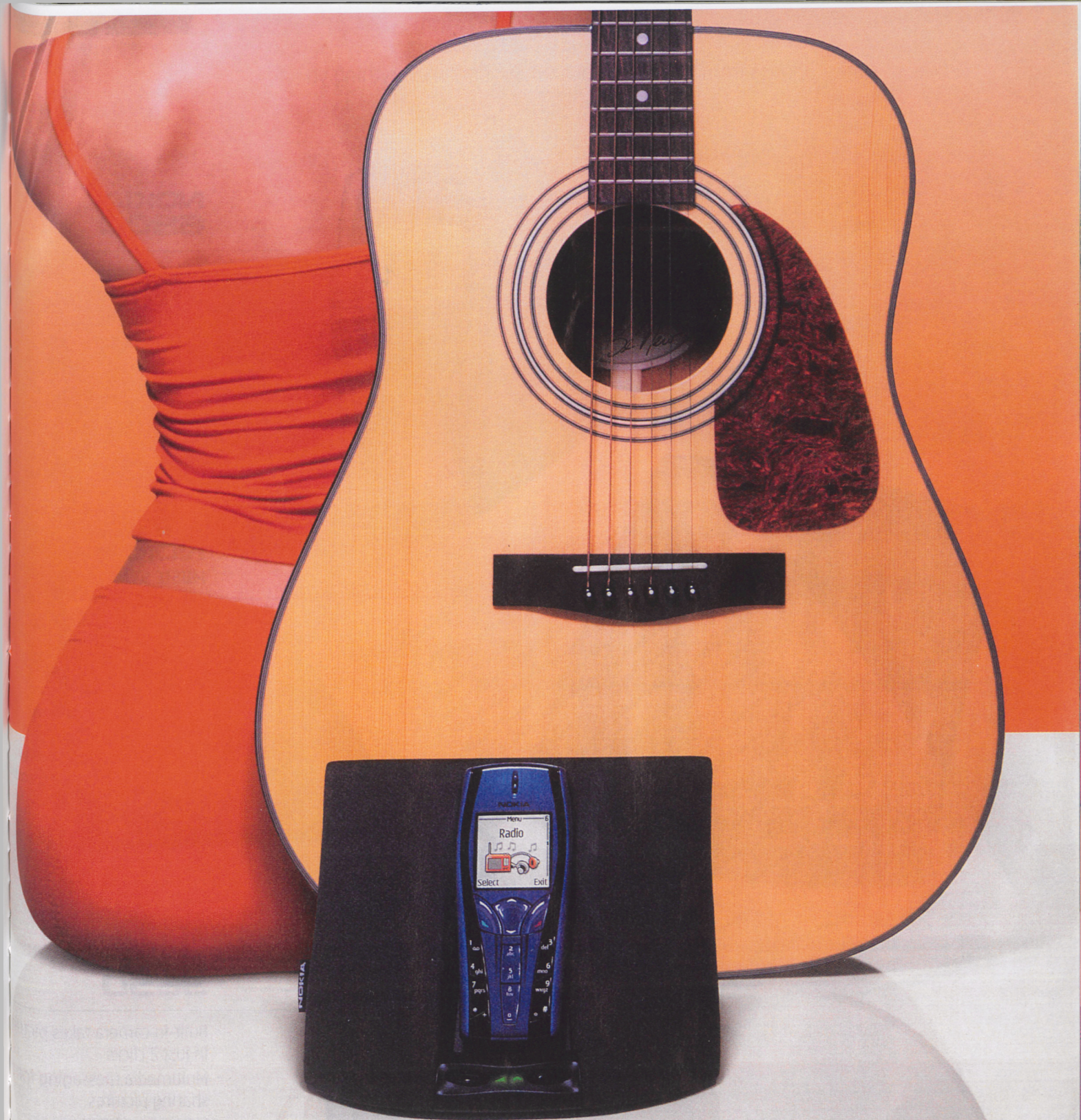
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