

# KANT AVEC SADE: A GHOST IN THE SHELL?

## Introduction

In a blazing assault on the foundations of enlightenment values and rationality, Lacan's *Kant avec Sade* attempts to read D.A.F. de Sade, the infamous French Marquis, as the consummate Kantian and in doing so, uncover the structural logic (and inconsistencies) underpinning both the virgin philosopher of old Königsberg and the libertine novelist's ethics.

Published just 8 years after Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir* details the depraved acts inflicted by a band of libertines on their virtuous and beautiful victim Eugénie de Mistival, and is, Lacan argues, not just an extension of Kant's ethics, but in fact its completion. Sade shows us the disturbing truth of Kantian ethics that Kant himself had failed to recognize or admit. But rather than the more obvious route of trying to prove the existence of "bad intentions" in the Kantian categorical imperative, however, Lacan is more interested in locating a solid adherence to an ethical maxim in the Sadean fantasy.

For Kant the ultimate objective of the moral law is the realization of the supreme good, the point at which virtue and happiness coincide. But by renouncing all emotional factors such as sympathy or compassion as "pathological" in the moral realm, Kant paved the way for a system of ethics which exposed the true and hideous face of jouissance and its structuring as the other side of the law. Kant proposes the establishment of a law which excludes any consideration of the relation between subject and object, and the capacity for the latter to produce pleasure or

displeasure in the former, but rather is based upon the extent to which the subject's will is in accordance with an a priori law.

Following this logic, Lacan (2006) is able to discern in the barbaric and licentious acts of Sade's libertines a certain adherence to a strict moral code which is articulated in the form of a maxim, which when enunciated takes as its foundation the acknowledgment of the other's supreme right to dominion over one's body, such that:

"I have the right to enjoy your body", anyone can say to me "and I will exercise this right without any limit to the capriciousness of the exactions I may wish to satiate with your body" (p. 248).

In highlighting the position of the enunciated "I" in this maxim as *not* the subject but the voice of law, Lacan proceeds to analyze its value as a universal and unconditional categorical imperative. Crucially it is the non-reciprocal nature of this edict that is significant. In the Sadean universe the right to *jouissance* is dependent upon the non-negotiable inequality between victim and aggressor in any sexual configuration and thereby all forms of social interaction.

However, in light of our increasingly technologically mediated and "tailor-made" relationships, the question of sexual enjoyment and ethics has become ever more problematized. As cultural fantasies about "robotic sex" draws closer to our grasp, we must ask what the future entails for these new configurations of sexuality and Artificial Intelligence? Whilst the likes of Elon Musk's *Neuralink*, *DeepMind* and philosophers such as Nick Bostrom (2014) consider the implications of AI and Robotics for our legal system, culture, politics and human relationships, they fail to attend to the complex question of the *ethics of enjoyment*. Lacan's groundbreaking contribution to the ethical debate *Kant avec Sade* on the other hand, whilst well-used in the literature on psychoanalytic ethics, has yet to be employed in relation to the (female) robot and its significance in human relationships. As sex becomes further "technologized" we are forced to inquire after the structure of enjoyment that drives it.

This paper will attempt to imagine how a reading of *Kant avec Sade* alongside Rupert Sanders' 2017 film *Ghost in the Shell* can preemptively decipher the foundations of a future ethics that will derive from individualized relationships with forms of embodied Artificial Intelligence, given that the law and jouissance are for Lacan inexorably connected. Since the growing intervention of AI in social and sexual configurations dramatically changes the very stakes and scope of the law, it is a domain of ethics in complete overhaul. Furthermore, *Ghost in the Shell*, I will argue, reveals the Sadean universe residing inside the seemingly most innocuous fantasies of robot bodies that prevail in contemporary culture. As developers and research units seek to legislate for Artificial Intelligence and "Robot Ethics", the other side of the law as human jouissance, comes conspicuously into view. How, for example, do Asimov's famous three Laws of Robotics, which seem to resemble the current prevalent discourse on AI ethics, immediately provoke dissonance with Sade's ethical edict as mentioned above? We will recall that in *I, Robot* Asimov's Laws state:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm;
2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law; and
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

Lacan already demonstrated how the ethical law, when it comes to matters of human enjoyment, is very much more complicated than it may first appear, so how is this further problematized in the domain of AI? If Sade's libertines' fantasies of a perpetual victim grow out of their fascination with the "second death", the inescapable law of castration, how would the "immortality" of the female robot body, and potential for endless torment, feature as a mode of fantasy for the desires of the libertines? What kind of ethics can be built around the assumption of a subject who does not know castration and who, supposedly, cannot suffer? And is the "sex-robot" the Sadean ethical imperative incarnate? The reading of *Ghost in the Shell*, crucially allows us to stage the mutual haunting of two diametrically

opposed philosophers through the fantasy of the female robot as *undead subject*.

### **Sexual Dis-Harmony**

Lacan objected strongly to the idea forwarded by many thinkers after World War II (including the French publisher Jean Jacques Pauvert, Maurice Blanchot and Simone De Beauvoir among others) that Sade's libertine novels foreshadowed Freudian Psychoanalysis (Nobus, 2019). Instead, as Nobus points out, Lacan argued that Sade's works should be situated within the history of ethics and that he ought to be considered as moral philosopher above all else. He argues that:

'If there is a link at all between Sade and Freud it has nothing to do, then, with the former anticipating the latter but merely with the latter being able to formulate his fundamental 'scientific' concept of the 'pleasure principle' and especially its ostensible contradiction - the fact that one can experience pleasure in one's own and someone else's pain - because Sade had somehow prepared the ethical ground for it' (p. 115).

So, you may ask, what does this have to do with automated female bodies (and the anxiety, fascination, and repulsion they provoke)? Sex-robots are a relatively new phenomenon, which as it stands bring to mind rubbery and uncanny looking dolls that may perform rudimentary sexual acts and, in some sophisticated versions, entertain the user with small talk and bad jokes. This, however, does not begin to reflect the meaning of the term sex-robot when applied to our fantasmatic imaginings of them, which has been developing in culture, literature, television and film over decades, Descartes himself having allegedly been one of the earliest dilettantes of the "art" (he purportedly had a robotic version of his late daughter Francine whom he took everywhere with him, supposedly not for sexual motives but the question of female automation is already well under way in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century).

In reference to sex-robots, I am therefore dealing with the significance of, on the one hand, actual sex-robots that exist commercially and of which only some arguably superficial

critiques exists in academic literature<sup>1</sup>, but more fundamentally I argue that the *concept* of the sex-robot, when taken to its speculative zenith, combines the *extimate*<sup>2</sup> notions of enjoyment and the law via the challenge to subjectivity that Artificial Intelligence poses. The sex-robot furthermore presents us with the very kernel of the ethical foundation of the pleasure/pain dichotomy epitomized in the Sadean maxim which stipulates the other's right to enjoyment over ones' own body, and by extension our own compulsion to experience this submission to the other's will or our domination over it.

*Abyss Creations* – previously *Realbotix*, but now known as *RealDollX* – are currently the company creating the most advanced forms of sex-robot, whose poster girl *Harmony* will be familiar to anyone who has taken even a passing interest in this phenomenon, appearing as she has in numerous TV documentaries and online articles. These humanoid figures come equipped with sophisticated Artificial Intelligence applications that allow their user (or should we say partner) to engage in basic conversation and even a bit of minor banter; and of course no-holds/holes-barred sexual intercourse. Their bodies are fully customizable – hair, eyes, skins, breast size and shape, choice of nipples, numerous vagina fittings – and even the particular regional accent are at the discretion of the purchaser. There are a variety of personalities too, including options from sensual, insecure, jealous, talkative, affectionate, cheerful, helpful, unpredictable, spiritual, funny, moody, sensual and even intellectual. But ultimately, if what you want is a rape or torture scenario, you can have it, despite what kind of personality you endow your sex-robot with.

As the first ever manufacturers of intelligent custom-made sex-robots, the mission statement of *Abyss Creations* is:

‘[T]he result of a dream shared by Matt McMullen, Daxtron labs and NextOS who bring their best efforts and individual

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Richardson (2018), and Devlin (2018) for opposing takes on the matter.

<sup>2</sup> Extimacy, a portmanteau of exterior and intimate, is a word first coined by Lacan in his seventh seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Although he does not take the concept up explicitly in any of his seminars, the logic of extimacy, following Miller (1998), can be said to underpin the structure of the Lacanian project at large; an intimate exteriorization and structural moebius strip.

specialties to collaborate creating the world's first practical and affordable human like robot' (Realbotix, available online).

But what is the navel of their dream, the intractable *real* that their project aims at? It is no great insight to see that the aim is to create the illusion of “women” (and some men) who exist only for the pleasure of their users, and indeed to continue to create increasingly life-like models that give their users an uncannily real experience. So, the question is what really *would be* the ultimate sex-robot? When would they become *too* human? Is it as the RealdollX website suggests a simulacrum of intimacy that means you will “never be lonely again”, or just the fantasy of another being who you can abuse and not be restricted, judged nor penalized? A way to escape guilt? To know oneself and one's desires better? Or simply the thrill of the illusion of transgressing the (human) law? Or, perhaps more fundamentally, it is not an illusion at all for some users, but rather the sexual access to a body without a “soul” is actually the real erotic prize? In other words, an *undead body*.

It is of course impossible to say on spec, what any individual experiences in using a sex-robot, but as it stands there is one significant difference between the use of a sex-robot and a human prostitute; one of them can enjoy, can suffer and can die. So clearly in terms of examining the Sadean imperative, actually existing sex-robots do little to push the boundaries of human ethics. For Sade, remember, to be in conformity with the moral law one must follow the maxim as outlined at the start, which contains within it an injunction to both victim and aggressor. As Lacan (2006) posits in contrast to Kant's practical reason, the Sadean moral experience revolves entirely around jouissance:

‘[J]ouissance is that by which Sadean experience is modified. For it only proposes to instate itself at the inmost core of the subject whom it provokes beyond that by offending his sense of modesty’ (p. 651).

As Nobus (2019) goes on to elaborate:

On the side of the libertine aggressor the will to jouissance is as absolute as the victims will to resist should be. Because of this, the latter's suffering will always be the former's delight

and the latter's agonizing disgrace will always be the former's cherished immodesty

(p.124)

As Nobus explains, Lacan's point here is that as the object of the moral law is materialized in the figure of the libertine tormentor, it loses its Kantian inaccessibility. As distinct from the Kantian moral law as outside the realm of sensory experience, in the Sadean view the law is an abstract point of emission, which nevertheless presents itself as a disembodied voice, heard but not seen and always to be obeyed. Unlike for Kant, for the libertines however this disembodied voice of law is not God, as Kant could not possibly conceive of the possibility of the *jouissance* of God (ibid, p. 126). Since they themselves occupy the position of Gods, rather it is *nature itself* that determines their actions. As Dolmancé puts it, whilst waiting for his victim Eugénie to regain consciousness after a bout of torturous activities:

‘If as merely the blind instruments of its inspirations, nature ordered us to set the universe ablaze, the sole crime would be to resist! And all the scoundrels on earth are purely the agents of nature's caprices’ (Sade, 2006, p.168).

The “tragedy” though for the libertines is that no matter how heinous or depraved their actions, their *jouissance* is but a pale imitation of the imagined enjoyment they would receive from executing the perfect crime; that is, of eternal suffering inflicted on their victims, along with their eternal ability to witness it and perhaps more fundamentally the fantasy of their own death. Of course, the obvious barrier to this possibility is the brute fact of the limitations of the human body and its ability to endure torment and destruction. So, as Lacan (2006) puts it, the libertines have to admit that:

‘[T]he humility of an act in which he cannot help but become a being of flesh and to the very marrow, a slave to pleasure’ (p. 652).

In other words, the libertines when all is said and done, can never achieve the full satisfaction they desire because it is always thwarted by the very human cycles of excitement and orgasm that are ultimately and inevitably always returning back to a state of

equilibrium. So, could we not say that the ultimate pleasure for the libertine is in fact not just death, but immortality, *to be the undead*. In which case perhaps the libertine would not wish to have a sex-robot, but *to be one*?

Clearly then, the sex-robot as a *concept* (not merely a tool or an invention), which I would argue it is, cannot be fully explored with recourse to reality, and of course why should it be, given that the very notion of a sex-robot is one that puts fantasy into play as the *raison d'être* of these “artificial” creatures. That is to say the logic of the ethics of enjoyment is revealed by our fascination with automated and inhuman (yet usually female) sexual companions. So, given the current limitation to the technological advancement of Artificial Intelligence, to put the conceptual question of the ethics of the sex-robot to the test I turn now to science-fiction.

### **Undead Suffering**

Rupert Sanders' 2017 film *Ghost in the Shell* adapted from the Japanese Manga series of the same name features the cybernetic female body and depicts its relationship to memory and trauma. The film allows us to examine the question of the body and suffering in relation to AI, and ask how the Sadean imperative may help us to understand our fascination with the fantasy of an automated female body. I could equally use examples from the films *Ex Machina* or *Bladerunner 2049*,<sup>3</sup> but by avoiding the explicit reference to sexual or romantic relations with Artificial Intelligences as the latter two films explore, I hope to highlight something fundamental about the question of the *undead body* as bearer of subjectivity and its capacity for suffering, which for our analysis of Sadean sex robot ethics is paramount.

*Ghost in the Shell* depicts a near dystopian future where virtuality and Artificial Intelligence have reached a state of sophistication such that the everyday texture of reality is interspersed with simulations and holograms, much like a walk through a Baudrillardian video game. The skyscrapers of what is in fact Hong Kong compete for dominance with giant holographic heads addressing the citizens with various commands,

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<sup>3</sup> As I do elsewhere (Millar, 2018 and forthcoming).



advertisements and provocations. Humans live alongside AI's in multiple forms of embodiment both humanoid and monstrous.

Like so many recent cinematic visions of cyborgian life, we are enthralled by a beautiful feminine protagonist; in this case, it is Scarlett Johansen portraying the character of anti-terrorism operative *Major Killian*. Killian is supposedly neither human nor AI. After an accident which destroyed her human body, she has been reanimated from the merging of her brain with an entirely synthetic body. She is presented to us as a perfect specimen of what Hollywood tells us woman should be: eternally young, beautiful, strong, perpetually naked and, of course, alabaster white<sup>4</sup>. According to the CEO of *Hanka Robotics*, Killian is a weapon in the fight against the threat of a new kind of cyber-terrorism which can hack into AI and human brains and perform mind control. She is told that due to her unique combination of human and non-human qualities she represents a new dawn for civilization. In effect Killian is a last bastion against the complete algorithmic takeover of humanity, whose relevance and efficiency is waning.

Given the progressive redundancy of the fragile and fallible biological body, Killian is, her designer Dr. Ouelet tells her “what we will all become”. Noticing Killian is clearly experiencing distress, her doctor is concerned for Killian's psychological wellbeing, even though she suffers multiple physical assaults which leave her temporarily incapacitated she does not seem to suffer any bodily pain. Suffering from occasional glitches in her own memories, she starts to experience visions of what she is led to believe are faults in her programming. When she first awakes from her transformation into a cyborg, Killian asks why she can't feel he body. Dr. Ouelet explains that her body could not be saved after a tragic boat accident which killed her whole family, and that she now has an entirely synthetic, yet supercharged new shell. Her brain, however, is completely intact.

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<sup>4</sup> Given the original Manga story was set in Japan the character of Major Killian was of course Japanese, leading to accusations of Hollywood whitewashing in the casting of Scarlett Johansen. The defence was given that, since the body of Killian was augmented, she was therefore not bound to being Japanese. Which ultimately only served to highlight the implicit superiority given to the white body as chosen for Killian's reincarnation.

Major Killian is sent to hunt for a hacker who is terrorizing Hanka Robotics. After a robotic geisha is hacked and starts a killing spree at a Hanka business conference Killian is sent in “neutralize” the Geisha. After which she defies protocol and decides to take a dangerous virtual deep dive into the AI of the defunct Geisha to see what she can retrieve from its memories. Here she discovers the author of the hack: Kuze. After Major is eventually captured by Kuze, he reveals that he was himself a test case of the same type as Major Killian, and there were many other before her. She discovers that the story she was told about her “origins” – i.e. that her life was saved after an accident and her brain uploaded into a new, more sophisticated, non-biological body – was all a lie. In fact, Killian’s life was “stolen”. It becomes clear though, through the visions she experiences as “glitches”, that her own memories have resisted complete annihilation after her organic brain was uploaded in her new synthetic body. It turns out she and Kuze were in fact young anti-augmentation activists who had run away from home. Posing a threat to political order, they were killed by a new and menacing technocratic regime that erased their memories in the hope of turning them into ultimate fighting machines in the service of the state. In revenge Kuze wants to create a super network of human-AI consciousness all connected to a central “brain” and implores Killian to join with him. She refuses, however, intent on retrieving her subjectivity and goes about a mission to recover her lost memories.

In a world where AIs are instrumentalized in a biopolitical regime of domination over humans, obeying orders without room for subversion, Major Killian holds out the possibility of a refusal of authority over her remaining humanity, albeit bolstered by a superhuman cybernetic body. Through it all, it seems Killian retains hold of her subject position and resists total assimilation into an automated and machinic life form.

But what may we glean from the depiction of the augmented female body in its relation to questions of the subjectivity of Killian? How does the film deal with the problem of Killian’s “lost” past? And what are we to make of the fact that whenever she engages in combat, she mysteriously loses her clothing and fights with a completely bare silicone body? Is it for her own pleasure or for the opponents? What is Killian’s relationship to her body? Does she feel physical sensation? And if

not, how does she operate in a physical world if her body can feel nothing? In other words, in what ways does the character of Major Killian speak to the question of sexualization in relation to the Sadean Universe of *undead* enjoyment?

It is notable that the film contains no sexual or romantic interactions, but mostly naked fight scenes. Apart from this there is a very short sequence where Killian accosts a human prostitute and takes her inside her room for the briefest moment of sapphic face touching. Her clothes do not come off for this, however. Why, in a film which has clearly chosen an actress known for her sex appeal, and in which she is depicted nude on the poster, does it not contain any actual sexual or romantic activity? Most likely not for the sake of modesty. Perhaps this lacuna represents a deliberate attempt to make Killian seem less human? Ironically though it is precisely this lack of overt sexuality, yet her condition of pseudo-nakedness when in combat, that reveals her subjectivity as all the more traumatic.

What do I mean by this? Here, with reference to the Sadean predicament it is useful to take the Lacanian approach and instead of inquiring after a soul or indeed consciousness, two very nebulous and ideologically loaded concepts, ask instead about the *subject* and the *enjoying body*. It seems that what is retained by Killian after her reanimation is her *subject position*, an indelible stain in the fabric of reality that cannot be substituted nor lost no matter what memories (conscious or unconscious) are erased by her physical designers. However, she appears strangely devoid of enjoyment, given that she cannot feel any physical sensation. But is this really the case? Can it be that Killian does in fact enjoy? And if so, in what is this enjoyment constituted? Like so many depictions of female robots, is what we are in fact being asked to imagine an articulation of *feminine jouissance*, the logic of which escapes castration? It would seem her primary source of suffering though still revolves around an originary loss. An impossible object that her reincarnated body still mourns after. It is no surprise then that the film ends with Killian being reunited with her mother, her original lost object.

This is just one of the many cinematic instances where the female body is put to work in pursuit of an answer to the question of the relationship between sex and the law. Major Killian's

subjectivity is of course intimately bound to her embodiment. Hence why, only when she is fulfilling her purpose as “ultimate weapon”, she is naked and eroticized? A banal and trite point about female representation in cinema perhaps, but there is something more significant behind this. Major Killian is not just a sexualized female body in this film she is a super-human one and in examining the idea of the superhuman, we may thereby understand something about the Sadean ethics of sexuality.

### **Lost Enjoyment**

Perhaps we should recall Freud’s notion of the *Prosthetic God*, which he never directly related to the question of sexualization but nevertheless to castration. In *Civilization and its Discontents* he (2004) writes:

Man has become, so to speak a [prosthetic] god with artificial limbs. He is quite impressive when he puts on all his auxiliary organs, but they have not become part of him and give him a good deal of trouble on occasion ... Distant ages will bring with them new and probably unimaginable achievements in this field of civilization and so enhance his godlike nature. But in the interests of our investigations, let us also remember that modern man does not feel happy with his godlike nature

(p. 36-37)

It may seem like Freud is articulating the familiar sci-fi anxiety over the future impingement of technology onto the human body but in fact he is saying something more nuanced than it first appears, contrary to how some critics have understood his position. For example, the philosopher of technology Bernard Steigler (2014) accuses Freud of not quite getting the significance of the technical object. But rather it is Steigler who, I would argue, completely misses the point of Freud’s use of the prosthetic God when he states that:

This Prosthetic destiny does not arise in the twentieth century as we might think from a cursory reading of *Civilization and its Discontents*, but represents the originary default of the origin that is the *originary murder* of the father by the weapon that is all technics. And the first of these technics is

the knife, that of *Totem and Taboo* just as much as that of the sacrifice of Isaac, but which Freud, not knowing how, was unable to think.

(p. 12).

What Stiegler fails to appreciate here I would argue is the logic of castration which is precisely the originary murder that Freud (1913) was alluding to in *Totem and Taboo*. While Steigler accuses Freud of not going far back enough in his theory of the technical object it is in fact Stiegler who does not go nearly far enough. The knife which kills the father is not in fact the first technics, which indeed Freud knew only too well and is why he had to resort to the medium of myth to express his conceptual point. What Freud understood to be the first of all technics, although he perhaps would not have put it that way, was sexuality. As we know the originary murder staged in *Totem and Taboo* is also the intractable antagonism giving form to the non-existent sexual relation and its resultant masculine and feminine modes of enjoyment (Lacan, 1998).

Far from predicting a possible time where humans will be replaced by some perfect God-like version of themselves that is all-powerful and all-knowing (in the form of Kurzweil's singularity for example), Freud recognises the inherent fantasmatic structure of this prosthetic God. Freud is in effect acknowledging the fact that the human *is human* by virtue of his inability to find satisfaction through his auxiliary organs. These organs will only ever circulate hopelessly around their partial drive objects. Much in the same way that Stiegler (1994) hypothesizes the technicity of being as predicated on the founding myth of the fault of Epimetheus, Freud had perceived a certain deficit or fault in the human whose existence was sustained by a perpetual prosthesis. It is of course Lacan who will pin down explicitly what Freud is getting at in his fantasy of the originary lost object. The m/other (or *das Ding*) is one way of understanding this lost object, but there is another, more precise even, way of understanding the structural significance of the postulation of the human drives, oral, anal, scopic and invocatory and their relation to the body and the fantasy of immortality.

The fantasy of the undead body that *Ghost in the Shell* depicts is described by Lacan in *Position of the Unconscious* (2006) and *Seminar XI* (1977) where he speaks of the mythical *l'hommelette* or “manlet”. He then further characterises it as the *lamella*, that strange amoeba that leaves the body at the time of birth when the child is separated from the placenta. He (2006) asks us to imagine a phantom ‘infinitely more primal form of life’ that would take flight away from the new-born (p. 717). This crêpe-like form is the remainder of the subject before it becomes sexed:

Whenever the membranes of the egg in which the foetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken, imagine for a moment that something flies off, and that one can do it with an egg as easily as with a man, namely the *hommelette*, or the *lamella*.

The *lamella* is something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba. It is just a little more complicated. But it goes everywhere. And as it is something – I will tell you shortly why – that is related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality, it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal – because it survives any division, and scissiparous intervention. And it can turn around. Well! This is not very reassuring. But suppose it comes and envelopes your face while you are quietly asleep...I can't see how we would not join battle with a being capable of these properties. But it would not be a very convenient battle. This *lamella*, this organ, whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ – I can give you more details as to its zoological place – is the libido. It is the libido, qua pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction. And it is of this that all the forms of the objet a that can be enumerated are the representatives, the equivalents'

(Lacan, 2004, p. 197-198).

So, the lamella has no sensory system in other words it has no need for partial drives oral, anal, scopic or invocatory, synthesizing all these aspects into one complete plenitude of pure satisfaction, wholeness and presence. It exists purely in the real with no need for symbolic mediation, and “thus has an advantage over us men who must provide ourselves with a homunculus in our heads in order to turn that real into a reality” (Lacan, 2006, p. 717).

The manlet or lamella is indestructible, immortal and undead. In other words, the lamella is libido. Pure enjoyment; a logical impossibility of course, yet whose originary loss provides the formal conditions for the structure of the sexed being. The lamella is the undead life force that the prosthetic god attempts to replicate but will never capture. As Žižek (2010) puts it paraphrasing Lacan, the lamella does not exist, it *insists* (p. 226).

The myth of the lamella, we could say, is the very thing that inhabits the eschatological fantasies of the “singularity”, that moment when human-kind is replaced by an immortal and indestructible digital form of life. This problematic phenomenon is arguably what we find manifested in the *lathouse*, a device for siphoning off enjoyment, that Lacan briefly discusses in *Seminar XVII*.

The relationship between technological forms of life and sexuality is indexed then, upon a certain mode of enjoyment. As *Ghost in the Shell* epitomises, the character of Major Killian serves as a perfect vessel to reunite the feminine subject back with the lamella, in the guise of an undead silicone fighting machine. But ultimately this, as with all attempts at breaching castration, fails. So, what is it in the subject that remains indestructible? Is it the lamella? If Major Killian retains her subjectivity despite the complete replacement of her body and her memories are virtually replaced in what sense is she traumatised by the event of her physical death?

### **Conclusion: A Sex-Robot Ethics?**

Here it is useful to bring in Malabou’s and Žižek’s debate over the post-traumatic subject. In *The New Wounded*, Malabou (2012) criticizes the Freudo-Lacanian paradigm of unconscious

trauma on the basis that it cannot possibly grasp the radical change of a subject who has faced a massive brain injury which effectively erases all memory and as it were “resets the program”. In this case, she argues, it would be impossible to apply the logic of Freudian trauma which operates via a double inscription. That is to say, the initial occurrence of the trauma is not registered as trauma for the subject but only becomes traumatic when a subsequent experience imbues this previous event with meaning and causes suffering to the subject. The error she is making according to Žižek is that, in focusing so much on the traumatic content of the supposed erasure of all memories, she omits the trauma of the erasure of all positive content that *is subjectivity itself*. In other words, a radical trauma in the form of a massive brain damage would reveal the pure empty form of subjectivity. The form which remains when all positive content is removed:

‘precisely insofar as it erases the entire substantial content, the traumatic shock *repeats* the past, ie. the past traumatic loss of substance which is constitutive of the very dimension of subjectivity. *What is repeated here is not some ancient content, but the very gesture of erasing all substantial content*. This is why, when one submits a human subject to a traumatic intrusion, the outcome is the empty form of the ‘living-dead’ subject... [W]hat remains after the violent traumatic intrusion into a human subject which erases all its substantial content is the pure form of subjectivity, the form which must have already been there’

(Žižek, 2016, p. 339).

So, when Major Killian awakes from her traumatic experience of total brain erasure and complete bodily substitution, the trauma she is exposed to is not the loss of subjectivity but in effect the stripping out of her objective substantialized content revealing the empty form of her as subject. When the memories of her past life appear to her they are traumatic insofar as they intrude as if from nowhere into the empty space of subjectivity. Killian is suddenly exposed to the effects of castration, moving from undead subject back to the trauma of birth and the realm of the living.



To return to Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, the action also centers around the complete erasure of a previous form of subjectivity and the explosive discovery of new forms of jouissance of the "exquisite" female protagonist Eugénie de Mistival. It is significant furthermore that her primary cause of suffering and indeed the victim of the culmination of her most depraved fantasy is her own mother. It is her mother whose unbearable (and hypocritical) virtuousness causes Eugénie to be caught between her own so called "natural" desires and passions and the restrictions put upon her by polite society. As Dolmancé explains to her during her sexual "education":

Did her mother think about Eugénie when she brought her into the world? The hussy let herself get fucked because she enjoyed it, but she was quite far from envisioning a daughter. So let Eugénie do whatever she likes to that woman! Let's give her free rein, and let's content ourselves with assuring that no matter how extreme her excesses, she'll never be guilty of a crime

(Sade, 2006, p. 57)

Horribly it is with the rape and torture of her mother that Eugénie supposedly fulfills her ultimate desire. Whilst of course Killian does nothing of the sort, the character of Dr. Ouelet who fulfills the role of Killian's new mother being her "designer", is blamed and killed by Hanka CEO Cutter once Killian has "gone rogue". But Killian's relationship to her 'real' mother is one of pure enigma. Her biological mother ties her to her human mortality and her indelible subject position as 'stain on reality', yet her second 'prosthetic' mother Dr. Ouelet, redesigns her and facilitates her escape from the second death the laws of castration (much like Madame de Saint-Ange attempts to "redesign" Eugénie in line with different laws). Her new body allows Killian to live outside of the restrictions of pleasure and pain which her biological body as given to her by her first mother could not accommodate.

As revolting and brutal as the appetites of Sade's libertines are, we may nonetheless see some of their ontology present in film *Ghost in the Shell*. What kind of fantasy victim would Killian represent? A body that can't die yet can suffer indefinitely

generating an unquenchable jouissance unfettered by the limits of human biological cycles? And what kind of subject is Killian? Does she have a history? And does this form the basis of her suffering and her enjoyment? Is this not the Sadean ethical dream of ultimate satisfaction? Is this the perverts dream? Or the Sadists dream? As pointed out by Nobus (2019) at no point does Lacan in fact directly equate the Sadean ethics with perversion which is mentioned only once in the text in a superficial manner and Sadism while mentioned several times is not treated as homologous to a Sadean ethics even if the brutal psychoanalytic category bears his name, these are assumptions taken up later by other theorists and analysts<sup>5</sup>. Lacan's aim in *Kant avec Sade* is to complexify the tripartite relation between the subject's enjoyment and suffering on the one hand and knowledge of the others pain and pleasure on the other and how *the law* mediates between the two.

In Sade's dark satire on contemporary French moralizing and its class politics, Eugénie ends the story in spectacularly gruesome fashion by sewing up the vagina and anus of her mother after she is raped by the syphilitic gardener. It is undoubtedly infinitely more graphically and explicitly violent towards the mother than *Ghost in the Shell*, but what seems to be at stake and under erasure in both stories, is the position of the mother as sole progenitor and indeed moral guardian of the species. For Sade the mother as the holy grail of religious discourse and morality must be desecrated, whilst for *Ghost in the Shell* the mother occupies an ambivalent role, supposedly the origin of Killian's subjectivity but ultimately limiting to the progression of the "species". The question of the mother and *reproduction* is an area highly under theorized in Artificial Intelligence debates, one which I have only begun to touch upon here, however this theme is of crucial importance for our understanding of robot ethics and AI going forward.<sup>6</sup>

This sketches out for us another crucial factor in the Sadean ethics which hinges on male and female sexuation. The victim, for the libertine must be female, but why? Not for a contingent reason relating to the specific heterosexuality dictated by the times, but

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<sup>5</sup> (Notably Miller, 1998 and Žižek, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Millar forthcoming for a discussion of reproduction and AI as depicted in the film *Bladerunner 2049*.

because the female subject represents the ultimate empty subject, for whom substantialised content is ontologised by the carnality of the female form. It is precisely the hyper-materiality of the female body that acts as veil for the negativity of being which the Sadean libertine cannot bear. As Žižek (2016) puts it:

This redoubling of the body into the common mortal body and the ethereal undead body brings us to the crux of the matter: the distinction between the two deaths, the biological death of the common mortal body and the death of the other “undead” body: it is clear that what Sade aims at in his notion of a radical Crime is the murder of this second body

(p. 334)

What Sade missed and Lacan realised, Žižek argues, is precisely that these two deaths come in reverse order: ‘I can see that the second death comes prior to the first and not after as de Sade dreams it’ (Lacan cited by Žižek p. 335). For Sade’s libertines (not Sade himself, as Žižek will hypostatize him) the universe is pure substance without subject, they still believe in the big Other and ‘Nature as ontologically consistent realm’ (ibid.). Therefore, according to Žižek:

Sade continues to grasp reality only as substance and not also as subject, where subject does not stand for another ontological level different from substance but for the immanent incompleteness - inconsistency - antagonism of Substance itself’

(ibid).

The sex-robot then comes to signify something altogether more quintessentially human than we may at first have thought, and the ethics surrounding it more urgent than ever. If we see Killian as our ultimate fantasy of a sex-robot it becomes clear that she embodies the irreconcilable trauma of subjectivity that full automation or artifice cannot erase. Killian is both the indestructible killer and the perpetually killed.

The law and enjoyment as first problematized by Lacan’s reading of it, is brought to a strange conclusion in the figure of the undead body that seems ubiquitous in both our sci-fi fantasy

worlds, the growing interactions with commercially available sex-robots as they currently exist, and inevitably soon our legislation on embodied Artificial Intelligence. Major Killian may be augmented into the form of a quasi-invincible non-biological body, but yet her “humanity” appears precisely at the point where satisfaction fails. In her search for the lost memories that escape her grasp, the voices she hears, the images she sees in her technological “glitches” point to a structure of fantasy that yearns after various lost objects, or one in particular. The prosthetic god that Freud once postulated was one which also dreams hubristically of not suffering the effects of castration, does not die and is not born. From the point of view of the Sadean Universe, Killian is probably the ultimate victim, a futuristic Eugénie de Mistival. Not only is she an impeccable body of alabaster virtue, perpetually unscathed and virginal, yet inhumanly strong but she also has the capacity to suffer indefinitely and probably can’t die. Is this what we could call the start of a sex-robot ethics?

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