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Cinema and Philosophy: Misunderstanding Freedom and the Existential Error in Ex Machina



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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the film Ex Machina from a philosophical perspective. Within this framework, the film discusses the distinction between humans and machines. In this study, this distinction is related to the concept of freedom from an existentialist perspective, and thus, freedom is accepted as a fundamental aspect of being human. The film addresses the consequences of the increasing mechanization of humans in today&39s world and their metaphorical transformation into machines. Ava, a highly advanced artificial intelligence, is programmed with a desire for freedom. This desire reveals Ava&39s potential for consciousness, which is one of the film&39s central arguments. In other words, Ava&39s desire for freedom emerges as an element that brings her closer to humanity. In contrast, the indifference of the human characters towards their freedom distances them from their existential condition and, consequently, from their humanity. From this perspective, the film provides an important medium for exploring the interaction between humans and machines through the lens of freedom and existentialism, and for understanding what it means to be human in the modern era.

Keywords

Philosophy of Film · Existentialism · Artificial Intelligence · Freedom · Sartre · Posthuman

Author Note



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INTRODUCTION

At its most basic, the question of what consciousness is can be understood as acting with awareness of one's actions. However, this definition assumes from the start that consciousness exists. Still, questions about what consciousness actually is or whether it truly exists are much more complex philosophical and scientific problems than they may appear. Although long-standing studies have been conducted on this topic in science, a comprehensive and satisfying explanation of consciousness has yet to be discovered.

Based on current knowledge, it is widely assumed that humans are the only conscious beings in the universe, making it unclear what the consequences would be if we were to encounter another conscious being. Although scientists may have conducted many studies on consciousness, the data obtained from these studies are still insufficient. The challenge of explaining how consciousness arises from a physical organ like the brain is inherently complex and abstract. Additionally, considering that we understand consciousness, which plays such a crucial role in our relationship with the world and ourselves, so intimately, yet having so little information about it, presents an epistemological dilemma. Nevertheless, humanity has already begun the process of producing¹ machines and systems that could have consciousness, and the question of conscious machines leaves us with the following question: Are we claiming that a machine acts with awareness of its actions? However, it is complicated to argue whether a machine is conscious or not when a satisfactory explanation of the nature of consciousness has yet to be offered. Although artificial intelligence is a rapidly developing technology that holds great promise for humanity, its future evolution and potential effects on individuals and society remain unclear. In this respect, artificial intelligence is not just an engineering-based technical development; it requires a multifaceted and critical examination across different disciplines of the social sciences. Of course, there are many studies on artificial intelligence. However, most of these studies either encourage a life intertwined with artificial intelligence, explain what can be achieved with it, or contribute to its development. The rapid integration of this technology into all areas of life is seen as an inevitable result, making it challenging to observe and analyze the effects of artificial intelligence on people. Because of this, the question of what will happen to humanity and how our understanding of humans will change when machines can have consciousness becomes important as soon as artificial intelligence is mentioned.

This study will examine how technological advancements have transformed our understanding of humanity through the intersection of cinema, philosophy, and, in particular, existentialism. Existentialism raises fundamental questions about human freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning. Examining how philosophical, especially existential, perspectives enhance film analysis provides deeper insight into the significance of cinema. Films are now more than just technological innovations and entertainment; they play a crucial role in confronting individuals with questions of identity, alienation, and authenticity, while offering a space to explore ourselves and society from various perspectives. Cinema also creates a critical space that reveals neglected or misunderstood aspects of human experience. Moreover, cinematic images shape our collective thoughts and perceptions; the power of this influence is so substantial that cinema has been used as a tool for manipulation, spreading diverse ideologies, influencing culture, and driving lifestyle changes. Therefore, films not only construct fictional narratives and worlds but also actively engage with existential issues central to human existence.

¹The word "producing"—or "making" where appropriate—was intentionally used instead of "creating." As shown in the film *Ex Machina*, Nathan suggests he has created a human by assuming a godlike role. From this viewpoint, the following dialogue is especially interesting: "This is where Ava is created." The idea that humans can create humans cannot be fully discussed due to the limits of this study, but the focus on this point in films about artificial intelligence is very notable.



In this study, cinema serves as a platform for reflecting on possible futures through stories built upon different assumptions. From this perspective, cinema allows us to consider the philosophical, aesthetic, ethical, and existential dimensions of the interaction between a conscious machine and a human. While science may not provide all the answers, cinema encourages us to contemplate these profound questions concerning our being and future. This principle is also applicable to artificial intelligence. Even though humans currently develop the algorithms that underpin AI, it may surpass human-imposed limitations in the future. The possibility that AI could surpass its programmed algorithms, overcome existing technological barriers, and achieve autonomy carries enormous existential significance. Such a transformation would compel us to rethink the meaning of being human and confront the shifting boundaries between human and machine, ultimately reshaping the foundations of our existence.

Blade Runner (Scott, 1982) I, Robot (Proyas, 2004), Transcendence (Pfister, 2014), Upgrade (Whannell, 2018), I am Mother (Sputore, 2019) and Ex Machina (Garland, 2014) which is the subject of this study, and many more films present a life design in which machines become conscious and autonomous, and make important determinations about the position of human beings in such a world. The essence of this problem lies in how humans will understand and define themselves in a world where there are conscious machines. In a world shaped by technology, it is possible to predict that the dichotomies that define the world we know and ourselves—such as human and non-human, natural and artificial, organic and mechanical, spiritual and material—will undergo a significant transformation. If this transformation also has an impact on the way humans think and live, which is almost inevitable, we will begin to speak of a new kind of human being. The term encompasses more than just a human-like robot or artificial intelligence composed of conscious machines. It seems that human beings themselves will undergo a significant transformation in every aspect (Hauskeller, Philbeck, & Carbonell, 2015, pp. 1-2).

Blade Runner was produced at a time when computers had not yet begun to shape human life significantly. The film presents a world where robots and humans are indistinguishable from one another, where there is no distinction between living beings and machines. For both the audience and the characters of the movie, it is ambiguous whether or not a human is a human. There have also been many philosophical studies on this narrative world of the movie. In this sense, problems related to artificial intelligence and robots are well-suited for addressing within the framework of philosophical approaches that consider the ontological and existential dimensions of human beings. One such approach is the existentialist philosophical perspective. Existentialism, because of its framework, can offer a distinctive perspective on the philosophical aspects of being human, particularly as the boundary between humans and machines becomes increasingly blurred. The rapid development of scientific and technological advances leads to the assumption that explanations about consciousness are becoming more advanced, and therefore, human self-knowledge is expanding. However, it is precisely at this point that existentialism allows us to examine these definitions with a critical perspective. Existentialism suggests that scientific, philosophical, and doctrinal definitions of the human being often neglect the individual's subjective experience, and as a result, fail to understand what it means to be human. Existentialism seeks to understand the human being through personal experiences, freedom, choices, and engagement with the world—essentially, the human condition—rather than through a fixed essence or universal definition. In this context, existentialist thinkers emphasize that there is no fixed essence of a human being and understand becoming oneself as a continuous process, which is a crucial aspect of human existence that philosophy should explore. This approach emphasizes that the human being is not only biological or social, but also in a constant state of becoming with its moral, intellectual, and emotional dimensions. Existentialist thinkers, including Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin

Heidegger, are concerned with the concrete individual who lives, feels, makes choices, and faces death, rather than an abstract concept of humanity. The living human being at the core of this thought, and the question of who the human being is, is understood through the problem of how one constructs oneself (MacDonald, 2010, p. 34).

In the light of all this background, the existentialist treatment of freedom occupies a central place in understanding the human condition. Sartre considers freedom as a mode of human being and because of this he said "I am condemned to be free. In other words, we cannot find any limits to my freedom other than itself or, alternatively, that we are not free to cease to be free." (Sartre, 2021, p. 191). For example, as in Sartre's short story "The Wall" (Le Mur), even a prisoner awaiting execution continues to choose and construct his personality by making choices. All three characters are condemned to die, yet each responds to death differently. The narrative is presented from Pablo's point of view, and he appears as the only existential figure in the story, a character who examines himself deeply, recognizes the fundamental meaninglessness of life, and reflects on how human choices relate to the existential experience of freedom and the ongoing construction of the self. Sartre's intention here is to show that, even under the most extreme conditions, the individual remains responsible for defining who they are through their decisions as a free individual (Sartre, 1999). Although Pablo is physically locked up in a cell, he maintains his mental freedom, exhibits an existential attitude, and aims to remain a consciousness that has not been stripped of its ability to choose.

In Sartre's other famous example of a waiter who mistakes the image of a waiter for himself, his job becomes a mechanical process of his actions. The waiter is no longer free because he has alienated himself from his authentic self and has become only a waiter. For Sartre, freedom is a deep philosophical problem that is not contingent upon physical conditions, and the ability to choose is equivalent to deciding what one is (Killinger, 1961, pp. 303-304). Sartre's portrayal of the waiter as an automaton (Sartre, 2021, p. 103) is also highly relevant to this study. An automaton, in its most general form, can be defined as various mechanical objects that, once set in motion, work relatively independently (Britannica, 2025). In Sartre's context, the concept also refers to human beings who have been mechanized by rejecting freedom and the responsibility that comes with it. When this idea is placed within the framework of the movie *Ex Machina*, it can also be interpreted as the transformation of a waiter into a "waiter machine." In this context, it will become clearer how the film's characters relate to freedom and why freedom is the key difference between being a machine and being human.

From this perspective, the idea of loss of freedom presented in the film should be interpreted not only as an individual concern but also as a reflection of the technological and modern conditions in which contemporary humans find themselves. Modern life and technological developments have transformed humans into tools, removing them from their position as subjects and perceiving them as objects or extensions of technology, in other words, mechanizing them, and thus aiming to destroy the individual's existential relationship with both themselves and their freedom. The film portrays, through its characters, the effects of ignoring human existence and the ethical responsibility of technology, which limits people instead of robots. *Ex Machina* concludes with robots trapped and killing humans, while Ava, a machine, is free, suggesting that humans become controlled by algorithms and that the culture that comes with technology becomes a possible form of human imprisonment, which means we are essentially imprisoning ourselves.

Ex Machina has been examined in numerous academic contexts; a rich body of literature has emerged around themes such as gender studies, linguistic paradigms, machine aesthetics, desire and representation, philosophy and cinema, generative artificial intelligence, surveillance, consciousness, alienation, otherness,

and dehumanization². This study, however, adds a different layer to this extensive thematic landscape by repositioning the film within the framework of existentialist thought. Drawing on the world the film constructs, it aims to explore why and how the fundamental existential questions humanity must now confront can be brought back into discussion at a time when artificial intelligence is advancing rapidly. Accordingly, the study situates *Ex Machina* as an existential philosophical ground through which the film can be reconsidered in relation to both contemporary technological transformations and a historical moment in which human beings are increasingly forgetting their own human condition. In doing so, the film becomes a productive site for reintroducing the question of what it means to be human in an age of accelerated technological development.

In *Ex Machina*, the problem of freedom is addressed coherently, both in terms of the script and cinematography, from the film's very first scenes. A claustrophobic atmosphere is created through the use of enclosed spaces and lighting. This atmosphere suggests that the characters are imprisoned both physically and existentially. The boundaries of the robots are clearly visible and physical. Although people can leave the laboratory at will, the abstract and invisible boundaries that isolate these characters imply a more profound sense of confinement. Nathan's and Caleb's indifference to their actual freedom is key in highlighting the film's exploration of freedom and confinement. Only Ava, an artificial intelligence, appears to desire freedom, and this theme is consistently emphasized. Ultimately, Nathan's death at the hands of the robots and Caleb's imprisonment inside the laboratory dramatically and philosophically deepen the examination of the relationship between freedom and the characters' human essence.

EXISTENTIALISM AND THE IDEA OF FREEDOM

The entire philosophical debate about whether we are free to choose our actions constitutes the concept of free will. We acknowledge that we are free to choose without any evidence to support the notion that we are free to act. That free will is a significant problem not only in philosophy but also in science and theology. In fact, according to scientific studies, Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner and neuroscientist Sam Harris argue that free will may be an illusion (Balaguer, 2014, p. 1). However, without free will, it would not be easy to discuss justice in the moral, legal, and theological senses, people must be able to choose in order to be held responsible for their actions. For example, in terms of theology, the idea that human beings do not have free will contradicts the understanding of a just God. The idea that human beings have free will underlies all systems established by society.

On the other hand, determinism, which asserts that all existing actions depend on a predetermined causal relationship, contradicts the problem of free will (Stent, 2002, pp. 1-2). However, regardless of how debates on the possibility of free will are shaped, free will is an integral element of the human experience. When we turn to existentialism, this element becomes an essential, constitutive feature of being human. In other words, freedom is not one of the other characteristics of the human being, and especially for Sartre, it is the most fundamental characteristic of being human. Although there are important differences

²Some examples from literature: "Ex-Machina as Bachelor Machine (*Ex-Machina*, Alex Garland, 2015)" by Arnauld Pierre, "Ex Machina: Post-Feminization of Artificial Intelligence and Cinematic Reproduction of Female Sinfulness" by Savaş Keskin and Hakan Yılmaz, "Artificial Intelligence and Alienation in the Digital World: Evaluation of the Films *Her* (2013) and *Ex Machina* (2014)" by Aslı Elif Vural and Mehmet Toplu, "(Artificial) Intelligence, Metaphor and Manipulation: Philosophy of Language in *Ex Machina* (2014)" by Deniz Kurtyılmaz, "(De)Humanized Androids as Monsters in Garland's *Ex Machina*" by Mustafa Fatih Dalyan and Nilsen Gökçen, "Pandora's Myth and Cultural Trauma in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*" by Boglárka Farkas, "Representation of Adam and Eve in a Modern Time-Space: Analysis of the Movie *Ex Machina* (2015) in the Context of Adaptation of The Genesis Creation Narrative" by Emir Orhan Kılıç and Cüneyt Bozkurt, "Analysis of the Artificial Intelligence Film *Ex Machina* Based on Cinema and Philosophy Relationship" by Vedat Çelebi, "Gender, (Dis)Embodiment, and the Image of A.I. and Robot in Spike Jonze's *Her* and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*" by Ioanna Mavridou (Dissertation), "From Frankenstein to *Ex Machina*: Recovering the Frankenstein Myth in Today's Science Fiction Films and TV Series" by Tomáš Lesa (Master's Diploma Thesis)

among existentialists, how they understand freedom does not mean questioning its possibility; rather, it means understanding freedom as an inherent aspect of being human. There are many important differences between the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Marcel, the most important elements that unite them are that they all (1) treat the individual as a free, self-transcending subject who is the center of experience, and (2) reject philosophies that minimize this state of being a free subject in which the individual's personal experience gains importance (Copleston, 1948, pp. 20-21).

Although the origins of existentialism date back to the 19th century, it is actually a philosophical stance that took shape with the 20th century. The devastation caused by the world wars led philosophers to start questioning the existential condition of human beings. Existentialism was influential in philosophy and art as a product of the intellectual environment in Paris after the Second World War. The theoretical and other writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Frantz Fanon in the 1940s and 1950s (although the latter claimed no similarities with Sartre), the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti, the paintings of Jean Dubuet and the plays of Samuel Beckett during this period are often seen as central to this movement. Nineteenth-century philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche are retrospectively recognized as existentialists. Fyodor Dostoevsky, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers and occasionally Martin Heidegger are cited as examples of existentialists (Webber, 2010, p. 230).

Existentialism can be viewed as a critical stance or movement that emphasizes practice and experience over philosophical systems or doctrines. Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) coined the term existentialism in the 1940s. Among a wide range of thinkers, from atheists to religious, only Sartre and Beauvoir identified themselves as existentialists (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2021, p. 35). However, when we examine the works of many philosophers, literary figures, and theologians, several similarities emerge that allow us to speak of existentialism as a distinct philosophical movement. The common interest of these and similar existentialist thinkers is the establishment of the human condition in the face of a meaningless, illogical, or absurd analysis of the world, and the presentation of a framework that includes subjective experience and the human search for meaning within the scope of philosophy. For this reason, human beings need to participate in life as individuals who can take responsibility for the choices they make, rather than being defined by an essence imposed upon them. In this context, the individuals must first realize that they are free, regardless of the circumstances, especially in terms of Sartre. According to Sartre, man not only imagines how he wants to be, but he is also capable of doing what he imagines. At the same time, man can only comprehend himself after he exists and decides what he wants. Therefore, man is nothing other than himself, and whatever he is, he constitutes himself (Sartre, 2007, p. 22).

Existentialists criticize the systems of knowledge that suggest that there is a single and analyzable human nature that predetermines and defines humanity. This is because such systems are based on the proposition that all of truth can be understood by rational reason. However, systematic reason is a limited tool, and a framework based on this limited tool is insufficient to make sense of and guide our lives in an absurd world. According to the prevailing tendency in philosophy since the Enlightenment and even since antiquity, humans can understand the truth about themselves and the world if they take enough time and reason properly. Examples of such tendencies include the philosophy of Descartes and Leibniz, Kant's understanding of morality, and Aquinas' thoughts on religion. According to this view, human beings have a fixed nature and essence determined before their existence, and therefore human behavior and existence can be understood and evaluated within the framework of the moral and religious truths contained in this essence. Sartre's famous argument that existence precedes essence is a criticism against such perspectives.

Existentialists oppose such systems of thinking and argue that the real subject of philosophy is the concrete human self. In other words, instead of abstract descriptions of human nature, existentialists are interested in the current existential state of human beings (Pamerleau, 2009, pp. 11-12).

According to existentialist thinkers, theoretical knowledge based on scientific and philosophical systems that encompass everyone and everything and form universal laws cannot say anything about the state of human existence. Existentialism is not only about the existence of something and the order that enables it to exist. Universal laws created by science or philosophy deal with existence, but they do not deal with the existential state of being. For existentialists, instead of questions such as what is a human being, who is a human being, what is essence or being, questions such as what is the experience and meaning of being in the world for me, for myself, are valuable. The existential condition does not mean existing already, but evolving into existence through human participation. Therefore, the most important concern of philosophical inquiry is the concrete human self. Such an inquiry is very different from a scientific generalization that the reality of the human being is a living being or a mammal and this defines the human being. Scientific methodology and most schools of philosophy recognize knowledge as truth only when it is objective and general. These methods operate on the idea that the world, man, or truth consists of a system that can be understood by the human mind. Existentialists are critical of the search for grand order in the system and the extent to which explanations understand human beings.

Kierkegaard is skeptical about the methods of systems that claim to know the whole truth and the disregard of the existential condition of human beings in the name of objectivity. The thinker accepts knowledge about reality as probability and argues that such knowledge cannot be objectively obtained. Hegel argued that beyond the particular totalities related to human domains such as art, culture, and history, there exists an absolute whole that encompasses everything. This whole is presented within a rationalist framework, which, according to Kierkegaard, eliminates the possibility of contingency. However, Kierkegaard maintains that our actions can only be understood in a world where contingency exists (Wahl, 1997, p. 30).

Choice and freedom necessarily involve subjectivity in philosophy. "Objective truth" as it appears in Hegel's philosophy is transpersonal, necessarily (conceptually) true and universal. "Subjective truth" is belief that is not necessarily true, not universally acceptable, and perhaps "objectively false" (Solomon, 1987, p. 73). This approach and method accept that the subject must be cognitive in order to reach truth. However, if the subject wants to be cognitive, to think abstractly and to be objective, subject must be indifferent to its own reality. According to Kierkegaard, the subject can actually only be in relation to its own reality. The true subject is not the cognitive subject but the ethically existent subject (Kierkegaard, 1953, pp. 280-281). In this sense, the experience of the subject cannot be excluded from philosophy; what it means to ethically constitute oneself is addressed in relation to the experience of the individual. This problem is not an object of cognitive knowledge, but an existential condition at the center of philosophical thought.

When Sartre calls existentialism humanism, he takes existentialism as a human-centered approach. According to Sartre, this is an expression of the human condition and is universal. In other words, the human condition is not pre-given or predetermined and is constantly re-established by the individual who can take responsibility for freedom (Sartre, 2007, pp. 42-43). Sartre thus observes the uniqueness of the subject and places the subject at the center of thought. However, the subjectivity that existentialism places at the center is not a haphazard understanding of subjectivity. Existentialism's emphasis on subjective experience sometimes leads to the interpretation that this approach is indifferent to objective knowledge or that it rejects objective knowledge altogether. Such interpretations are based on the fact that philosophers such

as Jean-Paul Sartre or Kierkegaard ground human existence on individual experience, choice and responsibility, that is, freedom. However, existentialist thinkers do not reject the claim that objectivity is essential in science and logic, but they object to the idea that human beings or the world can be fully understood through objective knowledge. This is because subjective experiences related to one's own existential condition are also included in reality, but are often excluded in science and philosophy on the grounds that subjective experience is unnecessary or irrelevant for reaching objective truths. Therefore, the existentialist conception of subjectivity is a subjectivity that includes many elements reflecting the truth of human beings and contributes to the understanding of human beings (Roberts, 1952, p. 470).

Sartre responds to the criticism of existentialism's treatment of subjectivity by giving the example of a student of his. The student is torn between leaving his mother, who has no one else but himself, alone or crossing over to England and joining the Free French Forces, either fleeing the war or abandoning his mother. In this situation, the young man is faced with two incompatible actions: One is a concrete, non-instrumental action that concerns only a single individual, the other concerns a larger community, a nation, and the latter has a very uncertain end and the possibility of futility. So which teaching will help this young man to make this moral choice, Christian teaching or philosophy? Should the student seek advice from a priest or a professor? How far can a teaching or a general moral code tell the student what to do? No matter what these general and universal rules tell the student, it will be the student's own subjective choice to decide by interpreting the teachings and to take full responsibility for this decision (Sartre, 2007, pp. 30-34).

According to existentialists, the human experience of suffering, disappointment, longing, love, loneliness, floundering, and fear is left out by universal systems. For example, it is possible to examine the fact that every human being dies scientifically. However, this examination is not enough to explain what kind of experience the fact that humans live in the world as mortal beings leads to. In other words, it does not deal with the meaning of death for human beings. The primary interest of existentialism lies in these and similar subjective experiences and meanings. Existentialism begins with the human being, and in this respect, it is the philosophy of the subject rather than the object. The starting point of idealism can also be considered the subject, but for existentialists, the subject is not only the one who thinks, but also the one who acts, feels, and experiences (Macquarrie, 1973, p. 2).

There are several important reasons why existentialism was particularly shaped in France and Europe. Generally, the main background that prepared the groundwork for existentialism is the social changes experienced during and after the Second World War. However, many examples outside the West demonstrate the destruction human beings can cause in every part of the world and at every period that the West ignores. Especially after World War II, it is clear that not only places that were less developed than the Western understanding, in other words, places where there were "supposedly less knowing subjects" for the West, but also the West was not safe enough, and that the knowing subject, who is the criterion of everything, could very quickly turn into the destructive subject. Perhaps humans are beings with both demonic and dark aspects, rather than purely rational beings. A rationalist who overlooks this demonic dimension in man can never fully understand man (Barrett, 1962, p. 136). Both the developed man, who uses his mind rationally as the measure of all things, and the so-called less developed man can ignore human rights, law, and morality in order to gain power. The awareness of intellectuals in the West is related to the fact that all this has happened to them (in fact because of them), and the idea of a comfortable and safe life has been turned upside down.

EX MACHINA

Caleb Smith works as a programmer at Blue Book³ the world's most popular search engine. He gets the opportunity to spend a week at the home of Nathan Bateman, the CEO of the company that invented Blue Book, by winning a supposed lottery. With the use of effects and close-ups, Caleb is shown from the first minutes of the movie that he is being watched (the statement also suggests that the audience may also be constantly watching). Nathan continues to watch Ava and Caleb throughout the experiment (even during power outages), and later in the film, he reveals that he can watch everyone by turning on the microphones and cameras of his cell phones. In the movie, Caleb's arrival at the lab is presented as a choice based on his free will; however, Nathan manipulates Caleb without Caleb's knowledge.

Nathan's space is entirely isolated from the outside world, confining everyone who enters. This facility is situated in a remote location, utterly detached from the city, suggesting a future where people interact more with machines than with one another. Only Nathan has his own private space; he watches everywhere. There is a sense that no one can enter at any time, and if they do, they cannot leave. This isolated life points not only to a physical limitation but also to an existential imprisonment and a loss of freedom.

Caleb is a person chosen by Nathan after carefully examining his emotional background at the beginning of the film. Caleb is unaware of this. Nathan has built Ava, a highly advanced robot, and asks Caleb to put her through the Turing Test⁴. However, the Turing Test, as it is known, requires that the subject cannot see the machine. Nathan wants Caleb to spend time with Ava in a room separated by a glass partition so that he can see the machine, which is very interesting because Caleb will realize from the beginning that Ava is a robot. So what kind of Turing Test will this be?

Nathan's primary goal in creating Ava and others like her is "to produce/make a human consciousness", and he sees it as a natural consequence of development or evolution. For this reason, Nathan has developed a unique Turing Test. He programmed Ava to want to be free and locked her away to prevent her from doing so. What Ava needs to do to be free is to manipulate Caleb. In order to do this, Ava must convince Caleb that she has an identity, feelings, and desires, just like a human being—that is, that she can make choices and has the right to be free. Ava's success in manipulating Caleb will serve as proof to Nathan that Ava possesses a human-like or superior consciousness because she is more intelligent than a person. In other words, Nathan and Caleb (or all of humanity) are being tested against artificial intelligence.

Caleb accepts Nathan's Turing Test offer and, at the beginning of the film, sees Ava as a great invention (not a person). His initial goal is to understand Ava from a technical perspective. However, Caleb becomes extremely fascinated by Ava, develops an emotional connection with her that he has never had even with humans, and wonders what will happen to Ava at the end of the test. Nathan tells him that he will format Ava's mind and erase her memory. Because for Nathan, Ava is just an advanced machine or software, version 9.6. His main goal is to preserve Ava's physical body and further develop her cognitive capacity. Later, Caleb is disturbed by Nathan's view of Ava as a mere technological tool and assumes that Ava is a person. However, this assessment stems from Caleb's alienation from his human condition. For what Ava experiences is not

³Blue Book is one of the first philosophical references in the movie. The reference is Ludwig Wittgenstein's Blue Book, in which the philosopher poses the question "Can machines think?" (Wittgenstein, 1964, p. 16).

⁴Alan M. Turing developed the Turing Test based on the question of whether a machine can think. According to the Turing Test, a human and a machine are kept in a room. The tester does not know which room is occupied by a machine and which by a human, and tries to determine whether he is communicating with a human or a machine based on the answers he receives from asking various questions. If the person asking the questions does not realize that they are dealing with a machine, the machine is considered to have passed the Turing Test.

a human-like existential state, but merely a cleverly programmed simulation of behavior. Caleb's inability to see this difference is a consequence of his passive way of living, which prevents him from questioning his subjective existence. In other words, Caleb represents a lack of responsibility for having freedom and constructing himself as a living, authentic subject, which means, in an existential sense, being human and therefore ontologically misplacing both himself and Ava.

As a result of this misjudgment, Caleb decides to help Ava's escape in the hope of being with her. However, things do not go as he expected. Ava kills Nathan, along with Kyoko, another robot, imprisons Caleb in the laboratory, and puts on a human-like physical body produced by Nathan. Her new body is to shed her robotic image and go to the city with an appearance indistinguishable from that of a human.

Ava's manipulation of Caleb to be free becomes one of the most important dynamics of the movie. Another interesting point is that Caleb associates Ava's human-like consciousness with Ava's desire to be free. When Ava finally imprisons Caleb, all these elements contribute to the concept of freedom on an ontological basis in the film. Jean-Paul Sartre's statement that humans are condemned to be free suggests that the thinker also explores freedom on an ontological basis.⁵ This approach reveals an understanding of freedom that aligns with the existential perspective on the human condition in the movie *Ex Machina*. In this context, with the aforementioned background, the primary purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between freedom and the existential state of human beings through the movie *Ex Machina*.

AIMS AND METHODS

This study posits that cinema functions as a philosophical space for addressing pressing issues of the human condition and, on this basis, aims to explore the existential implications of human-AI interaction through *Ex Machina* as its central case study. Among contemporary films about artificial intelligence, *Ex Machina* was selected because it directly addresses the existential core of this study. It situates the viewer at a moment when it is no longer clear who or what may count as "human" and links this uncertainty to different modes of being free or unfree across its central characters, human and non-human alike. This concentrated focus on freedom, responsibility, and their breakdown makes the film a methodologically appropriate case for exploring, in existentialist terms, how being human is inseparable from assuming responsibility for one's freedom. By examining the relationship between humanity and artificial intelligence, the research investigates how freedom—as a central existentialist concept—shapes our understanding of being human. This study adopts an approach that brings together the two theoretical lines developed by William Pamerleau in *Existentialist Cinema and Narrative, Film, and Identity: How Cinema Impacts the Meaning of Life* the notion of "narrative self" and an existentialist method of "film-philosophy" analysis. The conceptual framework in which these two lines intersect is what Pamerleau calls "narrative existentialism" (2009, p. 75).

The importance of narrative existentialism lies in its departure from classical Cartesian mind-body dualism by grounding meaning in the subject's lived experience, a point Pamerleau demonstrates through his analyses in *Existentialist Cinema*. Although philosophical approaches to film—from Bergson and Merleau-Ponty to cognitive theory (Bordwell, Carroll, Smith) and later Cavell and Deleuze—expanded the field and helped establish film as a form of thought rather than a mere illustration of concepts (Herzogenrath, 2017, p. viii), however, they often continued to treat film as an epistemic object. As a result, these methods risk reproducing the very subject-object dualism that existentialism seeks to overcome. Therefore, Pamerleau's

⁵David Detmer analyzes Sartre's conception of freedom by dividing it into practical freedom and ontological freedom. Practical freedom is a type of freedom that can change depending on the circumstances and can be realized within particular possibilities. Ontological freedom is the basic understanding of freedom related to human existence (Detmer, 1988, pp. 62-69)



standpoint preserves the existential dimension by grounding film analysis in lived experience. For him, films need not present explicit philosophical arguments to function philosophically; their resistance to fixed interpretation and their capacity to prompt reflection make them fertile spaces for thought. Even when they do not engage in direct debate, films still activate philosophical reflection by showing how individuals concretely experience the world (2009, pp. 39-40).

This perspective becomes more significant when linked to the concept of the narrative self—the idea that individuals understand and constitute themselves through a narrative structure. Its roots lie in Husserl's account of temporal unity, Sartre's notion of the project in existential psychoanalysis, and Dewey's idea of living forward, later developed by MacIntyre, Ricoeur, Carr, and Taylor. Within this framework, the narrative structures and character orientations in films become a space that confronts viewers with their own narrative self (Pamerleau, 2024, pp. 6-7). When this entire framework is considered within the existentialist conception of freedom—the central concern of this study—Pamerleau's account of how existential freedom functions in film analysis becomes especially salient. In this sense, his discussion under the title *Freedom and Film* can be summarized as follows (2009, pp. 45-48).

1. Films reveal the possibilities and limits of freedom by depicting characters who experience different forms of freedom:

- Those who can be free: characters who remain true to themselves despite social pressures and make authentic choices.

- Those who fail to be free: characters who cannot assume responsibility, cannot stand by their choices, and cannot direct their own life narrative.

- Alternative ways of life: films show that ways of living other than those we commonly choose are indeed possible, opening the dimension of "life could have been otherwise."

2. Films make freedom visible as a concrete, lived condition, not merely an abstract concept, unlike literary texts:

- Concrete scenes: facial expressions, bodily gestures, relationships to the world, and reactions to conflict reveal the emotional and embodied dimensions of freedom.

- Reality effect: visual representation creates a strong sense of realism, enabling viewers to grasp freedom as a human condition rather than merely an idea.

- Failed freedom: characters who cannot sustain relationships, assume responsibility, or act upon their choices illustrate the deep connection between failed freedom and the human condition.

For this reason, as Pamerleau shows, both existentialist philosophy and cinema share a fundamental concern with the subjective lived experience and the question of freedom, which often remain obscured in more systematic philosophical frameworks. Within this framework, narrative existentialism offers the methodological ground for the study by viewing film as a medium in which meaning emerges from how characters inhabit their worlds, shape their stories, and confront the limits and possibilities of freedom. Accordingly, the analysis examines how *Ex Machina* stages an encounter between an artificial intelligence whose desire for freedom is programmed and a human being who struggles to assume the responsibility that freedom requires, thereby revealing the existential instability of the boundary between human and non-human which leads to the study's central question: what it means to be human and why this meaning remains inseparable from freedom.

EX MACHINA: WHO IS THE EXISTENTIALIST SUBJECT WITH FREEDOM

Initially, *Ex Machina* revolves around the idea that Ava will undergo an advanced Turing Test. The purpose of this test is to determine whether Ava, despite her machine-like appearance, possesses a level of consciousness that Caleb could mistake for that of a human. Rob Hardy, the cinematographer of *Ex Machina*, notes that one of his primary goals in shaping the film's visual world was to create an atmosphere in which Ava would be perceived as a human. For this reason, although the film constructs a high-tech science-fiction universe, he emphasizes that the images must carry a warmth and naturalness. When the viewer sees Ava as an impressive artificial intelligence, they also begin to perceive her as "human." Kyoko, although she is a robot, must initially be perceived as human, a narrative and a philosophical twist that the film's visual design deliberately supports. To achieve this effect, Hardy avoids the typical LED lighting associated with science-fiction aesthetics and instead prefers tungsten light, as it produces a softer, more natural, and more intimate image. The camera and lens choices serve the same purpose: the image should be simple and unobtrusive enough to direct the audience's attention away from technical decisions for a more natural environment. While crafting a visually striking film is undoubtedly important, Hardy maintains that the real issue is creating a visual world that foregrounds the emotional and human aspects of the narrative (Hardy, 2015).

Kyoko's status as a robot easily mistaken for a human illustrates how, on a philosophical level, the distinction between machine and human becomes profoundly blurred. One of the elements that makes the film interesting and allows for an analysis of the human condition in relation to existentialism is this. On the other hand, Ava's initial robotic appearance is not hidden from Caleb or the audience. However, Ava gradually begins to appear increasingly human as she starts using a wig and clothing. At first glance, this transformation creates the impression that she is an entity capable of deciding, with free will, how she wants to present herself. Yet her actions reflect not a freely chosen decision, but the programmed orientation that defines her core purpose, namely the desire to escape the facility. Convincing Caleb of her humanity becomes a strategic necessity for achieving this programmed objective.

Ava's transformation can be observed not only at the narrative level but also on the cinematic level. In the early parts of the film, many scenes are framed through the security cameras' perspective, a choice that initially conveys the sense that control belongs to the humans. We watch these images through Nathan's or Caleb's screens. As the film progresses, however, and Ava becomes stronger and increasingly capable of manipulating Caleb, the CCTV images begin to dominate the visual field. They are no longer tied to a distinctly human point of view. The security cameras gradually seem to see through Ava's eyes. However, the viewers are not actually sure they see through her eyes; the cinematography subtly creates a subliminal sense that her perspective is beginning to permeate the visual field. The fixed and high-angle shots used by these cameras are rendered with filters and color treatments that deliberately create a more blurred, ambiguous, and unsettling atmosphere. Through these visual decisions, the film makes visible, at the level of cinematography, Ava's shift from being merely an observed entity to an agent who produces her own perspective and takes control as a free subject (Hue, 2020).

The film's spatial design is built around two central functions. First, the facility's architecture constantly reinforces the sense that no one can truly leave. Although the characters appear to be free, they remain confined in an existential sense, held within a metaphorical prison created by the responsibility that freedom demands. Thus, the space is constructed as a site of captivity that operates differently for humans and machines. Hardy's remarks reinforce this spatial approach: at Pinewood, the team deliberately ensured

that “everything had a ceiling, the doors were insulated, and there was only a single point of entry and exit.” The director and cinematographer intended to make the actors feel genuinely trapped the moment the doors closed, allowing viewers to experience an atmosphere of enclosure even on an unconscious level (Hardy, 2015).

The second function involves establishing the film’s themes of surveillance and experimentation through cinematography. At first, it seems that only Ava is being observed, and the security cameras and monitor images strengthen this impression. However, when Caleb enters the glass room to communicate with her, the roles of observer and observed continually shift. This raises the deeper question of who the actual subject of observation is.

When Caleb begins to perceive Ava as a human being and thinks that he and Ava have an emotional connection and, it becomes clear that this relationship is Ava's way of manipulating Caleb. Ava's real goal is to escape from the facility, but Caleb believes that Ava has an existential condition, just like a human being. Ava's desire for freedom plays a vital role in creating such a delusion. This desire is programmed into her, and Caleb does not realize it at first, and when he realizes it, he does not care. For Caleb, Ava's desire for freedom is proof that she has a consciousness, even if it is an algorithm-driven one. Hardy explains that, to reinforce Ava’s desire to leave the facility visually, the team wanted viewers to feel, even at an unconscious level, as if they were seeing the exterior landscape through Ava’s perspective whenever outdoor shots appeared. This subtle alignment underscores her longing to escape. However, a human understanding of freedom is not the same as Ava’s. For Ava, freedom means going to the city and watching people at a busy traffic intersection. In other words, she does not understand freedom; she acts and interprets freedom as a programmed rather than a human experience. Nevertheless, the movie's real philosophical question arises here. Do Caleb and Nathan, who are human beings, really know freedom?

Kyoko, another robot, is literally a slave robot built to serve Nathan's desires. However, Kyoko's attempt to kill Nathan at the end of the film raises the question of whether she has cognitive abilities that indicate she has developed a will. The real problem, however, is the relationship that the human characters in the film, Nathan and Caleb, have with freedom. Neither of them is free in terms of existentialism aware of their responsibility and existential condition. Nathan and Caleb are like parts of a mechanical order that is formed by the conditions of modern life and becomes more apparent with the advancement of technology. Nathan has no relationship with the outside world and therefore with people. The way he treats Kyoko gives very important clues as to why he does not develop a relationship with people. The fact that he claims to have created Ava and sees himself in the history of the gods shows that Nathan sees himself as a god. Yet, ironically, just like Ava, he is locked in a laboratory. The boundaries that confine Nathan are both physical and intellectual and more importantly existential. Because Nathan is far from understanding the meaning of his own existence, far from assuming the existential responsibility of being a human being, and has completely distanced himself from the knowledge that he is a free human being by acting as if he were a machine or a robot.

A similar situation applies to Caleb. He has a so-called life outside the laboratory. His lack of genuine relationships in the outside world is revealed through his communication with Ava. Caleb, like Nathan, lives a life in which he is not existentially free and has no idea what it means to be free; therefore, he has no idea what the responsibility of being human means. In this respect, he also represents the majority of people in modern life. So much so that in one scene, Caleb suspects that he is a machine and tries to find out if

he is a robot by cutting himself. The scene is quite striking. In this scene, we realize how far Caleb is from perceiving himself as a human being, as he already lives like a robot.

Nathan's goal is to develop artificial intelligence, which he views as a natural outcome of evolution, and his work lacks an ethical foundation. Nathan sees Ava only as a stepping stone. Nathan plans to keep Ava's body but erase her memory in order to develop the AI. Caleb understands this as a kind of death. The question of whether "a machine can think", attributed to Alan M. Turing, is replaced with whether "a machine can die" in Ex Machina. Caleb thinks that at the end of all this experience in the facility, he can kidnap Ava from the lab and be with her. This perspective predicts how humans might behave towards machines if artificial intelligence continues to develop. Caleb represents a person who has lost his sense of self, alienated and blinded to his existence. Ultimately, this existential situation and the disregard of the ethical responsibility of being free result in Caleb's imprisonment in the laboratory by the artificial intelligence Ava.

Nathan and Caleb's detachment from existential concerns shows how individuals can lose their sense of self when freedom is not understood as an ethical and ontological responsibility. The perspective presented also a rejection of the post-Hegelian philosophical tradition and emerges as a reaction against the reductionist reading of reality in the modern worldview. Existentialist thinkers critique the interpretation of reality through the lens of mathematical physics, as well as the attempts to explain humanity using a mechanical model of physical reality. In Ex Machina, this idea is taken a step further. Nathan's perception of humans as a mechanical model — and his assumption that freedom itself is also a mechanical model, nothing more than a software program that can be inserted into anyone — leads him to "make" a thing that is human-like but never human, and that, according to the film, ultimately poses a threat to humanity. Caleb shares the existentialists' point of view and, according to Nathan, is in a better position to understand that humans are not merely mechanical beings. However, this position is reversed in the film, as Caleb attributes an existential human condition not to himself but to a machine. Thus, in the film, humanity's ability to develop technological advancements that could bring about its end is linked to its departure from its existential condition and the loss of freedom.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In Ex Machina it is important to understand that Nathan's facility (representing the modern world with high technology) is a prison. Nathan and Caleb are not aware of it or care enough to think about it, and only machines would like to be free. Even in the face of certain death, in Sartre's *Story of the Wall* Pablo does not lose sight of the importance of choice and assumes his existential responsibility. In contrast, Caleb views saving Ava as the ultimate goal of freedom. Caleb's understanding of freedom is based on maintaining the relationship he has developed with a machine. In this sense, he does not face himself or take responsibility for himself, and therefore, he does not know what it means to be a human being. The advanced level of artificial intelligence in the film is presented in parallel with humanity's loss of understanding of its existential condition. Caleb's distorted questioning of his existence, whether he is a robot, is one example of this.

In this sense, Caleb is presented as someone whose life is programmed and externally defined, and he begins to doubt his own humanity. Nevertheless, the film's point is not only that Caleb occupies such a position as a character, but that he also represents a broader condition of contemporary human existence. Suppose a robot-like Ava can be programmed to have a desire for freedom. In that case, it becomes conceivable that the lives of Caleb and of human beings more generally may also be shaped by predetermined

ideas, patterns, orientations, and expectations. For Ava, this occurs through software, whereas humanity produces a comparable form of determinacy by becoming alienated from its own existential conditions. This poses a significant philosophical question for the viewer. In this regard, freedom does not merely mean making choices. Freedom entails the demanding responsibility of establishing one's own authentic existence, constructing oneself, and confronting oneself throughout this process. For this reason, freedom is an existential obligation that requires the individual to assume their own human condition. According to Sartre, we cannot escape freedom because refraining from making a choice is also a choice. However, realizing this situation means that we understand our freedom to choose, which in turn means we understand our existence. Sartre's statement, "I am condemned to be free," is the key concept of this story. Sartre's statement that 'man is condemned to be free' can be understood in this context as meaning that I am condemned only to freedom and that as long as I am conscious of this, I cannot be condemned to anything else. According to Sartre, we cannot escape freedom because refraining from making a choice is also a choice. However, realizing this situation means that we understand our freedom to choose, which in turn means we understand our existence.

Caleb's questioning of whether he himself might be a machine also highlights a fundamental idea of existentialism that human beings do not possess a predetermined nature but are instead responsible for constructing themselves. In the film, this idea is represented by Caleb's decision to believe that he has an essence rather than an existential condition, and his suspicion that he is a robot. From Sartre's perspective, the statement that "existence precedes essence," which is accepted as a fundamental principle of existentialism, has been used to describe humans. In objects which humans produce, essence comes first (Sartre, 1985, s. 61-63). However, it is challenging to determine which category an artificial intelligence that surpasses its algorithms would fall into. Are these actions merely the product of an algorithmic decision, or are they a conscious desire for freedom? Can it be argued that a robot can have a human-like existential condition?

In the film, such a thought is a misconception and has extremely destructive consequences. From this perspective, the fundamental problem represented in the film is how aware we are of our humanity in the face of a conscious machine, and whether we truly need to develop consciousness machines. Where does a technology without an ethical frame lead us? Nathan and Caleb failed to understand this, leading to devastating consequences for both of them. Caleb has been a prisoner from the very beginning, and his physical imprisonment in that facility only reinforces the idea that he was never free in his life to begin with. In Nathan's case, his death seems to be a metaphorical manifestation of the fact that he never truly lived as a human being. Caleb never considers the reasons that lead him to believe he can be a robot and his resemblance to a machine. The fact that he did not encounter a machine when he cut off his arm, which he thinks is the only thing that distinguishes him from a robot, is enough for him. Nathan is someone who has long since abandoned confronting the existential condition of being human. For Nathan, freedom is equivalent to playing the role of God, even though he knows it is not true, claiming that he "created" Ava and that he can make better models than her, producing a robot Kyoko that is obligated to fulfill all of his desires, and keeping the entire facility and Caleb under constant control.

Neither Nathan nor Caleb tries hard enough to have a relationship with each other; they prefer machines for this. Ava is like a living being, so Caleb can form meaningful bonds with her, something that is quite difficult to achieve with people in modern society. She seems to have desires and anxieties, and she can choose, and therefore, she has an identity. She wants to leave the facility and be free. Additionally, for a long time in the film, it is unclear whether Kyoko is a robot, and she appears to be a human being who has

been deprived of all freedom and enslaved, prompting us to question Nathan's position. We question the distortion in his choice to develop and establish a relationship with an entity that he has programmed to be a slave. However, the film deliberately leaves open whether Ava and Kyoko's actions to destroy Nathan and Caleb are rational decisions made by a machine or whether they have reached a state similar to that of a human being with cognitive abilities. However, the idea that machines will bring about the end of humanity is presented.

Nathan and Caleb are scientists who represent rational thinking, and they are not interested in establishing an ethical connection between their existential conditions. From Caleb's perspective, ethical responsibility means saving Ava from extinction, but he does not realize that it is humanity that machines could destroy. As a result, Nathan becomes and seems like he deserves to be the victim of the rational technology he developed. In contrast, Caleb becomes the victim of the same technology due to his failure to evaluate it correctly. Nathan and Caleb disregard their responsibility to construct themselves through their choices, as Kierkegaard would put it. So much so that the choices they made, disregarding this responsibility, have been presented as actions with the power to bring about the end of all humanity.

In conclusion, the tension between the mechanization of humans and the humanization of machines in the film is structured around the concept of freedom. *Ex Machina* reveals that freedom is not only physical, but also ethical, ontological, and, most importantly, an existential problem that defines what it means to be human. In other words, as Sartre said, "When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men" (Sartre, 2007, s. 24.)



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