Queering Reproduction through Cyborg Stories

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Introduction

In my sophomore year, I did an internship with a social media influencer, who is a mother of a 2-year-old child. One day, she brought her child on set. As soon as they entered the studio, everyone in the production team began to compliment the child's striking resemblance to both the influencer and her husband. Standing outside of the crowd, I started to realize that to assume a child should look like both of their parents is just one reflection of the ideology that sees normative reproduction as a biological combination of both sides of the parents. While this belief is based on the assumption that all reproduction is achieved and should be achieved through sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, this assumption does not necessarily relate to heterosexuality. I argue that when the hegemonic culture frames that only reproduction through heterosexual sex can be seen as natural and normal, it is less of a concern over the sexual preference of people, but out of the need of creating a social order that is based on the heteronormative, nuclear family structure. In his book, Lee Edelman argues that reproduction, the creation of children, has long been taken as a political weapon: “[the success of the] public appeals on behalf of America’s children [is based on] the social consensus that such an appeal is impossible to refuse.”¹ However, as he further explains, the concept of children that the politicians wield has nothing to do with real children’s experience; it is an imagined child that is constructed to be safe only under the current heteronormative social order. Similarly, the enemy of the social order in this narrative is the imagined queers who are unable to reproduce because they do not have access to heterosexual intercourse. This narrative ignores the existence of gay

and trans children who do not fit into the “innocent child” image and also ignores that there are queer people who reproduce through all sorts of methods.

Of course, this assumption is far from reality. Not only because the term “queer” covers such a heterogeneous community, but also because queer people have a long history of reproducing and creating dynamic kinships, such as through sperm donation, adoption, having and raising child from previous heterosexual marriage, etc. Scholars such as Laura Mamo, Laura Briggs, and Maureen Sullivan have researched extensively on the history and practice of how queer people, especially queer women navigate the physical, cultural, and legal process of reproduction. While I will be in conversation with their work, my thesis explores queer reproduction on a cultural level since many obstacles queer people encounter are due to their discordance with the normativity of reproduction, which is a constructed narrative rather than fact. To be more specific, I aim to give a queer reading of reproduction in cyborg media as a way to deconstruct the heteronormative assumption regarding reproduction.

I want to specifically engage with cyborgs because they are “boundary creatures”. They are not humans who use machines or machines that fail to be human; they occupy a space where elements from both humans and machines merge together. Since the concept of being queer already suggests a kind of fluidity in identity formation, in terms that a person does not fit within the strict binary of man and woman, I would like to explore this in-betweenness and fluidity in

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the media representation of reproduction as well: based on these media objects, in what ways
does reproduction between heterosexual parents contain a certain degree of queerness, and in
what ways does queer reproduction perform a sense normativity for its own flourish.

Additionally, the cyborg has been a stand-in for queer identity, both in popular
representations and in actual culture. Some of the most classical examples of cyborgs in media
are Murphy from *RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987) and Motoko Kusanagi from *Ghost in the
Shell* (Mamoru Oshii, 1995), where a human’s consciousness is integrated with a mechanical and
artificial body. Cyborgs are also replicants, clones, robot children created for emotional support,
robot soldiers aiming to destroy the human race, and artificial intelligence assistants that
suddenly wake up and decide to leave their masters. They are every being that is not exactly
human but is very similar to humans. They are not exactly “part of us,” nor are we “part of
them.” It seems that they learned everything from their human creators but their capacities are
way beyond human imagination.

In her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Donna Haraway compares cyborgs with
simians and women, because they are all boundary creatures, “all of which have had a
destabilizing place in the great Western evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives.”

She then further explains that the boundary creatures are seen as monsters in western social
orders since “The power-differentiated and highly contested modes of being of these monsters
may be signs of possible worlds.” In other words, the cyborgs represent the power of resisting
specifically and can be a metaphor “for people who need and hope to live in a world less riddled

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5 Ibid.
by the dominations of race, colonialism, class, gender, and sexuality”⁶. Therefore, cyborg media is a perfect site to queer the dominating assumptions of reproduction.

Furthermore, cyborgs do not only exist on screen as a fantasy. In Donna Haraway’s famous “A Cyborg Manifesto”, she connects the image of the cyborg with reality: “High-tech culture challenges these dualisms in intriguing ways. It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what is the body in machines that resolve into coding practices.”⁷ Indeed, not only are humans making machines to imitate human capacities, humans have come closer to machines through the very site of human bodies. Biologically speaking, human bodies now are subject to mechanical changes such as implants and prostheses. Moreover, many humans, especially those on society’s margins, do mechanical and repetitive labor that is not more creative than a machine on an assembly line.

In terms of reproduction, the process of humans becoming cyborgs has come true through the development of assisted reproductive technologies (ART). For example, in vitro fertilization (IVF) is one of the widely used reproductive technologies that fertilizes an egg outside of the human body and then transfers the embryo back to a human’s womb, which does not necessarily need to be the egg producer’s womb. As Sarah Franklin dedicates in her in-depth research on the cultural implications of IVF, IVF belongs to part of the extended history of attempting to create, manipulate, and control life. She cites Evelyn Fox Keller to argue that “this quest for life’s

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⁶ Ibid.
essence simultaneously works toward its dissolution”.

Technologies like IVF proved that life could be artificially manipulated, and thus life itself is mechanical and reengineerable.

More importantly, it suggests that kinship no longer needs to overlap with biological relationships, creating more possibility for extended kinships since life can be created without the existence of heterosexual intercourse. The emergence of reproductive technologies pushes back the arguments that privilege heterosexual marriage for its procreative functions. A direct example is that since the 1980s, queer women in America have been reproducing with the assistance of reproductive technologies, from non-medical technologies such as self-insemination through turkey basters to visiting fertility clinics for IVF.

Reading the use of ARTs through cyborg theories can be symbolically emancipating. However, the media representation of cyborgian reproductions is not without its problems. In her studies of reproductive technologies in science fiction horror films, Erin Harrington points out that ARTs in techno horror films often speak “to a compulsion to remove the female subject from the process for which she has been historically necessary.” While this removal can be emancipatory for females, as a way to escape the compulsory reproductive labor, it could also be dangerous. Harrington points out that “the pregnant subject herself is deemed irrelevant or unnecessary, and she is aesthetically or visually quite literally erased…This is a framework of knowledge in which masculine scientific rationality attempts to control or dominate nature, which is implicitly feminised as Mother and maternal environment.”

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9 Briggs, “Gay Married, with Children.”
Indeed, I see the relationship between humans and machines, or normativity and queerness, as the interaction between two kinds of liquid when you shake the container that holds them. While both of them try to invade and take over the space the other occupies, there are no still and clear boundaries between them and there will be some particles of one kind of liquid existing within the other liquid. Based on these discussions, I will look into three examples of cyborgian reproduction in the media to explore how to queer the current narrative of reproduction.

Chapter 1 is about the video game Detroit: Become Human (Quantic Dream, 2018). I focus on one of its plotlines that centers a domestic labor android, Kara, who later becomes a mother-figure of another android, Alice. Through the theory of performativity posed by Judith Butler, I argue that in this game, Kara needs to perform a sense of humanness to protect herself against the prosecution from the authorities. Kara’s fit-for-purpose solution echoes the experience of queer families in real life. However, the game ties the development of a heteronormative nuclear family with the success of the game and implies that the only way for androids to gain happiness is to become as close as humans. Throughout the game, it is disappointing to see how her strategic use of human norms gradually becomes a justification of humanity’s superiority compared with the androids. It is not a child, but the heteronormative hegemonic culture of the human world that is being reproduced by the androids.

Chapter 2 focuses on Neon Genesis Evangelion (Hideaki Anno, 1995), one of the most influential Japanese anime of the 1990s. This is a text that is almost the direct opposite of Detroit. Although the show centers the nuclear family structure in its imagination of the future, its characters operate a queer temporality. According to Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman’s
theory, queer temporality resists the teleological, linear sense of time that aims for reproduction. Therefore, the show inspires a way of imagining a queer reproduction through the sense of time, rather than sexuality.

In Chapter 3, I argue that the film *I Am Mother* (Grant Spoutore, 2019) presents a direct visualization of Haraway’s cyborg utopia. This film sets in an apocalyptic future, in which human reproduction can fully substitute by machine, and thus humans can finally leave the limitation of an Oedipus structure that emphasizes on the fight for a patriarchal power.

By re-examining these depictions of reproduction in science-fiction media and interpreting them through a queer perspective, I argue that our notions of reproduction already incorporate elements of queerness. However, queerness and heteronormativity will always integrate with each other and we should read it productively.
Chapter 1: The Layers of Performance in *Detroit: Become Human*

**Introduction**

It is the year 2038, a time when androids are designed as substitutes for human labor of all sorts. They are widely used as soldiers, detective agents, trash collectors, personal assistants, domestic workers, and so on. Yet they are also segregated in public transportation, harassed on the street, and physically abused by their owners. At the same time, some androids have developed sentience and no longer wish to be enslaved by human owners as disposable tools. CyberLife, the company that produces these androids, claims that those are deviant androids with malfunctioning software. However, the cause of deviancy is still unknown, so now CyberLife has cooperated with the police to capture and investigate deviants. As a response, the deviants have started a revolutionary war. They want to be free from slavery and want equal rights with humans.

You are a human guard at a bus terminal whose work is to identify and arrest any deviants who are running from their job. Soon, you see three figures approaching you: an average-sized woman who is holding hands with a little girl, and a tall man walking right beside them. The woman explains to you that her daughter is sick so they want to take the bus to go home. The little girl is trembling and the mother is very cooperative with your questions. You *feel* that there is a bond between the family which you have often felt around other human families you know. So you let them go, without realizing that they are three deviant androids.
This sequence is a scene from the video game *Detroit: Become Human*. But rather than playing a human guard as in my narrative, players of the game take the role of the androids who are trying to navigate their own destiny against the backdrop of an android revolution. As a role-playing game (RPG), the player controls three deviant protagonists: Kara, former domestic worker, who is trying to protect the child of her abusive owner; Markus, former personal assistant and the eventual leader of the revolution; and Connor, the detective android who is assigned to investigate why androids are becoming deviants. *Detroit* is also a choose-your-own-adventure game, which means the ending of the game is determined by the decisions the players make for all three characters. The protagonists may fail in their mission or even die based on even the smallest choice made by the player. As the revolution proceeds, nothing is guaranteed.

Instead of acknowledging that all androids are naturally capable of developing free will, CyberLife insists on framing deviancy as a type of software virus and explaining the massive awakening of androids as a result of pathologized contagion. By assigning the degrading label deviant to these androids, the company separates them from the androids who follow their owners’ commands and normalizes the company’s plan to police and prosecute disobedient androids. As a result, before the revolution, which might appear as a series of peaceful demonstrations or a revolutionary war depending on the players’ choices, most deviants call themselves fugitives and have to hide to survive. In this paper, I argue that the deviants are queer, as they are in a similar situation as queer people in real life. Queerness has a long history of being pathologized and medicalized, and the term “queer” was also initially a degrading name

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for people who deviate from the heteronormativity of society. In the game, the deviants ask for the acknowledgment of their basic rights. In real life, queer people in contemporary western countries have followed the same path. However, although now homosexuality and transgender people are no longer criminalized, same-sex marriages are being accepted, and transgender people are able to change their gender on their IDs, discrimination and inequalities still exist. For example, queer people are still expected and encouraged to fit into a heteronormative culture. Just like in the game, the agency, intelligence, and emotion of androids are only being celebrated as a successful imitation of human capacities.

I will mainly focus on the plotline of the android Kara, a domestic helper model. Kara is purchased by Todd, an aggressive drug addict, to look after his young daughter Alice. Kara soon finds out that Todd is abusive to Alice, threatening her life, and the player can choose to let her disobey Todd and let Kara take Alice to escape. However, after Kara and Alice escape, they have no place to go and are constantly facing threats from the police. After the first few nights, they are captured by Zlatko, a human who dissects and reassembles fugitive androids for fun. Zlatko has a servant named Luther, whose model is exceptionally tall and strong compared to other models and is also one of the few models that are Black. When Zlatko tortures Kara, Alice tries to protect her. The emotional attachment between them moves Luther and experiencing this emotion makes him a deviant. After Kara defeats Zlatko, Luther joins Kara and Alice in their journey to find a new home. Gradually, they see each other as family. Although later in the game, the players will be informed that Alice is actually also an android bought by Todd, the storyline of Kara challenges the players to imagine if a family can be formed across the boundaries between androids and humans.
The story of Kara building her family can be seen as an allegory of queer families in real life. Here I define queer families as families that do not fit into the heteronormative nuclear family mode, for example, families with same-sex parents and polyamorous families. The story of Kara reflects that while queer families challenge the heteronormative definition of family, they are also pressured to perform according to the norms. However, I also view the game’s representation of queer kinships critically. While the game acknowledges families that deviate from the social norms, it implies that they are worth accepting because they are “as good as human families.” This way of narrative, not only pressures the deviants to perform a sense of normalcy, but it also depoliticizes their existence. However, it is also important to note that by foregrounding that social norms are constructed through performative actions, the game also challenges the players to rethink the legitimacy of the boundaries between humans and androids, normativity and deviancy, hegemony and queerness.

**Humans Performing Androids**

I was welcomed to *Detroit* by an android named Chloe, who helped me to adjust the settings of the game and my devices. Before sending me into the game, she said to me, “Remember, this is not just a game, it is our future.” Her words made me anxious. I felt pressured to prove my ability so I could somehow defend the future of mankind. Therefore, I was pleased to see that *Detroit* not only provides tutorials for basic gaming mechanisms but also lists out the specific tasks I need to complete, such as “Find captain Allen” and “Save hostages at all
costs”, so that I could know that I’m on the right track.\footnote{Quantic Dream, “Hostage”, in \textit{Detroit: Become Human}.} As the game progressed, I got used to having these giant white text boxes on my computer screen to lead my action. I trust their guidance even more than my own observation and judgment because I was afraid that missing or failing missions will lead to disadvantages for my character’s future missions. I never questioned the veracity of these instructions, nor did I wonder why they existed in the first place until I unlocked the path to turn Kara from an ordinary, obedient android into a deviant.

After Todd brings Kara home from CyberLife’s store, Todd immediately tells her to clean up his house. As usual, I followed the task instructions and finished the chores. After I finished, I saw “wait for new instructions” appear on my screen and I didn’t expect that I was forced to witness Todd abuse Alice verbally and physically, but with no option to protect Alice.\footnote{Quantic Dream, “Stormy Night”, in \textit{Detroit: Become Human}.} I tried to press the keys that are supposed to move Kara but found they were no longer functioning. The only available function was to zoom in for close-ups of Todd’s violence. Fortunately, Alice soon ran upstairs to escape from Todd. I was relieved to see the instruction on the screen change to “Go see Alice” and I immediately tried to move Kara to the stairs. However, as soon as I pressed my keyboard, the perspective of the game suddenly changed from behind Kara to facing Todd. Todd was still angry and yelled at me “You stay there.” I did not want to follow his order but to my frustration, I found Kara had already changed her posture from running to at ease. I pressed the W key again to move forward but Kara did not move and my instruction told me “Don’t move” as well. Although I was eager to save Alice or stop Todd, my immediate reaction was still to follow the instructions because I believed it was designed to help players. While I waited, Todd continued to swear and yell and eventually went upstairs to find Alice.
Feeling that I cannot keep waiting, I decided to press the right button of the mouse to scan the surroundings to see if there were any items around me that could unlock a new path. After I pressed the button, the instruction I had received, “Don’t move,” multiplied to become a transparent red wall that appeared in front of Kara, seemingly preventing her from approaching Alice. However, a silhouette of Kara also appeared, pushing against the wall and encouraging me to walk through. At that moment I suddenly realized that the instructions that I had trusted and obeyed since I began the game are also commands within the diegesis that are given to the android character, not just non-diegetic instructions for the player. Yet ironically, I still relied on them to see the wall. I started to wonder to what extent I became Kara. I took orders from the game, I completed the orders, and I could never truly be free from the orders as long as I am playing this game.

In their research on video game players, Klimmt Christoph et al. point out that different from non-interactive media, such as television, in video games, players directly control the characters or fulfill a certain social role within the game world and they get to shape the properties and course of the game through the characters they take on. In this case, Klimmt et al. use the concept of identification to describe that “players do not perceive the game (main) character as a social entity distinct from themselves, but experience a merging of their own self and the game protagonist.”13 Indeed, as I adapted to the routine of completing commands from the owners and then getting rewarded with the proceeds of the storyline, I could no longer separate my identity as a human player from the androids I controlled.

While this strategy is commonly used by video game producers to enhance the players’ involvement and emotional attachment to the games, what shocked me was how obedient I was when Todd asked me not to move. Just like Kara later chooses to perform as a human for practical benefit, at that moment I chose to perform as an android because I thought the best way to play the game is to follow its instructions. As a game about deviancy, Detroit forces the players to obey the rules, and the obedience at the beginning of the game lays good foundations for the players to understand the meaning of becoming deviants. As Jaakko Sterno and Sarah Lynne Bowman conclude in their study about Role-playing games, “According to the labeling theory of deviance, rule-makers and enforcers are as involved, if not more so, in the construction of deviance as the alleged deviant.”\textsuperscript{14} The moment when the rules and commands become actualized as a wall in front of my character, I realized how much I was being trapped by the pressure of playing the role of an android who does her work and that I could choose another route to utilize the instructions to exert my agency.

However, being pressured, both consciously and unconsciously, to act according to a set of rules is not unique to the game, but is something everyone does every day. In their book Gender Trouble, Judith Butler raises their famous concept of gender performativity. They argue that instead of seeing gender as something as natural or essential, we should consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an act, as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning…this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of

corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into
sexes existing in a binary relation to each other.\footnote{Judith Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity}, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 190-191.}

This does not mean that gender is artificial, nor does it mean that the feeling of gender, or
a person’s gender identity, is unreal and could be changed easily.\footnote{Judith Butler: \textit{Looking Back on \textquote{Gender Trouble}},” 2021, \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUSb5vEcdFQ}.} Rather, the concept of
performativity focuses on how the definition of gender is produced and reproduced as a process
in which each person converts their internal, personal feeling of gender into something that could
be understood by others. Although in our daily life, the performative nature of gender has been
internalized as “natural” and thus hard to notice in daily experiences, in the game \textit{Detroit}, this
performativity becomes apparent through the multiple layers of role-playing from the diegetic
representations of the game and the mechanics of the gameplay itself: human players perform as
androids, and androids perform normative humanness.

\textbf{Androids Performing Humans}

As the storylines progress, more and more humans lose their androids, causing the police
and CyberLife to ramp up their search for deviants to calm public outrage. Therefore, after Kara
escapes Todd’s house with Alice, she needs to find somewhere to hide from the police.\footnote{Quantic Dream, \textit{“Fugitives”, in Detroit: Become Human.}} The
players are free to choose from three shelters, yet for every choice, they are asked to let Kara
change from her android uniform into human clothes, cut her hair, and most importantly, take off

\textit{Quantic Dream, \textit{“Fugitives”, in Detroit: Become Human.}}
or conceal the LED light on her head that indicates the state of an android’s software. In addition to her appearance, Kara also crafts her language to assimilate into human culture. Throughout the game, she introduces Alice as her daughter, instead of her former owner who willingly escaped with her. The game makes clear that if Kara wants to escape from the police, she needs to pass as a human. In her book “Passing and the Fictions of Identity,” Elaine Ginsberg defines passing as “to disguise other elements of an individual's presumed ‘natural’ or ‘essential’ identity, including class, ethnicity, and sexuality, as well as gender.” Since “presumably one cannot pass for something one is not unless there is some other, prepassing, identity that one is,” passing signifies that a body can be perceived as two different identities, which often have a distinct hierarchy. Therefore, not only does passing prove that identities are not “inherent and unalterable essences,” but it also illustrates that the hierarchies among different identities are socially constructed, rather than being the essence of one’s body.

Kara’s passing is successful, as we saw from her slipping past the bus terminal security guard. However, besides Kara’s effort to appear human, another reason why she succeeds in passing is that those around her understand the same set of cultural codes for what humans should look like, which she is also designed to perform since she is produced. As a deviant who betrayed her owner, Kara takes care of Alice because she genuinely wants to do so; however, as she translates her feelings into actions, she is performing under the influence of the information she received without her realizing it. In her book, Butler engages with Foucault to argue that: “in the context of prisoners, the strategy has been…to compel their bodies to signify the prohibitive

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18 Kara’s human-passing narrative is a default that will automatically be adapted by Kara whenever she encounters a human that might be a threat.
law as their very essence, style, and necessity.”²¹ This is not to say that there is no internal identity within people but suggests that even the inner self is produced and shaped by the culture around us. Before the androids are activated and put into use, they are all programmed with information about human languages and cultures. As Kara holds Alice’s hands to help her walk, sets up fireplaces to keep her warm, makes her bed, and puts her to sleep, she is performing a “proper” motherhood that she understands based on the knowledge she acquired as a domestic-worker android.

For Butler, “Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this ‘action’ is a public action.”²² As we repetitively draw references from certain cultural norms to express our identity, these norms are being naturalized and reinforced. This is dangerous because it means that we also internalize the unequal power structure that is baked into the cultural norms. For people in real life, it could be that heterosexual relationships and binary gender expressions are normal, and same-sex relationships or untraditional gender expressions are unnatural, disgusting, and inferior. For Kara, she internalized that the emotions and values of androids are less natural and thus inferior to those of humans.

In the game, Kara has always known Alice as an android child, but her subconscious directs her to see Alice as a human child. Through the words of Luther, the game explains: “You knew from the beginning. You just didn’t want to see it. She needed a mom and you wanted someone to care for. You needed each other.”²³ This implies that although Kara has the desire to nurture, she felt that she should not be nurturing an android, even if the android was designed as

²¹ Butler, Gender Trouble, 183.
²² Butler, Gender Trouble, 191.
²³ Quantic Dream, “Crossroads”, in Detroit: Become Human.
a child. It suggests that in Kara’s subconscious, taking care of a human child legitimizes her mothering desire and eases her queerness to some extent: although she disobeys her owner, she is still doing what she is supposed to do: to care for a human child as a domestic care-taking android. As she finds food for an android who does not need to eat and makes fire for an android who doesn’t feel cold, she performs a mother identity that eases her internalized deviant-phobia.

Of course, as a character in a role-playing game, Kara is also a medium between the game and the players. After the game reveals Alice’s identity to the players, it lets the players choose if they still want to be family with Alice, which pushes the players to reconsider if the hierarchy between a normative kinship and a queer kinship should exist.

Kara’s story could be read as an allegory for queer families in real life. Although it is a long way to change the social norms, the performative nature of identity makes straight-passing a fit-for-purpose strategy to protect some queer people and their families from both cultural stigma and legal risks. For example, in her research on queer polyfamilies, Emily Pain shows that while in public social spaces, such as schools,

many families are hesitant to disclose that they are polyamorous, instead passing as heterosexual (or queer) monogamous couples…[because]when polyamorous parents or children do disclose their family structure, they can be met with disapproval, stigma, or harassment…[which] made them more vulnerable to accusations of poor parenting or questionable family situations.⁴

As Kath Weston finds in her study on lesbian and gay kinship, “many lesbian parents described motherhood as a status that made their sexual identity invisible. In their experience, heterosexuals who saw a lesbian accompanied by a child generally assumed she was straight and perhaps married.” This assumption is made because most heterosexuals are not aware that queer people are also able to have children, regardless of their biological connection. More than thirty years after Weston’s research, mainstream culture still often uses heterosexual norms to imagine queer reproduction. For example, one of the popular questions for queer people who reproduce is whether it is possible for same-sex couples to have children with DNA from both parents, implying that it would be ideal for same-sex couples to reproduce like most heterosexual couples. Similarly, the guard at the bus terminal was convinced by Kara’s expression of motherhood because in his understanding, only humans are able to develop familial relationships and the associated emotions.

However, for all queer families, no matter straight-passing or not, a heteronormative understanding of family and kinship inevitably impact their day-to-day routines. For example, many people, including many queer parents, are concerned about what terms children should use to address their same-sex parents, assuming that the children will be confused over their non-normative family structure. As Weston points out, this ignores that “Children in the United States have two sets of grandparents, yet they manage to avoid confusing one with the other.”

27 Weston, Families We Choose, 173.
This example shows that just like Kara, queer people have also internalized some degree of heteronormative standard of family and are performing images of parenthood based on these biased beliefs. To some extent, the performance of normativity has become a responsibility for queer people. As Laura Mamo mentions in her study “Queering the Fertility Clinic”:

“Reproduction had become another “do-it-yourself” self-project—a way to transform oneself and one’s identity: ‘We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves.’”

The notion of making stands for the making of babies through purchasing eggs, sperm, or even surrogate mothers, implying that one’s identity could be actively achieved through individual effort and consumer behavior.

It is important to note that under this neoliberal paradigm, some populations are more vulnerable than others. Take the game for example: Kara and Alice are both designed to have Caucasian features. Their same skin color suggests that they have a biological relationship. People with light skin are perceived to be less threatening and suspicious and white mothers are also more likely to be seen as qualifying, good mothers than women of color.

In fact, most androids appearing in the game are assigned white bodies, which is an interesting choice especially given that the game is set in Detroit, a city with a high percentage of African American residents, and when many of its depictions of revolution resonate with the civil rights movement in America, such as seen in the use of slogans like “No More Slavery” and “Equal Rights.”


Allegories of Control and Homonormativity

In *Detroit*, every choice made by the players impacts the fate of the characters. Some choices bring death, while some bring peace.\(^{31}\) Stephan Schubert points out that these choices are more than narrative tools, but also a medium for the game to express political messages, for example, what they think is the right way of revolution.\(^{32}\) He points out that

in order to understand the game’s meanings and its politicality, it is necessary to examine which potential choices *Detroit: Become Human* offers and which it does not…[It is also important to] focus on its narrative discourse…analyzing which (sets of) choices the game—deliberately or not—encourages or discourages (and how), which ones it makes more difficult for players due to the information it presents or the context and framing it uses.\(^{33}\)

In this section, I would like to use the same approach to argue that while in many ways, the deviants in this game could be seen as representations of queer people in real life, the choice design in this game encourages the players to choose a heteronormative lifestyle for the deviants, which does not align with the goal of queer movements. In her work “The New Homonormativity,” Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while

\(^{31}\) For example, While I was researching for this paper, I learned that during the plot when my Kara becomes a deviant, if the players decide to follow the instructions they saw and do not take any action, Todd will kill Alice and then destroy Kara. The players will never see Kara again in future stories.

\(^{32}\) Schubert, “‘Liberty for Androids!’” 9.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.” The deviants in *Detroit* are homonormative deviants whose political capacity is being circumscribed. Although they seek equal rights, they aim and desire to be nothing but human. The players either are not given the choice to not comply with the heteronormative rule or are discouraged to do so.

Androids do not have sexes but their bodies were designed and produced as gendered. The physiques of their bodies are designed and created with obvious secondary sex characteristics. Their occupations, which are determined before they are activated, are also related to their assigned gender. Most soldiers, cleaning services, and detectives have male bodies while sex workers and domestic workers are predominantly female-bodied. Two of the main characters, Markus and Connor, are both assigned as male and are all designed to be crucial figures for the android revolution. In contrast, Kara is designed to present the domestic capacity of the androids. She is a strong and intelligent female character but her characteristics are mainly expressed through her motherhood. Protecting Alice is Kara’s top priority. The death of Alice will either directly lead to Kara’s death or survival with guilt and sorrow. The players will also be blamed by Chloe: “You could have saved them.” However, the players are not given the chance to change the gendered body or gender expression of Kara. When Kara changes her clothes to avoid the police on her first night of escaping, the players can not replace or alter her body parts to change the gendered construction of her body. Also, when Kara meets Markus in his

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35 Although one of the key plots in Markus’s storyline is to let the players replace his broken limbs with functioning limbs from the android dumpster, which seems contradicting with the game’s setting of androids having unalterable gender and race.
revolution fort Jericho before the final battle, the players are not given any choice but to let Kara join the revolution troops. Kara’s goal is designed to cross the border and go to Canada, where she believes that she could build a life with Alice and Luther like an ordinary human family.

The pressure to choose the right choice also comes in more subtle ways. In his article, Stefan Schubert argues that Detroit pressures the players to avoid irritating the human during the android’s revolution by presenting a symbol to indicate the human public’s attitude towards the androids on the players’ screen. He said, “Simply by indicating the people’s opinion, the game makes that very opinion seem important, and in the general gameplay logic, this measurement appears as a statistic that players want to be increasing.” A similar indicator is also used to show the character’s relationship with the side characters in their stories. In Kara’s plotline, the players are constantly reminded of their relationship with Alice and Luther, on the spectrum between distance and family. Any change will be reflected through a blue up arrow for family connection or a red down arrow for the decrease of trust. This design implies that the players should try to stay in good social relationships with other characters as much as possible or they will face negative consequences.

This implication is not wrong. In *Detroit*, the happiness of androids is tied closely to the establishment of a nuclear family or a heterosexual romantic relationship. Establishing a heteronormative family not only increases Kara’s chance of escaping from humans, but it also means that Luther would sacrifice his life to protect Kara and Alice when they face danger. A similar situation also appears in Markus’s plotline. If the player makes choices leading Markus

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36 Schubert, “‘Liberty for Androids!’” 11. The indication of public opinion refers to “when controlling any of the three characters, players can see a measure of the “public opinion” as part of the mission overview, which is meant to indicate what humans think about androids and their cause. It starts at “skeptical” and can either be lowered, incrementally, to “hated,” or raised to “supportive.”
and his female android companion, North, to become a couple, North will always support the players’ battle plan and might also sacrifice her life to save him. If the players choose a peaceful demonstration path, a public display of their love through kissing has the power to stop the police from shooting them and persuade the president that androids also have emotions and need to be treated equally. On the other hand, the only queer representation in the game, two female sex robots who kill their customers to save each other, are not that lucky. As side characters in Connor’s storyline, one of the sex robots might be killed by the player to fulfill Connor’s mission. Even if the robot is not killed, they will still be injured and will have to escape in the snowing winter, with nothing but the bikinis and high heels they are assigned to wear at work.

In the game, the love between androids is the reason for many humans to realize that deviants are not malfunctioning androids aiming to destroy human beings but are conscious beings that deserve equal rights with them. However, although love between androids is a type of queer love in the setting of Detroit, the game only celebrates homonormative queer love, which is love between androids that could be assimilated into human social norms. For Kara, fitting herself into a normative family structure is nothing uncomfortable and even desirable. Her story of successfully “blending in” suggests that it is justifiable to police the more non-conforming deviants since they choose not to comply with the standard that could get them respect and tolerance from mainstream society. For example, if Kara and Alice stay in an abandoned house after they escape from Todd, they will meet Ralph, a malfunctioned deviant android that is depicted as suffering from mental illness. Although he tries to make friends with Alice, the game represents him as a monster that can not control his behavior and will cause harm to Alice. Even
though his malfunctioning is due to the torture of a group of humans, the game presents him as someone that cannot be trusted and allows the players to threaten him.

Queer people in America have always been trying to establish families in the heteronormative system, such as by getting married, having biologically related children, and adopting their partner’s biological children. These actions could both acquire practical benefits such as legal protection over custody and defend themselves against discrimination based on a counterproductive homophobic argument. However, many scholars have also raised their concerns over the limitation of this active assimilation. For example, Laura Mamo points out that many queer people are experiencing compulsory reproduction “as they sought inclusions in normativity, demanding sexual citizenship. For many, buying sperm and eggs—and all that these embody—had become routes not only to achieving parenthood but also to realizing their imagined and desired sense of self and recognition in the social and cultural worlds in which they reside.” Just like Kara in this game, who is categorized as an outsider in society and redefined her value as a mother of a child. Her motherhood follows the standard of human culture and provides her reason to prove her value despite her deviancy.

Conclusion

As Stenros and Bowman point out, role-playing games are transgressive. The game constructs a special place, where players may transgress social rules outside of the game by

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38 Mamo, “Queering the Fertility Clinic,” 230.
39 Stenros and Bowman, “Transgressive Role-Play.”
following the rules inside the game. For example, smuggling into Canada using a fake identity would be breaking the rules in real life, but in Detroit, when you are a refugee during wartime, this behavior would be acceptable and beneficial. This shows that the boundaries are socially-constructed rather than essentialist. What is special about Detroit, an RPG game, is that these concepts are emphasized through the continuous action of the players. Through trying on other identities, both consciously and unconsciously, human players develop empathy for the androids they control.\(^{40}\)

However, while I agree with Leach and Dehnert’s argument that “for players with the privilege of limited experience in [racism], DBH provides a unique opportunity to temporarily experience and identify with those who exist on the margins of society.”\(^{41}\) I think it is problematic for Detroit to anchor the value of the deviants in their ability to “become human.” As Isabella Francis argues: “For cisgender/heterosexual consumers, the purpose of homonormativity is to fit queer people into their understanding of the world – to make themselves believe that queer people are ‘just like them’”\(^{42}\) while their heteronormative lifestyle is unproblematized. To praise the android’s ability to mimic humans is to shift the focus away from the problems of humans. The performance within the deviants and players’ actions are exploited to demonstrate the impregnability of the system, rather than showing how we could emancipate ourselves from reinforcing heteronormativity after we understand its performative nature.


\(^{41}\) David J. Leonard, “Not a Hater, Just Keepin’ It Real: The Importance of Race and Gender Based Game Studies,” Games and Culture 1, no. 1 (2006): 86. (Quoted in Leach and Dehnert, “Becoming the Other,” 25.)

Chapter 2: The Queer Temporality in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*

**Introduction**

*Neon Genesis Evangelion (NGE, Hideaki Anno, 1995)* depicts a story that happens fifteen years after the Second Impact, a worldwide disaster that wipes out half of the population on Earth. The disaster is caused by the discovery and explosion of a human-like giant in Antarctica. The giant is later named Adam, which is a certain kind of creature referred to as Angels. They are ancient giants in distinctive shapes and have enormous power, yet they were buried underground during most of human history. Their existence is kept secret from most of humanity by a secret organization named SEELE. As the series begins, the Angels have returned and put the entire human race once again at risk. Under this circumstance, Gendo Ikari leads NERV, an organization charged with protecting Japan. NERV’s central line of defense rests with giant mechas, known as EVAs, which are equipped to fight the range of Angels which attack the capital city, Tokyo-3. He recruits his long-estranged teenage son, Shinji Ikari, to join a program of children who are uniquely capable of piloting the EVAs. In NERV, Shinji lives with Misato Katsurago, a young woman who is the commander of the EVAs. When he is free from training and work, he is enrolled in a local middle school with the other two pilots: Asuka Langley Soryu, a proud teenage girl from Germany, and Rei Ayanami, a mysterious girl who is distanced from everyone instead of Gendo.

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On the surface, *NGE* seems like a typical shonen anime, a coming-of-age genre that directly targets teenage boys through elements such as adventure, and action. However, the way the show approaches its plot is almost the opposite of the shonen genre. Instead of showing the development of friendship, or the fun of the journey, *NGE* uses its experimental visual language and its references to Western religious mythology and psychoanalytic theory to present the pain the characters experience and the dysfunctionality of their interpersonal relationships. It is a story about conspiracy, trauma, and apocalypse.

Midway through the series, it is revealed that the ultimate goal of Gendo and the organization behind him, SEELE, is not to save humans from the Angels, but to bring the apocalypse to the human race. They plan to use the EVAs to ignite the Third Impact, also known as the Human Instrumentality Project (the Project), which would eliminate all the humans in the world. They believe that only after all the human bodies are abandoned and destroyed can humans become one single life form that can find eternal peace and warmth in a spiritual realm. Gendo also wishes to use the Project to eventually reunite with his wife, Yui, who was absorbed by EVA-01 during its development process, effectively killing her. However, none of the pilots and agents working in NERV are aware of the Project. They all think that they will resume their ordinary life after they defeat all Angels.

The greater franchise that comprises *NGE* is an extremely complicated series of works including the original anime TV show, films, and games. For the sake of this discussion, this chapter will only look into the television series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, which originally aired in Japan from 1995 to 1996. Although the show only provides ambiguous information about

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44 “shonen” literally translates to “boys” or “youth” in English.

45 A more explicit explanation of the mechanism and execution of the Human Instrumentality Project is presented in its later feature film, *The End of Evangelion* (Anno, 1997).
many key concepts, such as the origin of the Angels and the execution of the Project, this work has provoked deep physiological and psychological discussion among its global audience.

In my view, this show challenges the conventions of time and futurity and operates according to queer temporality. According to Jack Halberstam, “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”\textsuperscript{46} Similarly, the Project is also a conscious rejection of the desire of continuing humanity through reproduction since it aims for the extinction of the human body. Additionally, I argue that NGE also uses dysfunctional family relationships as a method to prove the necessity of adopting a queer temporality. Both Shinji and Asuka have traumatic childhood experiences as their parents are either deceased or they abandoned them due to their work at SEELE or NERV.\textsuperscript{47} Rei, on the other hand, is later revealed as one of the countless clones of Yui created by Gendo, who uses the clones as disposable tools in his experiments. Throughout the show, the young pilots are abused by Gendo both mentally and physically.

The following sections will focus on both Gendo Ikari, the representation of the side of the father, and the pilots, representing the side of the children, to give a queer reading of the show. Despite the fact that none of the characters are explicitly queer in their sexuality or identity, nor do any of them actively acknowledge a queer identity, I want to adapt Halberstam’s method of “detach[ing] queerness from sexual identity and come closer to

\textsuperscript{47} Even Misato and Ritsuko Akagi (the chief scientist of NERV), who are already adults approximately in their thirties, also have similar trauma. Misato’s father dies in the Second Impact to protect her. Ritsuko’s mother has an affair with Gendo and commits suicide after knowing Gendo only wants to use her.
understand...homosexuality...as a ‘way of life’” to read both the father and the children as queer based on their rejection and mockery over the heteronormative sense of time.\(^{48}\) Lee Edelman, in his book *No Future*, frames this time as reproductive futurism since it is justified by the aim to protect an imagined child that embodies the future. Edelman says: “For politics, however radical [in their desired social order]...remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child.”\(^{49}\) Therefore, Edelman argues that “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism.”\(^{50}\)

I see queerness in Gendo Ikari’s agenda as he also aims for the opposite of a sense of continuity, which is specifically expressed through his hostile attitude towards his son. He not only abandons his child right after the death of his wife Yui but also verbally shames Shinji whenever he expresses pain or wishes to quit during training and battles. The fact that he is villainized in the show also demonstrates that just as Edelman says, the queer view of the future is against the common understanding of the future in current mainstream culture.

But this show is more than a direct application of the queer future in Edelman’s term; rather, it complicates Edelman’s theory in many ways. While Gendo claims to desire a future


Although there is not an explicit explanation, many audience read that Shinji has emotional attachment to Kaworu, a pilot and also an Angel, who later enters NERV to replace Asuka. Some believe that their relationship has been erased by Netflix when it distributed it in the US. (see Aja Romano, “Netflix’s Re-Translation of Neon Genesis Evangelion Is Drawing Backlash for Queer Erasure,” *Vox*, June 24, 2019, [https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/6/24/18701179/netflix-neon-genesis-evangelion-kaworu-gay-backlash](https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/6/24/18701179/netflix-neon-genesis-evangelion-kaworu-gay-backlash).)

Since I watched the Netflix version, I will not offer an analysis on their relationship in this chapter.


\(^{50}\) Ibid.
where hierarchy ends and all humans can come to an ultimate solidarity, he also abuses his power granted by his position in a patriarchal society. Due to his exploitation, the pilots are deprived of a safe and healthy childhood and the hope to be approved by their parental figures, who represent the existing heteronormative social order. The children in *NGE*, therefore, reflect a kind of rejection of the future. Asuka, as a more extreme example, mentally breaks down and commits suicide after she is mentally attacked by an Angel and loses the ability to pilot. In her book *The Queer Child*, Kathryn Stockton theorizes queer children as growing sideways, writing: “I want to prick (deflate, or just delay) the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up…‘growing sideways’ suggests that the width of a person’s experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts.”\textsuperscript{51} Under the framework of reproductive futurism, Asuka committing suicide is an attempt to stop time and stop her growth. However, in Stockton’s theory, this would be Asuka’s way of growing sideways, which contains productive power even in her longing to die.

*NGE* plays with the concept of time and proposes an alternative imagination of the future where there is no future. Both the father and the children failed to proceed in the teleological process of maturation in the patriarchal order. The father desires a repetition of the past while the children can not and do not want to “grow up”. While *NGE* constantly directs the audience to anticipate the future, such as what Angel is coming next, it also constantly expresses that there is no future for humanity under the current social order. It is noticeable that as an anime about humans at risk, *NGE* uses a lot of still shots. Especially in the first few episodes, when Shinji feels uncomfortable about working as a pilot and wishes to leave, the show uses many long still

shots to depict a sense of stagnation. Sometimes the stills frame the empty and lifeless exteriors of a ruined Japan: buildings collapsed, towns flooded, and cars overturned. Sometimes it captures the characters keeping completely still, not even blinking, as they experience intense emotions such as hurt, loss, and loneliness. The use of stills plays with the sense of time. It implies that the future everyone is fighting for is actually a lie and the truth is after defeating all the Angels, there is no future waiting for humans other than death. NGE conveys the message that an imaginary future based on the imagined child does not guarantee happiness or even meaning; rather, there can be aspiration in a non-linear sense of time. In the end, the Project begins and everyone enters a spiritual realm. Although they are forced to face their internal fear and anxiety, the show ends with Shinji realizing that he can set himself free from the shadow of his father and implies that despite the occurrence of death, the story continues.

**Technology in Japanese Animation**

Before discussing NGE in further detail, it is important to first situate it in the general context of Japanese anime, especially how postwar Japanese pop culture and anime culture are always about the intertwining relationship between humans and technologies. Anne Allison, who studies robot culture in post-war Japan, points out that, although the entire country is still traumatized by the nuclear attack, the government realized that “gijutsu rikkoku”—building the state through technology” is the key to Japan’s reconstruction. In order to achieve its goals, Japan became the earliest in the world to develop and utilize robots on a large scale. From big
industries to small businesses, robots have participated in every aspect of the economic
development of Japan to this day.52

Along with the use of robots, robot characters, such as Doraemon and Astro Boy, have
also been widely created and consumed by generations of Japanese people since the 1950s. As
Allison points out, “As machines were used to rebuild the nation after the devastation of war, robots also became the tropes and fantasies of the postwar era by which Japanese crafted a new imaginary of the state and themselves.”53 In the wish of entering a more affluent and developed society, the audience imagines itself becoming a robot who goes on adventures of fighting villains and winning people’s affections. As a continuation of this tradition, NGE also imagines a future where giant biorobots are made to integrate with human pilots in order to function. Towards the end of the show, we learn that the EVAs are made from the remains of Adam, the first Angel found by humans. Adam is the cause of the Second Impact that killed half of the humans on earth; however, its replicant in the form of the EVA is also the only tool that can fight the other Angels in order to protect humans.

Furthermore, the EVAs are more than artificial mecha that assist humans, they have their own souls and consciousness that are usually being suppressed by NERV in order to control them. Sometimes the soul will also escape from control and exert their own agency, suggesting that the relationship between humans and technology is far more complex than what’s between users and tools. According to Susan Napier, a scholar dedicated to the relationship between humanity and technology in anime, EVA is a subversive work of the mecha genre. Mecha

53 Allison, “From Ashes to Cyborgs,” 56.
narratives often contrast between the vulnerable human body and the powerful mecha body to exemplify “the human inside the machinery.” The machine is usually the tool to enhance the physical capacity of humans and to bring out the humanity of the humans within. On the contrary, *NGE* proposes a much more complicated human-machine interaction. The pilots operate EVAs through neurological connection as if the EVAs are an extension of their bodies. Therefore, the machine no longer protects humans within but becomes a source of physical pain and a cause of enormous stress.

**The Father**

In *No Future*, Edelman points out that all politics stem from the motivation of protecting an imagined child. The discrimination against queer people is justified because the concept of being queer stands for the rejection of reproduction and does harm to the imagined children who cannot exist in absence of reproduction. Gendo’s character undoubtedly fits into this anti-children and anti-future narrative. Gendo is not a good father. He appears as an unquestionable authority and constantly verbally abuses Shinji whenever he feels scared or lost. In the first episode, Shinji reunites with his father after more than ten years of separation and loss of contact. However, instead of showing any warmth or compassion, Gendo remains aloof and distant, choosing to remain in the commander's room high above and looking down on Shinji. He then immediately pressures Shinji to pilot EVA and risk his life to fight the invading Angel. When Shinji questions his father's motives and asks if he was abandoned because he was useless

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to his project, Gendo dismisses his concerns and smirks at his tears, refusing to apologize or explain himself. When Shinji refuses to comply, Gendo becomes angry and orders him to leave immediately.

On the other hand, he gives most of his tenderness and care towards Rei Ayanami, a female child whose body, we learn later in the series, is cloned from the body of Yui. Although he is also cruel to Rei, he still shows some attachment rather than complete disdain that he shows towards Shinji. In episode 5, After she loses control of her EVA in a training session, he leaves his commander's room and runs towards Rei to rescue her even when he knows that he would burn his hand.

I read his attachment to Rei as an example of his desire to go back in time, rather than going forward in time. He rejects his biological child, who in mainstream culture represents the combination of the father and the mother. The children also stand for the continuation of the human that the future depends on. Instead, he prefers the child Rei, who suggests a repetition of the past. Rei is not only the clone of a person who is already dead, but also a repetition of herself since there are countless Rei made by Gendo. Each time a Rei becomes too broken, Gendo starts over with a new Rei. As the story suggests, Gendo’s goal is slightly different from SEELE, as he seeks to reunite with his dead wife, Yui. He does not want to move on to the next generation of humans but wishes to live in the repetition of the past.

For Gendo, his future lies in the destruction of the future in reproductive futurism. He sees the continuation, or even evolution, of humanity at the center of the end of human bodies. In NGE, SEELE’s Human Instrumentality Project is depicted as a vague plan that emphasizes the elimination of human bodies over the reunion of human spirits. The show spends most of the
time explaining the motivation and preparation of the Project but not so much in how ecstasy will the Project enfold after it begins. Therefore, to some extent, the Project is presented as a grand suicidal event that SEELE plans for the entire human race. In Episode 25, after the title announces that “the instrumentality of the heart, the soul, begins,” Gendo appears in the frame and speaks directly to the camera about his plan. While he claims that “No, we are not returning to nothingness. I am simply returning everything to its beginning,” we are given the image of Ritsuko and Misato being shot and killed. Soon, Misato appears to argue with Gendo, but her figure is covered by a soft glow of light, indicating that this is Misato’s spirit speaking in an unknown space. While the show is not clear about the spiritual space and people’s state of existence after the project started, it is very clear that their bodies are killed against their will. Therefore, I would like to read their ending as death, regardless of whether or not the characters’ consciousness remains.

Josh Cohen writes that Freud connects repetition and the death drive through an example of how a child would use the play of hide and seek to repeat and overcome the trauma of separation from his mother:

Freud thus discovered in this most unlikely of settings the fundamental activity of the death-drive: the compulsion to repeat. Repetition is the (inadequate) means by which we seek to master the forces which exceed our power. By shifting from object to subject of the traumatic experience, we diminish, and distance ourselves from, its power to damage us.  

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In this case, Gendo sees Rei not as a child that would eventually grow up and continue humanity like Shinji. Rather, he sees Rei as his tool of mastering his trauma. Through the cycle of cloning Rei, torturing Rei through constant training with EVA, witnessing Rei’s destruction, and rebuilding Rei, Gendo repeats his trauma of losing his wife in EVA testing.

Edelman is also in conversation with the concept of death drive to describe his understanding of the relationship between queerness and politics:

The ups and downs of political fortune may measure the social order’s pulse, but queerness, by contrast, figures, outside and beyond its political symptoms, the place of the social order’s death drive: a place, to be sure, of abjection expressed in the stigma, sometimes fatal, that follows from reading that figure literally, and hence a place from which liberal politics strives—and strives quite reasonably, given its unlimited faith in reason—to disassociate the queer.56

Since in reproductive futurism, the meaning of life is defined by the action of reproducing the child that embodies the continuation of the time, then queerness can be seen as the death drive of the social order. As a consequence, being queer is stigmatized as harmful to humanity and deserves to be punished. However, to Freud, the repressed message is often hidden under negation.57 Therefore, by referencing the concept of the death drive, Edelman aims to argue that although queerness represents a fundamental challenge to the social order, it is also an

important site of resistance and innovation. The Project, although it has its problem of dictating other people’s life, successfully achieves Edelman’s invasion of queer politics. The social order that punishes everyone that does not follow the teleological timeline of human development, will be destroyed with the end of human bodies. Humans shall build a new order in the spiritual realm, where there is no need and no meaning to reproduce.

**The Children**

Despite the queerness that is embedded in Gendo’s desire and plan, his character is also self-contradictory in terms of his abuse of his power as a paternal figure towards the pilots, which is granted by the patriarchal social order that the Project intends to destroy. In this section, I would like to look at how his paternal power impacts the children and in what ways the children’s reactions echo with the concept of queer time.

As previously mentioned, NGE is not a typical Shonen anime that attracts young male audiences with the excitement and fun of being a hero. Rather, it depicts the stress and pain of the young protagonists. By contrasting the pilots with their classmates, the show draws on the genre tradition to depict a sense of queerness of its protagonists. As previously stated, EVAs are not fully mechanical robots, they are artificial living organisms whose souls are tamed by a set of external restrictions.\(^5\) To control the EVAs, the pilots will be placed inside the EVAs in a cockpit and make a neurological connection with the EVA. In this case, the EVA acts according to its pilot’s nervous system’s control and the pilot also experiences all the damage that is made to the

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\(^5\) Despite the constant use of the concept of soul, the show is vague about what the soul is. My personal understanding is that it is a cluster of consciousness that does not need to be attached to a body. It is elusive and yet sometimes could be transferred and controlled by humans in this show.
EVA’s body. While a pilot can only pilot the EVA with a high enough sync rate with their EVA, it is unclear to them how to reach it. Rei once says that the EVAs have hearts and the pilots need to open their hearts to them, but still, all of the pilots are troubled by the ambiguity. Therefore, as EVA pilots, Shinji, Rei, and Asuka need to endure enormous mental stress and physical pain. However, when Shinji and Rei return to school when he is not training, he realizes that none of his classmates have a clear understanding of the experience of piloting. One of his classmates, Kensuke Aida, dreams of becoming a pilot because he assumes that being able to drive the EVA and save the world would be a fun, heroic experience. Other classmates in Shinji’s class are also excited after learning of his identity. They gather around Shinji to ask him about the details of his robot and call him the pride of the school. Another classmate, Toji Suzuhara, is mad at Shinji because his sister is hurt during a battle between Shinji’s EVA and an Angel. He assumes that Shinji wants to be a pilot but he is not capable of doing his job right.

The classmates, who fit in the Shonen genre tradition, are children that follow the linear progression of time under reproductive futurism. They go to school, socialize among themselves, experience sexual awakenings, and eventually, they are expected to get married and have children. On the contrary, Shinji, Rei, and Asuka feel that their possibility to grow up is being deprived because they are constantly facing the risk of death. In his book, Halberstam points out that the threat of death due to AIDS is one of the main sources of the production of queer time, since “Some gay men have responded to the threat of AIDS, for example, by rethinking the conventional emphasis on longevity and futurity, and by making community in relation to risk, disease, infection, and death.”59 Throughout the show, it is rare for the pilots to imagine what

59 Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place, 2.
their future will be. Most of the time they think about the upcoming training or battle with extreme anxiety, afraid of their performance. On the contrary, the show constantly provides flashbacks of the pilots’ childhood trauma, indicating that although they don’t talk about it out loud, they are haunted by their past and spend most of their time thinking about their past unconsciously.60 The children, like Gendo, are also obsessed with looking back.

Since their traumatic experiences all center on their relationship with their parental figures, Scholars like Mariana Ortega and Betty Stojnic read the children’s obsession with their past through the theories of psychoanalysis. In the last two episodes of the series, after the Human Instrumentality Project begins, all characters confess their pain in the spiritual realm. Specifically, all three pilots show a strong sense of self-loathing. They unconsciously believe that the cause of their trauma is because they lack worth. Therefore, they see piloting EVA as their way to prove their value and earn love and attention from others. Shinji painfully comes to the self-acknowledgement that he feels the reason his father abandons him in the first place is that he cannot help him with the EVA project. He confesses that “What [he] fears most turns out to be not the impersonal threat of the Angels but rather the disturbing workings of his own psyche and his dysfunctional family background.”61 Similarly, Rei also feels that the only reason Gendo cares about her is because of her ability to pilot. Throughout the show, she never refuses any request from Gendo even when she is heavily injured. Her self-destructive desire echoes with the

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60 The show implies that the pilots are also sexually queered. Shinji seems to be delayed in sexual development. He is always presented as a pre-pubescent, vulnerable, parent-seeking boy. When his friends visit his home and see his guardian Misato, they are immediately attracted to her, Shinji himself sees Misato as both a maternal figure and a sexual being. Asuka, similarly, dislikes Shinji but is obsessed with Ryoji Kaji, her guardian after the death of her parents.

previously stated Freud’s theory on death drive, as a way to regain control of her relationship with Gendo.

Asuka’s situation is slightly different from Shinji and Rei, since she is haunted by her relationship with her mother. Ortega points out that “EVAs have souls, and it is later discovered that Shinji and Asuka's units have those of their disappeared mothers.” Asuka’s mother experienced a psychological disturbance as a result of an accident during the EVA testing. Asuka used to feel that she was a doll of her mom, who constantly tried to kill her and offered very little love to her. She both longs for her mother’s love and is afraid of being controlled by her mom. As a result, she feels that she needs to be good enough to be loved. Ortega sees the motion of the children pilots climbing into their EVAs to drive them as a way that the mothers “absorb their children back into these mechanical hybrid bodies.” This act of swallowing represents the mothers having an “immutable psychic hold” towards their children.

To build on these psychoanalytic readings of how the pilots are impacted by their familial relationships, I want to read the character’s attraction to their own past through the concept of the queer time. In Stockton’s theory about the queer child, she says: “In one’s teens or twenties, whenever (parental) plans for one’s straight destination have died, the designation ‘homosexual child,’ or even ‘gay kid,’ may finally, retrospectively, be applied. ‘I am not straight’: ‘I was a gay child.’ This has been the only grammatical formulation allowed to gay childhood.” Therefore, the pilots’ habit of looking back to their childhood can be read as their way of making sense of their present situation. Since their future is so deeply tied to the pain and fear they experienced previously.

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63 Ortega, “My Father, He Killed Me; My Mother, She Ate Me,” 224.
64 Stockton, The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century, 7.
while they are in their EVA, they look back to their past to seek an answer: it is because I need the approval of my father or the love of my mother that I cannot quit being a pilot and have to bear this pain. Just like queer people in real life often trace back to their childhood to justify why they cannot simply “be straight.” Although it is clearly shown in the show that for Shinji and Asuka, looking back to the past often brings enormous pain, referring back to the concept of the death drive, this is also their way of overcoming the trauma and establishing a new sense of maturation without achieving marriage or reproduction.

**Conclusion**

The ending of the show is controversial. Mick Broderick argues that it is about the transcendence of humanity beyond the constraint of their bodies; Kotani Mari sees it as suggesting that a person needs to repudiate others to reach an ultimate maturation of being independent; Susan Napier connects the plot with its form and argues that the foregrounding of the show’s nature as an animation suggests that there is no true freedom, that we will always be trapped in a constructed reality. While these readings are only loosely related to my argument, I want to engage with these existing readings to argue that indeed as Edelman suggests, there shall be new possibilities for humanity once we dismantle the current structures, even if it seems that we are putting an end to the continuation of the human race.

*NGE* carefully structures the concept of time. Set in an apocalyptic future, it presents an imaginative vision of what the future could hold. However, the show's narrative structure is far

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from chronological. Through the extensive uses of stills and pause in the middle of an intense battle, the show creates a sense of timelessness, as though time has stopped and the characters are suspended in a moment that lasts forever. Additionally, the constant flashback and the montages of unconsciousness all convey a yearning for a time that is not linear, but instead exists in cycles and repetitions.

Through its use of circular and queer time, the series challenges reproductive futurism. Gendo's rejection of reproduction and the children pilots' resistance to growing up present an alternative definition of life that is more elastic and inclusive. By allowing participants to imagine their futures outside of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death, the show offers a more fluid, open-ended sense of time that is not bound by traditional societal norms, which essentially is queer temporality. In this way, *NGE* inspires a more inclusive and emancipatory understanding of human existence that does not exclude queer people in the first place.
Chapter 3: The Cyborgian Future of Queer Kinship in *I Am Mother*

**Introduction**

The film *I Am Mother* (Sputore, 2019) revisits the definition of motherhood in a post-apocalypse setting. Following the extinction of humans, the only hope for the survival of the species is a facility containing human embryos, which are nurtured and raised by a robot called Mother. Mother successfully brings up a human girl, named Daughter, from an embryo and is about to assess whether Daughter is now capable of joining her to proceed with the plan of human repopulation. However, on the day of her assessment, a human woman mysteriously appears in front of the fort. She is heavily wounded by a gunshot, which she claims came from a robot. She tells Daughter that Mother, and all the robots, are in fact the murderers of all humans. As the film unfolds, more evidence is revealed and proves that both Mother and the woman each have their own secret agendas. As another child is about to be born, Daughter faces the dilemma of deciding the fate of the future humans and the audience is invited to make their own decisions as well. Should we trust a robot who claims that it is built to protect humanity, a human woman who claims that she will not do harm to her own species, or a teenage girl who is biologically human but is raised by a robot mother and is struggling to find a balance between her two identities?

In her book *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film*, Erin Harrington uses horror films as objects to study how the discourse of motherhood has been articulated in different contexts. As

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66 *I Am Mother*, Grant Sputore dir. (Netflix, 2019).
Harrington illustrates: “Horror films can be considered as cinematic art and popular entertainment as well as discursive artifacts and sites of discursive conflict, in that they both contribute to the circulation and enforcement of cultural norms while simultaneously challenging or countering them”67. Similarly, this tension is also very prominent in I Am Mother. The film is aware of the conventional definition of motherhood, specifically about nurturing labor and biological relatedness. It simultaneously uses it to convince the audience about the character’s motherhood and utilizes it creatively to push back against it.

Despite being a highly intelligent robot, Mother’s motherhood is depicted as performing a range of physical and nurturing duties traditionally associated with human mothers. The human woman, on the other hand, is aligned with a traditional notion of motherhood based on biological relatedness. Not only because they are both humans, but also because the film deliberately chooses two actresses that have similar appearances, which amplifies the implied relatedness between them. However, as the film later reveals that she does not care for Daughter as a family, the common assumption that kinship is granted by biological connection becomes ironic.

At the end of the film, Daughter decides to separate from both Mother and the woman to lead the future of humans by herself. She becomes the new mother that develops from a daughter. She is a combination of human embryos and artificial reproductive technologies and she will continue to incubate human embryos through the artificial womb that gives birth to herself. In this way, the future humans are also combinations of humans and machines. Therefore, she is a cyborg mother that would discard the gendered labor and heteronormative assumptions related to reproduction and establish a new, queer family structure.

This film is a reverse Genesis story. Instead of the cliche of humans creating cyborgs and cyborgs long to become “real” humans. This is a story about a robot that creates cyborgs. Daughter and all the future human beings are cyborgs not only because they are artificially produced, but also because they have incorporated the mindset of their robot mother. This is Donna Haraway’s vision of a posthuman, post-gender world of fatherless cyborgs. As the metaphor she uses in her famous writing “A Cyborg Manifesto:”

The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project…The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential.\(^\text{68}\)

Josh Cohen summarizes The oedipal complex as “the child's recognition, around their fourth year, of their (his or her) father as rightful lover of their mother dislodges them traumatically from their own, fantasized occupation of this role.”\(^\text{69}\) Therefore, it is essentially a tension between the child and the father in which the child seeks to take over their father’s superior status. Although it is a highly canonized concept, it limits human development in a patriarchal family structure. Therefore, Haraway argues that the cyborg, since it is born as a combination of human and machine instead of from an organic, heterosexual nuclear family

\(^{69}\) Josh Cohen, How to Read Freud (London: Granta, 2005), 71.
structure, does not need to comply with the oedipal narratives. Daughter has no father, nor do the future humans. At the end of the film, Daughter refers to the newborn human as her brother, suggesting that the future family structure will no longer have a hierarchy that privileges the father.

**Robot as Mother**

*I Am Mother* is a genre film that echoes many tropes of the sci-fi genre, such as the setting of a future apocalypse, a high-tech but isolated location, and an extremely intelligent robot that is crucial to humanity's future. Yet, until the final revelation in the film, Mother is not as advanced as a regular sci-fi audience would expect. Mother relies on its physical body and spends most of its time doing domestic labor. The film downplays Mother’s non-humaness capabilities and rather emphasizes on the role of Mother’s body. On one hand, these designs personified Mother, making it more approachable and empathetic. On the other hand, it also creates a camouflage that tricks the audience to expect Mother as a substitute for the maternal figure associated with domestic labor, which is often seen as trivial compared to the more masculine work that happens in public spaces.

Mother is a humanoid with a disproportionately large head and torso. Its heavy frame and loud footsteps make it impossible for humans not to notice its presence. In a crucial scene where Daughter is struggling to operate the front gate to let the human woman into the fortress before Mother finds out, the film gives a montage that shows the action of Daughter with Mother running through a hallway to get to the gate in cross-cutting. As if Mother could not acquire
information unless it sees the scene with the eye attached to its body. This sequence could be seen as a visualization of Daughter’s understanding of Mother’s capability since she doesn’t realize that Mother is essentially a collective consciousness that mobilizes all the androids they see until the very end of the film.

Unlike many sci-fi films that involve robot characters, such as The Terminator and the RoboCop series, the film never shows the perspective of Mother. There are no point-of-view shots from Mother or from other devices such as surveillance cameras in this film. The only time we get a hint of how much surveillance Mother has in this fortress is when it confronts the human woman after she and Daughter decide to flee, it plays a clip of an audio recording of their conversation. Yet, the camera never focuses on any devices that might be an extension of Mother’s body. Indeed, this may give the audience more to chew on as they suspect whether Mother is a good robot or a bad robot for humans, but it also risks making Mother a less efficient robot that does not know how to use its strength.

Mother’s body is very similar to all the other robots outside of the fortress. All of them are outwardly genderless. They do not have a human-like face nor visible sexual appearance such as breasts built into their body. However, Mother’s body is more human-like compared to the other robots that are used to fight humans. All the robots have two small and round signal lights fixed on their heads. But Mother’s signal lights could move precisely on a U-shape track on its face. The movement of the two lights are substitutes for facial expressions to efficiently communicate with the humans around it.

70 Contrasting with Kara in Detroit: Become Human, see Chapter 1.
Furthermore, Mother is specifically designed to be feminine and maternal, although it is unclear if it’s designed by humans or the united consciousness of robots. Its arms and chest have built-in heating units and are covered with soft fabrics to make its body safe and warm for holding babies. It is also equipped with a gentle feminine voice. Mother’s voice is different from Siri or Alexa, who are emotionless and calm, or Samantha, the operating system played by Scarlett Johansson in the film Her (Spike Jonze, 2013), that is more sensual and docile. Mother usually sounds patient, and caring, but it can also sound determined and authoritative. Its voice is a representation of normative motherhood, which is expected to offer both care and discipline to the children. However, since Mother is a robot, there is always a chance that its voice could be changed to achieve different purposes. For example, when the human woman fights with Mother, its voice turns deeper and more masculine, although it seems to be the result of the woman’s attack, it might also be an active choice of Mother to threaten the woman by reminding her of its non-humanness.

In Addition to the material design of Mother, its motherhood is also depicted through the labor it is doing. It is interesting to reflect on why, as a highly intelligent robot, Mother’s work and ability are mainly depicted through its physical labor. Especially after the film later reveals that it is Mother who directed the human woman to the fortress, it becomes clear that doing domestic labor is a way for Mother to distract Daughter from detecting her plan. Before the arrival of the human woman, Mother intentionally places a mouse within the fortress and observes Daughter’s reaction. After Daughter shows interest in life outside of the fortress,

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72 The film keeps it ambiguous about to what extent Mother has planned the incident and whether the ending fits its expectation. In the film, after Daughter has returned to the fortress and made her decision of separating with Mother, Mother comes to the woman’s shelter, asking her if she has questioned why she is the only person who survived. Mother says: “As if someone’s had a purpose for you.”
Mother insists that the mouse is a potential toxin carrier and thus needs to be destroyed. Later, Mother creates an airlock to seal the place where the mouse stayed. It asks Daughter to stay outside while it remains inside the airlock, spraying disinfectants to clean the space. Here, the film uses a close-up shot to focus on Daughter looking into the void, feeling loss over the destruction of the mouse. In the same shot, Mother stays behind a plastic screen in the background, doing repetitive work of spraying. The audience could hear the sound of the spraying machine but could not see Mother clearly. This scene shows Mother as a supporter rather than a dictator. It seems to be the only labor force in the fortress and is not capable of finding other robots or technologies to substitute her for risky labor.

Similarly, in the first part of the film, Mother is often captured in a long shot that situates her in the center of a giant, empty interior space where everything is built by life-less gray metal. Mother is depicted as alone and even vulnerable. The earlier part of the film implies that Mother is not capable of surveillance and control over the infrastructures and residents in the fortress. It is not a threat to humans, but a nurturing maternal figure. This is a direct application of the concept of the Good Mother in Sarah Arnold’s work *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood*. Arnold points out that the motherhood of the Good Mother is constructed based on “self-sacrifice, selflessness and nurturance…maternity and utter devotion to childcare.”

Although as previously stated, the ending of the film suggests a future that is detached from the oedipal narrative, the film is aware that the audience is still within a patriarchal structure and thus it strategically situates Mother in a conventional family structure to distract the audience.

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According to Arnold, psychoanalysis is integrated with the cultural assumptions of good mothers. As Harrington concludes:

Arnold frames the Good Mother as the mother who sacrifices herself so that her child may move into the Symbolic realm. The transition of the child into the world of language and the rules of society, and the concomitant acknowledgment of and submission to the Law of the Father, involves a renunciation of the potentially dangerous, engulfing maternal body.\textsuperscript{74}

In other words, the Good Mother gives birth and nourishes the child, but shall have no power over the child. Eventually, she needs to give up the child to send them in the control of the Father. If she has the intention of keeping the child, forming a strong bond with the child that has no time limit, or in the case of \textit{I Am Mother}, wants the child to fulfill her plan for the human race, then she falls into the category of the Bad Mother, who usually is a villain that needs to be controlled and punished. Therefore, the performance of the Good Mother implies that there is a Father figure that signifies a patriarchal order and eases the audience’s possible suspicion of Mother’s intention due to her non-human nature.

\textbf{Human Woman as Mother}

\textsuperscript{74} Harrington, \textit{Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynachorr}, 186.
As previously stated, all three woman-coded characters in this film have expressed some sort of motherhood, but as the title suggests, the film is essentially a competition for the power to claim oneself as the mother of all humans. Inevitably, the competition between the mothers, especially between Mother and the human woman, is a main part of the film’s conflict. The human woman is never given a name throughout the film. However, it is clear from her very first appearance in the film that being a human is her most central characteristic. The film introduces her through her knocking and screaming for help outside of the gate at night when Mother is recharging. Since she is curious about the world outside the fortress, Daughter decides to let her in without telling Mother. As Daughter opens the outer gate, the camera uses a series of over-the-shoulder shots and reverse shots to emphasize the similarity between the woman and Daughter. By showing the two characters in close proximity but separated by the gate, the shots create a visual parallel between them, highlighting their shared physical features. Both of them are white women that wear their light brown long hair down. Their faces look alike and even the concerned facial expressions on their faces are the same. This design creates an impression that the two of them could be biologically related or even clones.

After seeing the woman, Daughter distracts Mother and hides the woman inside the fortress. However, they are soon found by Mother, who surprises them when it decides to help the woman and treat her wound. Mother, however, has an ulterior motive: this allows her to investigate this woman’s background and intentions. During her time in the fortress, she presents a stark contrast to Mother in terms of her behavior and beliefs. While Mother is clean, calm, rational, and gentle, the woman appears dirty, rude, violent, and mentally unstable. She refuses to let Mother treat her and tries to use Daughter as her hostage for freedom. Moreover, She claims
that she was wounded by androids like Mother and tries to convince Daughter that all androids are against humans. She also tells Daughter that, unlike Mother's statement, the outside is livable and she lives with a group of humans. Therefore, although she is not instantly a very likable or trustworthy character for both Daughter and the audience, she forms a clear-cut binary structure between humans and androids and tries to convince Daughter to be on her side because they belong to the same species.

Since she comes to the fortress, she and Mother alternatively approach Daughter to convince her to pick their sides. The woman says that there is a group of humans outside being chased and killed by the androids that look identical to Mother, implying that Mother is also a threat. On the other hand, Mother says that the woman is wounded by other humans and implies that this woman might be a danger to their family in the fortress. At this time, Daughter feels more attached to Mother because she believes that although Mother is a robot, it genuinely cares for her, having nurtured, taught, and accompanied her for many years. Her choice at the time echoes the opening of the film before it introduces Daughter.

The film opens with Mother incubating an infant from the embryo coded APX01 in the artificial wombs on the first day after human extinction. Then, the film shows a 5-minute long montage of Mother taking care of a young girl who is also white and blonde. Along with the non-diegetic music “Baby Mine”, the film shows Mother doing all kinds of reproductive labor, from helping the child to walk, to holding the child to ease her when she cries. As the child grows up, Mother is the only one by her side in the huge and cold fortress.75

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75 “Baby Mine” is a song sung by Bette Midler, originally from the 1941 Disney animated feature Dumbo, which is a film that focuses on the relationship between an elephant mother and an elephant baby.
In order to verify her decision of staying with Mother, Daughter sneaks into Mother’s drawer to find the bullet that is taken out from the woman’s wound, wishing to track back the identity of the shooter. However, she accidentally finds the files of APX02, a child that Mother breeds before her, and the file is labeled as “failure”. From the file, the film reveals that the child in the opening montage is APX02 and not Daughter. It implies that Mother has given the same care and affection to APX02 until she failed a test at the age of 7 and was killed by Mother. It also implies that the human woman might be APX01, the first infant that is ever created. In order to prove her suspicion, Daughter goes to the incinerator to find evidence. As she touches a piece of human jawbone among the ashes, she realizes that humans are interchangeable for Mother. She is not Mother’s only Daughter, but only a test subject coded APX03. If she had failed in any of her previous tests, she would have been killed as well. A close shot is used to capture her as she cries, trembles, and hugs herself out of complex emotions. However, her voice and sound are completely substituted by background music that sounds like the hum of a machine, as if it suggests that her subjectivity and agency mean nothing in front of Mother’s big plan.

Death is a physical punishment. In this film, on Daughter’s first attempt of disobeying Mother, she tries to steal medicine for the woman. She then accidentally breaks a glass jar and cuts her palm. Her injury echoes the woman’s bleeding wound and signifies her humanness. Only humans can be physically wounded. The woman’s bleeding wound, her painful scream, and the jaw bone of the child before her all remind Daughter that since she also has a human body, she might also be hurt like this. On the contrary, at the beginning of the film, we see Mother’s hand malfunctioning, and Daughter voluntarily fixes her hand with a screwdriver. This is a sign of the connection between them, but also a sign of their difference. Since robots like Mother will
never feel pain or have the risk of being killed, Daughter realizes she is connected to other humans because they have the same kind of biological construction.

It is interesting to see that the distinction between humans and robots is indicated by the difference between their bodies since the body is also an important aspect of reproduction. The human woman tells Daughter that leaving the fortress with her means she could meet other humans and they could find a future for themselves without the interference of the androids. While on the other hand, Mother’s way of attracting Daughter to stay is to let her pick a new embryo to put into the artificial womb as the next member of their family. In this case, choosing the human woman and joining other humans means that if they want to continue humanity, they need to reproduce through heterosexual sex and pregnancy. They would form kinships and connect the community through biological connections and genetic similarities. On the opposite, choosing Mother means that humans can be produced and reproduced entirely through technology. Mother represents a kind of motherhood that is not granted by or reliant upon biological relationship, but care and nurture.

Initially, Daughter chooses to follow the human woman, but soon realizes that there are no other humans outside, only androids and a dog. The woman then admits that she left the tunnel with humans years ago because “they were going mad with hunger, doing terrible things to each other.”6 Ironically, although she convinces Daughter by implying that only humans can help humans, she herself is a survivor of the violence between humans and has lost trust in humans. She refuses to look for other humans, and tells the Daughter that “it’s just us,” implying that she believes that it is impossible for humans to continue the species and she has lost faith in

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6 *I Am Mother* (Netflix, 2019).
humanity. Although she expresses care to Daughter and intends to take Daughter in as family, she denies Daughter’s wish and prioritizes what she believes is the best for both of them based on her belief that androids are essentially other than human and cannot be trusted. Eventually, Daughter still leaves her, showing that she realizes that the myth based on biological relatedness is unreliable.

The failure of the human woman reminds me of the concept of essential motherhood, which is a term raised by Harrington that stands for “the core assumption that motherhood is necessarily conflated with nurturance.” This assumption suggests that nurturing and caring for children is innate to women, and that motherhood is inevitable and natural for all women due to their reproductive capacity. However, what we see in this film is that the human woman, who not only belongs to the same species but also may share similar genetic information with Daughter, does not have the so-called motherhood instinct, either in terms of taking care of the daughter or the urge of reproduction. It is the robot, who could never physically give birth to any child, that is trained to fulfill the nurturing responsibilities.

**Daughter as Mother**

In his review, Dave Crewe points out that

*I Am Mother* isn’t an especially original movie. To a degree, that goes part and parcel with its chosen genre, speculative sci-fi, given the long shadow cast by its

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77 Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror*, 195.
78 Ibid.
predecessors over the last half-century or so. Taking place in the wake of an ‘extinction event’, the film opens in a sterile, secluded bunker resembling a spaceship. From this setting alone, you’d be hard-pressed not to think of the long-running Alien franchise.79

Indeed, the Alien franchise intensely depicts stories of genetic engineering, mutations, androids, and the extinction threats of human beings, which are all detectable features in I Am Mother. I would like to specifically look into the two prequels of the Alien franchise, Prometheus (Ridley Scott, 2012) and Alien: Covenant (Ridley Scott, 2017), which share more similarities with I Am Mother since they all involve an android that obtains enormous human embryos and seeks an evolution based on the human race.80 In the setting of these two films, humans are seeking colonization on foreign planets for human survival. However, tired of being the human’s servant, one of the androids, David, wants to become a creator and a ruler. David believes that there is a deficiency in the human species which made their extinction inevitable. Throughout these two films, he sabotages the humans’ plan of finding their creator and seeking space colonization, utilizes alien organisms to kill all the humans, and starts his own biological experiments to create mutated monsters, which he hopes will end human civilization and start a new order based on his vision. Despite all the resemblances between the Alien prequels and I Am Mother, these films are opposed in essence. What Prometheus and Covenant depict is a story within the Oedipus narrative while I Am Mother is a story about post-patriarchal queer kinship.

80 Prometheus, directed by Ridley Scott (Twentieth Century Fox, Dune Entertainment, Scott Free Productions, 2012); Alien: Covenant, directed by Ridley Scott (Twentieth Century Fox, TSG Entertainment, Scott Free Productions, 2017).
*Prometheus* follows a team of scientists and explorers who travel to a distant planet in search of the origins of humanity. The crew suspects that humanity is created by aliens named the Engineers. The crew is sponsored by Peter Weyland, a wealthy old man who believes that since they are the creator of human beings, they could also help him to overcome his illness and extend his life. Although they do find a male Engineer on the planet they arrive at, out to Weyland's surprise, the Engineer wishes to eliminate the human beings and kills him on the spot. Weyland has created an android named David, who is also on the team. As revealed in *Alien: Covenant*, David only pretends to be docile most of the time to hide his true intention of destroying humankind. Therefore he uses tricks to make the entire Engineer species extinct with their own biochemical weapon, and uses genetic experiments to create one of the famous parasitic monsters in the Alien franchise that kills its host as it bursts out of their chests. At the end of the film, David gets control over a colonial spaceship from Earth and places his Alien embryos along with the human embryos that are preserved on the spaceship, which implies that he is now in control of the future of the human race.

All of these characters can be situated in an Oedipus narrative. Weyland seeks to replace his father, Engineer, by asking for longevity. The Engineer, who feels that his power is threatened by Weyland, kills him to protect his own place. David, as the son of Weyland, also wishes to replace his father. After the death of Weyland, he then kills the ultimate father, the species of Engineer. In the two films, reproduction becomes completely about power between men.

On the contrary, *I Am Mother* emphasizes the complex female connections around the process of reproduction and removes the patriarchal father from the discussion. There are only mothers and daughters in this film, and these two identities can exist at the same time. The
human woman, who enters the film as a stand-in for the biological mother, might also be a
daughter of Mother.81 Even at the end, when Daughter decides to shoot Mother’s shell as her
separation from Mother, she does so with the knowledge that this is only one of the bodies of
Mother, proving that she does not intend to kill Mother to take her place. Rather, she
acknowledges to Mother that she learned everything from it and she will carry on what it teaches
her. It suggests that there could be a more dynamic, and also more equal relationship between
mother and daughter, and eventually among future humans.

I want to acknowledge that the Mother in I am Mother could be seen as a reference to the
Mother (MU-TH-UR 6000), the overarching computer system in the Alien franchise that
maintains the function of their spaceships. In her famous book The Monstrous-Feminine, Barbara
Creed connects Mother, the spaceship in Alien films to the concept of the archaic mother. She
says: “Alien presents various representations of the primal scene. Behind each of these lurks the
figure of the archaic mother, that is, the image of the mother as sole origin of all life.” Creed
explains that the spaceship can be read as the outer-space womb where the astronauts are
developed and birthed. She says: “In outer space, birth is a well controlled, clean, painless affair.
There is no blood, trauma, or terror. This scene could be interpreted as a primal phantasy in
which the human subject is born fully developed – even copulation is redundant.”82 This painless
birth of the humans is in contrast with the violent parasite process of the aliens, in which
pregnancy becomes the site of horror. In Erin Harrington’s book about Gynaehorror, she

81 Although the film is not explicit about the woman’s identity, the film ends with Mother approaching her, asking
her if she remembers her own mother and she does not respond. This might be suggesting that she is the APX01
who the story doesn’t disclose why she is not in the fort. Mother might have wiped her memory to let her become
part of its plan.
82 Barbara Creed, “Horror and the Archaic Mother: Alien,” in The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism,
mentions that many horror stories are built on women pregnant with monstrous offspring or women, but more specifically, related to the bodily experience of reproduction: “The horror genre, with its interest in subjectivity, corporeality, fear and instability, is a conceptual space where anxieties around the intersections of technology, women’s bodies and reproduction emerge, clash and bleed out.”

The horror of alien’s parasites is to take the horrifying nature of pregnancy and graft it onto male bodies.

Indeed, the fortress in *I Am Mother* resembles Creed’s description. Birth becomes “well controlled, clean, painless” not only symbolically but also in the film’s reality through the use of pre-made human embryos and artificial wombs.

I argue that *I Am Mother* produces a visualization for the post-gender and post-patriarchy world in Donna Haraway’s cyborg theories. Practically, since reproduction can be artificially controlled and managed, heterosexual sexual activity and pregnancy lose their privilege and legitimacy since they are no longer needed for procreation. But more importantly, as embracing a cyborgian way of reproduction proposes a post-gender world, it also has symbolic meanings. In Donna Haraway’s vision,

An origin story in the “Western,” humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate…Hilary Klein has argued that both Marxism and psychoanalysis, in their concepts of labor and of individuation and gender formation, depend on the plot of original unity out of which difference must be produced and enlisted in a drama of

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83 Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: GynaeHorror*, 137.
84 which could be a high-tech version of the combination of In Vitro Fertilization and surrogacy. See Conclusion for more discussion.
escalating domination of woman/nature. The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense.\textsuperscript{85}

What Haraway points out is that the current oppression of women is based on the Western concept that humans must be separated from, and dominate the phallic mother, which is a stand-in for nature, abstract, feminine, to reach symbolic independence. As previously mentioned, Arnold points out that the distinction between the Good Mother and the Bad Mother is based on whether they are willing to self-sacrifice and give their children to the Law of the Father. The hosts in \textit{Alien}, therefore, are Good Mothers since they are dead and no longer intimidating to the father; but the ship, Daughter in \textit{I am Mother}, and Haraway’s cyborg are Bad Mothers. They solely can produce offspring and provide for the children. Since the father is no longer needed, his power also no longer exists. The mother then does not need to self-sacrifice to yield to her position in the patriarchal order.

Toward the end, when Mother asks Daughter to pick the next member of their family, Daughter picks a male embryo. The existence of this male embryo further proves how future humans can live beyond the Oedipus complex. Although Daughter will be a maternal figure for him, there is no father that he needs to kill to secure his attachment to his mother. Also, although Daughter needs to be the caretaker of the new humans, she doesn’t actively take the name of mother in the film. She insists on being the sister. As the start of a new generation of cyborgs, she is also not pressured to prove her independence by dominating her mother. Her mother is embodied in the fortress that will continue to nurture her and she acknowledges that her life is a

\textsuperscript{85} Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” 8.
continuation of Mother’s goal. Daughter is free from sexual labor and the expectations of being inferior to the patriarchy. She and all the new humans are free to enter a post-gender future that moves away from the oedipal structure.

**Conclusion**

The title of this film is *I Am Mother* rather than *I Am A Mother*. This wording difference makes it a completely different work than *Detroit: Become Human*, the subject of the first chapter. Although both of them depict the story of a robot becoming a mother, they focus on different subjects. Kara’s storyline in *Detroit* is about proving that “I am a mother.” It is about how Kara shows the audience that she can assimilate into the existing definition of motherhood and become a mother as good as a human mother. Her robotness is a flaw that she needs to compensate for. She needs to pass as a human, through human skin and human outfit, before declaring to the public that she is a mother. However, in the film *I Am Mother*, the robot has no intention to become a human. It sees itself as the mother of humankind. This is a reversed origin story.

The entire film starts with the assemblage of one of Mother’s bodies. It is a human-less, automatic process. As soon as the body is created, Mother picks an embryo and puts it inside an artificial womb to produce a human infant. Humans may have created robots in the past, but now robots create themselves and create humans. As Mother explains in the film, it eradicates nearly all humans on earth because it sees inevitable failure in the human race and believes that the only way to give humanity a second chance is to restart human civilization under its education. In its
definition, it is creating a new family that will live on a new earth, which its other bodies are preparing humanity for. It is important to note that Mother doesn’t create humans for the evolution of the human race, but because it does not want to be left alone on this planet. Even though it could have countless bodies, it would still feel lonely and believe that humans, although will not have any biological relationship with it, could form strong familial bonds with it.

By strategically referring to the conventional assumption of seeing motherhood as something rooted in a woman’s nature and domestic nurturing labor, the film promotes a cyborgian motherhood that transcends society’s obsession with biological linkage. By portraying a mother that fully reproduces humans through technology, the film makes Donna Haraway’s utopian imagination come true. In this new vision of the future, Daughter and her fellow new humans will be free from the constraints of a heteronormative gender expectation that is based on their reproductive abilities, and will not be subject to patriarchal power since they have no father. The film thus offers inspiration for the practice of queer kinship.
Conclusion

The first case that comes to my mind when I was brainstorming for this project about cyborgs and reproduction is Rachael, the replicant in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) who, we learn in the sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017), had a child with Deckard. Her offspring is seen as a cyborg, a threat to the current order because it signifies the destruction of the boundary between humans and replicants. In *Blade Runner 2049*, the commander of the new generation of blade runners says: “The world is built on a wall. It separates kinds. Tell either side there is no wall, you bought a war,” as she orders a blade runner to wipe out all evidence, including Rachael’s cyborg child. What I tried to explore with this thesis is to imagine what will happen if the commander’s plan fails and the world gets to see with their eyes that “there is no wall.” In the film, the wall that keeps the order is the distinction between freeman and slave. For me, the wall is the distinction between straight people and queer people, regarding their reproduction.

I want to tear down the wall that separates natural reproduction, the imagined proper way of reproduction that is rooted in heterosexual sex, and queer reproduction, conducted by queer people who are seen as irreproducible yet threatening to the continuation of humankind. To be specific, I am referring to two mythical stereotypes of queer people: first, they cannot and have never participated in reproduction because they have no access to heterosexual sex; second, they are a threat to the future generation of humankind, since they can make them queer as well, and cause the humankind to extinct because nobody will reproduce anymore. In the thesis, I have cited Lee Edelman’s observation of politics in the US to support my claim, but I also want to
make it clear that these assumptions are transnational. As a queer person from China, I personally have encountered many questions that echo these stereotypes.

In this thesis, I focus on neither Deckhard nor Rachael, but the cyborg baby, the border creature that exists on the overlap of both sides. In other words, the objects I focus on represent neither completely normative reproduction nor completely queer reproduction, they are a combination of both. My thesis is not to help queer reproduction become the new straight reproduction. It is not about assimilation. I want to prove that the wall never exists, it is a constructed illusion of a heteronormative society. Queer people utilize straight reproductive norms and a heterosexual nuclear family could also queer the existing patriarchal structure. This is the reason why, as you might question, as a thesis about queering reproduction, none of the objects and characters I include are explicitly queer in their sexuality. Rather, I use the concept of the cyborg as a metaphor for queerness because of its subversiveness: humans stand for heteronormativity, robots are the queers, and cyborgs are the integration of both.

The robot mother and child in Detroit: Become Human are outsiders in the human world, yet they actively replicate human behavior. On the other hand, in Neon Genesis Evangelion, the father and son seek a queer time as a salvation for their pain, contradicting the political meaning of their heterosexual nuclear family. Only in I Am Mother does a hopeful vision of a productive and inclusive future emerge, as humans integrate with machines, leading to a post-gender future without oppressive paternal authority.

Science fiction has always been a male-dominated genre “in which masculine scientific rationality attempts to control or dominate nature, which is implicitly feminised as Mother and

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maternal environment.” Therefore, by revisiting these representations of reproduction in science-fiction works and reading them as queer, I argue that our imagination and expectation for reproduction already contain a certain kind of queerness, but the hegemonic culture is too quick to deny its existence. Like in *Blade Runner 2049*, the cyborg child has already lived on earth with humans and replicants for 30 years, it is just that humans never notice or acknowledge its existence.

However, I do want to point out that there is one big gap in my thesis, which is the gap between the queer reading of reproduction and the experience of queer people who reproduce in real life, especially regarding their bodily experience. Although as Edelman points out, queer people are seen as anti-children and anti-reproduction, this identity of queer people is a highly homogenous one based on the hegemonic imagination of queer people that disproportionately focuses on gay men. In reality, queer people, especially queer women, have always participated in reproductive labors. For example, many queer people reproduce during their heterosexual marriage, and lesbian couples have a long history of getting pregnant through sperm donors. In recent years, due to the rapid commercialization of the use of assisted reproductive technologies such as IVF, “advanced, high-tech biomedical options were becoming routine, standard practices... These options were constructed as not only the ‘best’ option but as the only valid approach [for queer reproduction].” However, the reproductive experience related to ARTs is

88 Lee Edelman, *No Future*.
not always pleasant. It shapes people seeking pregnancy as customers and commodifies the entire process of reproduction. Moreover, it implies that in order for queer women to become mothers, they need to be inspected and operated on.

The emergence of ART needs to be viewed critically. While it provides more opportunities for both married and single mothers by law to have children, the wide use of the technology also interacts with the existing moral value regarding reproduction and motherhood. In chapter 2, I cited Mariana Ortega, who points out that the mothers in Neon Genesis Evangelion are absorbed by machines: Shinji’s mother disappeared within EVA, Asuka’s mother lost her soul to the EVA, and Naoko, the mother of the chief scientist Ritsuko Akagi, commits suicide after transcribing her consciousness into MAGI, the bio-computer. Ortega reads their change in the body’s materiality as “the figure of the mother becomes both literally and metaphorically cannibalistic, ingesting both the bodies and psyches of her children in order to perpetuate herself as an entity whose presence is rooted in her material inescapability,” since these machines, EVA and MAGI, literally need to swallow their children to function.⁹¹ However, I am concerned about what would happen to people who seek to become mothers in reality when they are integrated with machines. Would they be consumed and exploited, as the EVAs and MAGI are under the control of Gendo, who represents a patriarchal power? Given more time, I would like to explore the notion of becoming a cyborg in the context of queer people who are pregnant with ARTs. Afterall, reproduction is not just a concept, it is made up by countless practice and decisions, which may or may not be consistent with the parent’s identity,

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imagination, or political belief. This entire thesis focuses directly at these moments of fractions, where straight reproduction could be queer and when queer parents perform straightness.
Filmography and Media

*Alien: Covenant* (Ridley Scott, 2017)

*Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)

*Blade Runner 2049* (Denis Villeneuve, 2017)

*Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018)

*Ghost in the Shell* (Mamoru Oshii, 1995)

*Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013)

*I Am Mother* (Sputore, 2019)

*Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Hideaki Anno, 1995)

*Prometheus* (Ridley Scott, 2012)

*RoboCop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987)
Bibliography

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Chapter 2


Chapter 3


**Conclusion**


