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# Ex Machina: Notes for Viewing

Bob De Smith

*Dordt College*, bob.desmith@dordt.edu

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**Abstract**

"The film is engaging and disconcerting, and looks at what it means to be human in an age of the machine."

Posting about questions raised in the movie *Ex Machina* from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

http://inallthings.org/ex-machina-notes-for-viewing/

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Everyone's familiar with the Latin phrase *deus ex machina*, used to describe the gods descending (with the help of "machinery") onto the Greek stage. More broadly, it describes any sudden resolution of problems in literature, as if the gods had intervened. The suppression of the first word in that phrase — the Latin word for God — is only the first of many intriguing aspects of this multi-layered, eerie film. I believe writer and director, Alex Garland, knows what he's doing by deleting the word he knows we'll supply: he invites us to ask what happens to God — or the gods — when computers become sentient. In fact, at one point, the young coder invited to a secluded compound by a brilliant, reclusive, and untrustworthy inventor (who is the head of the largest search engine in this future-is-now setting), declares early in the film that if the inventor has indeed created a sentient android, he has moved beyond the greatest accomplishments of mankind to those of the "gods." Nathan, the inventor, later (willfully?) misquotes Caleb (the invited guest) to suggest Caleb actually declared him a god. Later, Nathan predicts the demise of mankind, suggesting that androids will look on humans as we look at fossilized remains of our ancestors — as remote, primitive, and obscure.

Garland suggests a world in which God is no longer part of the equation. Are we surprised that things go awry? I'll not give away the ending, but let's say it is androids 1, humans 0. To quote another inventor, "What hath God wrought?" Of course, the movies present us a long line of uppity computers from *2001*'s HAL 9000 to *A.I.* to Neil Blomkamp's odd but thoughtful *Chappie* (2015).

*Ex Machina* centers around the Turing Test, that standard for genuine A.I. formulated by Alan Turing: can an interviewer distinguish between a human and a computer respondent based on text-only responses to messages. Actually, this description, which I garnered through the website *Alan Turing: The Enigma*, offers more insight than one might first think. Nathan has invited Caleb (under what turns out to be false pretenses) to his isolated compound in order to have Caleb engage his android, Ava, in a test of her human intelligence. His sessions with her are marked off in the film with inter-titles: "Ava: Session 1." This device puts us in the position of observers. Caleb is in a glass box, and Ava enters from the only room she has ever experienced: she has a perfectly human face, a humanly modeled chest and pelvis (these mark her as female), but the back of her head, her torso, and her limbs are robotic. The two engage in conversation which progresses from formalities to apparent friendship and even collaboration, including the sharing of secrets. The secrets are necessary since it quickly becomes apparent that Nathan is observing — even manipulating — from a control room. We thought Caleb was testing Ava, but as the provisions of the Turing Test remind us, Nathan appears to be testing both Caleb and Ava. In fact, in ways that become clear to any watcher of the film, everyone's watching everyone.

This condition extends to the viewer. Indeed, in important ways, WE are engaged in the Turing test, asked to consider who is human and how we know. There are reveals here that I won't give away, including a stunning scene in which Caleb is no longer certain that he is human. Could he be an android, too? Can he be sure? Are we? Much of the plot — and the insights provided by it — turns on whether Ava is capable of deception. Interestingly, this becomes a clearer test of human consciousness and her human-like engagement. The idea that what makes us human is not just language, or longing, or reason, or, indeed, embodiment, but our ego-centric drive and our ability (our predisposition?) to deceive. These offer worthy food for thought, particularly for Christians who affirm both our being made in God's image and our fallenness.

A word about embodiment, mentioned in the previous paragraph. At one point, Ava "puts on flesh," to borrow the biblical phrase, and stands in front of a 3-way mirror, as naked as the day she was born (is this her birth?). Yup, this is full-frontal nudity from a variety of angles. This means (and it's not the only reason) that the film is not for young viewers, but the scene is an acute challenge to viewers: what we are seeing is an android covered in perfectly rendered, but not genuine, flesh. This is our spin on the Turing Test: how do we respond to her? As a human to another, with emotion, empathy, and yes, even longing? Can we hold in our minds that she's just a robot? The questions here are profound, inviting us to ponder body and soul in unity. Can we see past flesh? Should we?

Okay, enough questions. The Ava Sessions are interspersed with conversations between the ultra bro Nathan and the geeky Caleb. Their conversations at times add philosophical depth to the experiences and also become a battle of wits and identity. In one conversation, Nathan asserts that Caleb, like any being, has been formed by many forces, including nature and nurture. This dyad cues us to consider one more aspect of the film, recurring shots of majestic, living nature — mountains, glaciers, forests, waterfalls. Notably, at least as I recall, there are no animals (though some may inhabit the soundtrack). How does "pure" nature relate to humanity? We experience natural realm as contrast to the modern, modular, sleek world of Nathan's compound. The connections are left mysterious, but the persistent visual images will not let us forget that humans find their place with respect to the natural realm.

There are a number of aspects of this film left untouched here. One is the connection between the information cloud and our beings: Nathan has tapped into the cloud to inform Ava and to manipulate Caleb. Perhaps we are what we search.

This post has asked more questions than offered answers. I believe this is in keeping with the film itself, and I hope that the topics raised here lead to more fruitful viewing. The film is an engaging, disconcerting, and looks at what it means to be human in an age of the machine.