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Ex Machina (8/1/15)

Yes, I like Von Trier, at least in measured doses, *Melancholia* especially; an old favorite was *Europa*. I still haven't seen *Nymphomania*. — *Snowpiercer* was a trifle difficult to evaluate, didn't the train seem rather overburdened with metaphor? or was that deliberate, and thus the point? but I love these new Korean directors, maybe they can't really be the new Hong Kong but it's great that they want to try.

And of course I watch everything on a computer. The evolution of my film library: VHS era, about ten years of painstaking labor [lots of poring over cable tv schedules and programming defective VCRs] to amass a collection of 300 tapes; DVD era, about five years to amass a collection of 300 discs, most of them in the last year I was collecting them; digital era, about 2300 films and to my astonishment I still don't seem to be anywhere near done with the original project of putting together the complete film-geek library. (I still haven't replaced all the Hitchcock I had on tape, for instance.) So now instead of needing an entire wall to shelve everything, it all fits in a couple of pocket USB drives, with much better picture quality. — As for whether all this was strictly speaking legal, no comment, though considering the amount of money I've spent in theaters over the years I don't feel at all guilty. (Still the best way to see a movie, despite the concerted efforts of multiplex owners to ruin the experience.)

I loved the concept of *Ex Machina*, but formula has an irresistible gravitational pull when you're spending a lot of someone else's money to put something on the big screen, and what he went with here was the classic film noir femme fatale; who was usually, you may recall, trying to seduce a younger guy into killing her older husband [the familiar Oedipal triangle], and then getting rid of him, too. In the old days of Hollywood moralism the femme fatale had to die at the end of the movie, because she was a Bad Girl, see Barbara Stanwyck in

Double Indemnity; in neonoir she usually gets away with it, see Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat*. So we leave Ava as she prepares to run amuck in the Big City because the screenwriter's fallen in love with her and thinks she's too gorgeous to die.

Whether anything like this could happen in what we laughingly refer to as "real life" I don't know. Nor am I sure whether a true artificial intelligence, at least one that could pass a Turing test, would really have to be embedded in something so close to a human body. You can make a serious argument for that from Wittgenstein, see for instance "The human body is the best image of the human soul" and the arguments in the *Philosophical Investigations* about the ability to learn and understand human languages being founded on "agreement in form of life". (Which is why I've never believed that SETI bullshit about talking to aliens on the radio, but that's another story.) — I suppose robots could do mathematics, but I'm not even sure of that. What is "geometric intuition"? — What I would guess at the moment, since Wall Street spends a lot of money on hardware and software, is that the first inkling we'll have of a breakthrough on this front will be when we wake up one morning and find out some superintelligent robotrader has suddenly acquired all the money in the world. Unless it's smart enough to conceal the fact that it owns and controls everything, which leads us into paranoid fantasy in the style of Thomas Pynchon. I think I like Alicia Vikander better, thank you very much. (And you're right, her robot look was better.)

Another recent film about an alien femme fatale was *Under The Skin*,¹ which starred Scarlett Johansson as a sort of vampire stalking the Scottish countryside, picking up hitch-hikers and then — well, see for yourself, if you haven't yet. Scarlett gets naked to devour her prey, which will underscore the statement that the most striking thing about the movie was the soundtrack, the work of an avant garde composer named Mica Levi.

¹ Dir. Jonathan Glazer, 2013.

No question, however, that (as I have been predicting for decades) robohookers (“robimbos”? hmmm.....)² will be the killer app for humanoid robots. And when they can do that, it will also be possible to have virtual-reality sex with somebody on the far side of the globe. O brave new world.

² RoboHos. Assuredly.