



BOOK REVIEW:

*Artificial Women: Sex Dolls, Robot
Caregivers, and More Facsimile Females*

Miranda Miller

Wosk, Julie. *Artificial Women: Sex Dolls, Robot Caregivers, and More Facsimile Females*. Indiana University Press, 2024. ISBN 9780253069245.

Building on her previous work on the intersection of women, machines, and artificiality, in her latest book, *Artificial Women: Sex Dolls, Robot Caregivers, and More Facsimile Females*, Dr. Julie Wosk studies the dual development of technologically artificial women in both media and history. She expands upon the analysis of the historical context for artificial women set out in her previous book, *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves*, to engage with more recent novels, films, and art that continue to complicate and engage with feminine artificiality. Wosk uses Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" as one lens of examining mechanical women, though frequently she goes beyond cyborg identity to consider works that portray full artificiality and the potential artificial creation of humanity or the elimination of such creations. As Wosk argues, this blurring of the lines between humanity and artificiality makes the robots under discussion into "an arresting version of posthumanism" (4). With a view to analyzing how works of fiction that deal with posthuman themes can help to redefine fixed binaries around gender and humanity, *Artificial Women* examines the overlap of such binaries through the figure of the feminine robot. The work of scholars like Sherry Turkle also prove critical to Wosk's discussion of the presence of empathy in technology, as empathy can both be perceived as culturally feminine and serve a key developmental role in human socialization.

Wosk situates her work at the intersection of three major fields of study: robotics, Women's Studies, and emotional human consciousness. Her research

essentially places each text under study – including films like *Under the Skin* and *Ex Machina*, and television shows like *Westworld* – in relation to these three fields to reveal a cultural perception, fear, or critique about its constituent parts. These critiques include, for example, technology as vector for control, women’s autonomy, and self-sacrificial empathy. Overall, the primary concern of Wosk’s book is to track the changing forms of artificial women and the cultural fascinations they both imply and create by virtue of their existence.

The book is structured into five main chapters, each focusing on a different form of artificial womanhood. The first chapter, “A New Breed of Sex Robots and Sex Dolls,” traces stories about an ideal synthetic woman back to the Pygmalion myth and then flashes forward through time to arrive at the real-world sex doll industry. Wosk pays special attention to the element of control that is present in the customizable features of both physical and AI-chatbot sex dolls, discussing how this customizability plays into cultural stereotypes of objectifying women and the need to “dial down” talkative women (Wosk 37). As a way to search for the borders of this trope, Wosk identifies the other end of this cultural stereotype in television shows where female robots escape the control of their programming. In direct contrast to the control over real-life facsimile women, she sees this as speaking to the fear that women “are not so controllable after all” (57). In the second chapter, “Under the Skin: The Fabricated Femme Fatale,” Wosk studies the recurrence of the eye motif in film and television narratives about artificial women, considering how it is meant to highlight both the viewer’s gaze and the women’s artificial presentation under that gaze. Wosk finds that these femme fatale artificial women are represented in ways that typically portray the extremes of either puppet and creation or puppet-master and creator. They may, however, swing from one axis to the other.

Moving away from tales of violence and destruction, the third chapter, “Female Robot Caregivers, Doubles, and Companions,” tracks associations of empathy as a feminine trait which extends to the way caregiver robots for children and the elderly are frequently gendered as female (Wosk 97). As a basis for this discussion, Wosk examines how real-life socially assistive robots are developed to “project the aura of empathy” (99) to enhance the social well-being of the individuals they care for. The fourth chapter, “Paradoxes of Perfection: A Servant No More,” returns to the duality of how the theme of puppet or puppet-master is treated, now in the portrayal of automated female servants. They represent both a desire for mechanically efficient women without any “negative” traits of womanhood and a fear of losing control of these automated women. Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” forms the basis for the idea of the “Cyborg Mommy” – the housewife who operates technology to perform her tasks – that transforms into the entirely robotic domestic servant or nanny figure in fiction (Wosk 130). “Virtual Voices: Talking Barbie Dolls, Alexa, Bitchin’ Betty, and More,” serves as the final chapter with a primary focus on the voice of a computer as a woman. From talking dolls for children that reinforce a gendered stereotype to voice assistants that default to female – harkening back to the days of female telephone operators and science fiction computer voices – Wosk tracks the connections of feminine passivity to the always-available female-voiced chatbot. Still, Wosk ends on a note of hope when she observes that rather than responding with a joking denial, recent

updates to virtual assistants now refuse to engage with sexual user comments (Wosk 154).

The strengths of *Artificial Women* lies in Wosk's dedication to the critical investigation of artificial women in both media and history. Her tracing of real-world sex dolls and robot caregivers allows for greater understanding of the exigence of stories exploring those topics. Her text thus serves as a resource for both a critical scholar of robotic technologies and womanhood and for a literary scholar of science fiction and feminist texts. Though the robot women are often placed into limited and restrictive identities, Wosk recognises the varieties present in the catalogue of artificial women and uses a multitude of examples to explore how they vary between sexual partners, mechanical servants, and emotional caregivers. She also looks at how robot women can attempt to break away from these restrictive identities and examines the strategies and strength required to do so.

One missed point of investigation in chapter two lies in the analysis of the film *Under the Skin*. While discussing how the female alien's true self beneath a fabricated female human skin is exposed, Wosk observes several times that the alien's self beneath her white skin in this film is a "black body" (77). While Wosk touches on racial stereotypes and portrayals in the previous chapter on sex robots, this section would have been an effective moment to bring that critique back to bear on this film and character, in particular.

Overall, however, this is a strong book that thoroughly examines artificiality, gendered portrayal and perception, and agency in images of artificial women. It gives a detailed overview of the current state of artificial women in real life and in various media and highlights several key examples in great depth. The ideal audience for this text would be any scholar or reader looking to deeply understand the imagery of female robots and the influence of gendered cultural perspectives on technological creation. Because of this, *Artificial Women* is a text that will continue to be relevant in the study of artificial women, as narratives exploring their humanity continue to be written even today.

Biography: Miranda Miller received her B.A. in English and Creative Writing from the University of Iowa and is currently a second-year graduate student at Florida Atlantic University. She is pursuing her M.A. in English with a concentration in SFF. Recently, she won the David G. Hartwell Emerging Scholar Award at ICFA 2025 for her paper, "Parasitism, Coexistence, and Colonialism in Animorphs."