

# ALGORITHMIC POWER AND THE FEMALE BODY: CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DATA-DRIVEN ALGORITHM IN FILM AND TV

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As well as creating new ways of knowing in television and film production, the epistemological power of the algorithm can be found on-screen: in visual representations of rise of datafication (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2015) in popular culture. By undertaking a textual analysis of films such as *Lucy* (2014), *Ex Machina* (2015), *Her* (2013) and TV shows such as *Black Mirror* (2011-), *The Good Place* (2016-2020) and *Years and Years* (2019), this paper explores the ways that society's turn toward data – and its subsequent entanglement in algorithmic power – is represented in film and television. We find that in contemporary popular culture, embodied algorithmic power takes a primarily female form: one characterised by a techno-biological omnipotence, the power of networked autonomy, and a computational knowing that might one day exceed, leave, or even erase both the society that has produced it and the body it inhabits.

In keeping with researchers who argue that anthropomorphised AI technologies are often rendered feminine (Guzman, 2016) we find that in contemporary popular culture, algorithmic technologies are situated within feminised modes of embodied existence. However, unlike their domesticated and 'friendly' material counterparts, we find that in fictional representations, the epistemological power of the feminised algorithm extends dangerously beyond the human and indeed paradoxically beyond the computational. This, we argue, fits with scholarship which has found that 'feminised technologies become associated with the exponential acquisition of information' in science fiction cinema (Farrimond, 2018: 160). We explore representations of the algorithmic female as an uncontrollable *femme fatale*: imagined in this way because of the epistemic uncertainties that, as scholars such as Brunton and Nissenbaum (2015) find, big data create. The algorithmic *femme fatale* is culturally imagined therefore both as epistemic *allure* and *threat*: the feminised algorithm/ algorithmic feminine knows all, and therefore know too much.

While they engage with recent technological developments, these representations do so by building on earlier narratives about gendered forms of knowing and the potentials of technology. Our analysis draws on scholarship about women who 'know too much' in film noir (Doane, 1991) and science fiction (Huysen, 1986) to explore the relationship between genre fictions and the representation of women in film and television as points of epistemic rupture. These representations also resonate with the fantasies of disembodied technological existence found in cyberpunk fictions of the twentieth century. Within the fantastical storytelling of contemporary science fiction, the body becomes the symbolic site upon which the cultural anxieties wrought by robotic and biotechnical developments are written. However, we argue these representations also present significant departures from their predecessors, especially in their treatment of bodily departure, data-driven autonomy and networked power.

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