

Bi/A.I.: *Life Like* (2019)

By Jacob Engelberg

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It is unlikely that Josh Janowicz's science fiction film *Life Like* (2019) will be remembered in the annals of film history. A direct-to-video feature from mini-major studio behemoth Lionsgate Films, its release went unnoticed to many. Although the film was not reviewed in any major publications, it did get some traction on social media where the idea of a bisexual robot sci-fi love triangle left some intrigued, myself included. By turning to low culture—in the depths of which *Life Like* is likely to remain—I want to venture beyond what Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1984) identified as some critics' "disgust at the 'facile'," (p. 486) to consider how bisexuality is invoked in this tawdry but nonetheless compelling text. Beneath the glossy veneer of derivative sci-fi clichés, fitness magazine-bodied actors, and gaping plot holes, *Life Like* offers a curious reflection on sexuality and technology in the twenty-first century. In this review, I would like to consider how the film engages with the bisexual visitor narrative, how it constructs a bisexual erotic triangle, and how it invokes robotics in its exploration of sexuality.

Life Like centers on a couple, Sophie (Addison Timlin) and James (Drew Van Acker) who, after the death of James's father, inherit a countryside mansion. After moving into the luxurious property, Sophie becomes uncomfortable with the three obliging domestic workers keen to cater to her every need. Sophie fires them, and she and James meet Julian (James D'Arcy), a seller of artificially intelligent humanoid robots. They agree to purchase a robot named Henry (Steven Strait), who works to follow the couple's orders and to emulate what he thinks they want to see in him. Whereas James's attitude toward Henry is initially that of master and servant, Sophie forges an emotional connection with Henry; they read Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* together and discuss metaphysics. One night, Sophie discovers Henry, seemingly unconscious, lying naked on their lawn; upon rousing him, Henry remarks that he had been dreaming (Of electric sheep? We know not). James becomes jealous of the close relationship between Sophie and Henry; this jealousy is first expressed through increasingly aggressive racquetball sessions with Henry, but later—in the heat of a sexually charged shaving session—Henry kisses James, before performing oral sex on him. Soon thereafter—in an equally libidinous scene—Henry is [p.139] giving Sophie a massage when

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the two kiss. At the discovery of their mutual infidelities, the couple's marriage begins to break down. Meanwhile, Henry seems to be becoming more and more human. The couple summon Henry's creator, Julian, to assess the situation, when the true nature of Julian's enterprise reveals itself to be something quite different from robotics.

Routinely, the cinema has invested transformative powers in the figure of the bisexual visitor. Perhaps the most well-known example of this tendency is Terence Stamp's character in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Theorem* (1968): the mysterious guest of an Italian bourgeois household, each family member falls—totally and helplessly—in love with him and, by the time he leaves, each of their lives has been torn asunder by their desires. Similar examples can be found in an array of filmic characters: Konrad (Michael York) in *Something for Everyone* (1970), Dallas (Sandra Bernhard) in *Dallas Doll* (1994), Loïc (Stanislas Merhar) in *Dry Cleaning* (1997), Emmanuel (Jonathan Sagall) in *Urban Feel* (1999). In these instances, a bisexual visitor disrupts a previously heteronormative home, less through their own desires than through their ability to unearth the desires of others. The chaos wrought by the bisexual visitor is characterized not only by infidelity, but also by the introduction of queerness in a space thought to be void of it. If, as Clare Hemmings (2002) argues, monosexual identity formation relies upon the repudiation of a gendered object (male or female), the threat of the bisexual visitor might be understood as the disruptive return of a queerness one thought had been repudiated. In *Life Like*, precisely such a process can be observed whereby Henry, as visitor, not only cracks open the fissures in the couple's marriage, but also unearths a supposedly repudiated queerness in James.

The moment in which James's desire toward Henry is made manifest is one of catharsis. His jealousy toward Henry and the closeness between him and Sophie is transformed into an erotic charge. The initial dynamic between James and Henry can be seen to mirror the literary erotic triangles René Girard (1961/1966) observed, in which the rivalry between two men for a woman secures a potent bond between the men. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) drew upon Girard's observations to situate social relations between men (homosociality) on a spectrum with erotic relations between men (homosexuality). Through the transformation of James's rivalrous jealousy toward Henry into an erotic desire for him, we can see Sedgwick's contention at play: that rivalries and erotics between men exist on a contiguous plane of desire. In *Life Like*, one of the effects of the bisexual visitor's insinuation into the home is the revelation and realization of desires between men, which are

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desublimated from the realm of the social to that of the erotic. What Sedgwick missed, however, and what *Life Like* attends [p.140] to, is that to recognize what she calls the “unbrokenness of a continuum, between homosocial and homosexual” (p. 1) is actually a way to account for *bisexual possibility*. *Life Like* makes knowable such a possibility even if, paradoxically, it realizes this possibility in a way that is typical of the narratives Sedgwick considers: through the woman's ultimate exclusion.

When Sophie discovers James's transgression she demands an explanation. “I was jealous of him,” James responds initially, a pertinent recognition of jealousy's desirous implications. Speaking more directly, Sophie then asks, “Were you attracted to him?” James falters: “No, no. Fuck, I don't know. In the moment, I felt like anyone could've been.” Such is the transformative power of the bisexual visitor, whose desirousness is radical insofar as it uproots the desirer's prior conceptions of their own sexual subjecthood. As we see in *Theorem*, the impact of this uprooting can be destructive, and this destructiveness speaks to the ideological possibilities inherent in the bisexual visitor narrative. The bisexual visitor reveals the instability of (hetero)monosexual modes of subjectivity and relationality, precipitating a reckoning with desire's very mutability.

Where *Life Like* differs from other cinematic examples of bisexual visitors running amok is the figuration of this visitor as a robot. When Henry is first introduced to the couple, his “maker” Julian demonstrates Henry's ability to follow orders by instructing him to lick the sole of James's shoe. This moment of submission not only anticipates the queer transgressions to come—Henry holds eye contact with the couple intensely as he licks—but also establishes Henry's subservience to the orders of humans. Having already witnessed Sophie's discomfort at being waited on by a Black Latina domestic worker, Rosa (Justine Hall), Henry—in his total obedience and whiteness—allows her the benefits of a servant devoid of her own white guilt. These racial politics teetering beneath the film's surface might compel us to investigate further the influence of slavery and racism on the development of robotic technologies (Chude-Sokei, 2019). The promise of Henry-as-robot is thus constituted, in part, by the appeal for a white wealthy couple to enjoy the benefits of slavery, while nullifying its ethical implications through technology.

However, we are told, Henry is not simply designed to follow orders. He possesses an artificial intelligence, which seeks to “emulate” that which humans desire. Like many algorithmic systems, Henry “learns” using human behavior as data. Henry-as-robot is thus

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initially presented to us as a figure in whom the desires of humans can be realized both directly and through imitation. Operating at the behest of his masters' wishes, Henry is responsive to humans of any gender. With a *tabula rasa* for a sexuality, Henry is Freud's (1905/2001) polymorphously perverse child in a robot body, bisexually open to *any* erotic object.

[p.141] It is through Henry's robotic figuration that the film explores concerns familiar to the science fiction genre. The potential for robots to have sentience, to feel, or to love has been thematized in decades of science fiction film, from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014). The robot is a figure which can produce anxiety in humans, and part of this unease is metaphysical. As Paul Preciado (2002/2018) suggests, "The model of the robot catalyzes the contradictions and paradoxes of modern metaphysics: nature/culture, divine/human, human/animal, soul/body, male/female" (p. 131). As the robot evokes the metaphysical binaries upon which human existence is predicated, it illuminates the contingency of these very categories. In *Life Like*, Henry challenges these metaphysical binaries in concert with his transgression of the monosexual binary that structures the *epistemological* organization of sexuality. *Life Like's* bisexual improvisation on the robot thus takes the robot's transgression of metaphysical categories to model a bisexual transgression of sexual-epistemological categorization.

Through his troubling contestation of binaries, *Life Like's* robot might be understood comparatively with the cyborg. Although robots are distinct from cyborgs, the humanoid robot that passes as human has close affinities with the cyborg, to the extent that, in the cyborg, the human and the machinic coalesce. Ann Kaloski (1997) finds in the figure of the cyborg something compelling for a bisexual sensibility. Although Donna Haraway's cyborg "has no truck with bisexuality" (1985/1991, p. 150), Kaloski argues that Haraway's words are rooted in a conception of bisexuality "which yearns for completeness" (p. 48). Kaloski contends that Haraway's cyborg does, in fact, speak to a "bisexuality which doesn't annul difference but stirs them up, pursues them, increases their number" (p. 48). When Jackie Stacey (2010) observes in *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) a "homoerotic intimacy" between Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and Call (Winona Ryder), "established through their increasing knowledge of each other's posthuman technological potentialities" (p. 63), she recognizes something akin to the cyborg's bisexual extensibility—a queer expansion of the realm of sexual possibility.

Kaloski's case for the cyborg's appeal for bisexual people is rooted in its fashioning of an "ironic authenticity" (p. 48). Bisexual culture, she proposes, has taken pleasure in setting up iconic images and then undermining them with irony, a practice related to the difficulty in interpreting bisexuality visually. The cyborg's bisexual pertinence is thus twofold: it exceeds the boundaries of dominant sexual epistemology and it plays with the tension between what it appears to be and what it is. With Henry, a robot who appears all-too-human and begins to experience dreams and feelings, the embodiment of seemingly contradictory qualities speaks to the iconic-ironic [p.142] process Kaloski describes. While he may not technically be a cyborg, Henry's figuration evokes the cyborg qualities in which Haraway, Kaloski, Stacey, and others found the potential for sexual subversion.

But I have a confession to make; I have withheld some important narrative information, and I hope this peccadillo can be forgiven. Toward the end of the film, when Julian is summoned to check up on his "creation," Julian is forced to confess that Henry is not actually a robot, but a human. Julian reveals himself to be a hubristic eugenicist who took in Henry as a baby with the aims of creating a "perfect human."¹ While the details of how this process worked are murky, what becomes clear is that Henry had been indoctrinated by Julian into thinking himself a robot. During his time with Sophie and James, however, Henry's humanness is nurtured by Sophie's treatment of him, and he gains a self-awareness that dispels his foundational myth once and for all. This narrative revelation need not render meaningless prior observations about Henry as a robot *figure*—the film certainly trades in the robot's symbolic significance in ways that support its relevance to the text. Instead, this revelation might allow us to recognize in the human that which tends to be metaphorized via the robot.

Is Henry's desire to be what his masters desire really all that different from the all-too-human phenomenon Jacques Lacan (1964/1977) described when he wrote that "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (p. 38)? As Henry's ability to disrupt metaphysical, epistemological, and sexual categories is revealed to be human in origin, might we be reminded of the human potential to radically alter understandings of the world? Or perhaps more accurately, might Henry's slippage between the human and the machinic make a more posthumanist gesture, which reminds us of the instability of these categories in the first place and gestures toward the growing precarity of the human-machine distinction?² In a world in

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which our desirous lives are already so mediated by machines—from dildonics to cybersex—can we rightfully theorize sexuality *without* accounting for its imbrication with the machinic?

These are some of the questions *Life Like* raised for me as I reflected, perhaps too seriously, on this strange, bisexual, robotic-human, sci-fi, Hallmark-movie-esque, straight-to-video film. I hope I have shown, however, that *Life Like* might help us think through certain ideas: the cinematic import of the bisexual visitor and their destructive desirability; the potential for classical erotic triangles to be bisexualized; the appeal of technology and robotics for bisexual storytelling, and its attendant potentials and limits. While I have made admittedly sardonic references to *Life Like's* shortcomings, what my engagement with the film has made clear is that pertinent issues are being explored cinematically in perhaps unlikely places. I take this as a reminder not to be guided too forcefully by the changing metrics of cinematic quality in ascertaining what is intellectually useful. In unlikely [p.143] places we might even find unexpected pleasures. Similar to the process Kaloski (1997) described, which she found typical of bisexual culture, I was drawn toward the iconic image of the bisexual robot, and I stayed with the ironies therein.

Notes

¹ That Julian is driven by a eugenicist vision might render Henry's bisexuality quite ironic. Merl Storr (1997) reminds us of the centrality of race for early sexological conceptions of bisexual primitivity, wherein bisexuality was characterized as a phylogenetic attribute of uncivilized species of people. It is these racist ideas that ground the aspiration of eugenicists towards civilizational perfection. It is ironic, therefore, that a eugenicist's creation, which Julian praises for its lack of "imperfections" would turn out to be bisexual. In this sense, *Life Like* might be read as a parody of eugenicist thought, in which the prized monosexual maturation model which characterized early eugenicist thinking is undermined by the very being purported to embody its apotheosis.

² Scholars like Gilbert Simondon (1958/2017) and Thomas LaMarre (2012) suggest that a more progressive technological politics would do away with hybrid models like the robot and the cyborg. LaMarre, building upon Simondon's contention that "The robot does not exist" (p. 16), writes that the "fascination with the blurring of the distinction between humans and machines, oscillating breathlessly between technophilia and technophobia, forecloses any reckoning with technical equality or technicity and reifies the paradigm of freedom and slavery by displacing it onto juridical paradigms of law and transgression" (p. 91).

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