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TV History

My Living Doll: Androids and the Social Construction of Femininity

1963 was a tumultuous year for straight white males in America. The Presidential Commission on the Status of Women turned in a report recommending wide-ranging reforms to establish equality between the sexes, *The Feminine Mystique* was published, and Congress passed the Equal Pay Act, which while it was not nearly as comprehensive as it sounds, was a major legislative step toward according equal financial status to both genders. And as if the American Dream was not being destroyed quickly enough, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibited sex based employment discrimination in 1964. Men who had discounted the justifiability and efficacy of the feminist movement were now faced with legal exigencies to recognize the new role of women, precipitating an unusual alteration in the collective male psyche of network television executives and their corporate advertisers. This movement of women into the work force liberated them from their limiting role as housewife, but it also jeopardized their enshrinement by American corporations as the household's primary consumer. Television networks' advertising revenue in turn was at risk of destabilization by any fluctuation in their ability to deliver a consumer audience to their sponsors. Additionally, educated and working women were assumed to be more skeptical buyers. Thus, networks had a vested interest in maintaining the traditional hierarchy of gender roles, with men at work, and women at home watching television to inform them on which brands they could trust to put an end to dishpan hands, embarrassing flakes, and greasy residue. In the throes of Freudian wish-fulfillment

complexes, the men of America yearned for a magical solution, some way to return women to their erstwhile roles of obedience and sexual co-operation. In the fall of 1964 ABC premiered *Bewitched*, a sitcom about an attractive witch who uses her diabolical powers to expedite her husband's rise in his advertising firm. *My Living Doll* appeared the same season. It revolved around Dr. Robert McDonald, a bachelor psychiatrist whose social life and work are upset by the appearance of Rhoda, a stunning robot. And in case male television viewers still were not satisfied, the next year NBC released *I Dream of Jeannie*, whose eponymous character has no will of her own and whose only desire is to serve her master. The appearance within a two-year period of three shows featuring gorgeous, acquiescent female leads who can manifest enormous power, but choose to direct their abilities toward the pleasure of the men in their life, reveals the tension of the representations of women in network television in the 1960s, both acknowledging their increased abilities, but also reasserting their positions as consumers first, fulfilled women second.

In the spring of 1964, CBS President Jim Aubrey was planning the fall's new programming lineup. Aubrey was falling out with his bosses after CBS experienced a string of ratings fiascos precipitated by his own arrogance, but in his carefree days as the network's golden boy he had secured CBS's domination in the primetime ratings competition. Aubrey's motto for television product was "broads, bosoms, and fun"¹ and he was looking for a vehicle for the Tony-award winning sexpot Julie Newmar to launch her career at CBS.² This coalescence of factors was the impetus for Jack Chertok, hit

¹ Andrew Grossman, "The Smiling Cobra" *Variety V Life*, June/July 2004, 68.

² Robert Metz says Aubrey once dated Newmar, but does not provide a timeline, making a connection between their romantic relationship and the show unverifiable. Robert Metz, *Reflections in a Bloodshot Eye* (Chicago, IL: Playboy Press, 1975), 230.

producer of *My Favorite Martian*, to pitch *My Living Doll*, a show that would take advantage of Newmar's six-foot tall frame and knock-out looks. She would play Rhoda, a top secret space program experimental robot who by happenstance strolls into the office of psychiatrist Dr. Bob McDonald (played by Bob Cummings), who for unknown reasons has a medical practice in an aerospace industry building. Rhoda's creator, Dr. Miller, is suddenly called away to Pakistan, and begs Bob to take care of Rhoda while he is abroad. He cautions Bob that nobody must know that "AF 709" has progressed this far, so Bob must keep her identity secret. Unfortunately for Aubrey, Cummings and Newmar despised each other. Viewing the show forty years later, this hatred has sublimated into a mild onscreen awkwardness, but it is visible enough to justify the mediocre responses the show received. Its review in *Variety* complained, "In both design and execution it's on an adolescent triggered-for-the-low-i.q. level and the wonder is what it's doing monopolizing such prime Sunday time."³ Indeed it is hard to explain what Aubrey was thinking scheduling *My Living Doll* against NBC's *Bonanza*, allowing the western to jump from its second place ratings spot to the number one rated show on primetime television. In addition, *The New York Times* decried the waste of a flesh and blood beauty like Julie Newmar playing a frigid, metallic robot,⁴ although the writer did not specify what exactly about Newmar became unattractive in the portrayal of an android. Ultimately *My Living Doll* did not remain on the air long enough to change critics' minds. The show was the victim of a confluence of factors, including Aubrey's dismissal for assaulting the daughter of an affiliate station owner after partying with Jackie

³ Rose, "TV Reviews," *Variety*, 30 September 1964.

⁴ Val Adams, "News of TV-Radio—A Laughing Matter," *New York Times*, 15 March 1964. X19.

Gleason⁵, as well as Cummings' unexpected mid-season departure. In the January 16th issue of 1965, *TV Guide* reported the story, quoting an anonymous source who revealed, "This thing has been building all season. It is a case of a tense young Method actress and the old pro who thinks he wrote the book. Cummings showed her how to play the scenes; She burned..."⁶ Newmar was arduously working on her craft for her first appearance on national television, while Cummings was a veteran with several successful attempts at headlining sitcoms under his belt. In every series, the industry stalwart usually played in essence the same character: a charming bachelor named Bob. His role on *My Living Doll* utilized these extratextual references to provide the audience with a familiar character for Cummings: a bachelor named Bob, but this time he was a psychiatrist. Different, but not too different. Whether it was the loss of its leading man or the stigma of being the offspring of the ousted Aubrey, *My Living Doll* found itself cancelled after only one season.

While the show's time on the air may have been short-lived, the dispute between the two leads is a cogent example of entrenched intergenerational gender conflicts in the early 1960s. Cummings was obviously irritated by the seriousness with which Newmar applied herself to her role, as compared to his more extemporaneous style. A comparison of the two performances heavily compliments Newmar, whose unusual line-readings seem fresh compared with Cummings' stale delivery and oft-repeated stock gestures, for example, an irritating habit of inexplicably snapping his fingers and cupping his palm over his fist in rapid succession. A similar tension is detected in other forms of media from the same period. Fashion magazines evinced a discrepancy in goals and values

⁵ Metz, 238.

⁶ Henry Harding, "For the Record," *TV Guide*, 16-22 January 1965, A-1.

between the editorial staff and advertisers. During the summer of 1964 just before *My Living Doll* premiered, *Mademoiselle* regularly ran articles encouraging its readers to travel independently, study abroad, and join traditionally male-oriented professions. Especially progressive were its features on female marine biologists⁷ and women entering executive positions on Wall Street.⁸ Additionally, they published essays by non-Western writers, like V.S. Naipaul, and thoughtful articles on the diminishing stigma of college students receiving psychiatric counseling. However, the advertising copy contradicts *Mademoiselle*'s brainy and modern editorial policy by reinforcing feminine insecurities and the primacy of beauty as a woman's greatest achievement. Some of the ads seem out of date even for the time period, highlighting silver patterns, women's hotels, and swimcaps. There are also an astonishing plethora of girdle ads, an odd contrast to the variety of active poses portrayed by the models and the rigorous popular dances of the period. The most stunning ad has to be for Norforms and it takes several readings of the text to figure out exactly what the product is used for. The image is a classic profile of a softly lit blonde, serene and poised, while the copy promises "Married women are sharing this secret...Norforms *eliminate* (rather than cover up) embarrassing odors, yet have no "medicine" or "disinfectant" odor themselves." The subtext of these words are that the unadulterated scent of a woman's vagina is offensive and disgusting to sexual partners. This Norforms ad succinctly encapsulates the dominant message of femininity: what is natural to the female body is often not feminine. Advertisers, like the corporations whose products filled the pages of *Mademoiselle* and the airwaves of CBS, forced producers to take an interest in retaining an unenlightened representation of women on television.

⁷ Helen Ellsberg, "New Old Worlds to Conquer," *Mademoiselle*, June 1964, 106-8, 124-5.

⁸ Sylvia Auerbach, "Jobs in the Money," *Mademoiselle*, September 1964, 128-31, 197-8.

Subconsciously, characters like Samantha, Jeannie, and Rhoda were the embodiments of the networks' fantasy of their ideal customer: women who fit the social accepted ideals of beauty and who excelled at doing what they were told.

In Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the Viennese psychoanalyst argues that every dream is a wish that the sleeper craves to be fulfilled⁹, if only subconsciously. It can be argued that science-fiction represents the collective dreams of a society or a particular group. Therefore, the regular reappearance of robot women in literature, television, and film signifies a desire to encounter sexually available, powerful women whose agency can be channeled to the impulses of her owner. Freud's theory of dream interpretation works through the processes of displacement and condensation that function to censor the latent thoughts of the dreamer and hide the desires of the unconscious. While networks may have wanted viewers as acquiescent as Rhoda, they could not openly admit that they wanted to replace their viewers with sexier, fantastical, obedient housewives. Samantha is an excellent example of this condensation through her channeling of multiple roles of sorceress, sex goddess, and slave in one character. She is played by an attractive blond in form fitting clothes who has the ability to produce any object out of thin air or travel instantaneously to any destination, but she chooses to stay at home to clean and cook, and primarily uses her powers to assist her husband in his advertising career. Rhoda typifies displacement; by cohabiting with Bob and serving as his companion and secretary she has obviated Bob's need for a wife. In every season there are multiple instances of the female characters following the guidance of corporate

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey. (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 154.

directed fashion and finding pleasure in shopping and looking pretty, thus displacing real women as the corporations' preferred customers.

One of the keys to understanding the entrenched position of businesses in the life of the American woman is the recognition of femininity as a social construct. Feminist author Susan Brownmiller delineates in *Femininity* the differences and outright contradictions between what is anatomically natural to women and what is regarded by society as feminine. Though the book is replete with examples, it is necessary here only to list the most jarring. While the female body has a natural covering of hair to protect the skin and assist in homeostasis, the "feminine" body is denuded of hair on the legs, underarms, upper lip, and the area of the pubis visible in swimwear; women's breasts come in a variety of shapes and sizes but the most attractive are large, round, and symmetrical; and hair growing from the head shares uniform similarities between both sexes but long hair is most beautiful on a woman. Brownmiller also traces the impermanence of qualities attributed as beautiful in women and their tendency to change as a reflection of other social trends. She notes, "Despite genetic variation, rarely is more than one type of female physique given sexual adulation in a given age, and the imposition of a single ideal pits woman against woman in a peculiar form of physical struggle."¹⁰ Whereas in the early 20th century a plumper physique was desired, during the 1920s the slim hips and flat chest of the flapper was in fashion. After World War II voluptuous screen goddesses set the standard for the desirable body, but during the 1980s a trim, athletic, and toned body like Jane Fonda's was the standard to attain. The Protean concept of the perfect female form enables the fashion industry to perpetuate varying

¹⁰ Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Linden Press, 1984), 50.

cycles of obsolescence, altering the silhouettes of clothing and implementing trends to accelerate the process or smooth transitions from season to season. The most effective way to communicate sincere caution against wearing last fall's ankle boots into spring is to utilize the sundry and powerful media formats that Americans turn to for entertainment, thus ensuring for every woman a fashion-conscious and attractive wardrobe.

Female androids are a unique construct for examining society's conception of "the ideal woman." Because they are completely artificial, every aspect of them correlates to a social need or fantasy. Critic Janet Bergstrom argues in her essay "Androids and Androgyny" that the ontological fluidity of non-humans who appear human is on a similar continuum with the spectrum of male and female. She writes:

"In this disturbance between categories normally kept distinct (human/non-human), another dimension is added to the standard representation of a differentiation by gender in mainstream fiction film. Where the basic fact of identity as a human is suspect and subject to transformation into its opposite, the representation of sexual identity carries a potentially heightened significance because it can be used as a primary marker of difference in a world otherwise beyond our norms."¹¹

In her work Bergstrom is using robots as a framework for the examination of androgyny, comparing a gender neutral entity with the social performance of sexual ambiguity. I argue here that the same paradigm is equally applicable in using androids to formulate a critique of the social construction of femininity.

¹¹ Janet Bergstrom, "Androids and Androgyny," in *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*, ed. Constance Penley, Elizabeth Lyon, Lynn Spiegel, and Janet Bergstrom (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 35.

Rhoda, like femininity, is artificially created. She is both gender neutral in that she lacks reproductive organs, hormones, or sexual volition, and is at the same time wholly “feminine” with her perfect makeup, long hair, and hourglass figure. Bob admires her for embodying the quintessence of pulchritudinous achievement, but he refers to her as an “it” rather than “she,” and seems abhorred when men express their attraction to her. What produces this revulsion in Bob? Is it that she exhibits sexual enticement without having reproductive capabilities or is it that her human appearance belies her lack of emotions? Possibly what threatens Bob is that Rhoda “passes” as a woman, echoing sexual, racial, and class anxieties of the period about miscegenation. During the social upheaval of the 1960s public paranoia persisted about boys who looked like girls, blacks who appeared to be white, and the “wrong kind” of people mixing imperceptibly with their betters. But because Rhoda is unable to conceive, Bob’s disturbance at the possible breach of a taboo on human-machine sex precludes any fear of mixed progeny. Either he is afraid of her secret being discovered through anatomical inspection or he too is unnerved by her sexuality. In the episode “Rhoda’s First Date” Bob attempts to solve the problem of Rhoda’s perpetual state of dishabille. For some reason, Dr. Miller had thought it sufficient to attire her in a towel during his experiments, but now that she lives with Bob, he must find some appropriate clothes for her. He purchases several fashionable outfits, but is flustered when she states that she has not been programmed to dress herself. Bob tries to stutter an explanation of how to put on a girdle and garter belt, but even mentioning the names of these undergarments sends him into a paroxysm of stammering. Finally, he devises a solution by giving her a fashion magazine and instructing her to outfit herself as a simulacrum of the models on the pages. The implied subtext of this

scene is that women's magazines provide tools on imitating the correct appearance of femininity and the answers to your problems are yours to purchase.

Bob situates Rhoda's inhumanity in her inability to express or understand feelings, and lists her most laudable qualities as her beauty, obedience, and compliancy. While Rhoda's face and body are perfect, their flawlessness lies in their invulnerability to aging, a beauty trick only robots possess. Women are considered unfeminine as they get older and their skin becomes more textured and testosterone increases. Ironically, the inhumanity that keeps Rhoda looking perpetually in the bloom of girlish youth is precisely what renders her infertile, her most unwomanly trait.

Rhoda's origin, according to Dr. Miller, her creator, is as part of a NASA experiment to simulate the effects of space travel on the human body. In his humorous article for *TV Guide*, science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, repudiated the inanity of building a female robot for such a mission when all astronauts were men.¹² While Rhoda may turn out not to be an asset to the space program, her abilities on Earth are remarkable. She has an enormous memory bank with infallible recall and she can learn how to imitate any action just by observing; in the episode "Beauty Pageant" she learns how to perform a Chopin piece by watching television. With all her extraordinary talents Bob decides the best employment for her is in his office as his secretary, filing and taking dictation. When he is not ignoring her intellect, he tends to find it problematic. In "The Witness" Rhoda commits to memory the entire penal code of the state of California. Bob summarily orders her to erase it all because he does not want her to become "a plastic Perry Mason."

¹² Isaac Asimov, "Why I Wouldn't Have Done It This Way," *TV Guide* 16-22 January 1965, 27.

While Dr. Miller intended Rhoda to function by “duplicat[ing] thought process through its computer system, but with no emotion to get in the way,” Bob’s goal is to “perfect” Rhoda by teaching her to feel emotions. He seems to think it will be the key to containing her, as one can point historically to guilt, pride, and other sentiments being employed socially to trap women in the strictures of femininity. Bob tells Rhoda, “You present a fantastic hypothesis. If a robot such as yourself could be given feelings, human emotions, you’d be the perfect woman. One who does as she’s told, reacts the way you want her to react and keeps her mouth shut. No offense, of course.” The *TV Guide* ads promoting the show paraphrased without irony Bob’s Pygmalionesque goal as the pitch of the show. The manifestation of Rhoda’s humanization does not consist of psychological analysis or an introduction by way of literature and music into the artistic history of human emotions, but primarily seems to be her acculturation into the worlds of shopping and dating. As mentioned earlier, Rhoda learned to play the piano by watching television and how to dress herself from reading a fashion magazine, proving her to be highly suggestible and thus, an ideal consumer. Her most essential (and therefore presumably satisfying) robot duty, is to carry out the commands of whomever instructs her. Bob at times childishly takes advantage of this by ordering her to stop, sit, or lie down suddenly in rapid succession. Her ability to be a good listener pleases her suitor, Peter, in “Rhoda’s First Date.” During a romantic dinner, he compliments her on listening politely and paying attention. She informs him, “I’m trained to focus my video sensors on the one commanding.” Peter replies, “You were sure brought up right.” This exchange infers that a mechanical ability to listen quietly and respond effectively is an attractive quality in a young woman who wants to please her beau. Rhoda is also led to believe that

human happiness can be satisfied by readily available commercial goods. In the episode “Kleptomaniac” Bob teaches her to use a fashion magazine in a ruse concocted to reveal what Bob’s sister, Irene, wants for her birthday. Irene gushes for an uncomfortably long number of minutes about how “women can never have enough of most things,” including items like cashmere sweaters, expensive perfume, and ostentatious jewelry. Rhoda comes away from the episode having learned that women want things, there are things in the magazines, and those things can be easily purchased in local establishments. If Bob’s training comes to fruition, she will be able to assume her position in the pantheon of ideal consumers and be a corporate role model to wayward housewives who seek satisfaction outside of the home.

Lynn Spigel posits in “From Domestic Space to Outer Space” that fantastic sitcoms of the 1960s were intended as satirical commentary on the banality of suburban life. “Borrowing from the discourses of previous texts and transmuting already established generic conventions, the fantastic sit-com provided a cultural space in which anxieties about everyday life could be addressed, albeit through a series of displacements and distortions.”¹³ Spigel astutely observes that Dr. Bob McDonald and Captain Nelson (of *I Dream of Jeannie*) both worked in the aerospace industry and harbored supernatural/sci-fi women in their households. Spigel sees ties between the homogeneity demanded by corporate culture of its male employees and the characters’ terror at the discovery of the odd nature of their female companions. In addition, I believe this was an attempt to inject levity into America’s fears about the space program. As mentioned previously, by casting Bob Cummings, a star of other sit-coms and a quintessential TV

¹³ Lynn Spigel, “From Domestic Space to Outer Space,” in *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*, ed. Constance Penley, Elizabeth Lyon, Lynn Spiegel, and Janet Bergstrom (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 214.

presence, producers were utilizing his extratextual potential of simultaneously signifying all the other bachelor roles he had played in his performance of Dr. McDonald. When a joke is made on *My Living Doll* at Bob's bachelor ways, the audience is able to laugh not just at this Bob, but all the other Bobs who have accumulated the weight of this womanizing reputation. By far the most trenchant criticism to be found in the still extant episodes is in the show where Bob judges a beauty contest. To his chagrin, through a confluence of shenanigans, Rhoda enters, and nearly wins. Bob is desperate to deny Rhoda first place, not just because it might expose his secret, but more importantly to avoid having a robot emerge victorious over human women. If Bob had not stepped in and made her flub up the talent contest by using a remote control to make her circuits malfunction, she would have won, thus proving that the most beautiful women are not "natural." It is a spectacularly cogent criticism of the 20th century beauty pageant craze in America and may have been an audacious move on the part of the show's staff. On September 12, 1964, CBS President Jim Aubrey was one of the distinguished judges at the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City.¹⁴ In a way, this episode seems to presage the 1968 protest of Miss America by four hundred feminists, the event that brought the women's movement to the attention of most Americans.

In Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" Haraway visualizes a quasi-utopian post-gender future with the cyborg, a close relative of the android, as its symbolic model. Like the cyborg incorporates both human and robotic elements, all traits of woman will be sublimated and equalized, allowing the rifts of identity politics feminism to be concomitantly subsumed and respected through the preservation of balance and co-

¹⁴ "TV Guide Close-Up: Miss America Pageant," *TV Guide*, 12 September 1964, A-13.

existence. Haraway concludes, "Cyborg gender is a local possibility taking a global vengeance. Race, gender, and capital require a cyborg theory of wholes and parts. There is no drive in cyborgs to produce total theory, but there is an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction."¹⁵ The image of the female android has been used in television by a male-dominated coalition of network executives and corporate advertisers to snare women within the contradictory confines of femininity, in an effort to arrest their liberation from the role of housewife-primary consumer. Haraway provides her readers with a positive appropriation of that image, combining the technological strengths of a robot with the pluralities embodied by women.

¹⁵ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), 181.

Archive Materials Used

Promotional Film CBS. 1964-1965 season. CBS preview show.
Inventory number T70913

I used this tape to find out what Jim Aubrey's last fall line-up was and how the network was promoting it to advertisers.

My Living Doll. Beauty Contest/Rhoda's First Date.
Inventory number VA7313T

My Living Doll. Boy Meets Girl/I'll Leave it to You/Kleptomaniac/The Witness
Inventory number: VA10951T

These six episodes were the basis of the textual analysis of my paper. Without viewing this material this essay could not have been written. The tapes also included the commercials broadcast with the show, which allowed me to analyze the type of sponsors interested in associating their product with My Living Doll. These episodes are unavailable in any other archive, including the Paley Center. I'm deeply grateful to ARSC for preserving My Living Doll and making it available to scholars.