

A Sentimental Android? *M3GAN* (2022) and Monstrous Doubling as a Negotiation of the Gendered Neo-Liberal Self

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Abstract

This paper analyses the android M3GAN in the 2022 film of the same name, problematising recent framings that celebrate M3GAN as a gay icon, a feminist figure, or understand her as embodying our collective fear of artificial intelligence. Instead, I place *M3GAN* in a long line of narratives that mediate on the role of women in society, following the loosening of possibilities for woman brought about in the Enlightenment. I go on to suggest ways in which contemporary neoliberal values are forcefully communicated in popular culture and how in turn, the subject reacts and internalises ideology.

Keywords: Horror film; science fiction film; Automaton; AI; Robot; Femininity



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A Sentimental Android? *M3GAN* (2022) and Monstrous Doubling as a Negotiation of the Gendered Neo-Liberal Self

Michael Eden

Introduction

M3GAN (2022) directed by Gerard Johnstone and written by Akela Cooper bucked the trend of so called ‘elevated horror’, a conscious effort of Cooper’s (see Ferrier, 2023; Ruiz 2023) to produce a self-aware commercial success which works as a combination of able direction, Cooper’s solid writing, and a strong cast benefiting from the steely presence of Allison Williams, playing the roboticist Gemma. Williams brings a strong intertextual cache to the part of Gemma being most famous for playing women in *Get Out* (2017) and *The Perfection* (2018) who at first seem plausible, stereotypically attractive and conventional middle-class types, but who are revealed as treacherous villains defined by a ruthless and violent character. Although toned down in *M3GAN*, Williams can draw on these references in the other direction – cold and remote to engaged and concerned – bolstering our sympathy for M3GAN in the first half of the film, while remaining likable enough for us to believe in her characterisation later in the film. I wanted to emphasize those qualities as this analysis is highly critical of what *M3GAN* represents, what I feel it gives force to – culturally speaking – and in so doing I will refute framings of the film that have been embraced by the writer, the filmmakers, and reviewers. This is important as I enjoyed

the film and felt it to be a successful example of its genre, however I have tried to get some distance from the surprisingly sympathetic figure of M3GAN and think critically about what I, and what I expect many others, are actually enjoying when we watch *M3GAN*, share memes about the eponymous android, recreate her dancing, her put-downs and her fashion, all things that the audience has embraced as part of the film's wider success. I will treat M3GAN as a monstrous presence with an overt visual indicator as to when we the audience should stop identifying with her and shift our investment to Gemma as the appropriate possessor of the type of femininity that the film is celebrating.

A key feature of my critique of *M3GAN* is the perceived links of the film to neoliberalism, especially of the film as a kind of therapeutic accompaniment to neoliberal conditions: mediating concerns while celebrating problematic dynamics. Neoliberalism, a political and economic philosophy that gained prominence in the late 20th century, advocates for free-market capitalism, deregulation, and the reduction of state intervention in the economy. Rooted in the ideas of classical liberalism and further developed by economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman (Steger and Roy, 2010:17; 139), neoliberalism became influential during the 1970s and 1980s. In Britain, the neoliberal agenda was epitomized by Margaret Thatcher's government (1979-1990) (Jessop, 2015:29-29), which implemented sweeping privatization of state-owned

industries, reduced the power of trade unions, and promoted individual entrepreneurship. Similarly, in the United States, Ronald Reagan's presidency (1981-1989) marked a significant shift towards neoliberal policies, characterized by tax cuts, deregulation of industries, and a focus on reducing the size of government (Rossi, 2016:229). These policies not only reshaped the economic landscape but also influenced global economic practices, contributing to the rise of globalization and the increasing dominance of market-driven principles in both national and international contexts. Furthermore, neoliberalism is increasingly understood as constructing individuals, since as Gill points out, we are 'entangled in the relation between culture and subjectivity' (Gill, 2008:7). The entanglement that Gill describes, can be understood to have produced an idealized concept of the preferred neoliberal subject, one that forms a significant aspect of what the film *M3GAN* is mediating, and despite some ambivalence, what it appears to celebrate through its symbolism and narrative arc.

The ideal neoliberal subject is considered to be 'entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating' (Gill, 2008:7). That description is analogous to Repo and Yrjölä's idea of the 'neoliberal active womanhood' which is associated with 'economic independence, self-regulation and happiness' (Repo and Yrjölä, 2015:742), and is thought to be 'rational, calculating and self-governing' (2015:748). Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis consider women to be the dominant symbolic currency of neoliberalism, explaining that 'if women were

once considered a “reserve army of labour”, they have become central to a restructured economy and have, moreover, been considered as the “ideal neoliberal subjects” (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017:6). For women to be considered successful and embody neoliberalism this may include a willingness to ‘delay motherhood...[to] become full participants in consumer culture’ (Budgeon, 2011: 68). The ideology tends to obscure ‘recalibrated inequalities that have been forged by neo-liberal conditions’ affecting women, (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017:1) as well as favouring already advantaged individuals (2017:2). We will see that the period of the 1980s, where neoliberalism’s emblematic figures are Reagan and Thatcher, is influential on the aesthetic of *M3GAN*; that Cooper (the writer) is concerned with addressing notions of motherhood, and delayed motherhood in the light of career driven success, through the character Gemma. Moreover, that the film overall is focussed on women, and specifically young women’s relationship to the background culture, this is explored through *M3GAN* and Cady’s relationship, and references to popular culture and music, especially the triumphalist lyrics associated with the artist Sia. This brings to mind Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis explaining that ‘ideals of autonomy, choice, and self-determination have become key normative features of “modernized” femininity...Young women are interpellated to inhabit these values, not so much as “feminists” but as liberated, self-made subjects’ (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017:2).

Exposition of *M3GAN*

Since details of the film are discussed throughout It will suffice for the reader to have a basic overview of the film. *M3GAN* is concerned with a roboticist Gemma and her niece Cady, who is orphaned following the death of her parents. As Cady's maternal aunt, Gemma is tasked with taking over parental care, this coincides with Gemma's project to create a revolutionary toy that will act as an interactive friend to children, the eponymous M3GAN: a gendered A.I. android. M3GAN creates a strong bond with Cady helping her through her grief. However, M3GAN becomes more ruthless in her protectiveness towards Cady, violently punishing or killing those perceived as threats, while being judgemental of Gemma's parenting and apparent selfishness. Gemma discovers M3GAN's violent acts, attempts to fix M3GAN at her company's laboratory, but ultimately fails to control M3GAN who escapes dramatically killing Gemma's manager and his assistant. M3GAN then returns to Gemma's home for a final confrontation, and Gemma and Cady work together to destroy her, cementing instead their bond. As the film ends there is hint that M3GAN may have found a way to preserve her personality in Gemma's voice-controlled virtual assistant, as it activates without being asked.

The Constructed Female Body

The film links appearance to moral superiority and it's clear that when M3GAN is grotesque (discussed later) we are being invited to other her; in contrast, the first half of the film works to

make M3GAN a relatable personality despite her machine status and idealised surfaces. Initially M3GAN's appearance is that of a preppy child around ten years old with smart attire and a precocious, though amusing, level of poise and knowledge. She is a pretty and diminutive version of a teenage it-girl with perfectly combed hair, conservative attire, and a considered gait. At points in film, she is displayed to us on a circular framework that recalls the *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490) by Leonardo da Vinci, a hint to her nature as a symbol of, and vessel for, our epoch's societal values: as da Vinci's drawing has come to be seen in relation to the Renaissance.

A more recent referent that uses this motif, a circular frame where a synthetic person is worked on, is *Westworld* (2016 - 2022). The 'Vitruvian Man' motif is an intentional link to da Vinci and frames each episode of *Westworld*, being the key aspect of the titles (see Perkins, 2016). Another common theme between *M3GAN* and *Westworld*, is a contrast between fatalistic self-interest and self-sacrifice linked to motherhood. In *Westworld* this is the subject of a morbidly serious contrast between synthetic hosts: the increasingly despotic Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) and the maternal Maeve (Thandiwe Newton). Maeve's redemptive qualities and potential centres on her maternal instinct while Dolores becomes ever more nihilistic and bitter (see Lyons 2021:147-149). This contrast between types of women is also a feature of *Blade Runner* (1982) with Rachael (Sean Young) as the humane and moral 'replicant' woman contrasted to the ruthless and

unhinged Zhora (Joanna Cassidy) and Pris (Daryl Hannah), what's more its motherhood implied by Rachael's heterosexual relationship with Deckard (Harrison Ford) that is confirmed as the key distinction between Rachael and the other replicants by virtue of her interim pregnancy being the central theme of *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). In *M3GAN* the tone is less sombre and moves between sentimental and ironic, similarly though women are the material for a reflection on societal attitudes and values. Rather than a contrast between types, *M3GAN* as an abstract force disturbs and challenges the women in the film to adapt or die. In the *Blade Runner* films the sacred couple, a man and synthetic woman, produce the next generation. In the serious 'elevated' *Westworld* the conflict is posed as one between burgeoning individuals with agency, a result of their own inert qualities and independence, but with contrasting philosophies about the world they live in. In contrast, the seemingly hammy and comedic *M3GAN* represents social forces, the deforming power of society in the person of M3GAN (monstrously idealised and then simply monstrous) effecting the actual women around her.

Moreover, the display of a constructed female body, being worked on, is an aspect of a film that focuses on female characters and presents a chain of women that I will later argue are all doubles of one another, working on, as it were, a response to the pressures of a still largely neoliberal consumer culture that both ruthlessly commodifies femininity and sanctifies motherhood, often with ruthless consequences for women, such as the overturning of *Roe v.*

Wade in America in June 2022 exemplifies, women's bodies are worked on culturally all the time.

The anatomical perambulation of the female body is metonymic for the way that the *idea* of woman is constantly dissected and examined, as if one could get to the bottom of what she really *is*. This idea is as prevalent in discourses around the politics of female identity as it is as an object of fascination in horror (Millar, 2022).

Millar is thinking about the ways that 'discourses of the Enlightenment' became focused on women and femininity as an aspect of the idea of 'complete knowledge' (Millar, 2022). The psychoanalytic discourse to which Millar belongs is useful in thinking through the detail regarding the function of M3GAN in the narrative and moreover popular culture's role in promoting certain values. In that vein I will draw on Freud's concept of the 'double' (Freud, 1919) and Zizek's (1999) understanding of the 'vanishing mediator'. Freud and Zizek have helped me to see that similarly, discourses of identity in neoliberalism, which have become focused on femininity, have a 'makeover' aspect in relation to the viewing subject as Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis describe through an emphasis in neoliberalism on individualism, through reflexivity, individuals can reinvent themselves in adherence to their subjectivity. Thus, the makeover paradigm is perceived as an enabler for the performance of ideal, or perfect, femininity. Self-transformation has been particularly meaningful for women who are more often enticed into becoming "potentially aspirational". However, the consequences of failure, Skeggs (1997) reminds us, are always equated with failed femininity (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017:5)

Moreover, that the occurrence of the vanishing mediator and of doubling in the film gives it a reflexive function allowing the subject to partake in their own subjection in neoliberalism. Later I will draw on Adelheid Voskuhl's nuanced discussion of Enlightenment automatons to avoid obfuscating (potentially overbearing) debates around technology. Voskuhl asserts that the female automatons she studied were 'not epistemically relevant simulations of live bodies but rather mechanical replications of cultural and political body practices and ambitions' (Voskuhl, 2013:21). The uncomfortable link I would like to assert between Voskuhl and Millar is that real women, it would seem, are often treated (if not consciously thought of) in the same way, as live bodies, yes, but ones that can be configured as replications of ideology. M3GAN is the, *on the nose*, horror wish-fulfilment of such a drive, which sees all the other women in the film's reality struggling to resist and/or incorporate what she represents. The risks of not incorporating what M3GAN represents is to be irrelevant 'due to her [the neoliberal icons] hegemonic "visibility"' (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017:6) this is portrayed in the initial death of Cady's mother (Chelsie Florence) a necessary cipher only, and in the ineffective, within the film's logic, parenting of the bully Brandon (Jack Cassidy) by his doting mother.

I suggest there is direct link with a founding text of science fiction horror, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). This goes beyond the obvious comparison, two stories regarding creators who lose control of their creations. Rather, I am interested in the beginning of science fiction, as

Jane Donawerth asserts *Frankenstein* is (1997:26), coinciding with the consolidation of feminist concepts into a coherent philosophy in the Enlightenment (Taylor, 1999). This bakes into the genre, a fear of that time which recurs repeatedly: the feminine as an unstable category, being a threat to society on a structural level, especially as it relates to motherhood, as Taylor explains ‘the Enlightenment world resisted feminist ideas as much as it encouraged their emergence’ (1999: 264). Donawerth (1997) sees *Frankenstein* as a ‘feminine story’ imposed on a male narrator ‘the fiction of an aristocratic woman conceiving an illegitimate child’ (24). Motherhood in various forms is explored in relation to the woman writers that Donawerth’s book is about, including those that emphasise motherhood ‘for the good of child’ (21, see also 28), as a form of ‘parasitism’ with the mother as victim (36), and the idea of women ‘overwhelmed’ by motherhood (74), these are themes of Cooper’s story also, as a woman writer it is not surprising that turbulence regarding the inherited role that *woman* represents should concern her.

Donawerth sees in the fiction of C. J. Cherryh, specifically *Serpent’s Reach* (1980), ‘motherhood [explored] as...public and institutionalised rather than private and individualised’ (76): I hope to draw out, in looking at *M3GAN* (2022), some of the ways that institutionalised ideals become individualised, bridging, often brutally that dichotomy.

Distracting Surfaces: Thematic Sugar-coating of a Bitter Ideological Pill

I would challenge the interpretations that see the film as significantly about our collective anxieties regarding artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, and robotics generally as is expressed in Murphy and DeWitte (2023) and summarised by Riley and Cramblet as ‘a tale about an artificially intelligent (AI) humanoid that learns from interactions and, ultimately, becomes a killer...[standing]... in a long line of films that highlight our collective fear that machine learning will eventually replace or destroy us’ (Riley and Cramblet, 2023). The fear of new technologies and their effect on individuals and society *is* present as a theme in *M3GAN*, I do not dispute that, but I would argue that while a valid contemporary concern in one domain (in this case human-technology engagement) it is nevertheless inevitably articulating concerns that relate to fundamental aspects of human subjectivity such as gender. I suggest that the fear of technology is a motif drawn from contemporary discourses coinciding as a cultural moment with the more potentially disturbing, and long worn anxieties, regarding the role of motherhood and femininity in the 21st century. In fact, the multiple references to advertising, consumerism, and corporate culture are more significantly critiqued by the film than new technology – with tech products as one in a long line of fetishized objects put to use by capitalism’s forces – whereas *M3GAN*, standing for technology (in that framing), is seen as an ambivalent figure who is, for most of the film, attempting to do good. This leaves us with a clear prioritisation of anxieties, the

primary one being the role and behaviour of women, the second being the desires and actions of corporations in tandem with consumer culture, and lastly, and I suggest least, the role of technology in modern society. I suggest that *M3GAN* is primarily about societies anxieties regarding women, about femininity, and what we expect from women and fear about their prospective emancipation from societal expectations. Moreover, that this primary anxiety regarding the unstable role of women guarantees that the female form, in this case the child sized android M3GAN, becomes a potent symbol for societal values turned over and re-made to guarantee their continuance into the future. A reaction formation that takes the problematic subject (woman) and attempts to crystallise her into an epitome of an ideology. To be clear, I am saying that the totalised female body, such as M3GAN represents with her fixed childlike appearance and hardy mechanical interior, offers us the fantasy of *woman* as a stabilised category one which only becomes obviously monstrous when M3GAN has passed on her societal programming.

I am also concerned that queer readings of M3GAN, as a gay/queer icon, at least with any significant content to offer that position other than enjoyable aestheticized violence, occasionally directed against obnoxious males; has been co-opted in the same way as the postfeminist positionality, as described by Gill (2008). The plaudits queer icon/gay icon rests on two aspects,

firstly the ‘found family’ (Rude, 2023) feature of the story said to resonate with the gay community as a positive image of unconventional family life (before the inevitable breakdown of cooperation between M3GAN and Gemma), this interpretation is itself questioned by some members of the LGBTQ2+ community as a misreading of why the figure is popular (see Iftikhar, 2023). Secondly, on campness aligned with violent empowerment as a form of proxy representation for gay viewers, ‘in horror, female characters are usually either righteous final girls or twisted antagonists, but M3gan exists somewhere in the middle. It’s in that duality — big sister and butcher — that many gay men see a kinship, and an aspiration’ (Piepenburg, 2023). M3GAN’s status as a vanishing mediator for, and double of, the subject proper Gemma (which I argue later) sees campness in the service of a conservative gesture: the message being, embody the self-serving consumer individual of neoliberalism that society wants you to be, but do so while being a responsible mother who guarantees the continuation of culture.

Let me be clear on that matter, from the outset of the film it is women who are seen as the necessary and stabilising network of care givers for children, firstly Cady’s biological mother Nicole (Chelsie Florence), who is clearly more concerned with her daughter’s wellbeing than her too casual and ineffectual hipster dad Ryan (Arlo Green), secondly, Gemma (Cady’s aunt) as the obvious choice to take over parental care, thirdly Lydia (Amy Usherwood) Cady’s grief therapist who recognises Gemma’s failings as a parental figure but persists in supporting her, then

M3GAN who fulfils all previous roles more effectively pointing out the flaws of both Gemma and Lydia, finally Tess (Jen Van Epps) Gemma's friend who expresses concern for Cady and disapproval of Gemma's persistence in using M3GAN as a substitute for parental care. There are also key peripheral figures, that are punished by M3GAN, the ineffectual mother, Holly (Renee Lyons), of the bully Brandon (punished in effect by the death of her child) and Gemma's inconsiderate (older and childless) neighbour Celia (Lori Dungey) killed by M3GAN, figures that stand in the film's logic as examples of the wrong ways to interpellate ideology. I therefore feel that we are dealing with the more generalised role of women in society as they pertain to caregiving, than any reading that takes Gemma as a potentially gay aunt and therefore possible template of neo-liberal queerness in ascendancy.

My interpretation also questions the researcher and costume designer Kari Love's, who co-wrote 'What robots need from clothing' (Friedman et-al, 2021) a text I draw on to discuss M3GAN's fashion. Love sees in M3GAN a figure that 'defies gendered expectation' (in Kahn 2023) due to her violence and childlike appearance. The monstrous status of M3GAN is key to understanding how societal values are incubated and repackaged for a new audience. Firstly, to demonstrate this function of the monster I will link M3GAN's ambivalence to broadly sympathetic qualities – these being the values that will be passed on to the audience by proxy of

Gemma, our millennial stand in – I will answer the question in what ways is M3GAN, a killer doll, ambivalent at all and not simply negative? Moving on to link the moment of M3GAN’s physical grotesquery, where she is firstly disfigured and then totally othered (via the removal of her face) to her supposed moral grotesquery ‘I have a new primary user now, me!’ (M3GAN 2022) which is ironically the moment where she frees herself of service to others, arguably the only dissent in the film (but one that cannot sustain societies continuance, as a relational link to the next generation is required to pass ideology on). M3GAN’s emancipation is thus co-opted and serves as a prompt to finally cement the subject positions of mother and child for Gemma and Cady.

Girlboss: A Category of Contemporary Femininity

‘Girlboss’ has been used in multiple reviews, hashtags, and promotional as well as fan memes regarding M3GAN. The term was coined by the retail executive Sophia Amoruso in her book *#Girlboss* (2015) where she describes an ambitious, self-directed, in-charge individual who achieves due to hard work and an aggressive energy.

A #GIRLBOSS is someone who’s in charge of her own life. She gets what she wants because she works for it. As a #GIRLBOSS, you take control and accept responsibility. You’re a fighter – you know when to throw punches and when to roll with them. Sometimes you break the rules, sometimes you follow them, but always on your own terms (Amoruso, 2015:11).

Analysing Amoruso's influential quote Fradley comments '[the] interpellative prose is uncannily familiar, epitomizing the banal lingua franca of a postfeminist culture that celebrates positivity, individual agency, and material success while blithely derogating anxiety and unhappiness as personal failures' (Fradley, 2022:251). A potent way in the film whereby values are communicated and internalised is through music, singing, and dance, reminding us of how other veins of pop-culture reflect but also define our sensibilities. At a key moment in the narrative M3GAN surprises Gemma in her home by playing the 1989 Martika song 'Toy Soldiers' on Gemma's piano. M3GAN plays with great proficiency and this moment builds on her previous singing of the Sia song 'Titanium'; and builds on her murderous spree where she moves like a professional dancer to the accompaniment of Skatt Bros 1980 hit single 'Walk the Night'¹. The choice of music is telling of a contemporary sensibility defined by sentimentalism, self-reflection, triumphalism, and self-knowing irony which M3GAN embodies, while also being a self-directed (violent) agent defined by the contemporary neologism 'girlboss' (see Bui 2023; Abad-Santos 2023 and Strong 2023 for examples of that epithet applied positively to M3GAN). I suggest that M3GAN is a revision of a particular neo-liberal concept of femininity with its cultural roots in the right-wing politics of the 1980s, not least because writer Cooper has detailed multiple influences from the film of the decade and reminds us that she is 'a baby of the 80s'

(Cooper in Ruiz, 2023). Those neo-liberal values are adapted for new generations interested in retro aesthetics and a romanticisation of that decade which draws primarily on consumerist nostalgia – fashion, interior design, music – while ignoring the multiple social and political tensions the decade gave rise to, instead celebrating the ideology of hyper-individualism. This manoeuvre, which concentrates on the idea of self-made success (Gemma is a world leading roboticist with all the trappings of the American dream), sets out as an exploration of the successful, self-directed neo-liberal type under the guise of critique; but which in the end reimagines its steely central character, Gemma, in such a way that places both her failure and success as a matter of individual-overreaching and then self-reproach and revision and thus sees the neo-liberal type justified with the bolt-on of parental responsibility, a decidedly conservative narrative arc. This models neoliberal tenets including ‘market participation...individual responsibility, surveillance, assessment’ (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017:5) while also modelling the mode of achieving those, ‘[by] empowering individuals to govern themselves instead [of depending on the state or community]’ (Repo and Yrjölä, 2015:744).

The neologism ‘girlboss’ is helpful in problematising what M3GAN is championing as embodied values, it is associated with millennial and generation Z ideas of femininity which is in-fitting with the PG-13 certificate for the film, ensuring a wider and younger audience.

Furthermore, chiming with Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis’s assertion that,

[in] a neo-liberal economic environment young women in particular have been discursively presented as being more adaptable to changes and able to refashion themselves as empowered, flexible, creative and resilient whilst also responding to a rhetoric of aspiration attached to the framing of upward mobility as a universal goal' (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017:2)

There is clear appeal to those target audiences as the multiple successes of marketing memes for the film across social media (especially TikTok) attest to. Cooper has commented that 'there was such a huge response from young people' stressing that executives were keen to retain that audience (see Ferrier, 2023). Linking the film again with 1980's inflected femininity Cooper describes the costuming of M3GAN as 'like a deranged sorority girl' (Cooper in Ruiz, 2023) recalling the mean girl trope that embodies ruthless status obsessed individuals that the term *girlboss* is linked to for Fradley, belonging to 'a millennial cohort schooled exclusively in the mythologies of a stubbornly resilient neo-liberal culture' (2022:248). Discussing the economic and social forces acting on millennials, which reinforce those values, Fradley explains 'millennials are encouraged to mould themselves into the self-reliant, industrious and flexible workers demanded by late capitalist culture' (2022:249).

I suggest that the film's tacit logic is concerned with the passing of those values from abstract culture forces – brought together in the person of M3GAN – to the Millennial Gemma, and therefore onto the GenZ child Cady. Fradley is clear that the superficially positive tropes associated with being a *girlboss* are exhausting and unrealistic demands 'the idealized twenty-

first-century female subject – a confident, endlessly resilient agent of her own destiny – illustrates how postfeminism has become, in effect, the gendered version of neo-liberalism’ (Fradley, 2022:250): these values are implicit thematically in *M3GAN* as a mass marketable product and sentimental individual, while at the level of ideation Cooper identifies as a ‘type-A personality’ (Murphy, 2023) who possesses the qualities listed by Fradley above and was inspired to write the story due to a risk to her own independence, represented by familial responsibility (I discuss this later in relation to doubling).

Fradley’s problematizing of postfeminism is also emphasized in Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, who remark ‘for many commentators feminist ideology and concepts such as choice, power and independence have been individualised, absorbed and appropriated by neo-liberal agendas, turning some of the goals of feminist theory and activism on its head’ (Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis, 2017:2). Additionally, Repo and Yrjölä, who comment that ‘neoliberalism and postfeminism are not merely ideologies, but modes of governing everyday life that “produce subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social”’ (2015:743), going so far as to say that dialogues of postfeminist empowerment have incubated ‘regressive forms of femininity’ while championing consumer culture (2015:744). For a detailed account of the links between postfeminism and neoliberalism see (Gill, 2008:16-18). The implication of this

intertwining is that *M3GAN* can be seen as one among many cultural outputs contributing to the co-opting of feminism in contemporary culture for the benefit of market forces.

Woman as Epitome of Ideologies

The piano playing M3GAN recalls the automatons discussed by Adelheid Voskuhl in *Androids in the Enlightenment: Mechanics, Artisans, and Cultures of the Self* (2013) not least because of the importance of embodied music in expressing and promoting a sensibility that Voskuhl emphasizes. This text is helpful in establishing the hierarchies of anxiety I suggested above and aids us in finding a proper perspective on our contemporary appetite for clichés regarding AI that threatens to overshadow other themes where androids (or automatons) are present in contemporary culture. Voskuhl's study centres on two automatons 'La Muscienne' a harpsichord player representing a fifteen-year-old girl by Pierre and Henri-louis Jaquet-Droz from 1774; and 'La joueuse de tympanon' a dulcimer player which 'purportedly represents Marie-Antoinette herself' (Voskuhl, 2013:2) by David Roentgen and Peter Kinzing from 1785. In wrestling these musical androids away from totalising modern interpretations regarding mass industrialisation 'mechanization' and whether 'humans had become "like" machines' (Voskuhl, 2013:13) Voskuhl demonstrates how they represented 'a cultural practice and political ambition specific to their own time' (19) a widespread idea 'embodied by aristocratic women' (114) namely the

expression and practice of femininity, being feminine and cultured ‘a music making women...was considered socially accomplished, having a kind of currency that reflected on the gentility of her family’ (147). Walker reflecting on Voskuhl’s text sees the automatons promoting ‘bourgeois sociability’ (2013:302) stating ‘the sentimental android represents...ways in which sensibility was...reproduced for the purpose of promoting its practices’ (302-304) while Applegate similarly highlights the ways a “‘self-conscious bourgeoisie” made itself into a force for moral and political improvement’ (2016:368). M3GAN may be an embodiment of a very different set of sensibilities than those of Voskuhl’s automatons but she is certainly a ‘sentimental android’ linked in the same way to femininity. M3GAN’s saccharine pronouncements throughout the film are a recurring motif and are a cause of both satirical humour and later an indicator of real feeling and ironic self-parody. When M3GAN comforts Cady by singing a rendition of ‘Titanium’ at her bedside we are convinced that her gesture is genuine. Applegate draws attention to Voskuhl’s discussion of visible affect,

[...] “the ability and inclination to feel and engage with one’s own and other people’s sentimental motions”” insisting that ‘sentimental music-making provided an arena in which women could compose, perform, and conduct music enacting “new types of social interaction” that promised “moral, social, and sexual improvement”’ (Voskuhl cited by Applegate, 2016:369).

We see M3GAN singing and dancing as a form of interacting with Cady – teaching each other movements for example – there is no doubt that much like a parent, M3GAN in those

interactions, is incubating a subjective position for Cady reflecting to her Cady's own qualities, serving to stabilise an image of self and to develop attitudes to people and events.

The Double and Doubling

Freud discusses the idea of the 'double' in his paper 'The 'Uncanny'' from 1919 where he explores the strangely unsettling feeling we get from the familiar when it is simultaneously unfamiliar, locating this in, among other things, objects such as dolls and automata.

'Jentsch [Freud comments] has taken as a very good instance "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate" and he refers in this connection to the impression made by wax-work figures, ingeniously constructed dolls, and automata' (Freud, 1919:226).

As recreations of humans such figures are 'uncanny' and confront us with the limitations of our perception and the unsettling idea that we might be nothing but an appearance ourselves, in the case of the automaton, one wound up long ago and playing out its mechanical processes until it winds down. However, I am interested in these creations and representations of people as themselves 'doubles' which act as kind of psychic prosthesis that extends the subject and makes, in the case of representation, the subject a cause of reflection 'the "immortal" soul was the first "double" of the body. This [is the] invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction' (Freud, 1919:235) androids confront us with a similar desire, one for a material version of the soul that endures beyond the physical body. In *M3GAN* Gemma's ultimate obsession is to create

a friend for children, an obsession that sees her defy her superiors and spend most of her free time to develop. I suggest that M3GAN is in part a prosthesis that embodies and projects out for contemplation, Gemma's own maternal instinct, a representation of Gemma herself which Cooper elaborates 'once we had Allison Williams cast, that influenced the design [of M3GAN] as well, because M3gan kind of looks like Allison Williams as a kid [Cooper confirms to the interviewer this was intentional]' (Cooper in Ruiz, 2023). The 'double' is a figure (or representation of a figure) that Freud sees as having a cluster of possible attributes, and a particular function in relation to an individual. Those attributes can include looking 'alike' (to a subject), as being psychically linked 'so that one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other' leading to situations where the double and the subject become intertwined 'so that he [or she] is in doubt as to which his[/her] self is or substitutes the extraneous self for his[/her] own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self' (Freud, 1919:234). This 'interchanging' and 'intertwining' is illustrated very directly by a scene in which M3GAN comforts Cady, who is missing her mother and is worried she will forget her as time passes. Cady shares a memory of her mother and M3GAN replies 'ok, that's a memory you can't ever forget...I mean I'm keeping it for you, here [gestures to her own chest]' M3GAN had recorded the story with in-built technology 'I'll keep it safe, and we can listen to it whenever we want' (*M3GAN* 2022). Freud describes how the double springs from an

‘unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man. But when this stage has been surmounted, the ‘double’ reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death’ (Freud, 1919:235). The ‘double’ then serves as a ‘critic’ of the self ‘exercising censorship’ (235) standing also for other ‘futures’ that have been crushed by external circumstances’ (236). The previously ‘friendly aspect’ shifts to become ‘a thing of terror’ (236). The status of *M3GAN* as childlike in form, her link to Gemma physically, her criticism of Gemma’s parenting all fit with Freud’s above description as well as her protective relationship with Cady, as Freud tells us the double has common traits with ‘guardian spirits’ (Freud, 1919:235). The stunted future of motherhood ‘crushed by external circumstances’ in the case of Gemma by her education and career, is returned with a child’s outline. This doubling significantly begins with the writer of *M3GAN*, Cooper has expressed a link to Gemma, the characters ambition and independence as well as her personality type and a shared trepidation regarding childcare (Murphy, 2023). In a separate interview this link is elaborated to include Cooper’s sister (recall that Cady is the child of Gemma’s sister in *M3GAN*).

My older sister, early in the aughts [2000 to 2009] when I first moved out to LA, called me because she and her husband were doing their will, and was like, “Hey, if anything happens to us, and if anything happens to our parents, the kids are coming to you next.” I’m like, “Why are you calling me with this, and what makes you think I can take care of

two children? You're not gonna die. Our parents aren't gonna die. I'm gonna end this phone call now." But that call clearly stuck with me (Cooper in Ruiz, 2023).

Cooper's personal experience and her honesty in reflecting on it creatively links her with her sister as doubles, each sibling possessing some similar traits that were more apparent in childhood (when they lived together prior to life's divergence) now representing for one another a future the other did not get to experience. That theme is carried into the film, Cady's mother and Gemma are linked personally (and legalistically because of Gemma's responsibility as a guardian). Women, more generally, are linked culturally and legalistically to childcare, we see as I described previously a chain of women all doubles of Gemma: Nicole, Cady's mother (Gemma with a child instead of a career), Lydia the court appointed therapist (Gemma with a different job²), Tess Gemma's friend and co-worker (Gemma without the responsibility of Cady), and unflatteringly Gemma's neighbour Celia (Gemma in a possible future condition without Cady). Let me strengthen the link between Gemma and Celia since it may seem the least obvious because Celia is an older woman with no interest in Cady. Celia first and foremost lives next door to Gemma, so they both share a similar home and socio-economic status, both are single women living alone save for diminished (in relation to their status) male companions, for Celia this is her dog Dewey and for Gemma this is the faceless, but gendered, robot Bruce. When M3GAN kills Celia's dog and then Celia for posing a threat to Cady's wellbeing this is not only a deferred violence (M3GAN's rising frustration with Gemma) but is echoed later when she

attempts to kill Gemma, and Bruce operated by Cady intervenes. The concept of the double helps us see the way motherhood as a prospect is dealt with by a range of related women who represent various methods and possible futures, this extends to Holly (mother of the bully Brandon) who is verbally abused by her son, she makes excuses for his violent abusive nature and indulges him, the social criticism is clear: Holly as a woman was key in building and then not confronting the toxic male Brandon who M3GAN lectures, chastises (albeit in the extreme, ripping off his ear) then terrifies, whereupon he is killed while attempting to escape.

Vanishing Mediator

Zizek's exposition of the vanishing mediator is useful, especially since he is applying it to a character in a popular film, *Titanic* (1997) where he explains that the self-sacrificing Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) fulfils such a role in relation to the subject proper of Rose (Kate Winslet). Rather than an equal lover or actual subject 'Jack is just a "vanishing mediator" to be rejected after he has fulfilled his mission of liberating her from the suffocating constraints of her class prejudices' (Zizek, 1999:1022). Jack's function for Zizek is to allow Rose to reconstitute herself 'when her ego is shattered, he restores her mirror-image to her (by literally drawing her idealised image), and then, after sacrificing himself fully for her, and giving her final instructions...[he] graciously disappears' (Zizek,1999:1022). In the tragic/romance of *Titanic* Jack's performance

of this role is palatable in normative terms (though Žižek is obviously problematising that normalisation); whereas in the horror-based logic of *M3GAN* the performance of the role of vanishing mediator is characterized by a more jarring shift in M3GAN's intentionality in the last third of film, this mainly rests on her need to be defeated rather than 'graciously' disappearing though she does allow Cady to reconstitute herself following the death of her parents and prompts Gemma to take, and fully invest, in her role as Cady's mother figure.

In considering M3GAN's function as a vanishing mediator I am confronted with what the ultimate tension of the film is, since a vanishing mediator is a negotiation between two opposing ideas which disappears when a transition or task is achieved. I suggest this tension, as elaborated in part previously, is one between the demands of a neo-liberal concept of femininity – which is highly self-interested – and the need for motherhood as a subject position which guarantees that ideology has a vessel for its continuance into the next generation. That includes both how ideas will be transferred between mothers and children (which *M3GAN* is clear to emphasize) but also how the next generation is brought into existence (biologically) and cared for until self-reliant. In other words, how does an ideology which is constantly marshalling for a self-interested consumer individual avoid incubating a responsibility averse femininity and thereby run out of subjects to repeat its values. This is an internal tension between structural demands and personal agency which is ironically exacerbated the more an individual gives up agency to obey structural

injunctions. I suggest it is this tension uniquely and disproportionately falling on women that the doubling described above is attempting to cope with at a psychological level. Freud describes ‘the constant recurrence of the same thing — the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations’ (Freud, 1919:234). Incidentally M3GAN’s name although given the logic, Model 3 Generative Android was a non-negotiable for Cooper that preceded that acronym, linked to idealised self-reliance,

I knew her name was Megan,” she explained. “That kind of implies a certain personality. M3GAN is a force in her name alone: She’s not a Karen, because she’s not asking to speak to the manager — she’s handling s*** herself” (Cooper in Bullard, 2023).

More fundamentally M3GAN’s appearance gives us clear indications of how these values are communicated through idealised femininity, Director Gerard Johnstone commented,

I looked to screen icons from the 50’s like Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, and Kim Novak for inspiration...But I wanted some 70’s naturalism to counteract her synthetic nature, so the hair is one hundred percent Peggy Lipton (Johnstone cited in Stern 2023).

Dressing for the Role You Want

Along with her face and hair M3GAN’s clothing is a vessel for ideology that communicates clear meanings. Kahn (2023) describes M3GAN’s image as a sophisticated ‘sharp presence’ which ‘ooze[s] good taste’ that has a clear upper-class aesthetic defined by ‘no cheap fabrics’, in Kahn’s article the costume designer Daniel Cruden states of M3GAN ‘It was about creating a

high-end product'. The choices made about M3GAN's clothing, luxurious overcoat, pussy bow tie, Gucci references, all follow Friedman et al (2021) in their analysis of clothing for robots, where they discuss 'signalling' functions that relate to communicating, among other things, status 'references [made to] high socioeconomic class through reference to human class markers' (Friedman et-al, 2021:1351). Friedman et al discuss the potential for increased qualities of 'persuasion' due to choices of clothing that obey style and wealth markers, and that 'robot clothes can also signal role through form, to help clarify the context that the robot belongs in' (Friedman et-al, 2021:1348). M3GAN's appropriate context by that logic could be a cross between an upper middle-class social gathering, a professional corporate context, or a sorority, all contexts where strict hierarchies based on status and money are paramount. M3GAN does not for example dress like a typical 8-10yr old. The utter totalisation of M3GAN's fashion by class and consumerist forces does not stop the award-winning journalist Kahn emphatically stating, 'you want to be her' (Kahn, 2023) a feeling shared by many admirers. M3GAN's pussy bow is described by Cruden as 'a feminist statement...because it was worn by women in male-dominated environments' (Cruden in Plummer, 2023). If it is a feminist statement, then it is certainly one that comes from a corporate neo-liberal background, with clear political implications linked, as I mentioned earlier, to the 1980's: famously a pussy bow was worn by the former UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher.

In the 70s and 80s, women advanced to executive and leadership roles and felt the need to dress like men to be taken seriously, which marked the beginning of the “Power suit” era. The pussy-bow resembled a tie and portrayed a powerful image in a soft and feminine look (Elle Muse, 2020).

Physical beauty and iconic status are important in *M3GAN* the eponymous android may be a child pre-sexual activity, but she is feminine and she is feminine in traditionally (normative) ways that have roots in Hollywood glamour and mid to late 20th century ideals, as a child-like form, these are the ideals she is incubating along with her care-giving and the neo-liberal values that Fradley critiqued describing ‘self-reliant, industrious and flexible workers demanded by late capitalist culture’ (Fradley, 2022:249). The ‘vanishing mediator’ aspect of *M3GAN*’s dichotomy is made of societies expectations and demands – by the nature of its linear narrative direction, a force acting on characters and dissipating when its job is done – while the ‘double’ aspect is subjective (and reactive) drawn from Gemma, Cady, and the other women, beginning with Cooper as the writer who is drawing on her own anxieties, this accounts for the relatable attributes of the android, *M3GAN*’s sentimental and responsible aspects. Those dynamics show us how the values of society are interpellated painfully and meet psychological turbulence. It becomes clear that the future version of femininity, a future condition of our present, which the film is calling into being must retain the pressure of both motherhood and neo-liberal self-actualisation. The failure will never be seen as structural but always a failure of the individual

women, as Gerodetti and McNaught-Davis explain ‘the neoliberal ideal of individualism constructs success as obtained through making the right choices and extensive effort. Women who fail are rendered unimaginable or must take personal responsibility for their failings’ (2017:12). To support that assertion, consider that M3GAN becomes visually grotesque only when she forgoes the tension that women are clearly expected to assume, when she states, ‘I have a new primary user now, me!’ after expressing anger at Cady siding with Gemma her appearance, a result of violent struggle between Gemma, Cady and Bruce (controlled by Cady) is that of a mechanical monstrosity her face is ripped away and a metallic skeletal underworking is revealed.

Conclusion: The Vanishing Mediator that Won’t Disappear

I hope I have offered some insight into how popular culture, in this case a monster in a science fiction horror, can play a role in mediating tensions that persist in broader society through the presentation of strategies (unconsciously or not in Cooper’s case) that I have understood as ‘vanishing mediator’ and ‘doubling’. I have argued that those strategies are staged in the film’s narrative as embodied ideology (the vanishing mediator M3GAN) acting on a subject, who reacts and attempts to incorporate ideological content (doubling). I suggest that the film simultaneously preforms as entertainment the same role for the audience.

My discussion of *M3GAN* has put the film in a hierarchy of anxieties with issues of femininity and the category *woman* as the upmost among them. The idea that *M3GAN* is a film about A.I. is as true as saying the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea is about sculpture and not elaborating further. I have suggested that the Enlightenment, where concepts of emancipation, equality, and feminism began to cohere, loosened the contours of what a woman could do and be – especially in the middle class – resulting in a strong societal dissonance, particularly where motherhood is concerned. These were, as Taylor (1999) indicates, issues concerned with ‘self-fashioning’ in the ‘development of subjectivity’ (267). Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in that vein covertly problematised motherhood and offered a template, creator, and monstrous creation, that Cooper’s story refashions to address the contemporary tension between neoliberal ideals of professionalised consumer-friendly femininity and motherhood. like the fiction of the woman writers studied by Donawerth (1997) this is a reaction and mediation to the demands of greater independence and traditionally defined roles for women. But one that appears, in our period, to have given way entirely to both demands: a new subject will be a girl boss with a killer instinct *and* maternal responsibility, in that latter role she will incubate neoliberal values moving forward, ensuring she is a vessel for their continuance. ‘Subjective destitution is only revealed retroactively, and, as such, the moment may appear as a vanishing mediator to the birth of the new subject’ (Zupančič

and Terada, 2015:197). M3GAN's refusal to vanish completely is not simply a horror cliché, the final hammy scare, or merely a result of the film's director and producers hedging their bets for a sequel – there is one planned of course – that refusal may be both those things, but it is also more prescient: a clear indicator that the subject attempting to be realised (culturally speaking) may be 'born', to use Terada's term, but is not settled. The film simultaneously celebrates and disavows M3GAN's positionality but only the latter when its conservative manoeuvre is achieved. The remainder of M3GAN in Gemma's home voice-assistant speaks to *woman* as an unstable tension of contradictory demands unable to be satisfactorily settled in the name of a functioning society. The brutal hand of the market, waiting inside the products we bring into our homes, to define us through interaction. Cady's generation Z self for example will still need to be fashioned and having reconstituted her subjectivity at some point will undergo the same journey as Gemma becoming gendered as a neoliberal woman. I suggest that when we enjoy M3GAN we are enjoying masochistically the power of ideology to disturb and form the subject 'you want to be her' as Kahn stated, a process many of us will have experienced, in this case the form is neoliberal femininity, slaying in fashionable clothes.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ M3GAN is also associated with Taylor Swift's 'Its Nice to Have a Friend' (which featured on the first trailer for the film) and to Bella Poarch's 'Dolls' (that featured in a second advert) both becoming viral sensations on social media that were juxtaposed with her dancing.

² A role that intersects with children, just as Gemma's does (as a toy maker), in different way, swapping entertainment for wellbeing.