

Robots, Humans and Mothers: Reading *Cassandra* as Gothic.

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ABSTRACT:

The notion of the ‘Human’ has always remained open-ended. Ever since the strains of the *Aufklärung* foregrounded intellection and scientific progress, the boundaries of the ‘Human’ have been stretched. The nexus between humans and machines and Artificial Intelligence is one open-ended site of interface that rouses marvel and awe as much as it rouses fear—fear of the unknown.

This paper will focus on *Cassandra*, a German webseries that showcases such a connection between humans and machines. The eponymous robot in the series, built by humans to aide humans in making life easier, turns into a monster, begins to take over, as ‘mother’, the control of the family it is supposed to serve, incarcerating, harming and finally threatening to kill them in the process.

This article will explore the *Unheimlich* created when AI deals in emotions and locks horns with the human world as we understand it. The paper will also analyse *Cassandra* the AI, as Monstrous Feminine and Abject. *Cassandra* will be discussed from the point of view of the orders of simulacra as Baudrillard explains in his chapter on Simulacra and Science Fiction. The article will partially take up the stance of posthumanism to raise important questions about the efficacy of artificial intelligence and the myriad ways the same can turn into a grotesque object of horror and terror—a Gothic reminder of what lies and could await beyond the bounds of human-ness.

Keywords: Human, Artificial Intelligence,
Cassandra, robot, *Unheimlich*, Monstrous
Feminine, Abject.

*Cassandra*¹ is a German Webseries, that is directed by Benjamin Gutsche, starring Lavinia Wilson, Mina Tander and Michael Klammer. Written by Sina Flammang and Benjamin Gutsche, the story showcases the titular Cassandra who is turned into a robot in order to cheat death by her scientist husband back in the 1970s. Years later in the 2000s, a happy family of four—Samira, her husband David and children Fynn and Juno move into Cassandra's house after buying it. Things take a sinister turn when Cassandra, a robot now, still keeps referring to the home as hers and the family as her family. There is a digital screen in every conceivable corner of the house with Cassandra's face on it, watching them, and waiting for instructions. Slowly it becomes evident that Cassandra is much more than just a robot. She understands. She feels. She emotes. Matters takes a turn for the worse as Cassandra ostensibly starts targeting Samira and eventually Cassandra succeeds in turning David, Fynn and Juno against Samira and causing her to be institutionalised for mental health. Cassandra then locks up the house completely, sealing all doors and windows, saying, now she herself, David, Fynn and Juno are a 'family'. All ends well with Samira coming back and setting things right once more. And like the original Greek Cassandra, this transhuman namesake too remains cursed never to be accepted, believed or fulfilled.

The series begins with an eerie and ominous metallic static noise that is removed from the human sensibility as digital, therefore signalling the presence of the non-human other, away from the usual Anthropocene. But the immediate shift of the camera angle to the interior of a car with a song being played on the music system and the driver nodding and finger-tapping along to it brings the semblance of normalcy back until seconds later the driver screeches to a halt at the sight of a terrible accident on the road, where the body of the man lies prostrate on the bonnet of the car, violently protruding out of the

shattered windshield, while a terrified woman huddles in the back seat with a child in her arms. As the rescuer guides the woman and the child out and asks, what happened the petrified woman replies, 'she's here', just as the camera pans out to reveal a robotic form standing close by, subverting the humanness of the pronoun, 'she'. The interface between man and machine, thus, is set out right at the beginning.

The adjective that best describes what I felt when I watched the webseries *Cassandra* for the first time, is 'unsettling'. So, where or what does the negative aesthetics of this unsettling gothic plot come from, in *Cassandra*?

Let's break it down. One realises that apart from the atmospheric music and suspenseful photographic angles, there are two core thematic axes of the Gothic that rouse fear here—Posthuman Gothic and the Domestic Gothic.

The first has to do with the seeming omnipotence of Artificial Intelligence which has the potential to prove to be an adversary to reckon with, for human beings. The mechanically powered *Cassandra* does everything from cooking to mowing to perfection. She even reels off the titles of every book authored by David, reminding the audience of 2026 uncannily of AI tools like Chat GPT and Gemini and Perplexity, and accelerating our fear of becoming the Other, of losing ourselves in a multitude of corporeal as well as discursive possibilities.

The fact that *Cassandra* attempts to take over Sam's entire world with her hybrid body, distributed agency, and technomaterially entangled existence is in itself very gothic as it symbolises the possibility of AI taking the human world over, thereby creating a digital dystopia for the Anthropocene.

The webseries, spanning out in six 50-ish-minute episodes, foregrounds the interface between man and machine, intelligence and artificial intelligence with the latter coming precariously near to annihilating the former. That was what was so unnerving about the show.

Posthuman Gothic explores the fear that rises from the more liminal states created by human-machine interface. Posthuman Gothic problematises concerns, fears and questions about the identity constructions that are stoked up by the uncanniness of the automaton– the almost-but-not-quite human cyborg or the abject, biotech human-machine hybrid.

Mary Shelley's 'hideous progeny', the epitomisation of one outside of the human(ist) paradigm, thereby deemed the monstrous Other once said, 'I was not even of the same nature as man . . . Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?'(Shelley,83) *Frankenstein*², the pioneering Gothic meta-text and emerging science fiction narrative, offers a vista into the complexity of 'living'-if it could be called so, outside of the human paradigm.

The very same outside-the-human-paradigm is explored in *Cassandra* too. *Cassandra*, in the eponymous web series, after her transformation into a robot, asks her scientist maker-husband: 'If I'm no longer human, what am I?' (S1: E5, 17:02), thereby reiterating the ontological aporia that haunts the human-machine dichotomy.

This destabilising of the essential ethical and epistemological paradigms of identity and the merging of human-machine borders, is what scares.

Apart from the question of liminality of identity, one more concern about the posthuman that intensifies the Gothic fear is the aporia about the many ways in which these processes can and will go wrong.

In the series, Samira voices fears concerning *Cassandra* that they 'don't know anything about this computer program. Or the kinds of errors it might run into' (S1:E2, 19:55)

David dismisses her saying 'Cassandra is made of zeroes and ones. It's just a computer program'. (S1: E2, 19: 23)

He also complacently reassures her that *Cassandra* can never be manipulative because she runs on algorithm. 'Cassandra doesn't

feel any emotions or plan schemes. She's not hu..(human)..it's software.' (S1: E2, 38:25) he says, only to be proved horribly wrong later down the plot.

The fact that Cassandra the AI takes over the autonomy of the human family becomes the site of terror, resulting in the evocation of the gothic. Gothic fear arises from the instability and ultimate unsustainability of our most basic ontological category – the human.

Cassandra, then, represents the ultimate digital dystopia of the Anthropocene, where algorithms usurp human agency, and simulated personalities take over physical spaces resulting in the terrifying collapse of ontological boundaries.

Now let's come to the second source of the Gothic in Cassandra: Domestic Gothic manifesting through how motherhood gone awry.

Adrienne Rich, in her 1976 text *Of Woman Born*³ (Rich 42), Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978)⁴ (Chodorow 85), explain that women are socio-culturally conditioned to have fluid emotional boundaries and a strong capacity for empathy and nurturing in order to live up to the roles of good woman and good Mother. And Alina Luna in her book, *Visual Perversity: A Re-articulation of the Maternal Instinct* (2004)⁵ warns that this often leads to disastrous results (Luna 55).

Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*⁶ (Kristeva 4) plumbs deep into how the maternal body is the first Abject, and how it is inherently terrifying because it weakens the boundaries between the self and the "other", refusing to let go and thereby threatening to consume the other back into the self-womb. Toxic motherhood is often more a byproduct of a patriarchal society that traps women in suffocating domestic spaces. Simone de Beauvoir⁷ said that one is not born a woman, but rather "becomes" one and Judith Butler said we 'perform' gender⁸. True enough society chalks out a Baudrillardian Hyperreal image of the 'Good woman', the 'Good Mother', which is a simulacrum that all women feel obliged to live up to. It's a copy of an idealized standard

that in modern capitalism, is supercharged by media, advertising, and AI algorithms. Women are lured to buy products, use fitness apps, and perform endless labour to conform to an idealised hyperreal form of perfect motherhood.

But the Gothic fallout of all this is that, this 'Good Mother' trope eventually gives birth to what is known as the 'Devouring Mother' or the 'Cannibal Mother' or the 'Toxic Mother' who often ends up creates a gothic Heterotopias out of the home which was supposed to be a safe place.

Motherhood is a concept that has always been shrouded in ambivalence. Despite the concept of motherhood as inherently nurturing and loving, maternal bond is often the suffocating, controlling, consuming and therefore, destructive carrier of patriarchy.

The mother who is herself oppressed by a rubric of patriarchal social expectations, often triggers off a vicious cycle of Toxic Projection by becoming hyper-controlling, and turning her frustration into emotional abuse and manipulation, or by projecting her own unfulfilled desires onto her children, just because she herself lacks agency within the male-dominated social sphere.

In *Cassandra*, it is evident that Cassandra Schmitt was forced to play the good wife and the good mother all her life in a home that was evidently run by the very patriarchal views of her husband Horst. The more like a repressed frustrated 'mad woman' she felt in her home, the more she exerted her control over her son Peter, turning him into defenceless, agency-robbed, Homo Nihili, a person of no value in his own home. Cassandra does not allow her son to grow up. She decides what game he should play and if he should play. She even decides how to dispose of the dead bodies when her son ends up murdering three fellow students. She does not allow Fynn to associate with his gay boyfriend, thereby curbing his sexual agency, which is a marker of individual maturity.

Melanie Klein in her book *The Psycho-Analysis of Children, Envy and Gratitude, and Love, Guilt and Reparation* explains that the Devouring Mother acts as the ultimate agent of patriarchy and capitalism⁹ (Klein 55). She wishes to prolong her effectiveness as the ‘good mother’ in her child’s life to validate her identity. As a result, the mother’s toxic nature manifests as an inability to let her child individuate. She refuses to “separate” from the child, thereby figuratively, but effectively “consuming” or swallowing them back into the womb. This makes her what is known as the ‘Cannibal Mother’. If the child resists, the mother splits her/him into the “Bad Child” and punishes her/him with existential guilt. As a result the child in turn, sees the punishing mother as the Bad Mother—the monster .

This is known as the Kleinian Connection or the Kleinian Split.

To survive this intense pressure, the child often develops a compliant False Self. They perform the gender role perfectly on the outside. But their true, authentic self gets buried in the process. And because this forced “becoming” is unnatural, the mind fractures, causing dissociative identity. Norman Bates in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* is an excellent example. This very form of Domestic Gothic plays out when Cassandra becomes the toxic Devouring mother in the family. Her son Peter, naturally exhibits classic dissociative identity, thereby showing up as the obedient polite introvert on the one hand, but then going and murdering three schoolmates who bullied him, on the other.

One of the ways in which Cassandra’s inexorable toxicity is cinematographically epitomised is through the Maternal Gaze. Cassandra the computer is in every single room, every single corner of the entire house being under her digital surveillance. This is a filmic symbolisation of the trope of the omniscient ‘Gaze’ of the Devouring mother just as her locking up the family later on, with all doors and windows sealed, is a representation of the ‘Locked Womb’.

This symbolic omnipresence of the mother in the child’s life, especially at home, prevents the home from being a safe place any

longer for the child. A heterotopia of liminality and aporia is created where the child feels drawn to and at the same time repelled by the idea of home as 'home' begins to equate with 'mother' and maternal control. The 'home' is no longer the safe haven for the child, but a prison of confinement—a locus for gothic claustrophobia and covert trauma as the mother's emotional toxicity refuses to back down.

The domestic Gothic sets in as home becomes prison exacerbated by the constant maternal gaze.

When Cassandra knows that she's dying of cancer, she tells her son, 'I'm not leaving you alone.' (S1: E5, 15:02) She describes herself saying, 'I'm not the kind of mother who leaves her children behind (S1: E5, 18:20).

Ironically, in a patriarchal social setup, a mother who asserts that she will never leave her children behind is deemed the ideal mother. But one realises that when the mother refuses to leave the child alone to individuate into an adult, she figuratively holds him prisoner in her own womb.

In the webseries, *Cassandra*, the robot's seemingly omniscient omnipresence is used as a visual metaphor to symbolise the devouring mother archetype, where the mother's constant lingering "gaze" mentally traps the child into an infantilized state.

And, deeper down, the fear that makes the webseries so gothic rises from the fact that the adversary here is a machine. The fact that the machine can potentially never die like humans and can possibly outlive them, terrifies one with the fear of an eternised ontological crisis.

Works Cited

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