Caleb Smith begins *Ex Machina* believing he has won the lottery, but things go downhill from there. The film wastes no time in setting the scene: the lucky young programmer, plucked from hundreds of other intelligent employees, off to spend an amazing week in picturesque Alaska with the CEO at his private estate. Nathan tells Caleb he’s been brought there to perform a Turing test – which the two characters helpfully define for the audience – about which Caleb is understandably thrilled. But then, we’re introduced to a robot who is very clearly a robot; Nathan does not try to hide this from Caleb, and so Caleb rightfully doubts the validity of his role for the week. If this is the robot he’s testing, it’s not a real Turing test – but Caleb serves a dual purpose. He simultaneously performs a “consciousness test” on Ava and, unbeknownst to Caleb, a true Turing test on Kyoko.

After Caleb interacts with Ava for the first time, he is blown away by her realism. But he recognizes that there is a problem with Nathan’s rationale for Caleb’s presence in the house.

NATHAN: So anyway, you’re impressed?

CALEB: Yes. Yes, although-

NATHAN: Although? There’s a qualification to you being impressed?

CALEB: No, there’s no qualification to her. It’s just, in a Turing test, the machine should be hidden from the examiner.
Since we already know that Ava is a robot, the test is redundant; no true conclusion as to Ava’s ability to pass for human has been or can be reached. Nathan waves away this problem, telling Caleb they’re “way past that.” He wants to see how Caleb feels about Ava and whether he believes she has consciousness. Caleb lets go of the idea of performing a Turing test, and so the audience does too.

The next day, Caleb wakes to find an Asian woman entering his room, dropping off breakfast, and leaving without a word. Nathan apologizes when he sees Caleb for sending the woman, Kyoko, to wake him. Then he says, “She’s some alarm clock, huh? Gets you right up in the morning.” This line can be brushed off as a lewd joke, and certainly, that’s how Caleb takes it. But Nathan is actually comparing Kyoko to a machine, and he watches Caleb’s reaction for signs of recognition. When he sees none, he congratulates himself on his own cleverness, not for the first or last time in the film. Nathan’s view of himself as a God-like figure – punctuated by the similarity of the name “Ava” to “Eve” – is hardly hidden from the audience. His overconfidence, alcoholism, and lack of foresight are his eventual downfall, God or not.

Caleb is not surprised by Kyoko’s presence: of course the genius, billionaire software designer has a beautiful, live-in girlfriend – that’s the assumption we, along with Caleb, make upon first glance. But as we see Kyoko more, we realize that is not strictly her position. She also prepares and serves Nathan’s high-quality dinner – with a very sharp sushi knife – and then promptly spills a bottle of red wine on the table and the houseguest. There is some excellent foreshadowing there, but this is another part of the Kyoko Turing test. Kyoko is a robot: she’s precise, efficient, and she obeys Nathan’s commands to the letter. She was instructed to spill the wine, and Nathan performs for Caleb when she does, cursing at her for being so clumsy.
Caleb tries to assure her that it’s okay, he’ll help clean up, when Nathan tells him, “You’re wasting your time talking to her, she doesn’t understand English.” So now, Caleb is to believe that Kyoko lives alone with Nathan, in an incredibly isolated house, cooks, cleans, presumably sleeps with Nathan, and doesn’t speak a word of English. If all of these things are true, then Caleb should doubt Kyoko’s awareness of her situation and, by extension, whether she consents to it. This should be a red flag for Caleb, and it is, in a small way; Caleb recognizes that Nathan is very rude to Kyoko, but he doesn’t interfere in what he believes to be their relationship, unbalanced as the power structure may be.

During the dinner scene, Nathan makes another seemingly flippant remark about Kyoko that, in reality, has a double meaning. Caleb is justifiably surprised to learn that Kyoko doesn’t speak English, though he’s too polite to comment on it. Nathan explains, “It’s just, it’s a firewall against leaks. Means I can talk trade secrets over dinner and know it’ll go no further.” After being compared to an alarm clock – a machine – Kyoko is now equated to the firewall of a computer system: software. Admittedly, she’s a combination of both. Since neither Caleb nor the audience are aware of her true nature, the line slides by without raising suspicion. But Nathan is deliberate in his every action, including his words, so this is yet another gentle prod at Caleb, checking to see if he is distracted by “the magician’s assistant,” so to speak.

The audience is in nearly the same position as Caleb throughout the movie: if it turns blue, we’re allowed in. If it turns red, it’s not for us to know yet. But at this point, there is at least some doubt as to how much English Kyoko speaks, because her facial expressions imply she understands what they say – one of the early clues that Nathan is in over his head and not as omniscient as he believes himself to be. The next time we see Kyoko, she misunderstands
what Caleb wants from her when he asks about Nathan, and begins to undress herself. Caleb
tries to explain to her, stunned to realize she speaks literally no English, almost as if she can’t
speak at all. Nathan finds them and slurs, “I told you you were wasting your time talking to
er.” Then, possibly the most comical and unexpected scene of the film occurs, after Nathan
says, “However, you would not be wasting your time if you were dancing with her.” The lights
turn red, reminiscent of the power cuts perpetrated by Ava, and disco music plays. Kyoko
immediately starts dancing, and Nathan – drunk, naturally – tries to persuade Caleb to dance
with her. He refuses, and Nathan persists, “Come on buddy, after a long day of Turing tests, you
gotta unwind.” It is odd that he mentions the Turing test again, since we have established that
is not Caleb’s true role – or so he and the audience believe. Then, to make a weird scene
weirder, Nathan joins Kyoko in her obviously choreographed and practiced dance routine,
executing the moves in perfect synchronization with her. If Caleb hadn’t caught the previous
hints toward Kyoko’s origins, this should have been the moment to give him pause: Kyoko was
confused and then on cue, as if programmed, began dancing a rehearsed routine as if it were
commonplace. For Kyoko, it apparently is.

Nathan consistently compares Kyoko to machines while suggesting that Ava is more
human than machine. At one point, he tells Caleb about Ava, “Now the question is: How does
she feel about you?” This is not a question that would be asked of a robot who has not already
passed the Turing test; as far as Nathan is concerned, she’s already passed. Despite Ava’s less-
than-human appearance, with her obvious metal body and pseudo-skin only on her face and
hands, Nathan seems to consider her more human than he does Kyoko. Kyoko, by contrast,
appears human in aesthetic and physical ways, but is not permitted to express herself beyond
that mold. The misdirection – the magician’s assistant – works flawlessly on Caleb, and he is genuinely shocked to discover that Kyoko is a robot. So shocked, in fact, that he seems to doubt his own humanity, and cuts himself deeply to make sure.

As it turns out, Caleb was never there to test Ava’s consciousness; Nathan knew full well how advanced his robot was. What he really wanted to test was Ava and her resourcefulness, her ability to use these human-like qualities to escape. But he is too busy laughing at his own jokes, watching Caleb react exactly as he expected, to realize that his creations have outsmarted them both. Nathan’s death is a satisfying moment of poetic justice as Kyoko stabs him from behind – he never saw it coming because he wrote her off in favor of Ava – and Ava stabs him from the front. He knew Ava’s game and he still couldn’t stop her.

In nearly every sense of the word, Nathan’s experiment was a failure. He underestimated his artificial intelligence, which led to his own death and Caleb’s, who ends the film stuck in a glass-walled room with no food or water, soon to be dead from dehydration. Nathan never gets to design version 9.7, and the eventual crime scene analysts will be equally horrified and perplexed by the scene. But the one thing that did go according to – what I believe to be – Nathan’s plan was the successful execution of a Turing test. Caleb only recognized Kyoko’s true nature a moment before she peeled off her skin. Despite Kyoko’s odd behavior and Nathan’s cutesy attempts to clue Caleb in, Kyoko passed the Turing test with flying colors.