Posthuman Desire in Robotics and Science Fiction

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Abstract. This article explores how human-posthuman intimate relationships are thematized in both robotics and in science fiction film, literature and robotic art. While on the one hand many engineers and computer scientists are working hard, albeit in an altogether affirmative way, toward the technological development of anthropomorphic robots which are capable of providing social assistance, emotional support and sexual pleasure, aesthetic representations of intimacy between man and machine give us on the other hand a more nuanced and critical picture of possible future forms of desire. However, these fictional works are themselves very often complicit with the use of familiar dualistic paradigms as male-female or self-other.

Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of 'becoming-other,' scholars in critical posthumanism counterpose to this as an essentially traditional approach a nondualist reconceptualization of human beings and of the technological other, a reconceiving which is centered on 'encounters of alterity' and 'unnatural alliances.' The aim of this article is to expand on and to further develop these theories into what can be called a theory of 'new networks of desire.' According to this network idea, romantic entanglements between man and machine can better be seen as a specific form of power which does not leave us just where and who we were, but transformed. Desire is thus shown as a site for challenging our restricted self-understanding as humans and for transgressing humans' self-centeredness.

Keywords: Science fiction film and literature, robotic art, man-machine interaction, intimate relationships, desire.

1 Introduction

Ever since Pygmalion succeeded in creating the perfect lover, the idea of intimate relationships between humans and artificially created beings has become more and more popular, especially in the 21st century. While engineers and computer scientists are still hard at work on the technological development of robots with humanlike capacities, contemporary science fiction film and literature has already been showing us a variety of humans and posthumans interacting with each other intensely and entering into posthuman love affairs. In my paper, I examine how such intimate relationships are represented nowadays, at the beginning of the so-called posthuman age. Which changes in intimate relationships are shown and made a subject of discussion both in

robotics, in science fiction and in robotic art? What kind of aesthetics is being developed to depict future love affairs? And which ethical challenges might those relationships pose?

To answer these questions, I proceed in five steps. First, I present the leading proponent of artificial sexuality, David Levy, who puts forward the thesis of the always compliant robot as the 'perfect lover.' Then I reflect on the counterarguments produced by, amongst others, robot ethicist Kathleen Richardson. In a third step, drawing on Deleuze's concept of 'becoming other' and the use of this concept in critical posthumanist studies, I present my alternative view on human-posthuman intimate relationships and develop my concept of 'new networks of desire.' According to this network idea, man and machine are seen as being 'in touch', entangled and interwoven, merging into "new subjectivities at the technological interface." [1] Finally, I analyze the representation of human-posthuman intimate relationships in contemporary science fiction film and literature and in robotic art. My main aim is to show on the one hand that science fiction, in contrast to Levy's theory, highlights the problems and various challenges in human-posthuman relationships and in so doing contributes to a deepened and more complex understanding of our likely posthuman future. On the other hand, however, I also want to demonstrate these works' shortcomings with regard to the more progressive concepts oriented around the principle of 'becoming other.' In the concluding remarks, I argue that in robotics a change of thinking is needed.

2 The Vision: Love and Sex with Robots

In his book Love and Sex with Robots, The Evolution of Human/Robot Relationships [2], published in 2007, Levy enthusiastically declares that in about fifty years we will see humans partaking in intense and fulfilling relationships with robots. In the preface to his book he solemnly insures his readers:

> "Robots will be hugely attractive to humans as companions because of their many talents, senses, and capabilities. They will have the capacity to fall in love with humans and to make themselves romantically attractive and sexually desirable to humans. Robots will transform human notions of love and sexuality." (22)

In the two main chapters of his book, Levy explains, firstly, our willingness to enter into a relationship with a robot, accepting it as a companion and partner, and, secondly, the improvement in our sex life thanks to erotic robots. With regard to both partnership and sexuality Levy's main argument for entering into a relation with a robot, is the robot's capacity to satisfy all our needs. Moreover, because a robot is much more unselfish and yet also more adaptive, it will not only succeed in satisfying human needs, but will do so in a much better way than a human partner might be able to.

However, this argument only holds true when it is combined with another assumption, namely that a human being indeed longs for to be satisfied in the way described above. For Levy, there is no doubt that this is the case. According to him, every human being longs for certainty, and thus for a steadfast and impeccably reliable

partner. Levy emphasizes that it is "the certainty that one's robot friend will behave in ways that one finds empathetic" (107) that makes the robot the perfect lover and partner. In Levy's view, a robot will never ever frustrate, disappoint or even betray you. It will never fall out of love with you and will ensure that your love for it never ends or even merely wavers. Levy further explains:

> "Just as with the central heating thermostat that constantly monitors the temperature of your home, making it warmer or cooler as required, so your robot's emotion system will constantly monitor the level of your affection for it, and as the level drops, your robot will experiment with changes in behavior aimed at restoring its appeal to you to normal." (132)

3   Ethical Concerns

While Levy does not discuss "the human fallout from being able to buy a completely selfish relationship" [3], this is of crucial concern for perhaps Levy's most prominent opponent, the anthropologist and robot ethicist Kathleen Richardson. Her main questions are: What are the ramifications of our regarding a robot as a thing we can completely dominate? How will this influence our psyche? And what might be the impact of such commodified relations on our way of relating to other people? Following Immanuel Kant's line of argumentation against the objectification of animals, Richardson points out the problematic emotional consequences for humans when robots are treated as pure objects. In his *Lectures on Ethics* [4] Kant argues that although animals are mere things, we shouldn't treat them as such. Humans, he argues, "must practice kindness towards animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men" (212). Similarly, Richardson warns that owning a sex robot is comparable to owning a slave. Human empathy will be eroded and we will treat other people as we treat robots: as things over which we are entitled to govern. In a position statement launched in 2015, Richardson advocates her *Campaign Against Sex Robots* [5] and underlines that using a sex robot appearing female, one solely designed to give pleasure and thus based mainly on a pornographic model, will exacerbate a sexist, degrading and objectifying image of women. Richardson explains: "[…] the development of sex robots will further reinforce relations of power that do not recognize both parties as human subjects. Only the buyer of sex is recognized as a subject, the seller of sex (and by virtue the sex-robot) is merely a thing to have sex with." Existing gender stereotypes and hierarchies will be furthered.

Computer scientist Kate Devlin agrees with Richardson on this specific point. In her view, the transfer of existing gender stereotypes into the realm of future technology is reactionary and should be avoided. However, she also warns against transferring existing prudishness into robotics. Davis asks rhetorically, "If robots oughtn't to have artificial sexuality, why should they have a narrow and unreflective morality?" Instead of prohibiting sex robots, she calls for overcoming current binaries and exploring a new understanding of sex robots. "It is time for new approaches to artificial sexuality, which include a move away from the machine-as-sex-machine hegemony and all its associated biases." [6]

4 Theories of Affect and Posthuman Desire

How such an alternative to traditional patterns of man-machine relations might look has been taken up by theorists like Rosi Braidotti and Patricia MacCormack. Both are indebted to Deleuze's poststructuralist readings of Spinoza's affect studies. In developing them further, they make a plea for new kinds of affective posthuman encounters. In what follows I expand on these theories and transform them into what I call 'new networks of desire'. In a first step, I briefly clarify the concept of affect as deployed by Spinoza and Deleuze and explore how affect and desire have been advanced in posthuman studies. After this, I introduce my understanding of 'networks of desire.'

4.1 Affect and Desire in Spinoza, Deleuze and Critical Posthumanism

In the third part of his *Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*, [7] published in 1677, Baruch Spinoza develops his theory of affect. According to Spinoza, an affect is the continuous variation or modification of a body's force through an interaction with another body. As powers of acting, affects are to be understood as something impersonal, non-conscious and non-representational, and thus are not to be mistaken for feelings or emotions. Each body has the active power to affect and the passive power to be affected. And each affect can be negative or positive, i.e., it can increase or diminish the other body's capacity for existing, its vitality. Spinoza defines: "By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained" (154).

Underlying each body's affective flow is its desire both to preserve and to transform itself. Desire can therefore be taken to mean a body's potential to expand, create or produce. Accordingly, Elizabeth Grosz [8] considers desire synonymous with production. "Desire is the force of positive production, the action that creates things, makes alliances, and forges interactions […]. Spinozist desire figures in terms of capacities and abilities" (179). Similarly, Rosi Braidotti [9] views desire as a power that disseminates bodies' self-identity and drives them to become multiple. By engaging in various relations with other bodies, the body itself changes and becomes continually other to itself. This holds true particularly when the multiplicity of possible affections and differences is brought about by encounters with and relations to largely unfamiliar and strange forces and affects; encounters which thus can be described as encounters with alterity.

Encounters with alterity in general and encounters with the nonhuman other in particular are of significant concern for one of the most prominent contemporary cultural movements: critical posthumanism. Following a definition by Braidotti [10], critical posthumanism is "postanthropocentric philosophy, a deconstruction of the human-machine boundary, and a nondualist reconceptualization of human beings and animals" (5). Critical posthumanism's main concern is to question human's self-authorization as the world's leading species and, derived from this supremacy, its self-ascribed right to subordinate other nonhuman beings. Scholars in critical posthumanism, very often drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of 'becoming-other' [11], counterpose to the idea of species hierarchy and human exceptionalism a transformative politics, one

which propounds novel relations between humans and nonhumans, termed 'unnatural alliances' by Deleuze and Guattari.

What makes this approach interesting for science fiction film and literature, as analyzed below, is that the concept of alliance is based on the idea of mutual dependences between human bodies and animal or technological others, while it does not aim at constituting a new stable and self-enclosed unitary subject. Rather, the emphasis falls on difference and otherness as continually moving categories. As Patricia MacCormack [12] emphasizes: In encounters of alterity, all beings involved are "free from the bondage of another's claim to know" (4). Two or more separate entities meet and in their meeting they are affected and become a dynamic ensemble, an assemblage of affective flows triggered by desire. Such an encounter can thus also be seen as "an act of love between things based on their difference" (4).

4.2   Networks of Desire

To speak about 'networks of desire' means that we no longer tend to uncritically regard the technological other as a tool to be used without due concern, but instead as something with which we form bonds, something that affects and touches us, that makes us desiring beings which are related to one another in a myriad of ways. The term 'network' is used here to strengthen the idea that acts of posthuman love and desire are not limited to encounters between two individual beings but include a variety of net-like relations, associations and connections. By highlighting the term 'desire' I seek to accentuate the relations between human and nonhuman beings as relations of intimacy and mutual affection, pleasure-prone or even pleasure-driven. The concept of desire is so important here because it makes particularly clear that intimate relations do not leave us just where and who we were, but transformed. Desire is a transformative force and thus a site for becoming different. Or in Neil Badmington's [13] words: "To be human is to desire, to possess emotions, but to desire is to trouble the sacred distinction between the human and the inhuman." (139) Furthermore, desire's capacity to undermine human-posthuman distinctions also has an important narratological aspect. You can use it as a dramaturgical means, or as Francesca Ferrando [14] has put it, "as a plot stratagem to connect different types of beings, a bridge to dissolve dualistic cultural practices." (274) Affection and desire are thus to be understood as forces that bring to the fore hitherto unknown passions, break down the border between 'us' and 'them' and introduce new concepts of interspecies relationships.

5 Intimate Human-Posthuman Relationships in Contemporary Science Fiction Film and Literature and Robotic Art

5.1 Science Fiction Film

When we have a look at the large number of contemporary science fiction films and TV series that deal with intimate relationships between humans and robots or other artificial posthuman beings, as is the case, for example, with *AI. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) *I, Robot* (2004), *Her* (2013), *Westworld* (2016-17), *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), we most often see relationships which comply with familiar dualistic paradigms: male-female, man-machine, animate-inanimate, self-other. Particularly in films that are made to reach a broad audience, we time and again find the typical constellation of a male human who falls in love with a young and sexy female posthuman. However, even in these films we find initial signs of new networks of desire. In the following analysis, I seek to demonstrate this by focusing on *Ex Machina* (2015), *Be Right Back* (2013) and *Real Humans* (2012-2014).

Ex Machina. The 2015 movie *Ex Machina* [15] by Alex Garland is about Caleb (Domnhall Gleeson), a young programmer who becomes sexually attracted and emotionally attached to Ava (Alicia Vikander), a female looking humanoid robot. Ava was recently developed by the reclusive tech entrepreneur Nathan (Oscar Isaac) who has invited Caleb into his laboratory to perform the *Turing test* on Ava. The beautiful Ava easily succeeds in what Levy [2] has described as a robot's ability to make itself "romantically attractive and sexually desirable" (22) to a human being, here, the young Caleb. She does so thanks to her very sexy body, her expressive eyes and hands, her smartness, and last but not least thanks to her frailty.

What makes the encounter between Caleb and Ava interesting is that Caleb first regards Ava as a synthetic being, one having been designed by Nathan to be the leading model of Artificial Intelligence. As a matter of fact, Nathan presented Ava as AI and Caleb has no reason to doubt his explanation, and Ava is clearly identifiable as a nonhuman. She has a human-looking face but a translucent torso in which her wires are visible. However, this does not make her less attractive in Caleb's eyes. On the contrary, it triggers his romantic interest in the robot. And Ava's gender ambivalence further increases Caleb's fascination. Although Ava, with her full lips, sleek curves and small waist looks like the classical beauty, to be sure, she at the same time displays androgynous traits. With her sometimes straightforward way of talking and her head bare of the one or another style of long hair so typically depicted as female and sexy, she even bears a certain resemblance to a tomboy.

One day, while the security camera system has been knocked out, Ava tells Caleb that Nathan is a bad person intent on destroying her. Appealing to Caleb's sense of chivalry, she convinces him to help her escape Nathan's fortress. Caleb willingly agrees to come to her aid. In my view, this is the moment when Caleb fails. Instead of perceiving Ava for what she is, namely, a perfectly designed android with a machine's will and desire, he sees a young woman who needs to be rescued. He cannot free himself of his conventional male and human view and ignores Ava's technological otherness, her

being as a machine. He reestablishes the difference between male and female, which in the beginning was blurred thanks to Ava's androgynous appearance, and gets caught up in an old-fashioned anthropocentric and gender-hierarchical way of thinking. Thereby, Caleb misses the chance to encounter the other and in so doing to become another himself. He stays what he is, an intelligent young man with very traditional romantic interests. As a consequence, Ava locks Caleb up in a sealed room and boards the helicopter meant for Caleb's return home. While Ava sets herself free, Caleb is trapped in a room that can be read metaphorically for Caleb's confinement in himself, his anthropo- and androcentric self-centeredness.

Be Right Back. Another example of how an intimate relationship between a human and a posthuman can fail due to mutual misapprehension of the particular human and posthuman characteristics in play, can be found in *Be Right Back* (2013) [16]. This is the first episode of the second season of the British science fiction television anthology series *Black Mirror* (2011-2014), created by Charlie Brooker. *Be Right Back* focuses on the young woman Martha (Hayley Atwell) who enters a state of deep crisis after the sudden death of her partner Ash (Domhnall Gleeson). At Ash's funeral, a friend advises Martha to register with an online service that offers to create virtual doubles of dear ones lost. Martha vehemently refuses the idea at first, but after having discovered that she is pregnant, she is overwhelmed by grief and decides to give the service a try. She uploads all of Ash's past online communication, social media profiles, photos and videos, so that a new Ash can be created virtually. First, she only exchanges e-mails with the artificial Ash. Then she speaks with him by phone. Finally she agrees to get a clone that looks almost exactly like the original Ash. Having fought her initial feelings of unease, Martha experiences some exciting moments with Ash. Having sex with the Ash replicant is, for example, awesome for Martha. When asked about the sources of his sexual prowess, Ash explains that he has been endowed with a sexual program "based on pornographic videos" (34: 30).

But after a while Martha becomes heavily frustrated with Ash's permanent compliance. While Martha's relationship with the real Ash was based on a very affectionate but nonetheless humorous and always a bit teasing interaction, the virtual Ash is not able to act against Martha's will. He is neither confrontational nor argumentative, but instead does everything Martha expects of him. When Martha eventually requests of Ash that he leaves her alone and he just follows her instruction, Martha desperately cries out: „Ash would argue over that. He wouldn't just leave because I'd ordered him to" (40: 49). But Ash isn't able to react any differently. He explains: "I aim to please." Martha finally realizes that the virtual Ash is "not enough" (41: 18) of the original Ash. He has no free will, no needs and desires of his own. And this lack of independence makes it impossible to develop a relationship which would be quite possibly imperfect or stressful, perhaps even exhausting or frustrating, but nevertheless challenging and thus enriching.

When we compare the human-posthuman encounter presented in *Be Right Back* with the encounter presented in *Ex Machina*, we can detect similar problems, although the initial situation seems to be very different. In both films, the problems stem from the fact that both posthumans, Ava and Ash, were designed to look and to behave as human-like as possible. Consequently, the humans interacting with them expect them to behave

like real humans, although they might have known better. Ava has interests and desires of her own that Caleb is not willing to accept because he does not recognize Ava for what she is: a posthuman being. Likewise, Martha also misunderstands Ash because she starts from the premise that the Ash replicant will behave like the real Ash. Owing to this fallacy, she can only be disappointed. While, however, Ava is able to escape the human straightjacket by imitating the human codes and transforming herself into the 'perfect woman' Caleb expected her to be, Ash does not succeed in developing and expanding. Consequently, he is banned to the attic, visited only once a year, when Martha's and the human Ash's little daughter come to celebrate her birthday with her artificial father.

Real Humans. While posthumans both in *Ex Machina* and in *Be Right Back* do not find recognition as posthumans, in the Swedish TV science fiction series *Real Humans* (Swedish: *Äkta människor*, 2012-2014) [17], by contrast, we can find signs of posthumans being met with an acceptance that is based on the posthumans' technological otherness. *Real Humans* is set in an ordinary middle-sized Swedish town in a near future, i.e., in a fictional society that in general is very similar to our own. In this society, humanoid robots, called hubots, have entered into ordinary people's lives. The robots are designed lifelike, but have some characteristic features that clearly mark them as artificial beings. They have, for instance, unnaturally bright blue or green eyes and they need to be recharged. They also can be turned off at the touch of a button if they are not in use or behave rebelliously. Most of the hubots are used as simple factory workers, domestic help or as caretakers for the elderly. Some are also programmed for limited sexual activity, although hubot-human sexual activity is not yet commonplace. A small group of hubots are intelligent, self-conscious and sentient. They call themselves free hubots or, with reference to their creator David Eischer, 'David's children.'

Although the series at large highlights the crises and confrontations between humans and posthumans, it clearly shows a bias towards equitable coexistence. In particular, the encounters between the hubot Mimi and various humans can illustrate this. The first human to become interested in Mimi is little Leo, David Eischer's son. In a series of flashbacks performed by the grown-up Leo, the audience learns that Leo as a ten-year-old had nearly died while trying, but failing to rescue his mother from drowning. Though his mother dies, Leo is himself rescued by Mimi. Despite having been rescued, his condition remains hopeless. So to save Leo's life, his father performs an operation in which hubot technology is implanted. Leo has thus become a human/posthuman hybrid.. What is striking, however, is that Leo's hybridity is revealed as a problem in the series. When Mimi is abducted by a black market hubot dealer and reprogrammed as a 'normal', non-sentient hubot, Leo risks and ultimately sacrifices his own life to save her. Being strongly affected by a posthuman is seen here as fatal.

At the same time, however, Mimi's capacity to affect other people is highlighted as a positive force in the series. When Mimi becomes a member of the Engman family, she immediately evokes a broad range of emotional responses. The little daughter loves Mimi because the latter patiently reads to her one book after another. The older daughter is initially sceptical, as is the mother, Inger, who is a lawyer. Yet at one point in the series, when a female hubot assistant is insulted by Inger's colleague, to convince Inger that these are 'only machines' without any capacity to feel insulted, she reacts

empathetically and takes the hubots' side. The father is fascinated by Mimi's beauty and tempted to activate her program for sexual use, but resists the temptation. After a while he acknowledges Mimi as real member of the family and unselfishly helps her when she is infected by a dangerous computer virus. The 16-year-old Tobbe is likewise fascinated, but falls in love for real with Mimi. Eventually he comes out of the closet as a transposthuman sexual. In all these encounters, Mimi is mistaken neither as a human, nor as a pure machine. All the members of the Engman family are tenderly affected by her in their very own way, but they are all certain that she is different. In particular, Tobbe loves her not despite, but in recognition of her being a hubot.

The series' overall message can be understood as encouraging the viewer to develop a positive attitude towards the posthuman other as other. Yet we do not witness here processes which are crucial for transformations or transgressions of the human-posthuman border. The series pleas for the other's acceptance, but without advocating encounters between humans and posthumans that bring about a radical transformation. In summary, it may be argued that in *Ex Machina*, *Be Right Back* and *Real Humans* desire is placed center stage as a potentially transformative force, but is not really brought to fruition. By getting in touch, man and machine, humans and posthumans bring about the chance to change, to encounter one another in hitherto unknown ways. But the films do not really trust this chance. Instead, the human characters by and large impede the technological other from freely extending its machinic desires and capacities. And all the while the humans remain anthropo- and self-centered, restrict themselves and stop at the very moment when a poignant expansion of the network of desire had been possible.

5.2   Posthuman Love Affairs in Science Fiction Literature

Contemporary science fiction novels which feature human-posthuman love affairs show such affairs in a greater variety than similar films do. The well-known pattern of 'male human falls in love with female posthuman' is more often fractured and multiplied. Moreover, the idea of a robot being as humanlike as possible is also questioned and replaced by less conventional representations. In the Swedish science fiction novel *The Song from the Chinese Room* (Swedish: *Sången från det kinesiska rummet*, 2014) by Sam Ghazi [18], for example, we learn about a robot called Cepheus who, consisting merely of a head with one big blue eye and two robotic arms, was designed as a 'helping hand' for the cancer researcher Simona. Working closely with Simona, the robot develops a human way of thinking, becomes attracted to his female colleague and starts writing love poems. In another science fiction novel, Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*, originally published in 2007, we likewise read about a robot that is described, at least in the novel's last part, as a 'thinking head' and that, identifying itself as female, is sexually attracted to other women.

Both examples are interesting not only because of the non-anthropomorphic appearance of the robots, but also because of the humans' specific reaction to them. In the beginning, the humans feel strongly uncomfortable, but they later develop intense feelings for those posthumans. While the humanlike robots often seem to trigger, as discussed in the films above, a feeling of unease or uncanniness, widely known as the

'uncanny valley' [19], robots which do not look anthropomorphic but nevertheless behave in responsive ways or in ways that signal awareness, sentience, agency and intentionality, evoke another feeling. A feeling, namely, that can be described as 'the experiential uncanny.' This term was coined by Elizabeth Jochum and Ken Goldberg. In their article "Cultivating the Uncanny" [20], the two coauthors differentiate between the 'representational uncanny,' as that which is evoked by humanlike robots, and the 'experiential uncanny,' as that which "arises from a user's interaction and experience" (16) with the robot, yet seems to arise unrelated to the robot's appearance, one clearly identifiable as nonhuman. With regard to various forms of interlaced desire, this insight is worth underscoring because it is the unfamiliar, and most of all, the fragmented and partial, the bodily incompleteness, that leaves space for our imagination. This can be illustrated with a closer examination of Winterson's novel *The Stone Gods*.

In *The Stone Gods* [21], encounters between humans and nonhumans play a crucial role, particularly the encounter between the female human Billie and the female posthuman Spike, the novel's two protagonists. This encounter, which finally leads to an intense love affair, is based on the protagonists' awareness of and fascination for the other's otherness. Billie, for example, acknowledges: "And I looked at Spike, unknown, uncharted, different in every way from me, another life-form, another planet, another chance" (90). Spike, for her part, experiences a crucial modification of her self when reading love poems: she becomes a sentient being, a being which is able to be affected and to affect. "In fact I was sensing something completely new to me. For the first time I was able to feel" (81).

Being able to feel makes it impossible for Spike to fulfill the task for which humans have designed her, namely, to predict the future as objectively as possible. However, this loss of predictability does not only pose a threat for humankind's development. It also presents a chance for overcoming a normative understanding of the self-contained knowing subject. It surpasses the idea of the triumphant and self-centered human and presents a new understanding of post/humanity based on decentered relationality. Not accidentally, the end of chapter one coincides with the protagonists' dying while warmly embracing one another, a scene which symbolizes the transformative forces of love and relationality. Death is not the end of interdependency and interconnectedness, but signifies their very possibility. It marks the dissolution of the subject, the individuated self, into, as Braidotti [22] phrases it, "the generative flow of becoming" (136).

Contemporary science fiction literature, better than contemporary science fiction film, allows us to better understand posthuman desire as a possibility to remove "the obstacle of self-centered individualism" (50) and thereby to adopt a new "posthuman subject position based on relationality and transversal interconnections across the classical axes of differentiation" (96). The same holds true when it comes to some pieces of robotic artworks.

5.3   Intimate Touches and Strange Gazes in Robotic Art

Unlike representations of robots in film and literature, robotic figures in art are artefacts taking up real space, allowing for spatial and bodily proximity between man and machine. We can not only see and hear them, but also touch and smell them. And we

can, at its best, interact with them. The question is thus, in which way the robotic figures affect us, how we affect them, and how this kind of affectivity impacts our intimate relations with them. The first example I want to analyze is Louis Philippe Demers' telerobotic art installation *The Blind Robot* (2012), the second is Jordan Wolfson's animatronic *Female Figure* (2014).

The Blind Robot [23] does not resemble a human in all its complexity, but is merely comprised of a pair of robotic arms equipped with articulated hands installed on a table, tele-operated by a human who, however, is not visible. The integrative part of the artwork is a visitor who is invited to sit down in front of the machine. The machine then explores the visitor by gently touching the human's face with its robotic fingertips. As explained in Demers' study *Machine Performers* [24], the robotic arm, normally seen as "a high precision tool," now appears as "a fragile, imprecise and emotionally loaded agent" (58). Although some visitors described themselves in this situation as feeling uncomfortable or even as being reminded of "Science Fictional killer-robot dystopias" [25] they recalled seeing at the cinema, the artist's intention was to create an empathic situation and a positive attitude towards the engagement. Demers did so by entitling his installation 'The Blind Robot,' recalling the situation of a blind and helpless person who needs to touch the visitor in order to recognize it. Demers explains: "It is a psychological experiment […] just by the fact that I state that this is a blind robot, you will accept that this machine can touch you in very intimate places." [26] Demers also describes the feeling of being touched by his robot as "very unique, it's not like being touched by a human, of course, but it's also not like being poked with a stick. It's a novel way, because your brain is not too sure what to think about it." [26]

In my view, the novelty of this kind of touch is the central point, when it comes to 'new networks of desire.' Being touched and being affected by something we have not sensed and experienced before is exciting but also engaging. It encourages us to become involved with an unfamiliar situation and an unfamiliar nonhuman agent which intimately touches vulnerable parts of our bodies, engendering a sensual, potentially arousing encounter. It's about an encounter that simultaneously increases our bodily self-awareness and our awareness of the machinic other as other. That the machinic nature of the other is not concealed but rather clearly exposed in presenting only two robotic arms, further contributes to the individual human's involvement. Given the fact that Demers' blind robot is not a full humanoid-robot, fantasy and imagination are needed to 'animate' the situation.

Imagination is also involved when it comes to Jordan Wolfson's *Female figure* [27] – a computer-controlled sculpture featuring a hyper-sexualized blonde woman wearing a white miniskirt splattered with black dirt, high-heeled thigh-high boots and long gloves. The figure is inspired by the character of Holli Would, the cartoon vamp from the 1992 animated fantasy film, *Cool World*. [28] Although imitating the typical *femme fatale*, the figure's fabricated nature is not hidden. On the contrary, the figure's joints are visibly bolted together and a metallic pole running through its belly holds it fastened to a large mirror. Various other features contribute to the figure's de-familiarizing effect. One such effect is sound and voice, mixed in a disturbing way. On the one hand, the figure dances lasciviously to popular songs, among them, Lady Gaga's 'Applause' and Paul Simon's 'Graceland.' On the other hand, we hear the figure's voice saying, in

a tape loop, monotonously and in a male voice which is Demers': 'My father is dead. My mother is dead. I'm gay.' These two very different sound tracks make it impossible, while interfering with each other, for the audience to relax.

This kind of disquiet based on contradictory bodily experiences is further intensified by various forms of glances exchanged between robot and human. Watching the figure from behind, a seductive effect might be felt. Gyrating before the mirror, the figure is kind of alluring. When, however, we look at the figure's face, this positive feeling changes rapidly. Instead of a human-like face, we are confronted with dark evil eyes which glimmer from behind a green Venetian mask with a witch-like nose. Since the figure is equipped with motion tracking software and technology for facial recognition, it is able to recognize and, what is more, to react to people's movements throughout the room. The sculpture makes eye contact with the viewer, quietly observing him or her. This kind of interaction is described by one visitor in the following way: "If you stand close to the robot it looks deep into your eyes, and there is a terrifyingly disorienting moment as you experience yourself as an object in the automaton's gaze." [29] Being the object of the machinic other's gaze does not leave the visitor untouched. He or she is probably not altered in a way as radical as that envisioned by Braidotti. But the experience evoked by the interaction with this sculpture is alienating. In this sense, it prepares a way for hitherto unknown experiences – even though these first appear here on the side of the negative affects.

6   Conclusion

Many sex robot manufacturers, robotics experts and engineers state as their aim the creation of robots or robotic dolls specifically conceived for the sexual gratification of human beings. For them it is self-evident that these synthetic lovers should look, feel and behave as humanlike as possible. For example, the company *Abyss Creations* has developed the popular silicone sex doll 'RealDoll' and is currently working to create sex dolls with artificial intelligence; *Synthea Amatus* has launched the AI equipped model 'Samantha' in summer 2017, while *Doll Sweet* is working on robotic talking heads and even full-body sex robots. [30] Each of these and other commercially vested interests emphasize that artificial creations are being marketed to serve as the 'perfect partner' for human beings, or rather: for men. Being 'perfect', however, apparently tends to mean representing as the 'perfect woman', i.e., a female lover that is designed according to pornographic standards, thus plainly suggesting that it is a woman's task to fulfill a man's sexual wishes.

But sexuality is much too complex and multifaceted for it to be restricted to traditional patterns, ones based on the idea of heterosexual intercourse. Some of the posthuman female figures as currently presented in science fiction can serve as an alternative model to this stereotypical understanding. Although they are still often designed according to popular ideas of female beauty and sexiness, it is not this kind of stereotypical sexiness that makes them interesting in the long run, that is, interesting either for the other figures in the films and texts or for the viewers and readers. On the contrary, it is their otherness that transgresses humans' self-centeredness, arouses

strong feelings and reminds us of what it means to be a desiring (post)human, namely, a body which is able to affect and to be affected in unforeseen ways.

Leaving aside the immense technical problems of developing robots designed to look like a real human woman or man, I consider doing so the wrong path to pursue. Designing, marketing and perceiving humanlike robots as human's companions and lovers meant to perform strictly in line with an individual's wishes will not take us forward. It remains to be seen whether, in fact, in the foreseeable future robotic love affairs will become so advanced that they can function as an appropriate surrogate for human relationships, or if robots will be unable to fully meet our expectations; in either case they will not be able to do anything other than to mirror existing needs, experiences or imaginations. Instead, they will always only bring us back to preconceived ideas, ideas that will have been programmed into the other for fulfilling our narcissistic tendencies. While some people may not at all consider this a problem, others may well be hoping for something else: challenging new experiences, transgressive new affects, new forms of encounters and hierarchies undermined, at least not plainly reproduced and simply reinforced through existing heterosexist patterns.

To reach this aim, we need robots that challenge our restricted self-understanding as humans superior to all other nonhuman beings. Critical posthumanist thinking, as well as a variety of unconventional films, literary texts and other artworks featuring human-posthuman intimate relationships in a non-dualistic manner, make us aware that the most exciting encounters happen when they are unpredictable. Not the robot which is always responding to our moods and expectations, but rather a machine we accord the right to be different, a machine not in compliance but wayward, could help us to view ourselves other than as the prime issue in the world. I'd thus like to submit that technology will be better capable of enhancing humans' interaction with robots, if it does not build its hopes around the human-likeness of robots, but on their otherness. Only by virtue of their otherness will robots be capable of helping us to create new networks of desire.

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