

The end of intimacy? Social robots as sexbots or the technologization of love and sexuality

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Abstract: In recent years, the phenomenon of what we can call of technological love has dramatically increased. The search for love through the use of technologies has resulted in new ways to experience love and sexuality. Many of the online platforms are based on the premise that love is the most important, with social networks and chats reaching their peak because of this, in such a way that they were extrapolated to TV shows or contests like “Love on Top” or “Adam and Eve”. But now the level is different: it seems that an absolute sexual revolution will take place in the coming decades, in which sexual partners may be exchanged for social and sexual robots – sexbots –, and with neuronal stimulation programs for personal satisfaction. In this sense, this essay seeks first to reflect on the current situation in which personal relationships are found, and secondly, to deepen the hypothesis of another sexuality, concluding with a reflection on the most radical possibility that will be the annulment of sexuality as an experience of love, that is, becoming a mere robotization of sexuality. In view of this possibility, a sexual revolution can reshape the phenomenon of intimacy which characterizes the human mind and essence.

Keywords: intimacy, sexual revolution, sexbots, social robots, technological love interaction

Introduction

In the second half of the 20th century, many pink magazines worldwide started a phenomenon that is still felt today (with different media and certainly with different approaches) but that may disappear in the coming decades: the search for love. Many people will remember those kinds of magazines that indicated (and still indicate) beauty paradigms, new fashion trends, some even gave marriage advice for a happy and

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healthy marriage (according to patriotic politics, national or foreign social events), and in addition they provided the beginning of what can be considered as the technologization of love. For example, see how in the pages usually identified as the reader's mail this search begins: lady widow, good social position, with own home, affable and companion, wants to meet a gentleman in a similar situation for future engagement. It should be said that these types of advertisements still exist in some of the current magazines (perhaps by people less prepared for new technologies) and in the end it can be said that it is the perpetuation of a strategy that seems to be paying off.

While it is true that the social, economic and political contexts in which many of these advertisements developed (after the second world war for instance), it is still curious how a (new) medium/interface was being created for the prodigy of love. Thus, the apparent novelty of platforms or social networks is nothing more than a technological democratization (in the absence of a more appropriate term) of the love phenomenon. From Facebook to Badoo, from MySpace to Tinder, the forms and content vary depending on the profile created and its objectives. Following this virtual trend of "the search for love" and having the perception of the potential that the phenomenon of love awakens, televisions also bet on reality shows and reinvented these models such as "Love on Top" or the more radical ones "Adam and Eve" and "Naked Attraction", in which participants go to a paradise island and find themselves naked (in fact, the producers are providing a new vision of a religious and romantic myth but without the primordial innocence described in the holy books).

These forms of public exposure can be summed up using the expression popularized by Paula Sibilia (2008), "intimacy as a show". The existence of applications in which it is possible to measure the love of the partner or check the compatibility of the couple, or even the future of this relationship, are some of the examples that allow us to perceive, on the one hand, the human need for love, and on the other hand, seeing how the love phenomenon has become cybernetic (in addition to a very profitable business). The phenomenon of love has enormous potential, as everything seems to revolve around the desire to find a soul mate, thus continuing the myth indicated by Aristophanes in Plato's *Banquet*.

A brief discussion between intimacy, sex and technology

It should be noted that matrimonial agencies, with their discreet offices and showcases of potential compatible partners, have given way to digital platforms, to smart and intuitive app's, where the algorithms are in charge of matching personalities (which means in current language to find the perfect pair of persons for love).

That's how we find anthropologist Helen Fisher (famous for her biochemical studies of romantic love) to give in to the temptation of the love business that led to the creation of chemistry.com, which belongs to the IAC (Inter Active Corp) group, which owns more than 150 brands, 10 of which are social networking sites like the mentioned *Tinder* or *meetic*. The *match.com* platform (launched in 1994, app launched in 1994) alone presented around US \$ 55 million in 2014, and so many more for Ashley Madison, which does not excuse its purpose well expressed in the slogan: "Life is short. Have an affair". In an article published in February, 2019, called "Is the golden age of online dating over?" by Gayle Macdonald, it is said that "even though the sector appears to be booming. The US\$ 3 billion American dating industry has seen a 140 per cent increase in revenue since 2009, according to IBISWorld. The market research firm counts approximately 55 million mobile dating app users in North America alone, and estimates that number will grow by 25 per cent next year" (Macdonald, 2019).

From what has been said so far, it has been appreciated that the phenomenon of love can no longer hide the entrepreneurial and economic potential it carries. Not only the legal ones but, and this must be said, even in criminal cases; look for instance at the economic dimension that pornography and prostitution can achieve. So, we do not need discourses, meaning the more or less philosophical or scientific discourses that end up being retained in the academies, waging an unequal struggle (which seeks to affirm the need for new educational projects), ignoring the reality of the world as it is seen with serious social and economic problems. According to United Nations, sexual exploitation represents the largest form of human trafficking (about 78%), far ahead of forced labour (about 18%). The UN estimates that more than 20 million people are victims of enslavement and an associated commercial transaction value close to 100 billion dollars.

It seems that it is no longer so much about questioning cybersexuality, about questioning the cyberization of the human body,

the abstract continuities of meaning that the semiotics of the sciences want to reinvent, but of seeing how the human is transmuting himself into another thing-self, and we must dare to say, in a metamorphosis of something that desires sexualized things, succumbing, to use the phrase of Mario Perniola's, to the sex appeal of the inorganic. It is recalled that Mario Perniola seems to resume Marx's premise in the statement that "the devaluation of the human world grows as a direct result of the valorisation of the world of things". The Italian philosopher knows that something (more or less) abstract has taken the place of man in the human world, that man's ontological Heideggerian statelessness is a harsh reality.

In his work *The sex appeal of the inorganic*, the philosopher is aware that things drive and seduce man towards immersion in the thing, and in this alienation in which man lives, he appropriately says: "if man could be something, your pain would end. Perhaps it is only through sexuality that one can think of overcoming this pain; perhaps only in sexuality does man become a thing" (Perniola 2004, 101).

Mario Perniola's words bring us back to the heart of the matter: from giving up what has been called the technologization of love to the sexualization of machines. The reification of the human world, as a process initiated in postmodernity, above all by the imposition of a global model of paradoxical happiness to use Lipovetsky's expression, will lead or better, it may lead to a failure of intimacy, of the love phenomenon and the ultimate revolution sexual. But maybe this is not totally new. In the beginning of the futurist movement founded by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti we can find several examples of this sexualization of machines or eroticism of things, but it can also be found in dadaism or surrealism, recall for instance the *Portrait of a young American Girl in the State of Nudity*, 1915, from Francis Picabia, which nothing less than a spark plug. In fact, Picabia is the provocative artist that interconnects not only art with machinery but that it sees it as the very soul of being human (when he arrives at the USA): "It flashed upon me that the genius of the modern world is in machinery and that through machinery art ought to find a most vivid expression. The machine has become more than a mere adjunct of human life. It is really a part of human life – perhaps the very soul". (*New York Tribune*, 1915)

In truth, the sexual life of the human species has existed for many hundreds of years accompanied by things that satisfy it, being more visible in the last century. However, the rapid development of

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cybernetics, computing and artificial intelligence now allows, similarly to what has already happened with magazine ads, the exploration of the remaining *humanitas* potential that exists in man, its intimacy.

The already existing reality: sexbots and other toys

As we have already mentioned, the phenomenon of the search for love has evolved in close connection with new technologies. But this search is already a distorted form of the loving ideal meaning that this way of seeking – perhaps not love itself but what love can give – has given rise to new ways of thinking about sexuality and the forms of sexual satisfaction. Different worlds have been imagined in the literature. Being able to imagine an interconnection with something that could reconcile the best of both worlds: the individual subject of feelings and emotions with the power of the machine, would constitute the perfect cyborg. But the idea of cyborg seems old and odd since the ambition for more went from that romantic ideal to androids (with fully artificial intelligence developed or should we say, with artificial minds capable of feelings).

As we already mentioned, Marinetti was a visionary and, in fact, he was long before Donna Haraway's Cyborg manifesto went public (Haraway provide a post-gendered world with no distinction between natural and artificial life). Like Allison E. Carey says:

Marinetti broadens his claims regarding the relationship between humans and machines. No longer does humankind merely co-exist, cooperate or connive with machines. Rather, Marinetti predicts a fusion of man and machine and "the formation of the nonhuman, mechanical species of extended man, through the externalization of his will. (...) Marinetti's sexualization of the relationship between man and machine is noticeable not only in his eulogies on "mechanical beauty" but also in his description of a locomotive driver's caresses of the "steel that had so often glistened sensuously beneath the lubricating caress of his hand". (Carey 2015, 377)

The sexualization that Marinetti predicts is somehow connected with the fetish process identified by several authors. Remembering for instance the movie *Crash* (1996) of David Cronenberg (that has written on the poster "...sex and car crashes"), refers to that mechanical intersubjective relation between human and non-human.

The question to be done must be about the state of the art, meaning by this, what is the reality about sexbots? Are we talking about robots built to appear as sexual companions, or if one prefers, about sexual

robots capable of satisfying the most secret desires? So, what is the true reality?

One of the first ones to take seriously the question (despite the many examples that exist throughout history and literature) was Arthur Harkins. Starting from the analysis of the Androbot BOB (brains on board), a robot developed by Nolan Bushnell, designed for companion, he puts several questions (and some of them are ethical questions):

If the evolution of PRs [personal robots] continues with the pace set by Androbot BOB, we will see a variety of institutional uses for these machines during the 1980s, including hospital robots (currently under development in Japan), robot playmates (two varieties- one for children and one for adults), tree-trimming and line- working robots, and a whole variety of robot appliances for the kitchen, for wheelchair applications and for hundreds of other uses. (...). What if a child's playmate robot wins affection away from the parents, or engenders a preference in the child for machines rather than for other children? What if an adult's playmate robot becomes the partner of choice in sexual relations, leaving a spouse or lover out in the cold? (Harkins 1983, 23)

Arthur Harkins maintains his optimistic view and considers the future possibility of personal robots become robots with sexual-services capabilities, and therefore, he puts the possibility of existing marriages between living and non-living beings in the beginning of the 21st century. This introduces another difficult question about what it means to be a living being, but for now, we have to skip this concept.

Mark Goldfeder and Yosef Razin in his famous paper entitled "Robot Marriage and the Law" (2015), argue that there must be three requirements in order for human-robot marriage take place (and acquire a legalized status): consent, understanding and capacity to make decisions. Regarding the first one, the authors say that three conditions must be fulfilled, both parties must have the legal capacity to do the (marriage) contract, both must be able to voluntarily assent and, finally, conform the legal requirements of the ceremonial. About understanding, Goldfeder and Razin say that if a robot can understand the meaning of marriage (which means that already passed the Turing test by its actions, behaviour and words), then it is able to marriage. About decisions, the authors say that if they can decide, they probably are capable of doing some rational thinking and at the same time to manifest their will (what they "want"). They say:

Humans are presumed to have mental capacity over a certain age, and, at least, from that point on, a right to a competency evaluation. If we adopt

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similar tests for AI, it would not be unreasonable to presume a status quo that given AI does not have mental capacity unless meeting the requirements of the test, and competency evaluation may be compulsory. However, once a robot's mental capacity and legal competence are established, it is presumed that they can freely consent, unless coerced or the robot's functionality is compromised (Goldfeder&Razin 2015, 137).

Some experts in robotics admit the radical hypothesis of mechanical sexualization of human life to the detriment of human companionship, such as the much-quoted Joel Snell (in an interview of September 3, 2016 to the *British Daily Star*) who warns not only about the possibility of an achievement fuller sexuality and the possibility of an addiction (addiction) given the unconditional availability that these sexbots can offer. Joel Snell's words seem very cruel, but at the same time very close to reality. In fact, the idea will certainly be very tempting for thousands of people who would prefer to have a sexual partner always available, organized, possibly smiling, with no headaches, with a high degree of sexual performance, and, to say, of low consumption (in all possible economical contexts, both for men and women).

In a 2012 article entitled "Robots, men and sex tourism", Ian Yeoman and Michelle Mars set the scene of Amsterdam's "Red Light District" offering sexbot escorts:

In 2050, Amsterdam's red-light district will all be about android prostitutes who are clean of sexual transmitted infections (STIs), not smuggled in from Eastern Europe and forced into slavery, the city council will have direct control over android sex workers controlling prices, hours of operations and sexual services. This paper presents a futuristic scenario about sex tourism, discusses the drivers of change and the implications for the future. The paper pushes plausibility to the limit as boundaries of science fiction and fact become blurred in the ever-increasing world of technology, consumption and humanity, a paradigm known as liminality. (Yeoman & Mars 2012, 365).

The most sceptical may argue that all this is nothing more than virtual scenarios or fantasy constructions of the human mind. To avoid fallacious discussions and wasted time, we will have to respond with what already exists. And what already exists are sex robots that can be found in companies like "Real Doll" or "True Companion". Naturally they are not, or rather, they are not yet in terms of artificial intelligence, comparable to the ginoid Sophia created by David Hason, who fluently articulates answers or sketches facial expressions with some ease, or to the "geminoids" models of the robotics pioneer,

Hiroshi Ishiguro, which assumes the coming of the “era of robots” (interesting to see the article wrote by Mark Gilson, “A Brief History of Japanese Robophilia”, in which he argues the fascination of Japanese people for robots).

Everything indicates that in the near future these true companions will be much more developed and ready to condemn the human species even more to loneliness. And one of the first reasons it is not just because of the more sophisticated materials but because of the rapid development of Artificial Intelligent systems. The rapid development that has taken place in this area has generated some controversy and the researcher Kathleen Richardson fears the increased isolation of human beings, directed the campaign “Against Sex Robots” to raise awareness about this danger but also to promote the discussion around ethics in robotics (it seems to be forgotten by most of them the Isaac Asimov’s classic “Three Laws of Robotics” that states that, first: A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. Second: A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. Third: A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the first or second laws). A fascinating and urgent topic begins to occupy the communities of researchers from different areas. Some researchers suggest that ethical programming must be done for artificial intelligence and thus, that a statute of legal responsibility be defined for robots. There are many questions about the owners of those sexual robots but also about themselves. Hilary Putnam more than fifty years ago put the question about the civil rights of robots or if one prefers, about “Robot Liberation” (the discrimination based on softness or hardness is empty and it is the same as discriminating humans on the basis of skin color), and Robert Freitas Junior (in late 1985) wrote:

How should deviant robots be punished? Western penal systems assume that punishing the guilty body punishes the guilty mind – invalid for computers whose electromechanical body and software mind are separable. What is cruel and unusual punishment for a sentient robot? Does reprogramming a felonious computer person violate constitutional privacy or other rights? Robots and software persons are entitled to protection of life and liberty. But does “life” imply the right of a program to execute, or merely to be stored? Denying execution would be like keeping a human in a permanent coma – which seems unconstitutional. Do software persons have a right to data they need in order to keep executing?

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However, despite these necessary and desirable contributions, the ethical implications of the use of sexbots in human life go beyond these discussions and investigations and threaten to become like other subjects in human life, a subject to be debated belatedly.

In a different point of view, Kate Devlin also published an article in *The Conversation* (17 September 2015) called “In defense of sex machines: Why trying to ban sex robots is wrong”, drawing attention to aspects less considered. She says:

The scope for sex robots goes far beyond Richardson’s definition of them as “machines in the form of women or children for use as sex objects, substitutes for human partners or prostitutes”. Yes, we impose our beliefs on these machines: we anthropomorphize and we bring our prejudices and assumptions with us. Sex robots have, like much of the technology we use today, been designed by men, for men. (...)

And sex robots could go beyond sex. What about the scope for therapy? Not just personal therapy (after all, companion and care robots are already in use) but also in terms of therapy for those who break the law. Virtual reality has already been trialed in psychology and has been proposed as a way of treating sex offenders. Subject to ethical considerations, sex robots could be a valid way of progressing with this approach. (Devlin, 2015)

The logic seems to be, if we already have care robots like, for example, pet robots or care robots, why not legitimize sex robots with the same caring dimension?! Is sexuality that scary for the human condition, for the law, for morality? And why not assume that it is a constituent of human nature?

Bendel (2015) sees sexbots as a way of promoting health (not only sexual health). He classifies them according with three main dimensions: therapy, surgery and care (note that for Bendel a sexbot it is not only a sexual partner but a companion that can caressing and give hugs, share erotic conversations). Döring (2018) calls into question these dimensions once and asks if nursing robots should have sexual functions. But Bendel goes further and in a recent paper called “Love dolls and sex robots in unproven and unexplored fields of application” (2020) he takes it seriously:

These include prisons, the military, monasteries and seminaries, science, art and design as well as the gamer scene. There is, at least, some relevant research about the application of these artefacts in nursing and retirement homes and as such, these will be given priority. The use of love dolls and sex robots in all these fields is outlined, special features are discussed and initial ethical, legal and pragmatic considerations are made. It becomes clear that artificial love servants can create added value, but that their use must be

carefully considered and prepared. In some cases [he admits], their use may even be counterproductive.

Conclusion

The discussion can be just as or more realistic if you one asks the following question: what will it take for a sexbot to pass the Turing test? Recall the science fiction film *Her* (2013) by Spike Jonze or another one *Ex Machina* (2015) by Alex Garland, in which virtual and artificial creatures can form relationships with people. In the film of Alex Garland, the ginoid Ava manages to deceive the evaluator and the creator (Turing test), not for any sexual performance but for the ability to simulate human behaviour (honesty, faithfulness, etc.) and specifically, to simulate seduction.

In other words, and possibly in a near future, it could be said that an answer to the question asked could be that these sexbots would pass the Turing test if they managed to be programmed to perfectly copy human behaviour (which also means that they can perform the same kind of mistakes as humans). In a certain way they can be an extension of our own mind and therefore also able to commit crimes (see Capasso 2023; Castro 2024). With the fast development of artificial intelligence and other areas like biomechanics, engineering robotics also the question of uncanny valley will disappear from the scientific, academic and popular horizon since sexual robots will become everyday more realistic – not only in movements but also in their “skins”, in their behaviour, in their way of “thinking”. In a sense – and one knows that this is a different issue –, social robots can be presented (or disguised) as “social assistive robots for supporting healthcare provision” (see Pareto and Coeckelbergh 2024, for these specific kinds of robots and issues) which ends up masking their conception, design and purposes for which they were conceived.

In this sense, manipulation, seduction and the ability to lie come to the top, as it is through lies that the incitement of the consumer of sexbots passes right away. We all know that creating an illusion is not done by the truth but by the ability to reinvent verisimilitude. In this sense, ethical and moral issues rise and one of the main questions is the one that if we can trust in social robots and Perconti and Plebe (2024, 40) suggest that the concept of deferential, or more precisely, a “selective deference” (meaning that “is an epistemic attitude that hierarchizes, both implicitly and explicitly, the kinds of social

knowledge to be the most deferential toward”) can create a scenario more suitable for trusting social robots.

Thus, it may well be the case that the question initially asked is completely unreasonable, because for the future consumer of sexbots (as it is today for the consumer of any sex shop products) the question, whatever it may be, is perfectly irrelevant. The technologization of love and sexuality is a reality in the daily lives of thousands of people and if some forms of proof were required, it would be enough to see the industries and companies that live in the shadow of this business flourish (even that Danaher & McArthur 2017) and so many others researchers still questioning about this human-robot interaction (and the possible effect on society).

With the sexbots, a true and ultimate revolution of intimacy will take place, which will bring a greater subject to the table. If this tyranny of intimacy remains in the coming decades, the love will only be a phenomenon described in the childhood literature of humanity - if there is still humanity to sexualize machines. Apparently, there is no use in such an achievement, but if the development of artificial intelligence is done based on the human species, if it is done based on the replication of conscious experiences, it may be that a being too intelligent (no longer any kind of state-of-the-art sexbot) gain “awareness” of pleasure and want to live it. All scenarios are possible and all scenarios are open.

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