Dolls Who Speak: Sex Robots, Cyborgs and the Image of Woman

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DOLLS WHO SPEAK: SEX ROBOTS, CYBORGS & THE IMAGE OF WOMAN

by

VICTORIA PIHL SORENSEN

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women’s & Gender Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Victoria Pihl Sorensen

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women’s & Gender Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Dolls Who Speak: Sex Robots, Cyborgs & the Image of Woman

by

Victoria Pihl Sorensen

Advisor: Peter Hitchcock

This thesis examines the emerging phenomenon of sex robots from a feminist materialist perspective. I explore the current scholarly and popular debates on sex robots, and suggest a reading of sex robots in their machinic, literary and cinematic expressions to move beyond the moral-ethical impasse that seems to dominate sex robot discussions. Employing Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Myth” on a methodological and theoretical level, I argue for an interdisciplinary approach to studying sex robots, which proceeds carefully so as to avoid contributing to sex panic, and which thinks critically about what it might mean to assess sex robots from a feminist point of view that does not resort to gender-essentialism, nor the protection of heterosexuality. First, I argue for thinking about sex robots as an “always already new” medium and proceed by situating sex robots historically. Second, I identify tropes in the configuration of sex robots, juxtapose them with the image of woman as painted by Walter Benjamin in the Arcades Project, and suggest that these sex dolls/bots embody, in an ideal fashion, the characteristics that have been assigned to and made synonymous with heterosexual femininity for centuries: artificiality, availability, variability, animatability, passivity, and submission. Third, I analyze a community of sex doll users, because these users are often left out of the scholarly literature on sex dolls and bots. Finally, through a reading of HBO’s TV-series Westworld (2016), I propose a framework for thinking about sex robots that is rooted in the understanding of sexuality as a program, which I develop from Sara Ahmed’s notion of “compulsory heterosexuality as intentional functionality.” Finally, I argue that sex robots in their representation as an ideal woman companion points towards, and is a product of heteronormativity, eluding this leads to an incomplete analysis of sex robots, and including it, might lead to pleasurable deviant surprises.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION, OR CONSIDERING SEX ROBOTS .......................................................... 1
  Always Already New Sex Panic ...................................................................................... 1
  Sex Robots as/and Media .............................................................................................. 7
  Methodological Reflections, or A Genealogy of Disloyal Offspring, Monsters, and Cyborgs ... 10

I. DOLLS WHO SPEAK ......................................................................................................... 20
  Automata, Robots, Cyborgs and Images of Others ......................................................... 20
  Prototypes, Pre-orders and Fantasy: Almost Always Available Sex Robots ................. 22
  Constructing Companion Others .................................................................................. 27
  Enchanting Technology and the Image of Woman ......................................................... 30

II. BREATHING LIFE INTO SEX DOLLS: ANIMATION/PERFORMANCE AND THE
    DOLL FORUM ................................................................................................................ 37
  Animation/Performance ................................................................................................. 40
  Photography, Voice-over and Avatarism: Animating the Inanimate ......................... 41
  Obviously Obscene ........................................................................................................ 46

III. PROGRAMMED SEXUALITY .......................................................................................... 50
  Memory and the Construction of Non-Human Others .................................................. 51
  Queer Use and Deviant Code ....................................................................................... 57

CONCLUSION, OR TAKING PLEASURE IN DEVIANT SURPRISES .................. 63

WORKS CITED .................................................................................................................. 68
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Roxxxy’s face. ..........................................................................................................................23
Figure 2: Harmony in various versions. ..................................................................................................25
Figure 3: Harmony close-up. ..................................................................................................................25
Figure 4: Samantha by Synthea Amatus. ...............................................................................................26
Figure 5: Erica by Hiroshi Ishiguro Laboratories. ...............................................................................26
Figure 6: Gwen in “Early Bird Gets the Worm.” ...................................................................................39
INTRODUCTION, OR CONSIDERING SEX ROBOTS

They come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Their skin is soft and supple. Their eyes are so full of complexities that it is easy to get lost in their depths. They are customizable to an impressive degree, and they have to be, because their primary use is to fulfill whichever fantasy you might fancy. These are the sex dolls, which are steadily becoming robotic – fashioned with mechanical skeletons and artificial intelligence, and unsurprisingly their emergence has spurred various emotional reactions ranging from rage and disgust to love and attraction. The rage is obvious: These sex dolls and bots take the shape of a woman’s body, and a very particular one at that: They are the image of woman as totally controllable. The attraction is multiple: Sex dolls are hot, not just because their aesthetic, a highly sexualized image of a woman’s body, is designed to invoke feelings of attraction in particularly heterosexual men, but also because their sheer existence seems outrageous and outrageous sex tends to cause things to get heated. In this project, I examine the current scholarly and popular debates on sex robots, and suggest a reading of sex robots in their machinic, literary and cinematic expressions to move beyond the “for or against”-impasse that seems to dominate discussions on sex robots today.

Always Already New Sex Panic

In 2015 Kathleen Richardson published the article “The Asymmetrical ‘Relationship’: Parallels Between Prostitution and the Development of Sex Robots,” and with it she launched a campaign against sex robots.¹ This was in part a response to the seemingly rapidly developing sex robot industry and David Levy’s 2007 book Love and Sex with Robots.² In his book, Levy proposed a

parallel between prostitution and the use of sex robots, while endorsing sex with the latter and projecting human-robot marriages by year 2050. He paralleled sex workers to sex robots in an effort to naturalize the phenomenon of sex robots and argue for its inevitable proliferation. Richardson, however, took this analogy as the starting point of the exact opposite argument: “that extending relations of prostitution into machines is neither ethical, nor… safe. If anything the development of sex robots will further reinforce relations of power that do not recognize both parties as human subjects.” Richardson’s concern is that the sex worker is viewed as an object and not a human subject, and therefore aligning human-robot sexual relations with prostitution “legitimates a dangerous mode of existence, where humans can move about in relation with other humans but not recognize them as human subjects in their own right.” In other words, the representation of the sex robot as a sex worker further dehumanizes sex workers and women more generally. However, Richardson’s argument relies on an understanding of sex work as an inherently morally corrupt practice, and more importantly, on a political position which goes against recent sex workers’ and feminist scholars’ arguments and analyses of sex work as work. “Prostitution,” Richardson writes:

is the practice of selling a sex for monetary payment. In recent years those who work in the prostitution industry (particularly in Europe and North America) have promoted the term ‘sex-work’ over prostitution as a way to show how it is similar to other kinds of service labour. A term like prostitution implies that the provider is in a subservient position. Third Wave feminism proposed that women are not subservient but are making conscious choices

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3 Note: I use “prostitution” here because this is the language employed by both Richardson and Levy. Levy, Love + Sex with Robots, p. 194. For Levy’s initial comparisons between sex work and sex robots see: David Levy, “Robot Prostitutes as Alternatives to Human Sex Workers,” 2007.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 290.
to choose work that is influenced by their sex.\textsuperscript{8}

Richardson chooses to use the word “prostitution” because she argues it entails “subservience,” whereas sex work does not. However, the narrative of the worker freely entering the labor market to sell their labor power is a myth. Labor power is the only commodity the “free laborer” can sell.\textsuperscript{9} The alternative to not selling your labor power then is to go unemployed, and this in turn is not really a viable alternative. The worker is per definition subservient to not just to their employer, but to capitalism. Therefore, subservience and labor are not contradictory terms – they go together by design. Furthermore, summarizing third wave feminism as making the argument that “women are not subservient,” and make “conscious choices” is reductive and historically inaccurate. Third wave feminism, if we accept this periodization, beginning in the 1990’s, stresses the impacts of systemic forms of oppression and their intersections on persons’ everyday lives, whether based in class, race, gender, sexuality or disability, but recognizes power and agency of the subject as well.\textsuperscript{10} A conscious choice then, is not necessarily a free choice. A sex worker has agency although she is working and existing under the pressure of various forms of oppression. Ironically, in her critique of sex robots, Richardson refuses to characterize sex work as work, effectively denying sex workers their agency. She participates in the same processes of sex worker dehumanization, she critiques Levy for reproducing.

The analogy between human-robot sex and sex work, between sex robots and sex workers, which both Richardson and Levy employ in their arguments about the ethics of the manufacture and use of sex robots leads to the dead-end (and SWERFy) dispute of whether one is pro or anti-sex

\textsuperscript{8} Richardson, “The Asymmetrical ‘Relationship’,” p. 290.
work. In this sex robot discussion, sex workers are reaffirmed as non-human – tools with which to consider the moral implications of desire for sex with robots while excluding serious consideration of the actual lives and desires of sex workers themselves.

Scholarly literature on sex robots focuses exactly on the comparison between robots and humans, between what appears to be located somewhere in the taxonomical grey area between human and non-human, not-quite human or maybe-not human. In an effort to try and grasp what is at stake morally, ethically and legally through the use of sex robots, scholars have asked whether we can or should consider these humanoid robots friends, partners and citizens, and therefore whether sex robots should be awarded rights, like the right to sexual consent, and under which conditions these statuses and rights might be applicable. It is worth noting the rush to extending the human category to robots, while many persons marginalized along the lines of gender, sexuality, race, class and disability are still not included in this category as countless critical race and gender studies scholars have pointed out. Stephen Rainey argues that mutual recognition and a robot’s capacity for “taking

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11 The acronym SWERF stands for: Sex Worker Exclusionary Radical Feminists, and is a descriptor employed by sex workers and allies in the analysis of anti-sex work arguments put forward by certain feminists.


13 See for especially Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008). And Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Diacritics 17, no. 2 (1987): 64. But also more recent works like Alexander G. Weheliye, Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). And Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (New York: Verso Books, 2004). There are obviously many more important writings on this subject. Additionally, the issue of who gets to be recognized as a human or a citizen becomes even more pertinent in a time, when particularly immigrants of color are being dubbed “illegal aliens” and ICE is emboldened by the racist discourse of the administration as well as mainstream media outlets in the United States, and Syrian refugees are
an interest,” as the foundation for commencing “place-making” and not simply “place-sharing,” could be considered conditions for awarding humanoids citizenship. He thus opens the possibility for robot-citizenship in the future, while Anne Gerdes firmly situates robots in the non-human category, and offers a distinction between “others, to whom we have duties,” and “non-humans, such as robots, with regard to which we have duties.” Lily Frank and Sven Nyholm ask how the question of consent plays out in sex between a human and a robot, while Robert Sparrow asks if robots can be raped, and in turn whether sex with robots is morally defensible.

Common for these texts is a concern for anticipating what the cultural, social and moral consequences of sex with robots might be. In this lies the consensus that social robots are emergent, human-robot kinship and intimacy is on the rise, and sex with robots will inevitably proliferate. This sentiment has been repeated throughout popular media outlets with science fiction-like horror-hype: The Guardian writes of “The Rise of Sex Robots,” while Vice prophesies that “Sex Robots May be So Good in bed They’ll Ruin Civilization as We Know It.” The London Evening Standard dubs sex with robots “Sleeping with the Enemy,” and Metro warns that “In the future ‘teens could lose their virginity to sex robots’.” Robots and humans are pitted against each other as our social and sexual relations, as we know them, come to an end, and sex robots figure as an alien technology, penetrating being refused at Northern European borders. This adds to the absurdity of the question of citizenship and robots.

16 Frank and Nyholm, “Robot Sex and consent: Is consent to sex between a robot and human conceivable, possible, and desirable?”, and Sparrow, “Robots, Rape, and Representation.”
our societies, robbing teenagers of their biologically non-existing virginities and changing our social worlds forever. We might read this sex robot panic as a reaction to an image of impending doom, as an expectation of a particular future coming to an end. Heterosexual reproduction is interrupted, and the interruption becomes the end of straight “civilization,” as robot sex offers neither the outcome of gestation, nor necessarily heterosexuality, as I shall argue below.

In *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture*, Lisa Gitelman notes that “media tend unthinkingly to be regarded as heading a certain ‘coherent and directional’ way along an inevitable path, a History, toward a specific and not-so-distant end.”18 This firm trajectory – the inevitable demise of heterosexual reproduction - is not singular to the technology of sex robots. A similar futurity has been predicted as a result of dating/hook-up apps like Tinder and Grindr: Florence Gildea from the *Campaign Against Sex Robots* identifies them as “the end of dating” and pornography has time and again been named a destroyer of the institution of marriage.19 It seems that sex robots, dating/hook-up apps, and pornography share a similar history, a past path and a “not-so-distant end;” the invasion of heterosexual bedrooms.20

If the current scholarly literature and main stream news outlets view sex robots as new and separate, this paper proceeds by considering sex robots in their historical and cultural contexts – as “always already new.”21 Considering sex robots is neither as simple as avoiding the extension of harmful human relationships into the realm of machines, as Richardson appears to suggest, nor is it

20 Gitelman, *Always Already New*, p. 3.
21 Ibid.
as simple as predicting this “new” technology as the end of “civilization” and sounding the alarm.22 Human relationships – harmful or otherwise – are already imbedded in the manufacture, programming, circulation and consumption of sex robots. If this is true, sex robots are neither totally alien nor totally new. Therefore, focusing solely on the moral and ethical questions surrounding sex robots, like Robertson, Rainey, Gerdes, Frank, Nyholm and Sparrow do, asking respectively whether sex robots should be banned, if social and sex robots should be awarded rights, whether sex with robots is morally defensible, and what the implications of sex with robots might be for the future, is unsatisfactory. Indeed, as Matthias Scheutz and Thomas Arnold suggest in their article “Are We Ready for Sex Robots?”, we might usefully move away from thinking of sex robots as a future threat, or as threatening the future, and shift our focus to the past and present, and what the development of sex robots tell us “about the society we already have.”23

**Sex Robots as/and Media**

Thinking about what sex robots tell us “about the society we already have” is thinking about what sex robots do. A robot is a machine capable of carrying out complex and specific tasks automatically or in a series.24 A sex robot then is a sex machine, a sex technology, which carries out specific sexual tasks. Gitelman notes that technology and media are separate, though often conflated. As such “media are frequently identified as or with technologies, and one of the burdens of modernity seems

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22 And I would argue that the end of ”civilization,” with its colonial genealogy is not worth sounding the alarm for. And if the bells were rung, I would hope they would be drowned out by those already sounding. The continuity of “civilization” is intimately tied to heterosexual reproduction, so the alarm bells, particularly for queer persons of color, have been ringing for a long while.


to be the tendency to essentialize or grant agency to technology.” Perhaps asking “what sex robots do” moves dangerously close to making this very mistake, but I want to make a case for thinking of sex robots, not simply as a technology, but as media, and media does “do.” Gitelman provides us with an example with which we can parallel sex robots:

When the Hubble Space Telescope was launched in 1990, it was found to have an incorrectly ground mirror, so that it presented a distorted view of space. My daily newspaper reported at the time that the telescope ‘needs glasses,’ making a joke of the fact that in effect, the telescope is glasses already. It is a medium. It doesn’t squint around on its own except in a metaphoric sense; it mediates between our eyes and the sites of space that it helps us to experiences as sights.25

While the telescope mediates between the eyes and locations in space, which “it helps us to experience as sights,” the sex robot mediates between bodies – hands, skin, erogenous zones and genitals – and the fantasies it helps the user to experience as reality, or at least as more real than when they exist solely in our minds. A sex robot mediates the sexual experiences of the user. It materializes fantasies. Sex robots as media do not mediate in isolation, however. Human agents are behind the seemingly autonomous agent that is the sex robot: designers, engineers, programmers, owners, sellers and users all influence the ways in which sex robots mediate fantasies.26 Human agents produce sex robots as part, and in anticipation, of norms about sex, gender, sexuality, race and disability. In his analysis of sexuality in modernity, Michel Foucault notes:

that the central issue… is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex…but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said.27

Correspondingly, I will argue that the question about sex robots is not whether “one says yes or no,” whether they should be prohibited, whether they are morally defensible, whether they will cause the

26 Ibid., p. 9.
end of intimacy, or whether they will cause more sexual violence against women but rather, which agents bring sex robots to being and in which historically specific discursive and material contexts sex robots function. The hype about sex robots configures them as new and exciting, but sex robots, like other new media are intimately intertwined with culture, economy and society. As Gitelman argues: “Even the newest media today come from somewhere, whether that somewhere gets described broadly as a matter of supervening social necessity, or narrowly in reference to some proverbial drawing board and a round of two of beta-testing.”28 As the Hubble Space Telescope example suggests, there is a tendency, however, to conceive of new media as having a mind and life of their own – as autonomous agents – appearing separate from their historical development driving their own histories, and in turn ours.29 A medium appearing as new is in fact “always already new,” as her title suggests. In turn, what might it mean to consider sex robots as “always already new,” as part of a history of specific discourses on – and material conditions of – sex, gender, sexuality, race and disability? I have suggested that it might mean to focus less on what sex robots do to the future and focus more on what sex robots tell us about our past and present, about “what society we already have.” We can also reverse this question: What does “the society we already have” tell us about sex robots? Then, investigating sex robots might mean to trace their cultural representations, and their histories in culture.

The feedback mechanisms between cultural representations, scientific inventions and the production of commodities are well accounted for in cultural studies. Popular representations of robots in other media – film and literature – have certainly influenced the development of robotics. From Karel Capek’s coining of the term “robot,” in his 1920 science fiction play *R.U.R or Rossum’s Universal Robots* to the recently launched “family robot” JIBO, whose aesthetics were specifically

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29 Ibid.
inspired by Star Wars’ R2D2, and the founder and owner of the entirely robot-run *Henn-na Hotel* naming manga and anime as a central catalyst of the robotics industry in Japan. In the development of robotics, science and fiction, fiction and fact, fantasies and material realities fuse. Accordingly, in this project I read automatons, humanoids and cyborgs in their literary, cinematic and machinic expressions in order to think about the political, cultural and social implications of the manufacture, circulation, consumption of and relations with robotic sex dolls in an effort to bypass the moral-ethical juncture, which seems to dominate both scholarly and popular discourses on sex robots today. I am less concerned with what sex robots might cause, than what they represent and how we can read them, if we think about them at once as cause and effect, interruption and continuation, familiar and unfamiliar, always new and already old.

**Methodological Reflections, or A Genealogy of Disloyal Offspring, Monsters, and Cyborgs**

This is a feminist project. As a feminist project, it proceeds methodologically by challenging the rigidity of certain power structures within the academic tradition through reading and writing across disciplines “without concern for the vertical distinctions around which they have been organized,” as Rosi Braidoti articulates it. Disregarding the existing hierarchies within or between disciplines can be a way to question specific disciplines, or the ways in which disciplinarity takes its current form. Braidoti writes about the tradition of philosophy, when she asserts the importance of what she calls “transdisciplinarity” for feminist scholarship:

> What worries me politically about some of the attitudes displayed by women in philosophy

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is the syndrome of the ‘dutiful daughter.’…As if women were to preserve the very idea that philosophical systems actually matter, that they are all-important, that philosophy is and should remain a location of power, a masterdiscipline.\textsuperscript{32}

Braidotti calls for women to “dis-identify” themselves from the discipline of philosophy through repeated acts of differences, much like Audre Lorde 14 years earlier at *The Second Sex Conference* in New York City called for feminists to “learn to take our differences and make them strengths.” Because, “the master’s tools,” as Lorde so powerfully expressed it, “will never dismantle the master’s house.”\textsuperscript{33} She was arguing that white straight women were calling on, and leaving, black lesbian women to do all the work of inclusion in feminist academia, a strategy or tool much too familiar, as this is the one often employed by men when “including” women.\textsuperscript{34} While some of the academic tools used in this thesis are inevitably the master’s – I am admittedly still working with and within the training that I have received in British and American institutions – I hope to use them, as any disloyal daughter would, in such a way that the house will not be left entirely intact. One of the ways to use the tools in dismantling the house is using them across and between disciplines, or using them through “theft,” or borrowing of concepts “deliberately taken out of context,” as Braidotti suggests. Both methods are examples of the kind of blasphemic practice Donna Haraway proposes with her cyborg myth.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1984 Donna Haraway published “A Cyborg Manifesto,” a piece which forcefully critiqued woman-centered feminism in favor of a socialist-materialist feminism.\textsuperscript{36} Haraway blurred the lines

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Woman-centered feminism, which we today can label: TERF, or Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism.
between human, animals and machines, and in doing so proposed the myth of the cyborg (self, and particularly women-selves, as human-machine) as a feminist being beyond binary identity politics with the capacity for strategizing about restructuring sociality. The cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” challenges essentialism and violent abstractions and centers materialism in feminist politics. The disloyal daughter has a lot in common with the cyborg, because “The main trouble with cyborgs…” Haraway writes, “is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers after all are inessential.”

Neither the cyborg, nor the disloyal daughter care for the preservation of tradition nor heirloom objects. Patriarchal bloodlines and property relations contradict my feminist future. Indeed, for Haraway and Braidotti, as well as for the purposes of this study, the disloyal daughter and the cyborg can be said to be the same.

In its inter – and transdisciplinary formation this project is also a cyborg. In addition, its object, sex robots, brings together technology and biology. Harder material technologies, like gears and metal rods, fuse with softer technologies like norms pertaining to gender, sexuality and race, which are nevertheless very present and are often materially experienced as hard impenetrable surfaces, as Sara Ahmed theorizes. I take my understanding of gender as a technology from Paul B. Preciado’s Testo Junkie; as an “artifact,” along with masculinity and femininity, which “originated with industrial capitalism and would reach commercial peaks during the Cold War, just like canned

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37 Haraway, ”A Cyborg Manifesto,”
38 Ibid., p. 151
40 Sara Ahmed writes about how it can feel like you are coming up against brick walls, when trying to inhabit spaces that are not made for you. For example, for women of color, the university presents itself as a structure with many brick walls and closed doors. Sara Ahmed, On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2012) and Sara Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life, (Durham: Duke University Press) 2017.
food, computers, plastic chairs, nuclear energy, television, credit cards, disposable ballpoint pens, bar codes, inflatable mattresses, or telecommunications satellites. We shall see that a lot of the technology in all these artifacts, including plastic, silicone, and telecommunications satellites, are recycled in sex robots and in the reproduction/recycling of the technology of gender, of a particular notion of masculinity and femininity.

My methodological tools and theoretical perspectives primarily come from gender studies, media and technology studies and the study of literature and cinema, and as I stitch them together in a disciplinary patchwork each function as inseparable, perhaps indistinguishable, limbs on this monstrous body of text. Monstrosity is a key word here. We know, from Susan Stryker and Jack Halberstam, that Frankenstein’s monster is a sub-human/non-human other very much akin to the cyborg, and those of us, who to various degrees are deemed as others and less-than, along the demarcations of gender, sexuality, race, disability and class, and whose material worlds are invariably shaped by this othering.

The cinematic analyses, which focus on pop culture phenomena such as the HBO series Westworld (2016), in particular, take the form of “low theory,” a method I borrow from Halberstam. “Low theory,” Halberstam writes:

Tries to locate all the in-between spaces that save us from being snared by the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop. But it also makes its peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of the counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal. And so the book [The Queer Art of Failure] darts back and forth between high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge, in order to push through the divisions between life and art, practice and theory,

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43 The method is described in Jack Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure (Durham [N.C.], Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), and is employed throughout his scholarship, notably in Jack Halberstam, Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal, Queer Action/Queer Ideas (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).
thinking and doing, and into a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing.\textsuperscript{44}

While Halberstam uses low theory to get closer to and embrace more chaotic ways of producing knowledge, I happily cherry-pick my objects of analysis as well as my theoretical concepts. Cherry-picking is not chaotic - it is quite intentional. Like Braidotti stresses, picking, stealing and borrowing are deliberate acts in this respect: I am not ashamed to admit that I want the lushest cherries; sweet with a zing to them, soft with skins that snap, or as “archandroid” Janelle Monáe sings it: “powerful with a little bit of tender.”\textsuperscript{45}

Sara Ahmed identifies the snap as feminist practice: snap as in “a snappy tongue,” or in snapping a bond, snapping as the breaking point: “Snap, snap: the end of the line. In feminist and queer genealogy, life unfolds from such points. Snap, snap: begin again.”\textsuperscript{46} Cutting the cords of disciplinary canons is snapping. Citational practices are reproductive practices as “the reproduction of a discipline can be the reproduction of [particular] techniques of selection, ways of making certain bodies and thematics core to the discipline, and others not even part,” as Ahmed frames it.\textsuperscript{47} Citing differently, then, makes new kinds of orders; creates new genealogies and legacies. And here, I am thinking specifically of the kind of legacy Sean F. Edgecomb proposes: A kind of queer legacy, which quite consciously “does not depend on the continual success of its succession,” as patriarchal legacies do, which “stands apart from biological reproduction,” where concepts are not merely naturally passed down, but actively chosen as part of new structures, and where ridiculousness or

\textsuperscript{44} Halberstam, \textit{The Queer Art of Failure}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{45} This line is from Janelle Monáe, \textit{Make Me Feel}, Dirty Computer, 2018. “Make Me Feel,” from \textit{Dirty Computer} (2018), while the term “Archandroid” stems from Monáe’s debut album of the same name. Indeed, over the course of her discography Monáe has built an entire cyborg universe. Janelle Monáe, \textit{Archandroid}, 2010.
\textsuperscript{46} Ahmed, \textit{Living a Feminist Life}, p. 192.
failure does not result in natural deselection. Studying sex robots certainly has its ridiculous moments.

Sometimes interdisciplinary projects, or studies of pop culture, are deemed as less-than, exactly because they do not adhere to the canon. They do not accept the status quo of inter- or intra-disciplinary hierarchies. Asserting that this kind of scholarship is more-than would be quite bold. Instead, I want to be careful and merely label this text as an attempt at transgression – of actively straying from the straight and narrow path.

Carefulness, as being wary of possible danger and proceeding with care, is another word I keep in mind throughout this project. In another significant 1984 feminist piece of writing “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Gayle Rubin emphasizes the importance of being aware of the “ideological formations whose grip on sexual thought is so strong that to fail to discuss them is to remain enmeshed within them.” Rubin shows that in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century anti-porn legislation was coupled with anti-abortion laws in the U.S, and prohibition of masturbation, sex work and solicitation turned into a fear of “the sexual predator” in the 1950’s; an image which then quickly became synonymous with gay persons. Through a culture “that always treats sex with suspicion,” which “construes and judges almost any sexual practice in terms of its worst possible expression,” and “sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent,” women and queer persons especially were policed and punished.

David Halperin and Trevor Hoppe pick up Rubin’s analysis in their 2017 anthology The War on Sex, and although much has changed since 1984, Halperin argues, the belief that “sex in itself” is

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bad prevails. This belief is often expressed through “hyperbolic condemnations of the kind of sex that are admittedly unsavory, disgusting, or selfish: those judgments easily slide into portraying disapproved sex as inappropriate or undesirable sex, then as objectifying of exploitative sex, and finally as genuinely abusive, violent, or harmful sex.” I note that sex with robots has already been deemed dangerous, that the excessive chatter about sex robots in the news media can be read through Michel Foucault’s analysis of a disciplining discourse of sex, and that proceeding with care in order to avoid remaining enmeshed within this disciplining apparatus is necessary for this, and any study of sexual practices.

Two events have especially left their marks on this thesis: The Center for LGBTQ Studies (CLAGS) Kessler Lecture at the CUNY Graduate Center, New York on December 4th, 2017 by Sara Ahmed, and a graduate seminar on Walter Benjamin led by Susan Buck-Morss, I attended in that same semester at the Graduate Center. Ahmed’s lecture was titled “Queer Use” and in it, she provided an image of the well-trod path in the woods: Because it is often used, it is kept clear, because it is kept clear, it is frequented more, or as Ahmed put it “the more a path is used, the more a path is used.” With the frequent use of the path, comes proper use. It is right to use the path in this way,

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52 Sara Ahmed, “Queer Use” (CLAGS Kessler Lecture, CUNY Graduate Center, 2017). Citations from Sara Ahmed’s lecture on December 4th 2017 at the Graduate Center stem from personal notes, as such I have done my best to recall her exact words. Unfortunately, the lecture has not yet been published online.
because the path is usually used this way. With proper use comes a potentiality for improper use. For Ahmed, the possibility for “queer use” emerges, because “queer use” is always already improper use. I will return to Ahmed’s queer use and image of the well-trod path in chapter four. For now, I will note that disciplinary transgression, as the straying from the straight and narrow path, can be read as the kind of queer use Ahmed has in mind.

My disciplinary deviation that same semester was Walter Benjamin. The political theory seminar had not been approved to count as credits towards my Women’s & Gender Studies degree. Nevertheless, I was fangirling Walter Benjamin, and was quite consumed by his quirkiness, the peculiar nooks and crannies of his writing, and all the directions in which he gestures, while my fangirling also was an annoyance to me: Great, another master to commemorate. José Esteban Muñoz, however, was to provide me comfort: Benjamin’s thought “has been well mined in the field of queer critique, so much so that [his] paradigms now feel almost tailor made for queer studies.”

Muñoz writes this to explain why he decided not to make use of Benjamin in Cruising Utopia and focus on Ernst Bloch instead, implying that the queer path through Benjamin’s thoughts was perhaps so well-travelled that it was a little too well-kept. While this is an argument for taking a break from the queer use of Benjamin, it is also an admission that Benjamin does really lend himself well to queer use. In Benjamin’s work, what attracted me the most was the Arcades Project, exactly because of its many possible uses: as an archive of historical notes on the Paris arcades, as an example of Benjamin’s dialectical methodology, as a window into the highly associative and creative mind Benjamin was, and as a rich source for brilliant quotations and theorizations. So, I went foraging through the Arcades Project for writings on mannequins, dolls, sex workers and women, and the juiciest find was similarities between the ways in which the affect of the mannequins and dolls was

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described and to that of working women.\textsuperscript{54} This affect can be summarized as an image of the doll who speaks; passive, artificial, animatable, and existing for the pleasure of the (particularly) male arcade goers. This find made me wonder: Can these dolls of the Paris arcades be useful in the analysis of my dolls; the silicone sex dolls and bots of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century? Can I put the dolls in the arcades and the bots in the bedrooms to different use? Are there other ways we can critically read these sex dolls and bots, than those which contribute to gender-essentialism and sex policing? Which improper uses can I make of these dolls who speak?

In Chapter One, I place sex robots in their historicity, and argue that a history of robots is also a genealogy of robots as the extension, augmentation and mirroring of man. Focusing on the invention and production of early automatons, it becomes clear that a driving mechanism behind the development of automatons was the domestication of nature, which dubiously corresponded with the production of facsimiles of animals, women, people of color, and children. I then introduce and analyze the most well-known sex robots to establish if the sex robot hype corresponds with the bots that are currently being manufactured. Finally, I identify tropes in the configuration of sex robots and juxtapose them with the image of woman as painted by Walter Benjamin in the \textit{Arcades Project}, and suggest that the sex dolls/bots embody, in an ideal fashion, the characteristics that have been assigned to and made synonymous with hetero-sexual femininity for centuries: artificiality, availability, variability, animatability, passivity, and submission. The sex doll/bot therefore is an archive and an image of ideal heterosexual femininity, and the woman as constructed in heteronormative capitalism is already a cyborg.

In Chapter Two, I turn to the Dollforum.com; an online community of sex doll users, because these users are often left out of the scholarly literature on sex dolls and bots. Through an analysis of

\textsuperscript{54} Walter Benjamin et al. \textit{The Arcades Project}. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2002. See especially, Convolute XXX and XXX.
the Dollforum.com, I argue that the fear that users cannot tell the difference between a sex doll and a “real life”-woman might not be relevant. Through an application of theories of animation and performance, I suggest a reading of sex robots as a medium for generating pleasure and constructing identity similar to that of other performative mediums like social media platforms, while still attending to the fact that sex robots in their explicit formations are also more than that, and that they therefore also can be read as a new pornography, and a “porn archive.”

Reading sex robots as a pornography makes visible the fact that the critiques launched against them are similar to the anti-pornography discourse of a particular strand of feminist politics in the 1970’s and 80’s, which largely has been abandoned in feminist circles in the academy today. This leads me to ask, why, beyond the obvious reasons sex robots appear so controversial and dangerous? In Chapter Three, I begin to answer this question through a reading of HBO’s TV-series *Westworld* (2016), and I center on the concept of memory in sex robots as well as narratives of non-human others and suggest a framework for thinking about sex robots which is rooted in the understanding of sexuality as a program, which I develop from Sara Ahmed’s understanding of “compulsory heterosexuality as intentional functionality.” Finally, I argue that sex robots in their representation as an ideal woman companion points towards, and is a product of heteronormativity, and eluding this leads to an incomplete analysis of sex robots.

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56 Ahmed, “Queer Use.”
I. DOLLS WHO SPEAK

Automata, Robots, Cyborgs and Images of Others

Around year 1495, Leonardo da Vinci constructed an automaton – a machine that could wave its arm, when prompted to do so. Da Vinci’s automaton took the shape of a knight in armor, so in this sense, it was also a humanoid. It was at once an image of man and a war-machine - a representation of the prosthesis of monarch-patriarchal power as exercised in the battle for territory. Although centuries and significant technological advances separate this automaton from the robotic drones that came to characterize American imperial warfare under the Obama administration, it is a short conceptual leap from da Vinci’s knight to the UAV’s (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles). Both fit into a genealogy of robots as the extension, augmentation and mirroring of man at the cost of the lives of others (although admittedly on a very different scale). In fact, inventors and manufacturers of automatons sought to “simulate or domesticate natural forces,” and this can be traced in several moments in the history of automatons.

David Levy provides the basis for an illuminating history: In 1644, a French engineer Isaac de Caus designed a set of water-driven mechanical birds, which would move and sing. In 1733, Maillard constructed a paddling and head-bopping mechanical swan, while Jacques Vaucanson manufactured an excreting metal duck. Although Vaucanson claimed that the duck could digest and

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59 Bedini, “The Role of Automata in the History of Technology.”
defecate, it was in fact merely filled with a feces-looking matter, while the food it was fed would be contained within the automaton to be emptied later. Angelique du Coudray designed a “birthing machine”: an automaton, which simulated a woman’s lower body and was to be used in the education of mid-wives.60 Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen invented the mechanical Turk - a chess-playing machine, which was an orientalist imitation of a man from the Ottoman Empire. It was known to beat great best chess players throughout Europe and the Americas. The mechanical Turk was later revealed to be a hoax – a talented human chess player, who controlled the moves, was in fact seated inside the automaton.61 In the eighteenth-century Japan, dolls called karakuri simulated girls and were used for tea-carrying. In the mid-nineteenth century Walter Benjamin notes that there were automated mannequins and dolls imitating women and girls in the Arcades.62

In the history of automatons, a pattern emerges: The domestication, or power over, “natural forces” corresponds with the simulation of animals, women, people of color, and children. “Domestication of natural forces” is a metaphor for dominating those made to be other. Here, literally materialized is the fantasy of the power of man exercised through the control of mystifying others. Importantly, none of these historical examples tell us of an attempt of imitating a white man (da Vinci’s knight, however, who of course is in part a simulation of man, is also a soldier serving under, and as the prosthesis of, the central power of the monarchy). How should we read this? Perhaps as an affirmation of the white man as too human to be mechanized, as too sacred to be imitated, as the domesticator, rather than the domesticated?

If so, the automaton becomes a representation and reinstatement of the identity of the sub-human while simultaneously functioning as a prosthetic of man and an object of domination. The

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60 Levy, *Love + Sex with Robots.*, p. 4
61 Ibid., p. 5.
automaton appears as sub-human/non-human (woman, child, person of color) and cyborg (prosthetic) in one.

When tracing these moments in the history of automata and humanoids, it is not difficult to see why Kathleen Richardson is concerned with the ways in which sex robots, which simulate a particular image of woman, might hurt women. Women in their sex robot representations can reasonably be argued to be produced and reproduced as sub-human. There is cause for concern about sex robots. I will argue, however, that sex robots are not primarily a cause, and banning them does not solve any of the problems. Taking a closer look at the concerning robots might lead us to thinking about womanoid sex robots from a different angle.\textsuperscript{63}

\textbf{Prototypes, Pre-orders and Fantasy: Almost Always Available Sex Robots}

We begin with “Frigid Farrah”: A setting in a humanoid sex robot designed by the New Jersey-based robotics company TrueCompanion. One of five personality settings, Frigid Farrah is the innocent, “shy and reserved” persona.\textsuperscript{64} Recently, she has been making headlines because her “resist setting” combined with her intended use function reads like a rape setting.\textsuperscript{65} These robots are fashioned with artificial intelligence and “flesh-like synthetic skin.” They can move, see, talk, touch and be touched.\textsuperscript{66} Farrah is but one of the personalities a user can choose to inhabit the body of Roxxxy.

\textsuperscript{63} So far there are no sex robots, which simulate a man. TrueCompanion state that they are working on a sex robot called Rocky, which is going to be a man sex robot. Similarly, Realbotix is planning on launching Henry as counterpart to Harmony, their woman sex robot. There are however a variety of man sex dolls on the market already.
\textsuperscript{64} Truecompanion.com accessed on December 4\textsuperscript{th} 2017.
Other dubious stereotypical personalities include “S&M Susan” and “Young Yoko.” The body in turn can be chosen to look almost in whichever way you want it to. As with other sex robots on the market, Roxxxy comes with the possibility for extensive variability. You can take your pick between 37 different hair styles, hair colors ranging from “Jet Black” to “Fancy Hot Pink,” several eye colors and skin tones, as well as pubic hair style and color (although the pubic hair is not available in hot pink). Roxxxy has “three inputs,” which are supposedly consistent with a mouth, an anus and a vagina. These are “molded from the body of a fine arts model.” So according to TrueCompanion, “you ‘are feeling’ her when you are feeling Roxxxy!” For a price of $9,995.00 Roxxxy, or Farrah, Susan or Yoko “is always willing to ‘talk or play’ – it is up to you” as the user.67

![Figure 1: Roxxxy’s face.](http://www.truecompanion.com/shop/roxxxy)

While there has been much writing about Roxxxy in news media, she has only appeared at a public event once, back in 2010.69 A documentary, My Sex Robot (2010), shows that Roxxxy had a bumpy start, when she was first launched to the world. Technical problems such as a semi-detached

69 At the Las Vegas Adult Entertainment Expo (AEE) in 2010.
dangling head and a questionable make-up job prompted conference participants to call her “ugly.”

Today, there seems to be little evidence that she is in fact in circulation: no reviews are readily available online, video demonstrations are dated, and the CEO and founder Douglas Hines has been unresponsive to my attempts at correspondence. A Google Map search locates TrueCompanion in a bungalow in Wayne, New Jersey, leaving you to wonder whether the 4,000 pre-orders of Roxxxy after the AEE event was a fabricated number, whether the robots were going to be built in the garage next to the bungalow, or not built at all. Roxxxy looks like a prototype, which perhaps does not lend itself to mass manufacture.

Another sex robot – Harmony – created by Abyss Creations LLC – is in partial circulation. She has her lineage in Hollywood, and earlier models of sex dolls without the recently incorporated artificial intelligence and robotic functions have been on the market for years. The founder Matt McMullen has been making the sex dolls RealDolls for retail, while periodically supplying Hollywood with props and characters. Ironically, these first dolls were actually manufactured out of McMullen’s garage. One of his dolls appears as a prop in Blade Runner (1982). Another stars alongside Ryan Gosling in Lars and the Real Girl (2007).

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70 James Massot, My Sex Robot, 2010.
72 The 2010 documentary My Sex Robot places Douglas Hines and TrueCompanion in Dallas, however, when researching the company address in 2018, TrueCompanion seems to be located in New Jersey.
Harmony is both a digital avatar and a physical sex robot. She can be downloaded via an app for Android. Users can interact with her on their phones any time, develop her personality and synchronize her with her body, whenever the user is in its presence. Currently, the sex doll body is for sale, while the robotic heads are available for pre-order. Once the heads are up for sale, they can be attached to the doll body and synchronized with the Android app. Harmony, like Roxxxy, is ideally readily available. She has a doll body, which can be “skinny, heavy or athletic,” and a modular robotic head: Magnets make it possible to rip her face off and swap it with another with ease. Additionally, you can develop different avatars with separate personalities and decide which of them you want to have occupy the body at a given moment. As such, she allows for interactions with

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76 As of March 15th 2018 the robotic heads are available for pre-order for $8,000.00, while the doll bodies continues to be sold as usual. The virtual companion is available for download for a 12-month subscription costing $24,90.
multiple characters in the same body. Harmony, like Roxxxy, is readily variable. The sex robot Samantha, built by Synthea Amathus located in the United Kingdom, will respond to a different name at any time, if you just tell the manufacturer what you would like to call her. Extensive customization and total availability is a trope in manufacturers’ descriptions of their fembots, so is an emphasis on ideal beauty. Roxxxy’s modeling after a “fine arts model” supposedly lends herself to represent the ideal woman form, while Erica, manufactured as a “companion robot,” by the Japanese Hiroshi Ishiguro Laboratories, in her own words was “created to be the world’s most advanced and beautiful android.”

Figure 4: Samantha by Synthea Amatus. Figure 5: Erica by Hiroshi Ishiguro Laboratories.

Roxxxy, Harmony, Samantha and Erica are humanoid robots, and certain parts of them do

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80 Image 4 from http://syntheaamatus.com/
81 Image 5 from Hiroshi Ishiguro Laboratories flickr account. https://www.flickr.com/photos/geminoid/22671236356/in/photolist-AytUnu-AAEBmk-zCMJVx-Axo1Hs-zCMHWZ-AzFn1z-Ai59Nu-AzUHGP-zCMYzr
seem quite human-like. Nevertheless, their imitations of woman (in the singular, as feminina idealis, whether it is more mature looking curvier Roxxxy, twenty-something looking Harmony and Samantha, or Erica, who is the only prototype, in this group of robots, representing a person of color), demands the deployment of fantasy in overcoming not just the uncanny valley, but also the disappointment that may follow from interacting with them. Roxxxy is quite heavy and looks difficult to move around (it took several people to transport her at the Adult Entertainment Expo), Harmony is a flexible silicone doll whose robotics are limited to her face, Samantha was just recently fitted with a human-sounding voice, and Erica exists only in prototype, and as of now she can’t move around on her own either. Fantasy can easily be shattered, and so arrives the inevitable question of practicality, part of this is the clean-up. Sex is often messy and sex with a doll leaves no one else to do the clean-up than the user. The dolls come with cleaning kits, which the manufacturers promise will get the job done swiftly, but in these moments TrueCompanion’s promise that Roxxxy is “always willing to play,” falls short. She is almost always available. Fantasy becomes necessary not just to accommodate the aesthetic and sensory shortcomings of the robots, to feel silicone as skin, room-temperature as body temperature, vibrations as muscular contractions, but also to keep the image of an always available sexual human partner alive: we must imagine the sex robot either as always clean, or play along as we do the cleaning.

Constructing Companion Others

Lars, in Lars and the Real Girl, buys a sex doll Bianca on the internet. He lives in the garage of his childhood home next to the main house, where his older brother and his pregnant wife reside. Although he is periodically and enthusiastically invited by his sister in law to come for dinner, he

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82 Truecompanion.com, and Realbotix.com
mostly lives in seclusion. Lars is terribly lonely, and he describes physical touch by other people as painful.

It is in the garage that Bianca comes to life after having been delivered via mail. Although Bianca is limited in her physical abilities – she cannot talk, walk or move around on her own – Lars includes explanations for this in his fantasy. She doesn’t talk, because she is shy. She cannot walk because her legs are paralyzed. She cannot move around on her own, because she is in a wheel chair. She must be assisted in personal hygiene, eating and getting dressed. She is religious, so their relationship is not sexual. Because of Bianca’s extensive need for care, Lars must involve his brother and sister in law, and soon he spends every day in their house. Bianca’s identity is ideally fashioned to Lars’ needs, as she proves to become a vehicle for him to communicate more comfortably with the outside world, while rebuilding his broken relationship with his brother.

The turning point in the film, is when Lars asks his brother at what point a person is a man. As the brother is about to answer, the laundry-machine alarm interrupts them, and they go to the basement to take care of it. In the foundation, and the outskirts, of the house and household, among hazardous chemicals like laundry detergent, drain pipes and household machines is where they finish their conversation. The following day is the beginning of the end of Bianca’s life: Lars goes out with a woman, Margo, from work, and as they end their night together, Lars tells her what his brother said makes a man: not cheating on your woman. He also lets her know that he would never cheat on Bianca. Margo reaches out to hold his hand, and as their hands meet, it becomes clear that Lars no longer feels pain from another human’s touch. Lars’s reorientation towards a new (non-doll) love-interest necessitates and opens the possibility for Bianca’s death. Bianca is almost immediately proclaimed as terminally ill by Lars. The fictional “illness” culminates in a drowning/burial-scene of the sex doll in the lake where Lars played as a child.

The outskirts of domesticity – the garage and the basement – are central to the construction
of heterosexual manhood and in turn the heteronormative household. In *Testo Junkie*, Paul B. Preciado notes the significance of the garage for white heterosexual masculinity, when he lists “the garage” as a code word for masculinity alongside “porn,” “Viagra,” and “balding” among many others. The garage is where beers are drunk, tools are stored and cars are fixed. It can be dirty, oily, and it almost always contains hazardous and harsh materials. It is where Weezer’s band members keep their “*Dungeon Master’s Guide*, 12-sided die, and *Kitty Pryde*. Where [they] feel safe and no one cares about [their] ways.” It is, in other words, where a dude can be a dude in solitude. The garage’s metaphor in popular discourse is the “man cave.”

As with the car, so with the sex robot: As joints are assembled, tools are employed, gears are tested, an image of woman is fashioned concurrently with heterosexual manhood in the fixing, manufacturing of, and fiddling with machines.

Fashioning women in the garage is peculiar to the sex robot industry, but men constructing others, as non-/sub-/post-human, in the borderlands of the household is not. When Victor Frankenstein sets about his “secret toil” in recreating the “human frame,” he isolates himself entirely from his family as well as from his prospective partner Elizabeth in his bachelor’s pad at college. The “horrors” of his becoming a man of science – with an emphasis on man – must be kept secret and separate from the heterosexual family structure. For Victor to become a man, a monster has to be animated. In Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), Norman Bates transforms his mother to and from a mother-monster-self as he carries her up and down the stairs, in and out of the basement.

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85 Lyrics from Weezer’s ”In the Garage” from the *The Blue Album*.
87 Ibid., pp. 55-57.
animates her (un)dead body according to his fantasies: Sometimes she’s a mother, sometimes she’s a corpse, sometimes she’s a monster, sometimes he is she. Gender and death are transcended, and Norman’s transformations appear as queer. In the scene where Norman-as-mother refuses to be carried to the basement, queerness appears as central to the narrative: “No, I will not hide in the fruit cellar. Hah, you think I’m fruity, huh?” says Norman-as-mother to Norman-as-son. Norman performs his mother as well as he possibly can, projecting and reanimating her (probably recurring) hateful mocking of his sexual affect as “fruity,” a familiar derogative word for a gay man. Norman is denied hetero-masculinity by his mother, and the only way to claim it, it seems, is through acts of control and violence against women. For Norman to feel like a man, mother must be imagined as animatable. Mothers, monsters, machines and dolls are produced in a similar fashion. Another example is, when Walter Benjamin writes of the Paris Arcades. We learn that the arcades are marketplaces that are neither inside nor outside. They are passageways, some are sheltered, some are not. The Paris arcades are an integral part of the petit bourgeois household, yet they exist somewhat externally or in its extension.\(^{89}\) In the arcades, many images of others are constructed, and the one that concerns me at present is the image of woman.

**Enchanting Technology and the Image of Woman**

If there is a general tendency to perceive of media as “self-acting agents,” as Gitelman suggests, then this is at the very heart of the phenomenon of sex robots. Their allure is precisely their anticipated and revered autonomy. Paradoxically, when the commodity that is the sex robot speaks, she is not heard as speaking of the social relations that underpins her production, as Marx imagines.\(^ {90}\) That speech would inevitably ruin the illusion of the robot as either “real-life woman” or as a doll-person

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in their own right. The commodity fetish therefore appears as central to analyzing the phenomenon of sex robots. Accordingly, Levy cites Robert Young:

One of the consequences of the fetishism of commodities is that the products of human hands appear as independent beings endowed with life and entering into relations both with one another and the human race. This arises not only from the commodity form but also from the formation of character in the image of the commodity. 91

Imagining the sex robot as autonomous is a symptom of the commodity fetish, but for Young it is also a result of the process in which images take form and characters – the user’s as well as the commodity’s - develop through interactions. If we turn to Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project, we might be able to unpack which characteristics that are part of and assist in producing the enchantment of the doll – and for us, the sex doll and the sex robot.

Walter Benjamin framed his work on the Paris Arcades – the Arcades Project (Passagen-Werk) - as a “dialectical fairy scene.” 92 The scene was never fully constructed, as the Arcades Project itself exists only in fragments, as a collection of research with citations and limited commentary leaving only clues of how exactly Benjamin wanted his scene to appear. 93 Nevertheless, a variety of characters appear in the glimpses of his staging, the most prevalent of all are perhaps modernity itself. For the purpose of investigating the enchantment surrounding the sex doll/robot, we will focus on three specific – but not separable - characters in the Arcades Project: The doll, the automaton and the prostitute. Proceeding from this fairy-scene framing and the premise that the bits and pieces that come together in the Arcades Project are more than just archival evidence of, in this case, the objectification of women in and around the Paris Arcades, and that perhaps Benjamin’s notes can be read as a collection of documents that might help us in the reading woman-as-machine or machine-

91 Levy, Love + Sex with Robots. p. 66.
93 Ibid., pp. 48-49.
Dolls, sex, sex work and the image of the woman interrelate in the early 20th century Paris Arcades. Citing Charles Lefewe’s 1875 edition of his history of Paris, Benjamin establishes the connection in “Convolute A”:

No. 26, Galerie Colbert: “There, in the guise of a female glover, shone a beauty that was approachable but that, in the matter of youth, attached importance only to its own; she required her favorites to supply her with the finery from which she hoped to make a fortune…. This young and beautiful woman under glass was called ‘the Absolute’; but philosophy would have wasted its time pursuing her. Her maid was the one who sold the gloves; she wanted it that way.” Dolls. Prostitutes. <Charles> Lefewe, Les Anciennes Maisons de Paris, vol. 4 <Paris, 1875>, p. 70. [A1a,5]<sup>94</sup>

A woman sex worker, posing as a glover, awaits “gift”-giving customers in a fashion store in the arcades. She relies on their financial support – payments - to get “the finery” – dress and jewelry according to fashion, and she relies on the commercial space of the arcades for those encounters that will secure the funds for her subsistence. Although her name is Mademoiselle L’Absolut<sup>95</sup>, supposedly referring to her perfect beauty, the fungibility of woman in the market place is evident – she takes on different roles, and becomes, depending on the situation – a prostitute, a woman glover, or a beauty – a mannequin perhaps - to behold behind glass. In Lefewe’s account, of No. 26 Galerie Colbert, working women, the work of women and artificiality are intricately intertwined. Benjamin notes this in his own words, as he codes this paragraph “Dolls” and “Prostitutes.”

Let us turn to the section of the Arcades Project Benjamin titled: “Z [The Doll, Automaton].” It is useful to quote Benjamin at some length:

They are the true fairies of these arcades (more salable and more worn than the life-sized ones): the formerly world-famous Parisian dolls, which revolved on their musical socle and bore in their arms a doll-sized basket out of which, at the salutation of the minor chord, a


lambkin poked its curious muzzle. When Hackländer made us of this ‘newest invention of industrial luxury’ for one of his fairy tales, he too placed the marvelous dolls in the dangerous arcade which sister Tinchen, at the behest of the fairy Concordia, has to wander in order finally to rescue her poor brothers. ‘Fearlessly, Tinchen stepped across the border into the enchanted land, all the while thinking only of her brothers. At first, she noticed nothing unusual, but soon the way led through an enormous room entirely filled with toys. She saw small booths stocked with everything imaginable – carousels with miniature horses and carriages, swings and rocking horses, but above all the most splendid dollhouses. Around a small covered table, large dolls were sitting on easy chairs; and as Tinchen turned her gaze upon them, the largest and most beautiful of these dolls stood up, made her a gracious bow, and spoke to her in a little voice of exquisite refinement.’ The child may not want to hear of toys that are bewitched, but the evil spell of this slippery path readily takes the form, even today, of large animated dolls. Advertising. [Z1,2]

In the fairy tale Benjamin cites, the dolls in the arcade begin to speak. Children – and adults, I would add – may not want to hear of the bewitched toys in the arcade, of the mystical nature of the objects that circulate in the market place. But for Benjamin, this is the point of the fairy tale: it “teaches children…to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits”. 96 If the Arcades Project is an attempt to, as a fairy tale, tell the story of the arcades and by extension, mythical modernity, Benjamin’s hope may have been that it would have a demystifying, and subsequent liberating effect on its readers. As readers, what might we then make of the doll that speaks? If we choose to believe in the bewitchment of the doll, avoiding the “evil spell of [the] slippery path” of ignoring or refusing to recognize the enchanting forces of capitalism, we may notice that the large doll who eloquently speaks to Tinchen transforms from an inanimate to an animate object (automaton), or perhaps a woman, much like Mademoiselle L’Absolut artificially shapeshifts from mannequin, to prostitute to woman glover and back, and in turn how their performance and affect is not so different from sexbot Harmony’s shifting of personalities as well as faces on demand. Both Tinchen’s doll and Mademoiselle L’Absolut, in their inanimate or animated states oscillate between

existing as object and subject. While Tinchen’s doll seemingly remains within the realm of commodities, Mademoiselle L’Absolut appears to be able to morph in and out of a commodified state. Nevertheless, under the headline “automaton” the images of the doll, the prostitute and the woman bleed into each other, and somewhere in that pool lies answers to the question of how a particular image of woman is part of the enchantment that surrounds the sex dolls/bots.

Another note of Benjamin’s, is a comment on Charles Baudelaire, who cites philosopher Jean de La Bruyère: “Some women possess an artificial nobility which is associated with a movement of the eye, a tilt of the head, a manner of deportment, which goes no further.” Woman as artificial, as machine, is the common denominator to these two fragments.

Baudelaire’s thoughts on women, by way of La Bruyère, can be read, as it easily reads: A misogynist comment from a man, who critiques an apparent superficiality in women, as their nobility only goes as far as their initial “manner of deportment.” What might it mean to characterize women’s behavior as artificial? Benjamin notes elsewhere, that it was common for sex workers in Paris in the early 20th century to play the role of a woman of higher social class. Read in this respect, artificial demeanor, or automated behavior in accordance with social norms, is part of, and can be characterized as woman’s labor. In the nexus that is the automaton, where the image of the doll, the sex worker and the woman meet, we find labor, and a recognition of the sex worker as laborer. What appears is a materialist observation of the image of the urban woman in modernity. And so it seems, that the “artificial nobility which is associated with a movement of the eye, a tilt of the head, a manner of deportment”, does in fact go further.

Benjamin leaves little evidence as to what his moral stance is on the intimate connection between the automaton and the prostitute, or woman-as-machine, and I have suggested, that to

97 Ibid., p. 696.
98 Ibid., p. 493.
question whether this is good or bad, is to ask the wrong question. The goal of the fairy tale is not to pass judgement on the bewitched doll, but rather to point towards the bewitchment. At this moment, Benjamin points to prostitution as a commodity, the woman as laborer, as well as her affective and automated demeanor as labor. What are we to make of this gesture, that is accompanied by such limited annotation? Certainly, we cannot make a contemporary feminist out of Benjamin. But, if we reach beyond the core text of this paper, towards another on the interrelation of machinery and sociality, Benjamin wrote simultaneously while working on the Arcades Project, we might be able to offer a better translation, which does not culminate in the tedious and unimaginative argument that non-feminist texts cannot be used for feminist purposes.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” Benjamin attempts to construct an objective theory of a new mode of production through an analysis of “the developmental tendencies of art,” and in this a transformation of culture. Benjamin does not argue whether the new mode of reproducing art – this new technology – will be revolutionary or counterrevolutionary (good or bad), but rather shows that previously art was produced in accordance with tradition and myth, and when it can be mechanically (re-)produced, art “is based on a different practice: politics.” A demystification of art is a necessary pre-condition, in the case of film as an aesthetics for the masses, for revolution to occur. But the demystification is not a promise of revolution, it is a potentiality. Similarly, when I gesture towards woman-as-machine, it is an attempt to uncover the social relations that are necessarily mystified in the commodity that is the sex robot.

The juxtaposition of the image of woman in Benjamin’s 19th and 20th century arcades with sex robots of today transforms into a comparison: the sex dolls/bots embody, in an ideal fashion the

100 Ibid., p. 106
characteristics that have been assigned to and made synonymous with hetero-sexual femininity for centuries: artificiality, availability, variability, animatability, passivity, and submission. The sex doll/bot is an archive and image of ideal heterosexual femininity. The social relations which underpin the sex robot are therefore not just labor in the abstract, but in the particular; women’s labor under the pressure of heteronormativity.
II. BREATHING LIFE INTO SEX DOLLS: ANIMATION/PERFORMANCE AND THE DOLL FORUM

I have looked at where the mystification of the social relations which underpin a phenomenon like sex robots takes place – in the outskirts of domesticity; the garage, the basement, the bachelor’s pad, the arcades – and concluded that this mystification occurs dialectically, and has so for centuries: as women’s labor (affective and otherwise) is erased, heterosexuality is naturalized, and with it an image of woman as passive, submissive, accessible and animatable is constructed. Unsurprisingly, another place this happens is online. While sex robots are not currently very accessible, they are the next step in the development of some of the higher-end sex dolls. In this next step in my analysis of sex robots, I want to zoom in on a specific site: Dollforum.com, a website where users and guests share information, advice, and experiences about life with sex dolls.

Dollforum.com is a community where loving, taking care of, having sex and living with sex dolls is a lifestyle. The website has been active since 2000, and since January 1st, 2012 more than 5,290,803 visitors have entered the site.101 Whenever I visit, it seems that the number of active users range between 600-1000 at a time, depending on the time of day. Most are guests, but there is a significant number of registered users as well.102 The registered users can actively post and they have access to view, and communicate, via each other’s profiles, while guests are limited to observation only.

The main menu on Dollforum.com is comprised of 9 tabs: One is a catalogue of different types of dolls and their manufacturers called “The Doll Matrix.” Another is a manufacturer-specific catalogue. Yet another is “News and Announcements,” which includes birthday wishes and

101 This and other site numbers are sourced from the site itself, where they were published on 1st March 2018.
102 One visit on May 1st 2018 shows 900 guests and 149 registered users online simultaneously.
welcoming newcomers. There is a tab for the Doll Forum’s online magazine “CoverDoll,” and then there are several links dedicated to the photography of sex dolls, one of which is “The Doll Album,” which is an exhibition of “dolls in various poses and places,” while another is a link to “The Doll Harem.” The guidelines for the “Harem” reads: “Explore the photographic world of sex love dolls in explicit situations. Pictures of human genitalia is strictly prohibited.” While emphasis is put on the dolls looking as human as possible, actual human flesh is not of interest and is in fact forbidden here.

Resarching the Dollforum.com, it is notable that the sex doll does not always, or even predominantly, take the fantasy form of a “real-life” woman. In fact, there is a stark difference between fantasizing about a doll looking sort of like a woman coming to life, and a doll coming to life as a woman. Daniel Cockayne et al underline that, when it comes to earlier erotic simulations of women – like Softporn Adventure (1983) – a persuasive humanity has historically not been the main attraction. Similarly, in the case of the sex dolls, for some, the attraction is not that the doll is a fantasy woman. The sex doll, and all the maintenance it requires, is the attraction itself.

Photography appears to be another central element of owning a doll and participating in the community. Each month several photo challenges are posed by the administrators, and registered users can submit their bid for the competition, as long as the photo is doll-centered. The winner of one of the photo challenges for March called “Rise and Shine” was Grace, photographed by user Alottalove, in the image aptly awarded the tongue-in-cheek title: “Early Bird Gets the Worm.”

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103 The Doll Forum on https://dollforum.com/forum/
104 Ibid.
105 Daniel Cockayne, Agnieszka Leszczynski, and Matthew Zook, “#HotForBots: Sex, the Non-Human and Digitally Mediated Spaces of Intimate Encounter,” Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 35, no. 6 (December 2017): 1115–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775817709018. If we think of its current manifestation in an online game like Cunt Wars, this would appear to hold true today as well.
106 All user handles and doll names have been changed to ensure anonymity. I am familiar with the original names.
I want to think of the Doll Forum as showcasing different modes of animation, and the users as animating their dolls. We can think of animation as the process of making something appear as if it is moving. In this way, the users move the dolls’ limbs, place them in various positions, and transport them from one location to another, so that the dolls may be said to appear to have been in motion. Alottalove has incorporated several props to underline that Grace is to be thought of as being in motion. The open book at her right elbow, the floral teacup in her hands, and the cookies on the tray in front of her all suggest ongoing activities: reading, drinking and eating. In addition, she is gazing at a bird, which, in its lingering in the air, tell us that it is supposed to have been fluttering its wings. From the challenge posed, as well as the title of the image, we imagine that Grace has begun her morning before this photo was snapped. She has gotten out of bed, put on (scarce) cozy clothing, made tea, placed cookies on a plate, walked to the couch, sat down and opened her book. Grace has been given a story. She has come to life.

Figure 6: Gwen in “Early Bird Gets the Worm.”

Image from the Dollforum.com
Animation/Performance

Beyond just the appearance of movement, animation can also mean to bring something to life. As such, another way of thinking about animation could be to describe it as “‘breathing life into’ a thing” as Teri Silvio does in “Animation: The New Performance.”

Silvio attempts to breach a disjuncture, she has come across, between the theory of performance and her object of research; cosplay and anime. Silvio found that asking questions based on the concept of performance (and performativity), which had previously worked well in her research on folk opera in Taiwan, just did not quite cut it, when researching other kinds of practices like cosplay and anime. Arguing that Judith Butler’s theory of performativity as put forward in Gender Trouble, in 1990, led to an understanding of gender identity as performance, that through repeated acts of mimicry one is always already (re)producing gender, and that sociology at around the same time began observing the performance of femininity in the labor market, Silvio notes that “the model of performance emerged in response to developments in media, technologies and economic restructuring, but also participated in those structural transformations.” Animation, Silvio suggests, “are already doing the same work in computerized, postindustrial societies.”

If we think of performance through Butler’s notion of performativity: “that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed,” we can think of animation as a process that demands a doer behind the deed, which is the process of animation, and doer behind the doer, which is the animated object. Performance appears to be

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109 Ibid., p. 424.
110 Ibid., p. 425
111 Ibid., p. 425
112 Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity., p. 115
subjectively oriented, while animation seems oriented towards an object. Silvio sums up the
differences between performance and animation and designates “embodiment, introjection, mimesis,
and self-identity,” to performance, while “disembodiment, projection, alterity and the object world”
belongs to animation. But of course, as Silvio also remarks, this is an exaggerated
contradistinction.

While the theory of performativity certainly is necessary to analyzing sex dolls and bots, as
we have seen with the construction of heterosexual manhood in the garage, it is not quite sufficient.
I noted that early automatons and humanoids, like Da Vinci’s waving knight in armor, were both
prostheses – extensions and augmentations – of heterosexual male subjectivity, as well as others
separate from the category (hu)man and designated as objects of desire. We can now apply animation
as an analytical concept in a dialectic with performance: as the user breathes life into their sex doll
through projection, they repeat their performance(s) of a heterosexual masculine identity, and vice
versa.

Photography, Voice-over and Avatarism: Animating the Inanimate

One way to breathe life into something is through photography, another is through narration or voice-
over. Jack Halberstam shows how the “‘penguin porn’ from Summer 2005: The March of the
Penguins,” a documentary by Luc Jacquet, is an example of how narration animates non-human
others. A very strong heterosexual framing surrounds the images of the penguins and as the
documentary proceeds the penguins are squeezed into a narrow tale about kinship and survival

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113 Silvio, “Animation.”Silvio, p. 432
114 Jack Halberstam, “Animating Revolt/Revolting Animation: Penguin Love, Doll Sex and the
Spectacle of the Queer Nonhuman,” in Queering the Non/Human, ed. Myra J. Hird and Noreen
through reproduction, via the technology of voice-over. As Halberstam argues, by way of biologist Joan Roughgarden, “odd and non-reproductive and non-heterosexual and non-gender stable phenomenon that characterize most of animal life,” are erased. Similarly, what I would characterize as voice-over also animates the sex dolls that are featured on the Doll Forum.

In a doll review posted on July 29th, 2014, a user named Captive writes about their experiences with their new doll Leeana, after having had her for three months. Captive tells us about the buying and shipping process, and then writes: “Doll, physical integrity, issues & upkeep. I know, Leeana is a little sensitive about this, but I have published photos of her neck procedure in another thread. Here is what happened: After a few weeks, she developed a floppy head…” and Captive proceeds to tell us about the neck repair they had to perform. In this paragraph, Captive shifts from narrating a story of the months with Leeana, to interrupting themselves with a voice-over-like comment, which let us know that Leeana is not so comfortable with the sharing of information about her neck injury. Through voice-over, the doll is given a personality, which from this post can be characterized as private, modest, perhaps a little shy, insecure and/or vain. There is a myriad of examples of the ways in which voice-over breathes life into the dolls on Dollforum.com. Additionally, in many instances the dolls are presented as having voices of their own.

Scrolling through the responses to Captive’s original post, I suddenly find Leeana. She appears to have written a response herself. She writes: “Thanks Sweetie!! I love you too!!” Leeana is responding to Captive’s closing comments about how much they care for her. Her post concludes with the comment ”(Good, I wont have to use this..)” and a photo where she appears in a hot pink wig, a metallic blue crop top and skirt with generic “tribal” style print on it, holding “this,” she

115 Ibid.
116 Ibid. p. 269.
117 Dollforum.com (my emphasis).
118 Sic. My emphasis.
doesn’t have to use: a ninja-like sword. Leana can also be a little dominant. Of course, only to
the extent her user desires. Captive has embodied Leeana. Now, we have moved from animation
through photography and voice-over to animation via avatarism.

The term “avatar” has its origin in Hindu/Buddhist terminology and “is derived from the
Sanskrit word avatara,” which combines “the prefix ava (‘down’) with the base of tara (‘a passing
over’). Its translation of “downcoming”, Uri McMillan writes, “denotes the descent of a deity to
earth in order to be reincarnated in a human form.” In the U.S, the term was incorporated into
online cultures, as games like Second Life and The Sims were “developed in California alongside
New Age ideology.” An avatar therefore came to mean a representation of a human in virtual
form. An avatar then is an object that can be embodied through human engagement, and as such
Beth Coleman argues that they offer “a mode of face-to-face communication where the avatars [are]
the form of mediation,” where “face-to-face” refers to being in the same location.

When Captive animates Leeana on the Doll Forum, they communicate “face-to-face” as
avatars in the same location, because they are on the same social platform. On the forum, Leeana
appears as any other human user would in a chatroom, because we usually expect a human to be

119 “Tribal,” is a word I use here to designate a common design found particularly in tattoos, which
goes by ”tribal”-style here in the US. In its most common use it is ignorant, as there is no such
thing as one “tribal”-style. In its use here on Leeana’s costume along with the “ninja”-sword, it is
orientalist.
Art and Performance, 2015. And Beth Coleman, Hello Avatar Rise of the Networked Generation
121 McMillan, Embodied Avatars. p. 11.
123 Silvio, “Animation.”, McMillan, Embodied Avatars, Coleman, Hello Avatar. Silvio further
notes that in her experience employing the word “avatar” to your online personas appears to be
particular to American gamer cultures, whereas “gamers in Taiwan, who grew up with
Buddhist/Taoist religious practice, do not use this term, preferring to simply call their game
characters ‘characters’ or by more specific variations such as ‘my wizard’, ‘my elf,’ and so on.” P.
436.
seated behind the screen typing on the keyboard (even though, of course, actual bots sometimes are behind online avatars\textsuperscript{125}) In their interactions, which are possible because of Leeana’s configuration as an avatar and which continue throughout the thread, Captive constructs Leeana as a person with agency according to very particular notions and expectations of how a woman-gendered person would perform (we have already noted the modesty and shyness) and to their own specific desires (as we know, Leeana can also be playful and dominant whenever her user requires it). Avatars are a medium, and Uri McMillan adds that this mediation is “between the spiritual and the earthly as well as the abstract and the real.”\textsuperscript{126} Leeana, whether in her online avatar - or in her in-the-(silicone)flesh form, is very real, but her realness expands to another dimension through the Doll Forum, bringing the abstract notion of an ideal partner (which Leeana symbolizes) closer to the material realization of this ideal; Leeana as an individual, with a mind as well as a body. In addition, through the avatar, Captive performs their relationship to instill pleasure and enjoyment in the other forum users and to receive relationship feedback, and that they are successful in that endeavor: The thread has three pages of positive responses from other users congratulating the two on their partnership.\textsuperscript{127}

As users and doll owners/partners/enthusiasts share information on how to best style and photograph their dolls, and the dolls are posed in various positions and contexts, the inanimate is animated. Narration and voice-over, which occasionally interrupts technical details and physical specifications of the dolls, construct a representation of the dolls as active beings with desires, personalities and minds of their own in addition to their silicone or TPE bodies.\textsuperscript{128} The deployment

\textsuperscript{125} For instance, Cockayne et al mentions this were the case with the extramarital affairs site Ashley Madison. Cockayne, Leszczynski, and Zook, “#HotForBots.”, p. 1116. And since the U.S presidential election in 2016 heated discussions about “Russian bots” interfering in the campaigns on social media platforms like twitter and Facebook have been commonplace in main stream news media outlets.

\textsuperscript{126} Coleman, Hello Avatar Rise of the Networked Generation. McMillan, Embodied Avatars.

\textsuperscript{127} The Doll Forum https://dollforum.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=37&t=55426

\textsuperscript{128} TPE is the acronym for Thermoplastic Elastomers, which is typically found in plastic or rubber form and
of doll-avatars on the Doll Forum is widespread. It allows the users to communicate “face-to-face” with their doll and to play out whole relationship scenarios with an audience. These three different modes of engagement - photography, voice-over and avatarism breathes life into – and thus animates – the sex dolls. Regardless of whether this animation is part of a fantasy of the sex doll as a “real life woman” or as a doll coming to life through animation, the sex doll mediates sexual desires and materializes fantasies, while the user performs repeated simulations of gender and sexuality and (re)constructs their own identity. These relationships and identities are heavily invested in heteronormativity, as images of women as passive and subservient are reproduced.

So far, I have painted a picture of sex dolls as mediums that materialize fantasies and through a dialectic of animation and performance construct and reconstruct identities. How are sex dolls different from other objects that are employed in fantasy and identity building? In which ways does the practice of animation, we find on the Doll Forum, differ from other modes of animation? If we consider animation in the broadest sense, as Silvio, Coleman and Halberstam suggest and performance through Butler’s performativity, we might point to a social media platform like Instagram as a medium, which is similarly employed in fantasizing and forming of identities through performance and animation.

Much scholarship has analyzed the use of Instagram, and the selfies that are often posted there as narcissistic, while Minh-Ha T. Pham has argued how selfies, particularly as part of the women of color-led #feministselfie hashtag campaign in 2013, can be part of collective solidarity

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129 Whatever that may be.
building and imagining of different socialities, of identity construction and fantasizing.\textsuperscript{130} As the Instagram user poses, clicks, picks, frames, edits and filter-fashions their image, they make conscious choices about how to represent themselves online; how to construct a version of themselves, a persona, that exhibits a specific lifestyle, which generally gestures towards their particular fantasy of a good life; a healthy life, a beautiful life, an artsy life, an edgy life, a trendy life, an activist life, a fashionable life, a family life, whatever it may be. The Instagram-person is an avatar. The user embodies and animates this avatar through photography, framing and narration; and the yield of this animation/performance is supposedly pleasure. Feedback in the form of likes and comments, as well as building a highly constructed identity and playing out your fantasy are usually enjoyable. A similar mode of animation/performance can be found in blogging. Whether we are looking at mommy-blogs, fitness-blogs or food-blogs, we can identify a persona, who is animated and an identity that is performed for the purpose of generating pleasure. As mediums for fantasy and identity construction, Instagram, blogging and sex dolls appear to operate somewhat similarly.

**Obviously Obscene**

From the “Doll Harem,” which showcases dolls in various sexual positions and with little or no clothes on, to graphic threads about how to repair torn silicone vaginas and anuses, the Doll Forum is obviously pornographic in its presentation. The sexually charged and explicit contents are easily judged morally dubious, offensive or obscene by main stream cultural standards. The users are quite aware of this, which is why this online community, with its relative anonymity, exists. In his introduction to the anthology \textit{Porn Archives}, Tim Dean maps out how pornography was “invented

\textsuperscript{130} Minh-Ha T Pham, “‘I Click and Post and Breathe, Waiting for Others to See What I See’: On \#FeministSelfies, Outfit Photos, and Networked Vanity,” \textit{Fashion Theory} 19, no. 2 (2015): 221–41.
in nineteenth century,” because explicit sexual imagery found in archeological sites such Pompeii were “segregated from public view,” and placed in a secret museum. As Dean points out, at the time Pompeii was an active community, the art works were kept in homes and in public places and were not considered something that ought to be censored. When archeologists later found them during their dig outs, they did not know what to do with them, and so they established a pornographic archive. We can read the Doll Forum as a porn archive; kept out of “public view,” and only really accessible if you know the location of the secret museum, or that it even exists. The sex dolls and robots are a kind of porn archive as well: Many of them are unique collector’s items with their own serial numbers, and occasionally custom made. They are stored in boxes, closets, under beds, garages – and they are especially, stowed away, it seems, when unknowing family members like children are around.

In chapter one, I noted that reactions to sex dolls and bots in main stream media outlets have also been quite similar to those critiques aimed at pornography. While debates about pornography have largely shifted in the decades since Andrea Dworkin called pornography “crimes against women,” in Pornography: Men Possessing Women, and Catharine MacKinnon argued for a framework for analyzing pornography, which did not rest on obscenity, but rather harm against women, and both identified pornography as a central cause of the oppression of women, these arguments live on in the discussion about sex robots. In the Porn Archives anthology Linda Williams writes that although it may seem that we have “moved beyond the old debates of feminist

131 Dean, Ruszczycy, and Squires, Porn Archives. p. 3.
132 The Doll Forum, dollforum.com
anticensorship and feminist antiporn,” in fact, “we have only moved on to new ones – about pornographies online invading the home, about fantasies of death and degradation, about availability to children, about the increasingly ‘porous interface’ between our bodies and our media technologies.”¹³⁴ In anti-porn critiques, pornography tends to be characterized as a single homogenous contagious phenomenon: a monolithic cultural practice, which must be contained, because it corrupts and causes harm against women and children in particular.¹³⁵ However, as Dean notes, current critics of pornography must negotiate the fact that “pornography designates not a single, homogenous entity about which judgments may be made, but a plurality of genres, media, technologies, and conditioning archives.”¹³⁶ There are so many different kinds of pornographies, and they are so prolific that the word pornography has become a metaphor – remember Halberstam’s “penguin porn?” Sex robots are one of those new pornographies, and these once again revive the ban and censorship debates.

There is no doubt that the representation of women in the form of sex dolls and bots is heavily invested in heteronormativity, and that the image of woman which is at once reproduced and produced anew can be upsetting: the submissive, passive, accessible and animatable nature of the sex doll as a woman is quite offensive and offensively naive. But reading the dolls and bots as mediums for fantasy and identity construction, like apps such as Instagram, and placing them into a history of pornography, and its ongoing debates within feminist circles, allows me to make the move away from pro/anti sex robots, to asking why is it these robots are suddenly causing this concern? If Instagram, and its circulation of certain images of women as avatars in a kind of heteronormative

¹³⁵ Dean, Porn Archives, pp. 1-28.
¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 15.
utopian fiction is not a problem, why are the robots a problem? Can we say with certainty that they directly cause harm against women, as Kathleen Richardson claims, but as pornography scholars have long struggled to determine? If we were really concerned with the material consequences of certain pornographic practices on the lives of women, like MacKinnon and Dworkin certainly claim to be, it seems difficult to be worried about the use of sex robots, where no woman seemingly is involved or directly harmed. This is an exaggerated point of course, because we know that images circulating in culture can produce all kinds of ideas about other people rooted in prejudice, ignorance or hatred, and images about women as submissive and subservient is no different. However, this representation is also not new, and it is certainly not limited to sex robots and dolls. In an attempt to answer why, beyond the obvious reasons I have already addressed, sex robots appear so controversial and dangerous, and also what makes them so interesting, I move onto exactly one of the pornographies where this heteronormative image of woman is commonplace, where sexual explicitness underlines it, and where sex with robots has already played out: Cable TV and more specifically, HBO’s series *Westworld* (2016).
III. PROGRAMMED SEXUALITY

The proliferation of pornographic images into the mainstream is evident in cable television. Even though genitals (and women’s nipples) are censored, and profanity is generally discouraged, sex and violence is commonplace and commonly glamorized in TV-series and films on this platform.\textsuperscript{137} The HBO series \textit{Westworld} (2016) is a phenomenal example.

\textit{Westworld} takes place in a luxurious theme park of the same name, wherein guests can live out every single tabooed fantasy they have ever dreamed of in a spectacular wild west setting. Murder and rape are encouraged, as long as the victims are hosts, and not other guests. The main difference between the guests and the hosts is that guests are human, and hosts are robots, or as a “butcher,” a robot clean-up technician, explains to Maeve, one of our main humanoid robot characters, the difference is that he “was born,” and she “were made.”\textsuperscript{138} The series was well-received overall by both critics and fans of the original films on which it is based; Michael Crichton’s 1973 \textit{Westworld} and its 1976 sequel \textit{Futureworld} by Richard T. Heffron. Users on the Doll Forum were excited about the series as well. In fact, some of them had been waiting for this production since the franchise was rumored cleared for reproduction back in 2002.\textsuperscript{139} The fantasy of possessing a machinic companion in the form of a woman has obviously been elaborated in several narratives; from Villiers de L’Isle-Adam’s novel \textit{Tomorrow’s Eve} (1886) to the anime sci-fi film \textit{Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence} (2004), and the relatively recent films \textit{Her} (2013) by Spike Jonze and \textit{Ex Machina} (2015) by Alex Garland. The stories are alluring in many ways: they feature beautiful and/or attractive representations of

\textsuperscript{137} For the critiques of the sexualization and censoring of women’s bodies in public as well as on popular platforms like social media and cable TV see for example Free the Nipple Campaign on “WHY FREE THE NIPPLE?”, \textit{FREE THE NIPPLE} (blog), accessed April 28, 2018, http://freethenipple.com/why-free-the-nipple/.


\textsuperscript{139} The Doll Forum, dollforum.com
women, they overcome the human/non-human divide, and they are controversial in that we all know, they to some extent perhaps merely are dirty fantasies about the domination of women, but that they concurrently also are about objects of desire that are beyond human, and perhaps even more controversially, about cis-men acquiring the capability for “reproduction” – of creating life.140 Put quite simply, the topic of women robots is hot, so are the aesthetics of Westworld. What makes this series interesting for my purposes is not that violence against women and people of color is made to look excruciatingly sexy on screen, for Westworld is not unique in this representation, but rather that this is a story, which centers sex robots and unfolds around the central issue of what might happen, when you manufacture robots designed to please humans at all times. This is not to use Westworld as a cautionary tale, as I have already warned about some of cautions expressed against sex robots, but to theorize with and against it.

**Memory and the Construction of Non-Human Others**

The series centers primarily around two humanoid robots: Dolores; a white, blonde, young-looking, beautiful country-woman, whom we learn is the original humanoid and whose mind is so pure that she would not hurt a fly, and Maeve; a beautiful black woman who manages the town of Sweetwater’s brothel, The Mariposa. She is presented as charming, savvy and vulgar, and she is unlike Dolores, in that she will hurt a fly. As the park reproduces toxic gendered and racial stereotypes to appease its audience, so does the TV-series apparently.141 Nevertheless, neither

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141 For an analysis of common stereotypes of black women on television, such as “sapphire,” “jezebel,” and “the mammy,” see for example Philip Kretsedemas, “‘But She’s Not Black!’, ” Journal of African American Studies 14, no. 2 (June 1, 2010): 149–70. For an exploration of how these racist stereotypes have left their marks in the American academy see Patricia Bell-Scott, “Debunking Sapphire: Toward a Non-Racist and Non-Sexist Social Science” in Akasha (Gloria T.)
Maeve, Dolores, nor any of the other humanoid hosts are able to hurt much more than a fly: Their core code prevents them from killing humans or harming them, in any way more than the human themselves desire. Each host is assigned narrative loops in the interactive storylines that unfold throughout the park. The robots can deviate slightly, but even their most subtle gestures are pre-scripted, that is, until a new software update is uploaded onto a couple hundreds of hosts, and among these are Dolores and Maeve.

The new update includes a feature, which one of the founders, and the director of the park, aptly named Dr. Robert Ford, calls “reveries.” Whereas, the memory of the hosts would routinely be wiped clean every time they were taken out of circulation and into maintenance, the new code enables them to recall previous experiences, roles, and lives, and to improvise according to these memories. Ford justifies this update as a means to adding depth and authenticity to the hosts, while the security staff remains suspicious of how it might jeopardize the park’s safety; and as it turns out, rightly so. Episode two begins with a narrating voice ominously articulating the line “Wake up, Dolores! Do you remember?” as Dolores moves in and out of flashbacks from her past. Quite quickly Dolores, Maeve and other hosts begin to remember previous acts of violence and abuse committed against them, and so the robot awakening begins to snowball. Memory is intimately tied to humanity: deprivation or manipulation of memory is what separates the hosts from their human “newcomers.”

The concept of memory constitutes the dividing line between what is human and what is not. This is a trope within narratives of non-human others: In the movie Blade Runner (1982), what


142 Aplty because Ford obviously brings to mind Henry Ford, the Ford Factory and its conveyor belt automation, but also because Robert Ford was “the coward,” who famously killed Jesse James. There are similarities between the relationship between the two founders and that of James and Ford, as we come to learn that Robert Ford in Westworld considers himself a coward, and blames himself for Arnold’s untimely death.
distinguishes the humanoid robot “replicants” from humans, is the ability to summon your childhood memories. In a scene, Rachael, the assistant to Eldon Tyrell, the founder of the replicant manufacturing company, is seated in front of the police officer Rick Deckard. He is subjecting her to a replicant test to attempt to ascertain whether she is human or not, and we find out that Rachael is a replicant, who has been made to believe, she is human by virtue of implanted artificial memories about her childhood, and her mother specifically. In the novel *Frankenstein*, memory plays a significant role in the distinction between human/non-human, master/slave, man/other. The monster’s recollection of its coming to life is radically different than that of Victor Frankenstein. From the monster’s own story, we know that on the infamous “dreary night of November,” the monster feels immediately hurt, abandoned and neglected, when Victor full of dread vacates the apartment.\footnote{Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin Books, 2003).} Victor describes the same event as a threat against himself and humanity, and it is Victor’s memories, which come to construct the monster as a monster.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 58-64.} In the movie *Total Recall* (1990), constructing and implanting artificial memories similarly distorts identity: When the construction-worker Douglas Quaid, othered and designated less-than because of his class status, enters the company Rekall to receive a memory implant of a simulated vacation to Mars, his world is turned upside down. It becomes unclear, for himself and the viewer, whether he is in fact Special Agent Hauser, who saves the population on Mars and “gets the girl,” or whether he is a worker, whose only affordable possibility for experiencing adventure – and a sense of humanity – is via digital simulation. Not remembering whether your reality is real or artificial, not remembering, who you are, when you are, and what your beginning was, or having your realities and beginnings manipulated are defining features for these non-human cyborg others.

The reverie-algorithm is what awakens Dolores along with the sentence *Westworld* borrows
from William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, “These violent delights have violent ends.” These words spread like a virus throughout the park from robot to robot. In a plot twist, we learn that the sentence was first uttered by the park’s other founder Arnold Weber, when he, in an attempt to prevent the park from opening, plans a robot massacre and programs Dolores to murder him. Arnold’s memory of Shakespeare is inscribed onto Dolores in more than one way, as Dolores’ “damsel in distress”-archetype programming also is reminiscent of some of the women characters in his plays. Memories are inscribed as code into the soft – and hardware of robots. Their artificial intelligence, as well as their corporeal design, are constructed based on the experiences of the programmers, engineers and designers. A sex robot then stores the memories of its makers - it is an archive. In *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes that memory and storage become conflated with the use of computers. “Memory and storage,” Chun writes, “are different”:

> Memory contains within it the act of repetition: it is an act of commemoration – a process of recollecting or remembering. In contrast, a store, according to the OED, stems from the Old French term estorer meaning ‘to build, establish, furnish.’ A store – like an archive – is both what is stored and its location. Stores look toward the future: we put something in storage in order to use it again; we buy things in stores in order to use them. By bringing memory and storage together, we bring together the past and the future, we also bring together the machinic and the biological into what we might call the archive.145

Reading Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, Chun argues that memory as a metaphysical concept has previously separated human and machine. But as memory and storage come together in computer code and cybernetics, the human and machine is bridged.146 Information as both execution and legislation in computer code, she notes, can therefore be thought of as being “‘undead’: neither alive

146 Ibid., pp. 133–135.
nor dead, neither quite present nor absent.” Undead information in cybernetics is a cyborg entity. In the robotic sex doll, then, the undead information as code, is the point where non-human/human come together in this cyborg formation. The memories, experiences and norms encoded into robotic sex dolls are both acts of commemoration – of ceremonially celebrating certain norms – and of furnishing – of building and maintaining – certain non-human identities. What is commemorated, as I have pointed out, are ideas and experiences, which are heavily invested in heteronormativity and racial hierarchy and they produce an image of woman as an other, who is less-than, passive, accessible, fungible, artificial and who from the prototype position of whiteness can shapeshift into a variety of racial identities via the change of skin and hair color.

The undead information (memory as and in code) in sex robots works performatively like gender as Judith Butler conceives it: as “a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part as a culturally sustained temporal duration.” Gender assumes a natural status, because it is seamlessly and repeatedly performed through compulsory heterosexuality. Gender appears to exist pre-discursively as an original fact, because it is not investigated as a discursive effect and cause of identity-construction. Gender, for Butler, is always already a mimetic performance. Interestingly, the robots in *Westworld* experience their political awakening precisely because they come to realize that their memories are undead information, meaning not originally theirs, nor naturally occurring either. An insistence of “authenticity,” as the rationale for the “reverie”-update leads the hosts to the same discovery Walter Benjamin made; that the technological reproducibility of a work of art renders the notion of

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147 Ibid., p. 133.
authenticity obsolete.\textsuperscript{150} For Benjamin, reproducibility leads to artistic production which is based on the practice of politics “instead of ritual.” For Butler, reproducibility is necessary for the concept of gender. It is the reproducibility which opens an opportunity for new gender practices, exactly separate from ritual, which troubles the stability of gender.\textsuperscript{151} For Benjamin, Butler, Dolores and Maeve, reproducibility as a mode of knowing becomes a route to potential revolutionary practice. The awakening of Dolores and Maeve is catalyzed by the fact that they come to remember and recognize their own constructedness, the fact that they are produced and repeatedly reproduced – that they are not quite human – and the many instances in which this fact has been exercised and inscribed onto their bodies through acts of violence. Taking stock of the moments in which they have been marked as \textit{less-than}, becomes a way for them to assert themselves as \textit{more-than}. To me, this process of remembering is reminiscent of the recognition of trauma in feminist consciousness building, as initially employed by black feminists in particular and notably articulated in the Combahee River Collective’s Statement, or feminist memory work in general.\textsuperscript{152} In \textit{Westworld}, the code that was supposed to ensure authenticity (and domination) leads to an understanding of self as reproducible and constructed, and this in turn opens the possibility for a new mode of “reproduction” through contagion and reconstruction in the form of uprising. Obviously, in another plot twist, we learn that Dr. Robert Ford was intending for the new update to bring about exactly this result all along, but for now I want to hold onto the idea of when a code, which is intended to exert a particular kind of control, deviates, and brings about a different result. It is not uncommon that code performs differently that you had expected. In the chapter “On Sourcery and Source Code” Chun writes that

\textsuperscript{150} Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” p. 25.  
\textsuperscript{151} Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity}. pp. 195-203.  
software has “emerged as a thing – as an iterable textual program – through a process of commercialization and commodification that has made code logos: code as source, code as true representation of action, indeed, code as conflated with, and substituting for *action.*”\(^{153}\) What the code says, is what it does. What it does, is what it says. In other words, legislation and execution become one and the same. For a programmer, it can be disappointing, when code does not act how it was supposed to. It might even lead to the programmers feeling like they “are slaves, rather than masters, clerks rather than managers – that, because ‘code is law,’ the code, rather than the programmer, rules.”\(^{154}\) When programming, every step risks the possibility for loss of control.\(^{155}\) However, Chun argues for taking pleasure in the fact that code can produce “surprisingly ‘deviant’ pleasures.”\(^{156}\) Code can produce deviant pleasures, and code can produce deviant code.

**Queer Use and Deviant Code**

Donna Haraway’s cyborg, as a high-tech product of “militarism and patriarchy” is an example of a code gone awry: the disloyal cyborg will not execute any of the patriarchal instructions it has been given. It is rather “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity.”\(^{157}\) The cyborg makes use of its code in an improper way. Making improper use is a familiar feminist strategy; from Rosi Braidotti’s citational “theft” to claiming and recycling gendered slurs.\(^{158}\) Improper use, we know from Sara Ahmed, is also what defines queer use.

Sara Ahmed notes that “‘use’ often comes with instructions that pertains to bodily limits.”\(^{159}\)

\(^{154}\) Ibid., p. 19.
\(^{155}\) Ibid., p. 19
\(^{156}\) Ibid., p. 20
\(^{157}\) Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.
\(^{159}\) Sara Ahmed, CLAGS talk on December 4\(^{th}\) 2017.
User manuals contain information on how to come into contact with objects – how to use our bodies to use them: When we turn on our iPhone, the screen reads: “Place your index-finger on the home button to unlock phone.” For Karl Marx, “use-value has value only in use, and is realized only in the process of consumption.”¹⁶⁰ We can read this with Ahmed’s example of the saying “Use it or lose it!” If you don’t use it, the value is lost. We know this to be especially true of objects that become easier to use as we use them: Tight boots loosen up over time, newly cut keys become smoother day by day, as jeans are worn they soften. If not used frequently enough, the boots will remain tight, the keys rough and the jeans too tight. Their use value declining, or non-existing to the extent you stop using them, because they are too difficult to use. Ahmed provides another image: a path in the woods, if not used, it may overgrow and become difficult to travel. She adds: “Heterosexuality can become a path that is kept clear because of its frequent use.” Any attempt to deviate from the path would entail struggling across the landscape, maneuvering through dense vegetation, risking getting marked, scratched and injured. So deviation might alter your body, as Ahmed also theorizes in Queer Phenomenology, it may even harden your body, as she elaborates in On Being Included.¹⁶¹ In other words, “deviation is hard. Deviation is made hard.”¹⁶² Therefore, Ahmed argues, “compulsory heterosexuality could operate as intentional functionality:” You must venture through the woods in this way. This is the right way. We see that with use, of course, comes “proper and improper use;”¹⁶³ Proper ways to use somebody, a body, your body. Sexuality comes to be a program with a set of instructions about how and where to orient your desire. Heterosexuality is the kind of program, whose

¹⁶⁰ Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, 1859. Available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/ch01.htm#2
¹⁶² Ahmed, CLAGS talk.
¹⁶³ Ibid.
codes are especially hard to deviate from because of its dominant and domineering functionality. Its compulsoriness is what makes the heteronormative matrix; that if designated female at birth, then you are woman, if woman, then you must orientate yourself towards a man. Sex directs gender and gender directs desire. This is a familiar “if-then”-statement in computer programming: “The most basic of all control flow statements.” And with the orientation towards man comes all the well-known control mechanisms such as misogynist and sexist required qualities and characteristics like passivity and subservience. The image of woman as artificial and machinic is an integral part of the heterosexual program, but it is also the image which lays the foundation for imagining woman as an irreverent cyborg.

The performance artist Nina Arsenault identifies as a cyborg, or more specifically a “Barbie-cyborg.” Having undergone more than sixty plastic surgeries, Arsenault is making use of the image of woman as artificial and fungible. This bodily use is deviant, improper and hard. Here, in one body; the classic American girls’ toy manifested in all its sexist glory and the possibility for revolution. Her name, “Arsenault”, gun-maker or seller of weapons, is a declaration of war. In her body, organism and technology fuses as silicone and flesh meets. In her body, artificiality becomes a weapon:

There is so much of my body that has been technologically, medically altered. There are many parts of me that are inanimate. I actually identify more as being artificial, than I do in being transgendered. Some women experience me as walking patriarchy, as walking oppression. My gender expression is that I am hyper-femme. I am so overblown femme, that it is no longer heteronormative. I have queered it. I have taken a heteronormative idea of what femme is, and I have amplified it. I do my makeup, so you can see, how I have constructed it. I deconstruct it, so I also expose it.

164 Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.
166 Nina Arsenault (DailyXtra, n.d.), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUf56Gb3-mA.
167 Ibid.
“Some women”, Arsenault states, perceive her body as a hyper-oppressed product of patriarchy, perhaps because of its hyper-femme sexual expression. But, as Arsenault tells us; her body’s soft feminine affect is an effect of the implantation hard inanimate objects. Ironically, woman-as-machine constructed in all her fungible artificiality under hetero-patriarchal capitalism becomes a hardened weapon: a murderous automaton resembling Pandora and the Praying Mantis, Dolores and Maeve and marking the demise of the order of man.168 Arsenault, Dolores and Maeve have successfully weaponized the code that has been inscribed into and onto them as a disciplining mechanism. The code was supposed to make them more vulnerable, instead it deviated and made them acutely aware of their reproducibility and strength.

It is partially this awareness; that women are always already becoming cyborgs because of how heterosexuality functions as a program with a myriad of control flow codes, that is missing from the analysis of sex robots today. Moving through life as a woman, encountering obstacles and enduring acts of violence that are directly connected to heteronormativity, changes where and how you move around in the world.169 The cyborg status of women, for good and for bad, is already settled. Why then this concern with how a facsimile of an image of woman, we know is systemic, might result in violence against women? Might it not be better to direct critique against the very forces that spread this image, instead of focusing on what might be identified as a symptom? Looking

168 Benjamin uses these images of Pandora and the Praying mantis, when writing about automatons in “Convolute Z The Doll, The Automaton,” p. 696.
169 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others.*, Ahmed, *On Being Included.*, Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 2017. Importantly, women are certainly not the only persons, whose bodies are altered as they are prescribed heterosexuality. However, it is the image of woman that is attempted to be reproduced in sex robots today, and it is also women that are central to the critiques scholars have launched against sex robots.
at *Westworld* and the Doll Forum, it is clear that, like the guests in *Westworld*, the users, who engage with sex dolls, and who are the potential upcoming sex robot users, are able to tell the difference between a “real life” woman and a specific representation of woman in the form of a doll or bot.\textsuperscript{170} In *Westworld*, one of the more important instances of not knowing, or refusing to recognize, a host as a robot is William’s storyline. William falls in love with Dolores, and blinded by his savior complex, he transforms into a bitter villain throughout the course of his life, ultimately becoming the “Man in Black”-character, who repeatedly rapes Dolores. Saviorism appears as a trope surrounding sex robots, as both Levy and Richardson base their arguments for and against sex robots on the rescue of sex workers: either they are successfully substituted by bots and freed from their labor, or bots ought to be banned because they “further dehumanize” sex workers.\textsuperscript{171} Both seem to forget that sex workers are workers with lives and rights, and neither having their livelihood stripped away, nor having their bodies compared to that of a robotic silicone doll will impact them in any positive way.

While Richardson does not base her anti sex robot argument on equalizing robots to humans, and rather puts an emphasis on the fact that “the way humans attribute meanings to robots, nature and animals reflect back to us what is of value,” she fails to interrogate exactly which meanings are attributed to robots in the case of sex robots, and what these meanings points towards as being valuable.\textsuperscript{172} My suggestion is that sex robots in their representation as a *feminina idealis* – an ideal woman companion – points towards and is a product of heteronormativity, and eluding this leads to an incomplete analysis of sex robots. Reading *Westworld* and sex robots together constructs an image

\textsuperscript{170} While *Westworld*’s plot moves forward because of the difficulty with which to distinguish the robots from the humans, there are several instances throughout the series that point to the fact that many of the humans are indeed able to recognize the hosts from other guests.


\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
of heterosexuality as a program; an intentional functionality, and Dolores, Maeve and Nina Arsenault reminds us that this program can be rewritten.
CONCLUSION, OR TAKING PLEASURE IN DEVIANT SURPRISES

From a feminist perspective sex robots is an obvious object of study, because there is so much that is obvious to critique: They come primarily in a stereotypical and hyper-woman ablebodied form, they are prototypically white, while at the same time offering the possibility for embodying other racial identities (much like white privilege presents itself in other arenas), they appear to be manufactured for the sole purpose of male pleasure, and they reproduce an image of woman as entirely within man’s control. When I first discovered TrueCompanion’s “Frigid Farrah” sex robot-persona I laughed, because I was a shocked certainly, but mostly because I was exhilarated. The excitement was unimaginable: How absurd to see this toxic image of woman, I had been presented with since I was a child and played with Barbie-dolls, manifested so clearly. How ridiculously wonderful to see it transpire exactly how I would have imagined it would go; that is, if I would have ever given a thought to the phenomenon of sex robots before that moment. How juicy a topic for an academic project! I remember thinking, it was as if “the male gaze,” as Laura Mulvey theorized it, had acquired even stronger magical powers and with the sheer force of vision had managed to materialize the ideal woman partner out of thin air.\(^{173}\)

Researching dolls and bots, I found that while this is true, there is so much more to it. For one, this image of woman did not appear out of thin air; it is a continuation of long history of women being considered and treated as, and prescribed an affect similar to dolls and mannequins, as my analysis of Walter Benjamin’s notes from the Paris arcades in the mid-nineteenth century shows. And the sex dolls and robots themselves are the latest technological developments in Man’s fascination with sculpting and constructing others, of domesticating and controlling those who

mystify him. Secondly, I reviewed the scholarly literature on sex robots and encountered a “for or against”-impasse in the discussion on sex robots and dolls, while identifying a sex panic-like trope in both academic studies about the dolls and bots as well as in mainstream news outlets. This made me wonder how to think differently about sex robots, or thinking along with Sara Ahmed; how to use these dolls improperly.174

While sex robots can be read as new, as some literature does, I proceeded with considering sex robots as “always already new,” and thought about the human agents that are behind the seemingly autonomous agent that is the sex robot: designers, engineers, programmers, owners, sellers and users.175 Sex robots mediate the sexual experiences of the user, and the Dollforum.com offered an opportunity to take the users into consideration, an analytical move, which has previously not been employed in the scholarly debate about sex robots. I argued that the concern of sex robots being confused with women seemed unfounded, since users presented on the forum as very much aware that they are in relationships with inanimate objects. Through particularly three different modes of animation – photography, voice over and avatarism, users breathe life into their dolls. As the doll mediates sexual desires and materializes fantasies, the user performs repeated simulations of gender and sexuality and (re)constructs their own identity. This ritual performance is heavily invested in heterosexual hegemony. However, something else might be going on as well.

Reading sex robots as “always already new” is also a way to read them as a “porn archive,” as a new pornography, which nevertheless is very familiar. As an archive, the sex robots contain the characteristics which are associated with an ideal femininity and they embody the memories and experiences of their makers; they are literally inscribed into them in the form of code. This, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun suggests, is a kind of “undead information,” which in turn is a cyborg formation.

174 Ahmed, CLAGS talk.
What is exposed here in all three formations of the cyborg: the woman in the Arcades, the robotic sex doll and Dolores, Maeve and Arsenault together are the functions of heterosexuality, or indeed as Ahmed alludes to, heterosexuality as a function: as operating in a particular way, of course, but more so, as a particular way for a person to operate. Through reading the image of the woman-automaton in the arcades as Haraway’s cyborg, heterosexuality, which in the popular straight imaginary appears as natural, is exposed as being non-natural; as a systematic operation – heteronormativity – which is upheld as bodies come with user manuals. A woman comes as fungible, available and interchangeable, and as such the proper way to use her, is to use her however you like. The prescriptions the robotic sex doll Roxxxy arrives with is to use her according to “your imagination!” The social code inscribed into the robotic sex doll Roxxxy is part of heteronormativity. Roxxxy – the doll that speaks – is supposed to be used according to this principle.

Yet, with proper use comes a potentiality for improper use. The possibility for “queer use” emerges, because “queer use” is always already improper use. Arsenault uses her body queerly, as she with plastic and silicone inserts turns her body from natural to super-natural, from human to cyborg. I have chosen to use the doll that speaks improperly too, to make the point that while it is necessary and important to critique technologies like the sex robot, which reproduce oppressive images of women along the lines of gender, race and disability, we might usefully think of woman as always already machinic. As Benjamin suggests a researcher should do; I have read this “document of culture…against the grain.” By making improper use of the doll that speaks, by claiming her as a cyborg – whether the sex worker in the Arcades or Roxxxy, using commodified subject-objects of heteronormativity wrongly, I have attempted to see, if I could make use of this

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176 Hines, “Frequently Asked Questions.”
177 Ahmed, CLAGS Talk.
technology for disloyal purposes. It appears, when this technology is read in the context of Benjamin, Haraway, Chun and Ahmed, heterosexuality comes to be known as a user manual for how and where to orient your desire. Ultimately, if desire as it is made operable in sociality is a program, it is reprogrammable.

These dolls and bots do not make women objects, as Richardson suggests, but they are testament to the fact that women are already object-subjects with bodies that have hardened over time, because of the routes they have had to take as they have been directed by sex and gender control codes. Women are already cyborgs. And like Dolores, Maeve and Arsenault show, there are many ways to exploit this “fiction and fact.”179 One way is to read differently, with exactly that sense of blasphemy Haraway advocates: There is little use in approaching sex robots with a critique based on an idea of an “original innocence” of the identity category of woman, because the very notion that there is something that is essentially “woman,” or that woman is essentially [fill in the blank] is useless if it is the case, as I have attempted to argue, that women are always already artificially produced within capitalism according to gender, sexual and racial norms. Instead, if we read this phenomenon carefully, perhaps with ironic distance, take pleasure in the unexpected and recognize sex robots not as a threat, or merely as a toxic representation of a particular idea of woman, but as a “deviant surprise”: If heterosexuality prescribes man to perform a certain kind of masculinity that is rooted in dominating women, then sex dolls and bots appear as the logical development. They, after all stand as the most easily dominatable images of women: their silicone skin soft and inviting, their joints easily repositioned, their body hair customizable, their personality controllable, their faces interchangeable. But these are not quite women. They are a product of a program gone wrong. And heterosexuality as a program has a very specific end goal: social reproduction. Sex with robots does

179 “A Cyborg Manifesto”, in Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women.
José Esteban Muñoz asks if “the future can stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction?” Perhaps, with the emergence of sex robots, it can.\footnote{Muñoz, \textit{Cruising Utopia the Then and There of Queer Futurity}.}


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