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The robot and the puppet: Fantasies in Disguise

Report on the development of a hypothesis on anthropomorphization.

This text accompanies the video "Machina visits Coppélia; Robot and Puppet, Doppelgänger in Anthropomorphisation." The development of a hypothesis on anthropomorphism through a field study is presented by doubling the field research and its reflection in the peculiarities of the media of video and text.

Oliver Schürer

We humans have millennia-old fantasies about other beings. We animate them as humanoid creatures so that they are available to us as references or substitutes. At times, they might be generous or selfish, helpers or predators, playful or earnest, reliable or unpredictable. Fantasies may be among the mightiest techniques we possess. We homo sapiens continue to exist by means of techniques.

How we do things and what we know about things gets materialised in, and practised by, the gradual development of tools, machines, media, devices, and other technologies. Today, technology is capable of auto-controlling itself. Those technologies fuse different kinds of autonomy for mobility, communication, and decision making. We infer ever more possibilities to make these technologies penetrate the objects and spaces of our everyday life. As with previous technologies, we are increasingly adapting as we optimise them according to any desired idea of self-efficacy.

This is a short story about this new category of technology – of machines and devices that decide by themselves and behave as if they were alive. Especially in the Western understanding of the world, we find this new technological condition without cultural references. As we are strictly conditioned to distinguish precisely between either animate or inanimate, either mind or matter, either subject or object. The one excludes the other. An object can't be alive. But robots behave as if they were alive, and artificial intelligences decide as if they understand. Here we find ourselves opposite to our technologies as our fantasies in disguise. We

transform with the social and cultural consequences of the embodiment of our fantasies and the meanings we relate to them.

But - Who is mirroring whom? Who is controlling whom?

Among these technologies, AI-controlled humanoid robots are most fascinating and at the same time most irritating devices, as they mimic us. Their precursors had been automata, constructed already in ancient times in many cultures around the world. But the first biomechanical automata, supposed to explain human body functions in early 18th century France, began to dissolve the hitherto rather clear distinction between the living and the inanimate in the European understanding. During the 19th century, those automata became increasingly popular by means of ever more sophisticated and at the same time increasingly simplified items, ranging from high luxury goods to children's toys. This obsession led to coin the latter half of the 19th century "The Golden Age of Automata." In this era, the ballet *Coppélia* was developed.

The ambiguity of automata between the living and the inanimate and humans between being passionate and being mechanic is addressed as kinds of deception in the ballet. They are played out in two directions to provide the sociocultural frame for the satiric endeavour. On the one hand, the automaton gives a woman the image of the prototypical idea of the bourgeois woman being domestic and educated, which is socioculturally attractive. On the other hand, the female protagonist gives the automaton, the prototypical idea of mechanical perfection, being discrete and repetitive, which is socioculturally utilitarian. The differences between women and woman-automata are not only visually blurred in these deceptions. Also, the same sociocultural values get applied without respect to the living or the inanimate, and the passionate or the mechanical.

For this woman, being educated entails being precise. As well as being domestic, it entails being discreet. Both are at the same time useful and attractive. Hence, personal and mechanical characteristics are getting transferred between the woman and the automaton.

In an undercurrent, one finds another kind of automaton right vis-a-vis to the female protagonist. Torn between woman and woman-automaton, the male protagonist is incapable of reacting other than according to his sociocultural conditioning. In yet another undercurrent, *Coppelia* the doll evolves into a puppet by realizing her ability to imitate movement.

This discussion of anthropomorphism had been realised by programming the humanoid robot *Machina* to visit the doll *Coppelia*. In a manner of

speaking, by means of a 21st-century high-tech device, we are going to visit a 19th-century narrative about young love that was a social satire of the time. By following the sociocultural tension between love and satire, we'll find some of its premises, anthropomorphization versus objectification, technology as the projection of self-efficacy, and as the embodiment of phantasms. Of course, this arouses human jealousy, not because of the mechanical abilities, but because of the loving attention.

We are the first generation that is about to live and work with technology that resembles us humans. Additionally, we are the first to see how well-established cultural fantasies, robots, and artificial intelligences become artefacts of the banal everyday. Today we witness this beginning. Already the societies and cultures we are part of, the groups and individuals that we are, as well as our super- and infrastructures - all being transformed already by the introduction of these technologies.

Human fantasies of artificial intelligence-equipped humanoid robots come in a variety of guises and tastes: from servants and butlers to soldiers, playmates, sex partners, and entertainers. Whatever the human fantasies might strive for, we will have complex, mobile, autonomous machinery becoming part of our lifeworld, acting in our immediate spatial proximity.

Social humanoid robots get shaped like us – partly – along what is desired to be utilitarian in material space. Artificial intelligences mimic our way of thinking – vaguely – in what is understood to be utilitarian in decision making. In many senses, both technologies are our Doppelgänger, partly and vaguely serving a new utilitarian corporeal reality.

New technologies, such as artificial intelligence and robotics, question the capabilities of our bodies by imitating both human thinking and sensuality. In the past, industrialisation has made our strength and pace obsolete. Today, our intelligence and our dexterity seem to be becoming obsolete. Again, we have to reinvent modes of our existence as individual and assembled, living bodies, in contrast to the machinic systems we have invented.

But - What are we capable of? What do we want to become?

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Method:

Machina and her friend, agent provocateurs in anthropomorphism.
Empirical phenomenological approach.

Literate Jean Paul first coined the term Doppelgänger. Contrary to many later applications of the Doppelgänger (from S. Freud up to early 21st-century media buzz), in Jean Paul it is not merely a physical double or straightforward uncanny. Rather, it serves as a challenge to one's sense of identity and connection to the world.

Coppélia may refer to the Latin word "copula," a bond or connection. Machina is the Latin word for either machine, artifice, or trick. It originates from the Greek word "mechane," meaning "contrivance" or „stage machine.“

Doppelgängers in the project:

The dancer - Coppélia, the stage role.

The friend - Machina, the robotic device.

The human dancer - The human friend.

Coppélia, the stage role - Machina, the robotic device.

Results:

Despite the fact that a robot is a rather obvious technical device, we offered a condensed version of the well-known narrative of the Hero's Journey to the audiences and the media: The robot has been narrated by naming and gendering it „Machina,“ and giving it the agenda that „she“ would „follow her intention“ in „wanting“ to „learn“ how to dance like a puppet.

Interestingly, this kind of suspending disbelief (S. T. Coleridge) did not develop to stay temporal, as it would be typically for theatrical performances. This kind of suspension remained permanent and was interpreted anthropomorphically in a variety of ways by the opera audience and various media.

The hypothesis we draw from the project is that the suspension served as a mental means to familiarize oneself with the known unknown of a humanoid robot. Sharing that kind of familiarization with others leads to a common insight, hardening the narrative, and turning it into a pervasive understanding.

The various audiences at the opera, on TV, and on social media seemed to replace their individual known unknowns about a new technology with the permanent suspension of disbelief by means of both internalizing and sharing the narration accompanying the technology.

We showed how an offered, well-known narrative is taken up willingly; how it elicits understanding; and by means of various channels of media, how it gets woven into the fabric of many life worlds and contexts of understanding.

By taking the suspension of disbelief as a shared understanding, individuals join the Doppelgänger situation with the technology. The narration seems to allow for projecting one's own individual pursuits onto the tech device. By that, individuals are animating it with their own striving: Allowing the Doppelgänger situation to serve as a mental device to confirm one's own sense of identity and connection to the world. Observing another entity, living through striving like one's own, gives a strong feeling of connectedness and understanding.

Further research:

Working out the hypothesis scientifically.

Would the tendency to anthropomorphize inanimate objects create a tendency to reify people who are perceived as other?

Further references

<https://h-a-u-s.org/>

The robot and the doll at the H.A.U.S. blog:

Robot Machina will visit the opera performance of the doll "Coppélia" at the Vienna Volksoper:

<https://h-a-u-s.org/index.php/2019/03/03/robot-visits-the-opera-performance-of-the-doll-coppelia-at-the-vienna-volksoper-5-2-19/>

Robot Machina and her friend Eva reminisce on visiting the windup doll "Coppélia" at the Vienna Volksoper 5.2.19:

<https://h-a-u-s.org/index.php/2019/03/07/robot-machina-and-her-friend-eva-reminisce-on-visiting-the-doll-coppelia-at-the-vienna-volksoper-5-2-19/>

Robot "Machina" and Puppet "Coppélia", a video study in anthropomorphization (DANCR-tool short video documentary):

<https://h-a-u-s.org/index.php/2025/06/06/post-in-progress-anthropomorphization-study/>

