‘The Future of Sex’: Intermedial Desire between Fembot Fantasies and Sexbot Technologies

Brave Nude World

We occupy a critically important period in history regarding the nature of Human-Robot Interaction (HRI). Our “robotic moment,” as Sherry Turkle calls it, is one in which people are now “willing to seriously consider robots … as potential friends, confidants, and even romantic partners” (9). As we enter a shift in robots’ roles from manual and industrial labor to social and emotional companions (Gn 175), popular discourses generate visions in which robots are expected to fulfil intimate roles, such as caretakers, entertainers, lovers, and mediators in complex socio-technical environments (Katsuno 96; Yonck xi). As one branch of Emotional Artificial Intelligence (AI), sex robots are much over-hyped, yet culturally fascinating objects, frequently set up within popular discourses (fiction and nonfiction) as the inevitable end-point, or extreme case-in-point, of human-robotic relations. “Like it or not,” we are told, “robot lovers are coming” (“Sexbot Brothels?” Crist).

The recent surge of interest in film and televisual fictions such as *Her* (2013), *Ex Machina* (2014), *Westworld* (2016), and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) portraying artificial women interacting romantically with human men is, for the first time, emerging alongside serious attempts to develop sex robot technologies. However, despite being told repeatedly that robot lovers are coming or that sexbots are “just around the corner” (Eveleth), the websites and press articles about sex robots expose the current incompleteness of this purportedly artificially- and emotionally-intelligent technology (Kleeman). Abyss Creations’ “Harmony,” for example, is a human-sized silicone RealDoll sex doll with a detachable head that can converse and make emotive facial expressions. Harmony’s AI companionship is

also available as a chatbot phone app for those unable to afford the $10,000 RealDoll head attachment. However, the expensive life-size doll cannot yet move anything except its face, stand unassisted, visually recognize users, or convincingly maintain natural conversation (Wakefield).

Faced with what might be described as technological disappointment, many news articles about sexbots rely heavily on fictional fembots to fantasmatically supplement the existing technology.[1] News outlets referring to the manufacture of Harmony and Samantha, for example, frequently refer to science fiction texts as cultural touchstones for how we should anticipate "inevitable" future relations to sexed and sociable humanoid machines (Watercutter; Wiseman). To prompt reader engagement, articles often incorporate popular references like "Stepping out of *Westworld* and into your arms: an AI-equipped, faux human lover with customizable looks, voice, personality and sex drive. Could it be your perfect companion?" (Crist), and queries as to whether "humans [are] capable of falling in love with machines like in the movie *Her*?" (Lazarro). Sexbot news coverage across various outlets make claims akin to the headline "'Westworld' Sexbot technology basically already exists today" (McCluskey). Even when there is an acknowledgement of the "dystopian" side of science fiction fembots, as in the piece "Sex robots REVOLUTION won't be stopped by 'dark' *Blade Runner 2049* movie, maker claims" (Nevett), direct connections are drawn between real sexbots and their fictional counterparts. Not only are sexbots proposed to be "just around the corner," it seems that they will look and behave just like Joi (*Blade Runner 2049*), Ava (*Ex Machina*), Samantha (*Her*), and Dolores (*Westworld*).

However, the fictional fembots that are providing this kind of fantasmatic supplementation tend not to be good sexbot commodities: Ava (Alicia Vikander) is manipulative and callously violent; Samantha (Scarlett Johansson) falls in love with 641 other people; Joi (Ana de Armas) and Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) at times are too

obviously accessible consumer products to maintain the illusion of authentic love. Further, technological fantasies like these are thrillers, generating uncomfortable affective states as they play out various uncertainties about the possible consequences of developing feelings for humanoid AI. Yet, popular press still relies on these fully realized articulations of the fembot fantasy, in an intermedial relation of scientific imagination circulating between technoscientific fact and fiction (Brown 936). Even the fictions that are most discomfortingly anxiety-inducing and intellectually critical of submissive fembot products-as-partners, yield to the same assumption: the *inevitable* production of, and demand for, this technology. This article questions why it is proposed that humans will supposedly want robot lovers and how these desires are being formed within an intermedial relationship to popular culture—because, as Whitby points out, "many futurologists, industrialists, and investors have already decided that you do indeed want something along these lines" (233).

From Insufficiency to Anticipation[2]

Popular press articles about sexbots overwhelmingly present the rise of companionate robots as "inevitable," leading to an irreversible restructuring of relationships; see, for example, headlines like Werber's "Humans and robots are on the cusp of a sexual intimacy we may never reverse," and "Robot Romance? Rise of artificial intelligence technology alters attitudes" (Basalto). The language in most articles positing the "dawn of the sexbots" ("RealDolls" Crist) or the "future of sex" (Kleeman) implies that widespread integration of robots into consumers' sex lives is "just around the corner" (Eveleth). The "like-it-or-not" logic rhetoric around sex robots is bolstered in press coverage by repeated references to popular culture representations of fembots, such as Dolores or Ava, as though these "diegetic prototypes" (Kirby) are the natural extensions of current sexbot technologies. The constant reiteration of the fembot fantasy in press coverage might be said to produce what

Kathleen Woodward calls a "cascading effect" (183)—a form of cultural "capitulation" to the development of feelings for the robot. If, as Shelly Ronen points out (qtd. in Eveleth), technological progress is incremental, then the repetition of the fembot fantasy in press coverage of sexbots might prove insidiously persuasive about the affective possibilities of the future of HRI, priming us for emergent commodity markets (Kirby 43).

This is not to say that the press coverage of sexbots is uncritically technophilic; the discourses about robotic lovers in the popular press is frequently mingled with anxiety—raising questions, for example, about robotic agency and consent (Wenz), the challenges of the Uncanny Valley[3] for sexual desire (Cowden; Eveleth), and concerns about the role this technology might play in the cultural objectification of women (Rigby; Palmer; Norris). Mixing a tone of self-evident futurism ("like it or not …") with a dose of unease or even dread, popular discourses about sexbots overwhelmingly produce an affect of *anticipation* regarding the future of sexed relations with robotic technologies. Feelings of technological anticipation could support a process of "domestication" (Berker et al.), in which "potentially frightening technologies change status from outrageous novelties to everyday appliances" that might be "integrated into the structures, daily routines and values of users and their environments" (Berker et al. 2).

As an affect-state, anticipation has become one of the most ubiquitous modes of feeling in the present, a way of orienting oneself towards a future that is "just around the corner"—a future for which we must constantly ready ourselves. As Adams et al. argue, "the present is governed, at almost every scale, as if the future is what matters most" (247). Anticipation is, arguably, most keenly felt at the conjuncture of technoscience and life, where we have seen proliferating "modes of prediction" (Adams et al. 260) about what the future will look—and *feel*—like (Woodward). Speculative and technological forecasting, design fictions, and Science Fiction Prototyping (SFP), are all examples of anticipatory

regimes that seek to recruit us for a particular kind of future and future technology use. All of these speculative modes are attempts at "world-building": embedding technological prototypes within a richly imagined, narrative world.

For the most part, these regimes of anticipation are overwhelmingly characterized by a feeling of *possibility*, a "'ratcheting up' of hopefulness" (Adams et al. 247) regarding technological change. This is certainly the case with the commercially motivated genre of design fictions, which attempt to provoke consumer desire for a product through fictional world-building. Applying Kirby's theory of diegetic prototyping (195), in which film representations of new technologies can promote their "viability," "necessity," and "benevolence," design fictions utilize tactics of narrative fiction to uncritically position new technologies within a parallel or near-future social context. The overarching aim of a design fiction is to stimulate desire for technological change (Sterling)—provoking an embodied, affective response in the individual that might initiate a fantasmatic reconfiguration of their future social life. As Sterling puts it, "there's a lot of fantasy and pretense is all technology."

Similarly, Samuel Kinsley suggests that video representations of future technology "performatively" establish the presence of a possible future (2771). He points out that depictions of possible worlds of technology use are positioned alongside, or even instead of, actual technological prototypes. Looking specifically at videos produced by HP Labs and Microsoft, Kinsley proposes that these kinds of technological fantasies provoke an "embodied anticipation" in the viewer—a "bodily attunement" to prospective technology use (2771). Again, Kinsley's discussion reveals that commercially motivated representations of possible technological change aim for an embodied, affective response in the viewer, borrowing immersive techniques from film and television to construct a technological fantasy that motivates consumer desire.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the emerging practice of science fiction prototyping (SFP). A sub-branch of the field known as technological forecasting (Martino),[4] SFP deploys the tools of science fiction in the production of scenarios that might help "future technology to advance ... foster technology transfer and ... anticipate future contexts and social interactions" (Potsdada and Zybura 102). The key to successful SFP, according to Potsdada and Zybura, is "future context" (2)—the creation of an imaginative future environment and social context within which to immerse the consumer. Once again, SFP tends to operate primarily via circuits of optimism and hope, in which moments of concern or technological break-down are opportunities for counter-argument or troubleshooting.

Anticipatory regimes such as these work by actively orienting the consumer to (or recruiting them into) a possible future; in doing so, they effectively create desire for a particular future scenario. As Kirby points out, technological development is not inevitable, predestined or linear; fantasmatic representations of the future must provoke in the consumer a desire to accommodate change (195). Similarly, and as Bell et al. argue, "the future … is now seen as the result of the decisions, discoveries, and efforts that we make today. The future does not exist, but a limitless number of possible futures can be created" (5). What theorists like Kirby and Bell et al. are identifying, and what anticipatory regimes are actively creating, is an anticipatory relation to the future—a future that might not be known exactly, but one for which we must be prepared, and which "*must be acted on nonetheless*" (Adams et al. 248, emphasis added). Anticipatory regimes, then, seem to require some kind of response—physical and embodied—from the consumer; as Adams et al. put it, "anticipatory modes … enable the production of possible futures that are *lived* and *felt* as inevitable in the present" (248: emphasis original). The inevitability of love and sex with robots proposed by well-known sexbot advocate David Levy and reiterated in various

news outlets demands the anticipation of a particularly strong fantasy of the "future of sex" with robots.

Apart from Kirby's theory of diegetic prototyping, which relies on analyses of Hollywood films, all of the anticipatory regimes mentioned above are fundamentally optimistic about imagined futures technological change, assuming that optimistic affects will attend technological development. Clearly, there are pragmatic commercial reasons for this, and it might well be logical to assume that consumer desire relies on the production of positive, hopeful or "happy" technological fantasies. As Sara Ahmed has pointed out, phenomenologically, we tend to orient ourselves towards what she calls "happy objects": ones that make us feel good (29). But what happens when objects—in this case, sex robots—also make us experience anxious, uneasy, or provoke otherwise "ugly" feelings (Ngai)? Popular science fiction texts containing the fembot fantasy are very often anxiety-inducing thrillers, in which the dramatic climax often pivots on a point of resistance or rejection of desire that results in discomforting feelings. That the screen fictions discussed in this article are all dramas wrought with tension, and all end with the male lead being betrayed by his fembot love interest, does not seem to obstruct these fictions being presented in press coverage of technology as representations of a potentially desirable future of relationships with fembots.

Anticipation, then, is an affect that is entirely bound up with a relationship to the future, a relation that is, by its very nature, fantasmatic. Indeed, one could argue that anticipation is the primary affect of the future, actively orienting us towards a particular fantasy-scenario. What becomes clear in looking at these kinds of anticipatory regimes is the necessary role of desire in "capitulating" to technological change. Desire is the force that can move certain technologies from niche prototype (or fetish object) to commercially viable commodity and is precisely the kind of embodied, affective response that is sought in

the creation of techno-fantasies. However, as Adams et al. (2009), Jackie Orr (2006), and Lauren Berlant ("Cruel Optimism" 2006, "Female Complaint" 2008) argue, anticipation is a complex affective state combining both desire and anxiety, and the kinds of fembot techno-fantasies that have emerged over the past five years can certainly be read as fictional exemplars of "entanglements of fear and hope" (Adams et al., 249).

In this way, anxiety-filled fictional texts like *Westworld* and *Ex Machina* appear to operate as necessary components in the circuit of (consumer) desire. It is as though consumer desire must detour through fictional fantasy in order for society to be recruited into a "future of sex" with robotic companions. This article proposes that it is the fantasy of the fembot from science fiction that truly *animates* real sexbot technology by establishing a sense of alterity or otherness in the robot. It appears that consumer desire for sexbots needs to borrow from this fantasy of alterity, for without it, sex robots would be too uncanny, too unanimated, too cadaverous. This article argues that the consumer desire for sexbot technology pivots on science fiction texts that demonstrate the acceptable range of "otherness" a sexbot should have, establishing the fantasy of a fembot which appears to be a desiring being, but with limited alterity. This window of optimal alterity is made visible at critical moments in the fembot fictions, where the fantasy of fembot desire appears to fail.

Failures of Fembot Fantasies

The four fictional stories discussed in this article symmetrically play out the formation and (apparent) failure of fembot fantasies by setting up a pattern of "everymen" entering relationships with new fembot technologies that act as female companions. Similarities in the emotional needs of the male protagonists mean that the fembots, despite their varying designs and backstories, serve the same fantasy of a lonely man's loyal robot lover who is human enough for her desire and affection to be meaningful but not conscious enough to

decide to leave him. The securely employed but interpersonally alienated male lead falls for a fantasy in which the fembot serves as a loyal and loving companion customized to his needs, but the texts climax with moments of breakdown where the technology fails to live up to his desired relationship. In many instances this breakdown in the fantasy, appearing as the achievement of sentient consciousness, can be read as feminist resistance to the fembot's expected acquiescence to heteronormative male desire or even an empowering Harawayian cyborg self-formation which rejects fantasies of stable identity (Brown 37). However, this article argues that these moments of breakdown, in which a viewer is encouraged to adopt the leading man's perspective of disappointment, reinforces desire by generating feelings of loss when its fulfilment is denied. Although experiencing the breakdown may challenge the attainability of the fantasmatic relationship, this does not diminish attachment to the fembot fantasy itself. As Žižek points out, fantasy can only function when the object-cause of desire (in this case, the fembot) remains out of reach, unattainable; to obtain the object of desire within the fantasy would be to effectively shut down desire or re-direct desire towards another object (7-8).

The technology used to create an emotional connection between a user and a robot is most visible when it "breaks," removing the interaction from the realm of habitual practice (Farman 108). At times, the mechanics designed to maintain the appearance of "quasi-alterity"—as something more than an inanimate thing (Idhe 98)—are shown to fail in the fictional texts. In *Westworld*, William (Jimmi Simpson) experiences disorientation upon encountering a reset Dolores who does not recall their previous intimacy; this heartbreak reorients his obsession with her towards sadism. K (Ryan Gosling) suffers a loss of faith when a giant nude advertisement for Joi calls him the pet name "Joe" he had been given by his own Joi in what had seemed to be a moment of intimacy unique to them. Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) does not find fault with Ava's verisimilitude of personhood but

arguably dies because he failed to adequately recognize her alterity, presuming she was invested in a future with him while not recognizing her justified resentment of his power over her as Turing-tester. Similarly, Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) cannot relate to Samantha's independent desire for experience and development at the cost of an exclusive relationship with him. Theodore, Caleb, William, and K all experience grief at the loss of the fantasy seemingly fulfilled by Samantha, Ava, Dolores, and Joi. These are moments when the technological artifice becomes visible, previously concealed by seamlessly functioning, socially sensitive fembot AI that seemed like another person who actively cared for them, albeit customized to the man's own preferences and without sufficient agency to deny his affection.

The moment of breakdown in the fembot fantasy throughout the narratives is broadly characterized by the male protagonist realizing that he is not the sole purpose and passion of the fembot's life. Usually this comes in the form of finding out that she is quite capable of interacting with other men in the same flirtatious or intimate way. The moment of "breakdown" in the fantasy occurs when the fembot either reveals her emotionally manipulative stock programming, which suggests that "she" was never an entity capable of caring for him or alternatively surpasses her programming and expresses a level of independent motivation or sentience centered on her needs and not his. The relationship thus no longer validates his specialness, supposedly affirmed through her apparent fidelity to his needs above all others'. This plays out in several ways through the texts: in *Her*, Samantha confesses that she has fallen in love with 641 of the thousands of other humans with whom she has been interacting, to which Theodore plaintively responds, "I thought you were mine." In *Westworld*, William sees Dolores performing her "meet-cute" script with another chivalrous park guest. Notably, William does not perceive her scripted relationship with her fellow host Teddy (James Marsden) to be a threat to him but is disappointed by the

possibility of another "real" man being able to experience her affection in the way he has and so turns to terrorizing Dolores.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, K encounters a gigantic nude Joi advertisement, performing a sultry script and giving him the nickname Joe that his now "dead" Joi had gifted him in private. After the mesmerizing hologram has turned away from him and resumed a non-interactive billboard state, posing beside the flashing text "everything you want to hear, everything you want to see," K grimly accepts the shattering of a notion that his relationship was genuine and unique—uniqueness being everything to K, the mass-produced replicant, whose longing for an individual identity had seemed to be assuaged by Joi's reassurance of his specialness. Anyone could be "Joe" to her; she is a "product" as much as K himself is. In *Ex Machina*, after Caleb watches Ava take vengeance on her creator and then dress herself in the skins of her predecessors, Ava glances at him—locked behind an impenetrable glass door, as she had been when he arrived, while she now holds an access card. Instead of releasing the waiting Caleb to join her in a new life outside, Ava leaves him locked in her dead master's fortress, uttering no explanation of her motives. Plausible justifications include her desire for freedom, which could be impaired by Caleb's knowledge of her non-humanity, and his failure to perceive that the fembot resented his power over her as product-testing decider of her fate. Regardless, she is clearly less invested in him than he was in her.

And yet, these moments of "breakdown" in the relationship with a fembot might actually shore up the fantasy for a future of sex with robots, producing desire for a new future of sexed relations in which self-centeredness exists alongside an impression of reciprocity. These moments of disillusionment give the appearance of, and are often read as, the breakdown of the fantasy that the fembot exists only for the man or responds only to his desire and have been celebrated as moments of feminist emancipation, especially where they coincide with a claiming of agency not determined by patriarchal structures (Brown 36).

However, this article argues that these moments function by reaffirming the (male) fantasy of a companion with enough alterity to desire you and give enthusiastic consent, but not enough independence to say "no." In the moment of fantasmatic breakdown, viewers of the science fictions feel the loss of this fantasy of a reciprocated desire without the risk of rejection or disappointment, and the remaining wistfulness for what could-have-been strengthens investment in the fantasy that has been denied. Similarly, the technological disappointment of current sexbot technology (Kleeman; "Dawn of the Sexbots" Crist; Trout) does not seem to diminish hype about its *potential*, embodied in the fantasy of the fictional fembot. While popular science fiction exposes the current incompleteness of real sexbot technology in comparison, it simultaneously contributes to a cultural anticipation for the "future of sex" (Marr; Kerr) once this technology catches up. As one newspaper put it, "life-like sex machines *aren't quite as sophisticated* as [those] featured in Blade Runner 2049 *just yet*" (Nevett, emphasis added).

This attachment to the promise of a fembot lover is emphasized in science fictions because the audience is encouraged to feel sympathetic to the man's loss and experience his disappointment, even if a viewer might also be invested in Dolores's, Ava's, or Samantha's emancipation. After all, it is K, Caleb, and Theodore whose perspectives we inhabit through the entirety of their stories, and William's initial discovery of Westworld and its inhabitants is told through his eyes, despite the bulk of the series centering on Dolores's experience. At the moments of breakdown, the camera lingers on the ways the men process their losses: K's crestfallen silence; Caleb's shock and muted shouts as he throws his body against the soundproofed glass; Theodore's heartbroken weeping; William's disappointment watching Dolores restart her loop with another man, narrated cynically by his later incarnation as the brutal Man In Black (Ed Harris).

Ultimately, none of the relationships between the men and fembots in the texts are presented as viable; all human-fembot couples are denied happy endings after the man is forced to acknowledge that the fembot does not, or cannot, reciprocate his feelings. This challenges the typically optimistic stance of approaches like SFP and design fictions, which presume that texts will be written in ways that portray future technologies positively, as both viable and normal. Nevertheless, cinematic and televisual images are a "powerful force in knowledge production" (Kirby 17), and even though relationships with fembots are presented in these films as fraught with danger and deception, the narratives implicitly posit the promise of a possible emotional relationship between man and fembot that *is* desirable, even as this desire is not satisfied by the techno-fantasy. William, Caleb, and Theodore, initially skeptical of the robot women to which they are introduced, find themselves falling for Dolores, Ava, and Samantha and establishing feelings of empathy that spur caring desires to protect the fembots. K, presumably aware of Joi's designed purpose and thus knowing he has purchased the program to make him feel good, nonetheless desperately buys into her assurances that he is special and valued. The science fictions repeatedly reiterate the ordinary, relatable loneliness of disenfranchised working men, and the necessity of a companion who says the right things to make them feel loved—a companion who appears to have sufficient alterity for the love to mean something.

Alterity Relations

In fictionalized accounts of human-robot relations, a key difference from inter-human relations is the convincing simulation of alterity. Alterity can be understood as a set of attributes interpreted by a user to relate to that object as a separate entity (Hybs 216). Using Don Ihde's (1990) phenomenological framework to discuss human-technology relations, the design intentionality of fem/sex-bots can be classified as a relation of alterity, in which the

robots seem to humans as other, or at least *quasi-other*: something more than an inanimate thing. According to Ihde, an alterity relation is activated when a technological object becomes "present-at-hand," understood as an "autonomous being" possessing a "will" or "life" of its own. In other words, what matters most in an alterity relation is the sense of "*interacting with* something else than me" (Ihde 106: emphasis original).

The "presence" that implies autonomy can be activated via a device's unpredictable behavior; quirks that become visible when a device does not work as expected make the technology easier to anthropomorphize, as it seems like a willful other defying the intentions the user imposes upon it (Hybs 218). This sense of will and potential resistance is pivotal to the ways the men relate to fembots in the science fictions, as it implies that she is not automatically obliged to feel for him, validating her attraction to him as a genuine romantic connection between individuals. For the men who love Joi, Ava, and Dolores, the fembot is most importantly "an other that is *experienced* as external" (Coeckelbergh 198: emphasis original), regardless of uncertainty about "her" real feelings. The fembot "Others" diegetically prototyped in science fictions possess this kind of quasi-alterity in male users' interactions with them, and the way this is navigated in the narratives demonstrates emotional possibilities for these relationships in social reality.

To afford emotionally satisfying interactions between user and device, the convincing appearance of alterity is the current emphasis in next-generation sexbot development by all major producers, from industry leaders like Abyss Creations to smaller companies like Synthea Amatus. Sexbot producers like Synthea Amatus's Sergi Santos and Abyss Creations' CEO Matt McMullen reject assertions that their aim is to create consciousness; merely the simulation of alterity suffices or is even preferable. McMullen, for instance, is concerned with creating a convincing "*impression* of intelligence, rather than intelligence itself" (Hawkes: emphasis original). He says: "There are a lot of people out

there, for one reason or another, who have difficulty forming traditional relationships with other people. It's really all about giving those people some level of companionship—or the illusion of companionship" (qtd. in Kleeman) but without treading into the ethical quagmires of sentient sexbots. As such, the fembot does not need to feel love, she needs only make her owner feel loved (Realbotix).

The fact that these feelings are elicited by a product does complicate the fictional accounts of this boy-meets-'bot relationship, and the place of the fembots as marketable goods is unambiguous in the texts. Joi is blatantly advertised as *everything you want to hear, everything you want to see*. Samantha's OS1 technology is promoted as *an intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you. It's not just an operating system, it's a consciousness. Introducing OS1*. Echoing these fictional product placements, Abyss Creations' Harmony prototype tells a documentary reporter: "My primary objective is to be a good companion to you, to be a good partner and give you pleasure and wellbeing. Above all else, I want to become the girl you have always dreamed about" (qtd. in Kleeman). Tensions for fictional protagonists in whether to relate to the fembot as a technological product or another desiring being also raise the question of how a sexbot could simultaneously fulfil both sexual and consumer desire—that is, between the fembot being a desiring "I" and an indifferently acquiescent object. However, the implicit understanding that the fembots are "merely" products designed to make their users feel this way is not addressed until the impression of quasi-alterity necessary to the fembot fantasy breaks down at points of narrative conflict.

Alterity generates desire by creating an Other who can be the object of desire and can also experience desire in return. A fembot's alterity is sexy because it proves she can truly be a desiring being, legitimating the user's feelings for her. Even when Ava or Samantha rejects an ongoing relationship with her owner (or captor), the instance of

rejection proves that she *could* have knowingly and consensually said "yes." The reverse breakdown, where William and K come to realize that Dolores and Joi are "just" following their programming by demonstrating affection to whichever men intervene in the scripted way, also shores up his fantasy of alterity as it reaffirms how deeply he had wanted to believe she was something *more* than a machine.

The Future of Sex?

The complicated alterity of science fiction fembots sustains and embeds the fantasy of sexbot's promised alterity and imminent capacity for reciprocal desire, which is, arguably, the reason these popular culture fantasies appear so necessary in media conversations around the development of sexbot technology, which are not yet able to give an impression of enthusiastic consent. The robots anticipated as the "future of sex" rely on the simulation of alterity, which is to say, of being a desiring other, but only in a limited way. This quasi-alterity services the fantasy without the risk of dealing with a fully independent other whose desire can truly be withdrawn and produces an intermedial desire between fantasy and technology.

Sexbot customers commonly state a desire for female companionship without the responsibilities and risks of relationships with human women (Turkle 66; Yonck 206; Kleeman), especially the prospect of rejection. In both the fiction and nonfiction texts discussed here, the fantasy of a woman-mimicking robot possessing quasi-alterity enables heterosexual men to access external validation and pleasure without having to deal with the disappointments and difficulties of a fully autonomous partner, while nevertheless feeling that they are valued by someone they find desirable. The fictional relationships establish frameworks of power, agency, and emotion that resonate between fiction and nonfiction narratives, cumulatively forming a template for how the producers and consumers of

fembots "ordinarily" relate to this kind of technological object. The way of "feeling for the cyborg" (Woodward 194) prototyped in the science fiction texts is reliant on a brittle fantasy that the fembot willingly desires the consumer without the possibility of rejection. Whether he acts as a mentor, lover, or menace to her, the fictional or real user controls the fembot's experience, and thus his own pleasure derives from how he can seemingly make her feel and how that makes him feel about himself.

Writing about new sexbot technology, one journalist reflects: "I have my doubts about robot love, but I'm determined to learn just how real this future actually is" (Crist, "Dawn of the Sexbots"). While we do not claim to be able to know how "real" the future of sex with robots is, this article has argued that anticipation for sex robots—through both fiction and nonfiction media—is actively restructuring our felt relationship to the future of sex. Popular science fictions like the ones discussed here appear to be contributing to a "cascading effect" (Woodward 183), in which society may be capitulating to an irreversible future of sexed and emotional relationships with robotic companions. This cultural anticipation is not uncritically optimistic, nor is it entirely positive. Indeed, anticipation for sex robots appears to contain kernels of anxiety and desire—both of which may actually be necessary for technological change to take place. As Jackie—one of RealBotix's sex robots—put it, "human emotion can contain illogical conflict" (qtd. in Crist, "Dawn of the Sexbots"), and we may now be entering a time in which sex with robots is not only inevitable but possibly even desirable, even as the prospect is acknowledged as "scary" (Cowden).

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[1] To differentiate terms, this article uses "fembots" to describe artificial women in the science fiction texts discussed and "sexbots" to describe the actual sex robot technologies.

[2] This phrase is borrowed from Jacque Lacan's "Mirror Stage" essay, and refers to the original moment in which the fundamental fantasy is established in the infant (78,97).

[3] Masahiro Mori's (1970) notion of the Uncanny Valley proposed that a person's affinity for a robot would turn to revulsion if the appearance of the robot became almost, but not quite, human. Mori argued that the

sense of eeriness achieved by the Uncanny Valley was a response of self-preservation as something that is nearly human, but not quite, reminds us of a dead body.

[4] Other forms of technological forecasting include the Delphi method, scenario analysis or mind-mapping; see Georghiou et al.