A Master's Thesis by

Maaike van der Horst

Keeping It Real

Sex with Humans and Robots from a Lacanian Perspective

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Maaike van der Horst

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prof. dr. Ciano Aydin &

dr. Yashar Saghai

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Then he and every one who desires, desires that which he has not already, and which is future and not present, and which he has not, and is not, and of which he is in want; - these are the sort of things which love and desire seek?

Plato (385 BC)

In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.

Oscar Wilde (1892)

Is that all there is, is that all there is?

If that's all there is, my friends, then let's keep dancing.

Peggy Lee (1969)

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Last but not least, I want to thank the version of myself who wrote this thesis. As Lacanian theory points out, the subject never coincides with itself.[1] Luckily 'I' had a part in me that was able to write this thesis with great pleasure and satisfaction.

[1] Colby Chubbs, "Psychoanalysis and Consequences," interview with Joan Copjec, *Chiasma 6(1)*, March 2019, 200, https://westernchiasma.files.wordpress.com/2020/12/copjec-chubbs_chi6_proof_29-12-2020.pdf

Table of contents

Summary

Having sex with a robot might sound like a futuristic science fiction dys- or uptopia. However, sex robots are already on the technological horizon. Currently, it is possible to design a personalized sex robot online and have her delivered to your house. Next to that, half of Americans expect having sex with robots to become commonplace in the next fifty years.[2]

Sex with robots is a topic worthy of philosophical study because the boundaries between a domain long thought of as human, intimate and warm (sex), and a domain long thought of as artificial, distant and cold (technology) become blurred. Therefore, sex with robots leads to the uncanny question of what makes us human and different from a robot in the first place. Is there a difference between sex with humans and sex with robots ? And if there is a difference, what does it imply for our self-formation?

In this thesis, I argue that there is a difference between sex with humans and sex with robots. Namely, that robots 'lack the lack' that humans do have, and that the process of desiring functions differently when it comes to sex with humans than to sex with robots. More specifically, desire functions differently since sex with humans allows for a different kind of jouissance than sex with robots does.

I arrived at this argument by using the ideas of psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan. Firstly, I explain concepts necessary to understand his view of humans as fundamentally desiring beings: subjectivity, the Other, extimacy, desire, lack, objet a, the Thing, fantasy, jouissance and sublimation. Following, I look into the meaning of sex from a psychoanalytic perspective. Finally, I conclude that even if sex with robots leads to a different kind of jouissance, it can have a potential emancipatory role: by visualizing the absent, it can help humans embrace their inherent lack, and thereby create space for (partial) enjoyment.

Because of this, I aim to move away from the techno-pessimism prevalent in the academic debate on the ethics of sex with robots. Lastly, I hope that this thesis can serve as an example on how (Lacanian) psychoanalytic theory can enrich philosophy of technology and vice versa.

[2] Yael Bame, "Sex with a robot? 1 in 4 men would consider it", YouGovAmerica, accessed June 5, 2022, https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2017/10/02/1-4-men-would-consider-having-sex-robot

Introduction

The future of sexuality is expected to become increasingly technological.[3] Whereas sexual technologies such as dildo's, vibrators and sex dolls have been around for a while, new and emerging sexual technologies are rapidly developing and the sex-tech market is booming.[4] Examples of sexual technologies that are currently in development are sexual VR/AR experiences[5], sex toys that can be controlled over distance by a mobile application and sex robots. The latter will be the focus of this thesis. Whilst sex with robots may sound like science fiction (and perhaps a dystopian nightmare, or an utopian world), it is already possible to buy a sex robot and have it customized according to your liking. For instance, a recent survey undertaken by a sex toy company shows that people perceive it as more likely that they would have sex with a robot (37%) than that they would invite somebody over for casual sex (30%).[6]

Sex robots are a hot topic in the academic philosophy and ethics of technology. The majority of the arguments made are critical of the idea that sex with robots can take place in a healthy or meaningful way. Common arguments against the use of sex robots are that they promote the objectification of women,[7] that they embody unrealistic pornographic beauty standards[8] and that sex robots cannot give consent, and thereby promote the idea that consent is not a necessity for sexual interaction.[9] Arguments in favour of sex with robots (that do not appear very frequently) are that sex robots can support sexual liberty,[10] that sex robots can promote a safe outlet for sexual urges that would otherwise cause harm (such as violent

[3] Jenna Owsianik and Ross Dawson, "Future of Sex report", Futureofsex.net, accessed April 20, 2022, https://futureofsex.net/Future_of_Sex_Report.pdf
[4] Annabel Acton, "Taboo no more: The sextech industry is on the rire, and here are the players making waves", Smartcompany.com, accessed May 15, 2022, https://www.smartcompany.com.au/startupsmart/startupsmart-technology/sextech-industry-players-making-waves/
[5] Michelle Drouin, "Immersive VR is the Next Frontier of Sexual Experiences", OneZeroMedium.com, accessed April 10, 2022, https://onezero.medium.com/immersive-vr-is-the-next-frontier-of-sexual-experiences-d0e43074dce9
[6] Dainis Graveris, "More People Would Have Sex With A Robot (37.5%) Than Invite Someone For Casual Sex (30.1%), New Study Reveals", SexualAlpha.com, accessed March 15, 2022, https://sexualalpha.com/sex-with-robot-stats/ . (This was a survey done by a sex-tech company. So, not an academic study. This consequentially means that the people who have filled it out are (perhaps) already more interested in and open to using sex technologies than the general population. This should therefore not be taken as a strict empirical fact, but more as an illustration of ideas that people have around sex with robots).
[7] Kathleen Richardson,"The asymmetrical 'relationship'," *ACM SIGCAS Computers and Society* 45 (2015): 290-293.
[8] Tanja Kubes, "New Materialist Perspectives on Sex Robots. A Feminist Dystopia/Utopia?," *Social Sciences* 8, no. 8 (2019): 224.
[9] Lily Frank and Sven Nyholm, "Root sex and consent: Is consent to sex between a robot and a human conceivable, possible and desirable?" *Artificial Intelligence and Law* 25, no. 3 (2017): 305-323
[10] Marc Berendt, "The moral case for sexbots," *Paladyn Journal of Behavioral Robotics* 11, no. 1 (May 2020): 171.

sex or sex with children)[11] and that sex robots can serve a therapeutic goal of assisting people who struggle with sexual interactions, such as people on the autism spectrum.[12]

Although these normative discussions on the ethics of sex with robots are useful and important, I have the philosophical intuition that some perspective was lacking in the current academic debate. I share the following observation with Berendt, who states his criticism of the pessimistic and straightforward tone of the current sex robot debate as:

> "[...] unlike machines, what makes us quintessentially human, is our ambiguous and often contradictory nature, especially when it comes to complex emotional experiences, such as love and sex."[13]

Arguments in the sex robot debate seem to take common dichotomies, such as human/artificial, natural/technological, object/subject and intimate/external as a starting point, and thereby miss out on the complexity and nuance of technologically mediated sexual experiences. Sex is something that we tend to see as deeply human, natural, warm and intimate, and as something that in that sense is opposed to a robot which is technological, distant, cold and artificial. It is exactly the fact that these distinctions cannot be so easily sustained when it comes to, for instance, sex with robots that makes it an exciting and potentially rich field of study from a philosophical perspective.[14]

Another problem is the pessimistic tone of the debate. This could lead to the rejection of a technology (sex robots) that can potentially be helpful to many in order to experience sexual satisfaction, which has proven to be of great importance for the wellbeing of humans.[15] For instance, people with certain physical or mental disabilities who struggle to experience sexual satisfaction with other humans could potentially benefit from sex robots. The same goes for people without disabilities: perhaps their sexual satisfaction can also be enriched or enhanced by the use of sex robots. If the debate mostly echoes critical normative (and thereby techno-pessimistic) arguments, potential beneficial applications of sex robots are being overlooked.

[11] John Danahar, "Regulating Child Sex Robots: Restriction or Experimentation?" *Medical Law Review* 27, no. 4 (November 2019): 553-575.

[12] Janna van Grunsven and Aimee van Wynsberge, "A Semblance of Aliveness: How the Peculiar Embodiment of Sex Robots Will Matter," *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 23, no. 3 (2019): 290-317.

[13] Marc Berendt, "The moral case for sexbots," *Paladyn Journal of Behavioral Robotics* 11, no. 1 (May 2020): 173.

[14] Berendt, "The moral case for sexbots," 172.

[15] María del Mar Sánchzes-Fuentes, Pablo Santos-Iglesias and Juan Carlos Sierra, "A systematic review of sexual satisfaction," *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology* 14, no. 1 (2014): 67.

Critically reflecting upon these common dichotomies and overall critical tone in the debate can also help to provide a counterargument against another persistent critical argument and assumption in the sex robot debate that I have not mentioned yet: namely, that sex with robots cannot be healthy or meaningful because sex robots cannot reciprocate, whereas humans are able to do so. Therefore, sex with robots cannot offer a sexual experience that is as satisfactory as sex with another human.[16] Reciprocity in the sex robot debate (though often not explicitely defined as reciprocity, but in similar terms such as genuine connection or intimacy) seems to be understood as: "[...] the act of being recognized by another as a minded, sentient, and intentional being which is typically seen as a feature central to human to human dyadic interaction" according to van Grunsven and Wynsberghe.[17]

An example of an author who is critical of the potential of sex robots to reciprocate is Sherry Turkle. She argues that social robots (like sex robots) are programmed in order to appear to have mental states like humans do, and therefore offer a fantasy of reciprocity to the user. Humans could potentially mistake interaction with a sex robot as truly reciprocal and become emotionally dependent on them, instead of on other humans (if they do not understand the phantasmatic nature of the interaction).[18] The potentially problematic fantasy of reciprocity has stimulated many of the ethical concerns relating to sex with robots.[19]

Charles Ess also criticizes the ability of robots to reciprocate, and does so by building on Ruddick's (1975) notion of mutual desire. Ruddick argues that in order to experience 'complete sex', partners need to desire actively and also respond actively to the desire of the others, which is understood by Strikwerda as the partners reaching a level of reciprocity.[20] In contrast, incomplete sex is sex that lacks reciprocity because it is "private, essentialy auto-erotic, unresponsive, umembodied, passive or imposed."[21] Important to note is that Ruddick does not mean that incomplete sex is morally wrong per se, since she understands a sexual act that provides pleasure to be generally good. However, she argues that the less complete the sexual experience is, the more risk there is that harm will be caused to one of the partners, which can be seen as morally wrong).[22] Van Ess extends her argument by stating

[16] Van Grunsven and van Wynsberge, "A Semblance of Aliveness," 291.
[17] Van Grunsven and van Wynsberge, "A Semblance of Aliveness," 292.
[18] Van Grunsven and van Wynsberge, "A Semblance of Aliveness," 290.
[19] Van Grunsven and van Wynsberge, "A Semblance of Aliveness," 291.
[20] Litska Strikwerda, "Legal and Moral Implications of Child Sex Robots," in *Robot Sex. Social and ethical implications*, ed. John Danaher, & Neil McArthur (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 140.
[21] Sara Ruddick, "Better sex," in *Philosphy and sex*, ed. Robert Baker and Frederick Elliston (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984).
[22] Strikwerda, "Legal and Moral Implications of Child Sex Robots," 140.

that sex with robots cannot offer a user complete sex because a robot cannot desire our desires back, and can therefore not offer a reciprocal relationship.[23]

However, the centrality of the notion of reciprocity in the sex robot debate has also been criticized, for instance by van Grunsven. She states that the academic sex robot debate is framed around the question of whether sex robots can be good companions, without questioning the centrality of this notion. This stems from the ideas of what robots can be in popular culture, where robots are often presented as entities that look, think and experience the world like humans do.[24] A popular example of a reciprocal robot in an intimate and romantic relationship can be found in Spike Jonze's movie *Her* (2013), which also served as the main inspiration for a group of sex robot developers.[25] The AI with whom the main character experiences an intense emotional and romantic connection is presented as a human-like connection, but also as better than the human connections the main character has previously experienced. Next to that, it also stems from the ways in which sex robot developers market their products as being able to offer a sexual experience similar to, but better than a sexual experience with another human.[26]

Sex robot developer and academic David Levy for instance does recognize that he is "venturing into contested philosophical territory when addressing the issue of reciprocity in human-sex robot 'relationships,'"[27] but still takes a behaviorist stance by arguing that if a robot appears to behave in a way similar to you, it is similar to you, on the basis that there is no evidence to the contrary.[28] Van Grunsven does not offer a comprehensive definition of reciprocity, but rather defines it by what it is not. She describes genuine reciprocity as "[...] a mutuality that goes deeper than behavioral responsiveness through tracking".[29] According to this description, sex robots currently cannot reciprocate because they can only pick up on certain behavioural cues by users and respons to them in ways that were previously programmed into them.

Van Grunsven furthermore argues that if the sex robot debate would focus more on the technological materialities of the robots, it would become more clear that seeing them mainly as potentially reciprocal good companions will become more difficult, because the

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[23] Van Grunsven and van Wynsberge, "A Semblance of Aliveness," 294.

[24] Janna van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots: A Critique of the Sociotechnical Vanguard Vision of Sex Robots as 'Good Companions,'" in *Being and Value in Technology*, ed. Enrico Terrone and Vera Tripodi (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 63.

[25] Van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots," 74.

[26] Van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots," 64.

[27] Van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots," 70.

[28] Van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots," 70.

[29] Van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots," 79.

machine learning technologies embedded in them (and that are likely to be embedded in them in the future) do not allow for a reciprocity that moves beyond a behavioural response.[30] For instance, the inductive biases in AI systems embedded in the robots that determine the correct output based on the input by the user are likely to be either too permissive, or too restrictive when compared to human intelligence.[31]

The vision that developments in AI systems will soon allow for cognitive and embodied capabilities in robots that can generate similar experiences to humans intelligence has also been criticized in the sex robot debate.[32] I agree with van Grunsven's criticism on the lack of the focus on the materialities of sex robots in the ethical debate. I will however also refrain from most discussions on robot materialities for the sake of this thesis. Firstly, as will become clear later, I will focus on providing a psychoanalytic (and Lacanian) perspective in my thesis, and it falls outside of the scope of my research to also dive deeply into the debates on whether robots can have a consciousness similar to human consciousness or not. Secondly, I am not trying to provide a normative and ethical stance on sex robots with my thesis. It is rather my aim to provide a descriptive analysis and understanding of sex with robots compared to sex with humans from a Lacanian perspective. When it comes to robot consciousness and whether their materialities would make robot consciousness similar to human consciousness possible, I therefore take a similar stance to van Grunsven that it is unlikely that sex robots will be capable of providing an experience similar to human intelligence in the near future, but will not dive deeper into the issue.

Framing the ethical sex robot debate around the questions of whether sex robots can reciprocate (and can therefore function as good companions to humans) is problematic for multiple reasons.[33] First of all, as van Grunsven identifies, it frames us to mostly consider ethical questions that assume sex robots are always seen as anthropomorphic entities, and not as anything else.[34] We therefore do not ask equally relevant ethical questions that consider sex robots as simply another type of sex toy that collects and sells our intimate and personal data and potentially threatens our privacy, since sex robots are unquestionably framed as quasi-human potential lovers.[35]

[30] Van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots," 81.
[31] Van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots," 83.
[32] Van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots," 72.
[33] Van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots," 65.
[34] To be clear, there is ample evidence that shows that people tend to anthropomorphize technologies in general, and humanoids in particular. So, van Grunsven's criticism is not meant to argue that anthropomorphization does not take place. Rather, she tries to show that this is merely one way to see sex robots that unquestionably leaves out other possible interpretations and thereby anticipations.
[35] Van Grunsven, "Anticipating Sex Robots," 63.

Next to that, framing the debate around reciprocity as an ideal also leads to moralizing and restrictive understandings of alternative sexual experiences, both with humans and with robots. Why and if reciprocity has to function as a normative criterion that helps us understand the meaning of satisfactory sex in general is however not critically questioned.[36] Satisfactory sex with robots would therefore, according to the current debate, have to be sex that mimicks the so-called reciprocal and intimate human sexual experience and does not open the space for a changing conception of what satisfactory sex can mean when mediated by technologies.[37]

So, according to some of these critical arguments, it is impossible for robots to reciprocate and therefore to provide satisfactory sexual experiences whereas humans are able to do so. Van Ess' criticism based on the idea that reciprocity necessitates the ability of the other to desire your desire back reminds of Lacan's famous formula "man's desire is the desire of the Other."[38] Lacan would however not argue similarly to van Ess. Rather, he would argue that full reciprocity is impossible in any (sexual) interaction, either with robots or with humans. Importantly, this seems to imply that there is no difference at all between sex with robots and sex with humans. As I will argue in my thesis, there is a difference between desire for robots and humans.

So, thinking about how to contribute to the sex robot debate in the philosophy and ethics of technology from a perspective that problematizes dichotomies, the necessity of reciprocity and that takes the often paradoxical, contradictory and ambiguity of human subjectivity when it comes to sex to account led me to the work of psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan. I believe that Lacanian theory can offer valuable insights to this

[36] Interestingly, it is argued that the ideal of reciprocity in love relationships is present in Plato's Symposium. Love is described as the need to find one's other half. This need is caused by Zeus, who has cut humans in half because he found them to be too self-satisfied when they were still whole. From the moment of being cut in half, we start to search for our other half in order to become complete again. However, psychoanalytic theorist Todd McGowan interprets this not as the search for completion through our complementary half, but rather focuses on the cut that causes our desires and creates the original lack. Love therefore becomes more of an asymmetrical and disruptive experience, opposite to a harmonious and complementary experience. (ToddMcGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 183).

[37] The idea that emerging technologies can mediate and change core conceptions underlying our morality (such as, what does satisfactory sex mean) is explored extensively in the field of technomoral change, whic I do not get into for this thesis.

[38] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977. p. 235

debate that have not been researched extensively yet.[39] For instance, psychoanalytic theorist Alenka Zupančič argues that a valuable insight that Lacanian theory can bring to the field of philosophy is that it recognizes the inherent contradiction that concepts such as subject, object and truth imply.[40] I think that this can also be the case for the conceptions of sex and technology.

It has surprised me that little Lacanian or psychoanalytic approaches have been used in the philosophy and ethics of technology so far. Lacanian theory emphasizes that our (technological) society (in Lacanian terms: the Other) and the human condition (in Lacanian terms: the structure of desire) are intimately intertwined and cannot be understood without each other.[41] Lacan does not explicitly talk about the influence of technologies on our human condition. However, his work can be interpreted in a way that understands technologies as part of the big Other.[42] Since most academics in the philosophy of technology aim to understand human-technology relationships, the step to including Lacanian insights to help understand human-technology insights does not seem to be a strange one. My thesis will be a starting point for illustrating potential ways that Lacanian theory can be a valuable addition to the philosophy of technology, applied to the case study of the comparison between sex with humans and sex with robots.[43]

Next to that, Lacanian theory can also be useful in addressing existential questions on how we ought to give meaning to our lives. So, this thesis also serves as a starting point (based on Aydin's *Extimate Technology)* for a potential framework that can help us address more existential questions related to the influence of new and emerging technologies.[44] Even

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[39] The only author I could find who has done extensive research on the Lacanian psychoanalysis of sex robots is Isabel Millar. Her work has been very useful and inspiring to me. What makes her work different from my thesis is that she writes more from the tradition of cultural studies and film studies, and uses a lot of psychoanalytic jargon without defining her own interpretations of Lacanian concepts in a clear way. This makes her work (from my perspective) a bit obscure at times. In my thesis, I will not try to reinterprete Lacan's primary work (which is what Millar is doing), but I will rather take Lacanian theory and apply it to the comparison between sex with humans and robots, which is also not something that Millar is doing.

[40] Alenka Zupančič, *What is Sex*? (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2017), 2.

[41] Hub Zwart, "“Extimate” Technologies and Techno-Cultural Discontent: A Lacanian Analysis of Pervasive Gadgets," *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology* 21, no. 1 (2017): 25-26.

[42] Aydin similarly argues that the Other is becoming increasingly technological (Aydin: *Extimate Technology,* 209).

[43] Important to note here is that I want to use Lacanian theory as a hermeneutical framework in order to provide a perspective on human-technology relationships that can add to the discourse in philosophy of technology. This simultaneously means that I do not want to endorse psychoanalysis as a valid clinical treatment for psychological distress. Psychoanalysis as a form of therapy to reduce symptoms has historically developed in a deeply sexist and unscientific way (when compared to today's scientific standards). This however does not withstand that psychoanalytic theory (seen as a philosophy on what it means to be human) can have great value in philosophical debates, which is what I try to show in this thesis. Next to that, Lacan has always engaged with philosophers to formulate his core conceptualizations such as Marx, Kant and Descartes. Therefore, I think we can see Lacan as somebody who also provides.

[44] Ciano Aydin, *Extimate Technology: Self-Formation in a Technological World* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

though emerging technologies might help us solve some things that we define as problems, self-formation and meaning making as a 'problem' is not something that can be fixed by technological means only. Self-formation and existential questioning will remain an at least partially human endeavor.

Aydin argues for understanding the Lacanian concept of sublimation as self-formation, meaning that sublimation is a way to understand how subjects can critically relate to themselves and form their own subjectivity.[45] He also argues that his interpretation of sublimation is well suited to analyze extimate technologies (meaning: technologies that increasingly 'intrude' our selfhood).[46] The three examples he uses are technological environments, brain imaging technologies and smart drugs, because these examples illustrate technologies that we cannot identify easily as external anymore, since they profoundly shape how we experience ourselves.[47]

Next to these three examples, Aydin also argues that technologies in general become more existential. Technologies become a more integral part of who and what we are.[48] My thesis hopes to add to his analysis by using a technology that is not as extimate as the other technologies he discusses. Rather, I did not want to start from an emerging technology, but from a domain of the human experience that is commonly understood as something intimate and human (and thereby non-technological): namely, the domain of sex. Therefore, my research adds to Aydin's work by showing how Lacanian theory more broadly (and not only the notion of sublimation, but rather the Lacanian structure of desire as a whole) can help us understand how domains of the human experience (rather than technologies) previously understood as human and intimate become more extimate.

To bring all these motivations for my research together more concretely, I will work towards answering the following research question in four chapters: 1) what can reflection on the Lacanian structure of desire 2&3) show us about sex with humans and sex with robots? The fourth concluding chapter will be slightly more normative rather than descriptive. In this chapter I will set out the potential implications of the previous chapters for our self-formation. This chapter however only serves as a starting point for further research on how we could deal with robotic interactions from a Lacanian perspective, and does not present any final arguments.

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[45] Aydin, *Extimate Technology*, 240.
[46] Aydin, *Extimate Technology*, 240.
[47] Aydin, *Extimate Technology*, 243.
[48] Aydin, *Extimate Technology*, 243.

In the first chapter, I will describe concepts fundamental to Lacanian theory that will also be relevant to my analysis of sex with robots and sex with humans. I will start by clarifying the Lacanian understanding of subjectivity. Following I will analyze concepts such as desire, lack, objet a, fantasy, extimacy and jouissance. This will be mainly done based on the work of Lacanian theorists such as Bruce Fink, Alenka Zupančič, Slavoj Žižek, Mari Ruti, Calumn McNeill and Todd McGowan.[49] In the second chapter, I will look into the way sex is understood from a psychoanalytic perspective, since it is quite different from the everyday definition of sex. I will also analyze the similarities between sex with robots and sex with humans based on the concepts that I have described in the first chapter and argue that there is one main similarity and one main difference that can be distinguished. In the third chapter, I will move beyond the individual level and place my analysis in a broader societal perspective, understanding sex with robots and sex with humans from the perspective of commodity fetishism. In the fourth and concluding chapter, I will reflect on what my analysis so far can add to for how we can deal with sex with robots and sex with humans, and how it ought to contribute to our self-formation according to Lacanian theory.

[49] I will focus on the work of Lacanian theorists as a base to form my own understanding and application of these Lacanian concepts. So, my aim is not to provide a reinterpretation of the primary works of Lacan, since that would have been too ambitious for a master thesis project.

Chapter 1: a Lacanian structure of desire

1.1. The Lacanian subject, the Other and extimacy

Before diving deeper into concepts of importance to Lacanian theory and my research question, it is first necessary to rephrase that I will use Lacanian theory as a hermeneutical tool, rather than as claiming that Lacanian theory is empirically grounded. The aim of this chapter is therefore to introduce the reader into the ways that I will use concepts of central importance to the work of Lacan, as well as of importance to answer my research question. These concepts are: the Other, extimacy, desire, lack, objet a, fantasy, jouissance and sublimation. In order to get a grasp of these concepts, it is first necessary to get an understanding of a Lacanian understanding of subjectivity.

Lacan's view of subjectivity is different from ideas that dominate Western philosophy and psychology. The subject is not an autonomous, rational agent that can and will act in her or his best interest. Rather, the unconscious (instead of the ego/conscious mind) plays a vital role in what drives the subject and in what the subject desires.[50] The idea that there is something like an unconscious (and that there is a distinction between the conscious and the unconscious) is one of the core premises of psychoanalytic theory.[51] The ego (that what we consciously think and believe about ourselves) is for Lacanian theory in some sense an illusion.[52] That does not mean that the ego does not exist, but rather that identification with the ego as our true and intimate self is not correct.[53]

Lacanian theory continuously emphasizes that the source of our desires (what we think we want) are not always conscious to us. Even though we might consciously think that we want to become a lawyer, we do not consciously realize that this might be because we want to please our parents, because our parents would see this as a worthy pursuit.

The fact that we are usually not conscious of the source of our desires is not because our unconscious is one, big chaotic mess that does not allow for any meaning-making.[54] Rather,

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[50] Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 1.

[51] The existence of the unconscious as understood from a psychoanalytic perspective is heavily disputed, especially since there is no substantial evidence for its existence. But, as stated before, I will use Lacanian theory as an hermeneutical framework that can help in understanding what it means to be human, and not see it as something that can be clinically applied and proven. (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 1).

[52] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 1

[53] Calum Neill, "Lacan's Return to Descartes" in *Lacanian Ethics and the Assumption of Subjectivity* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 26.

[54] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 3.

Lacanian theory emphasizes that the unconscious is structured like a language, meaning that the unconscious has a structure that is similar to the grammatical structure of a language. The unconscious is bound to certain rules and logic that can sometimes be deciphered partially.[55]

Parts of the unconscious can reveal themselves at the level of the ego through, for instance, 'Freudian slips'. These are instances where one word gets confused for another by accident. For instance, calling your lover 'mom' instead of by their actual name. This slip of the tongue can say something about an unconscious feeling that you may have towards your mother that you are now projecting onto your lover. You are not consciously aware of these feelings and projections, but from a Lacanian (and psychoanalytic) perspective, that does not exclude the possibility that these feelings are based in the unconscious.[56] The unconscious will in that way influence the conscious thoughts and desires that a subject has.

Another fundamental premise of Lacanian theory is that subjects are always formed and shaped by the world around them. This leads to the idea that our desires can never be completely intimate to us alone, since they can only exist in relation to the Other. Everything that is not seen as internal and private to the subject alone is what Lacan calls the Other. Some examples of the fact that our desires are always shaped by the Other are that we form beauty ideas based on influencers that we see on Instagram, or that we form expectations of our careers based on what we imagine our parents would want for us.[57]

Lacan distinguishes three interrelated forms of the Other: the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic.[58] Lacan uses these forms in two ways: in order to explain phases in the developmental psychology of children, as well as in order to explain different forms of the Other that will remain with us for the rest of our lives. The idea that the Other is always an inherent part of our subjectivity of the Other also means that subjects will always carry a sense of estrangement or alienation with them throughout their lives.

The Real stands for, from a developmental perspective, the time that a baby is still completely intertwined with its mother. This is also the time that a baby is not able to voice its needs through language yet. The Real also expresses the state of wholeness, completion and fulfillment that a baby experiences with the mother. The baby does not experience any split between itself and the world.[59] According to Lacanian theory, subjects will throughout their lifetime continuously yearn for this feeling of wholeness and completion, even if it has always

[55] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 9.
[56] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 1.
[57] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 214.
[58] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 214.
[59] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 216.

been an illusion, because babies were never completely intertwined with their mother.[60] For instance, the mother has always had needs of her own that were not about taking care of the needs of her baby. For instance, having a good night's sleep, or enjoying a night out with her friends without her baby.

The Imaginary stands for the time in the development when a baby forms an ego and starts to identify with it.[61] This happens around the time when a baby recognizes itself in the mirror, as well as when the baby starts to acquire language. So, the Imaginary also stands for the (imaginary) identification with the ego.[62] As stated before, identification with the ego is an illusion in the sense that by identifying with the ego, we identify solely with the conscious part of the mind. It is the process of a baby understanding themselves as an 'I' distinct from its mother and from the world. Importantly, this is the time where the baby becomes a subject, which is simultaneously the time where the Other starts to exert its influence.

Thirdly, the Symbolic stands for everything that is societal. For instance, law, tradition, norms, expectations, morality, and culture fall in the category of the Symbolic.[63] Everything that is Symbolic can be represented by language, and language is necessary for symbolization. Where the Imaginary stands for the relationship between the self and the ego, the Symbolic adds the dimension of the relationships between subjects and society. So, whereas the Imaginary can be understood as a dyadic relationship, the Symbolic can be understood as a triadic relationship.[64] As mentioned in the introduction, reciprocity in the sex robot debate is understood as: "[...] the act of being recognized by another as a minded, sentient, and intentional being which is typically seen as a feature central to human to human dyadic interaction."[65] From a Lacanian perspective, however, all interactions are triadic rather than dyadic, and therefore reciprocity as a dyadic interaction (and as understood in the sex robot debate) is always an impossibility, both with humans and with robots. The Symbolic (especially in the form of language) always plays a mediating role in any interaction.

The role of language in the process of becoming a subject is of great importance to Lacanian theory. The moment when the baby starts being able to talk 'to' the mother is the moment when it becomes clear that mother and child are in fact two separate subjects, and have never been in a state of wholeness and oneness. The baby had to start learning language because it has a need to express its unfulfilled needs: the child experiences a

[60] Darian Leader and Judith Groves, *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide* (London, Icon Books, 2010) 92.
[61] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 215.
[62] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 199.
[63] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 216.
[64] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 201.
[65] Van Grunsven and van Wynsberge, "A Semblance of Aliveness," 292.

lack.[66] She or he becomes (and will remain) a split subject. This split subjectivity is of key importance in order to understand the Lacanian structure of desire, and the cause for the inherent lack and feelings of estrangement that stay with subjects throughout their lifetime.

An example of the alienating effect that language acquisition has on a subject is that the specific language that the baby learns influences and molds the needs that they can voice. The language is not the intimate language of the child alone. Rather, it is an external language that happens to be at the child's disposal, most often determined by the language that the parents speak. In that sense, language is imposed upon the child by the Other.[67] Language is therefore something external that a subject has to use in order to voice their seemingly intimate needs. The words that the child is able to use also shape the needs that the child can voice, and therefore also for the type of identity that they eventually form.

Language is an external influence that not only shapes the way we can voice our desires, but also one that greatly shapes what we desire. Our desire is therefore never completely 'ours', but will fundamentally be shaped by the Other. This is even more the case because even if the unconscious (the source of desire) will never become completely known to us. It will always remain partly 'Other', again leading to the idea that a subject can never fully know themselves and have an understanding of their private and intimate self.

An example that clarifies the idea of the split subject and the alienating effect of language is one of an inhabitant of a deserted island.[68] Imagine that she is the only person living on the island. She creates a system of coloured signs in order to mark routes on the island to different places. The blue signs point to the place with the fruit trees, the red signs point to where she hunts for meat, etc. At first sight, it seems like she invented a private and intimate language: she is only in communication with herself. Lacan's point would however precisely be that the woman is still communicating with somebody, namely with herself.[69] The woman who creates the sign does so in order to communicate with another version of herself: namely the one who reads the signs.

So, as I explained in this chapter, subjectivization can only take place by means of the Other from a Lacanian perspective.[70] Simultaneously, the Other prevents the subject from ever experiencing the sense of wholeness and fulfillment that is symbolized by the Real. The Real itself is paradoxically and simultaneously also what causes the inherent failure to reach

[66] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 103.
[67] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 4.
[68] This example is not my own, but was provided by Calum Neill in the *Lacanian Ethics and the Assumption of Subjectivity* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 18.
[69] Calum Neill, *Lacanian Ethics,* 18.
[70] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 199.

this feeling of wholeness, since the Real embodies the lack inherent to subjects. The Real cannot be symbolized, and can therefore not contain anything.

The subject is therefore never complete, in the sense that a subject can never reach a point of complete self-understanding and self-formation. There is therefore a paradoxical relationship between the self and the Other (like many psychoanalytic concepts embody something contradictory or paradoxical).[71] Lacan uses the term extimacy to problematize this internal/external dichotomy.[72] A subject can never have full access to their intimate self, and can only exist in relation to the strange and alien Other, which is seen as the external. The internal can be understood as 'the self', as that what makes a subject experience a sense of autonomy and particularity. Subjects can however not come into being without the Other as an external influence.[73] The subject is thus from a Lacanian perspective not intimate, nor completely external, but rather extimate. Extimacy can thus be understood as the idea that a subject is always both internal and external, intimate and strange at the same time.[74] The Other including technologies) are always an inherent part of our subjectivization, and there has therefore never been something such as an intimate self. Subjectivation can only take place when the subject starts to identify with the Other.

[71] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 199.
[72] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 200.
[73] Aydin, *Extimate Technology*, 199.
[74] Aydin, *Extimate Technology*, 8.

1.2. Desire, lack and objet a

The fact that the subject is always a split subject (and therefore extimate) leads to a persistent feeling of lack. This lack is what in turn causes desire, which makes a subject first and foremost a desiring being according to Lacanian theory. Desire is therefore the “essential” (in a non-essentialistic sense) fundament of our ontology. Desire can be understood as the constant search for something else, for something that is currently not present in order to fill the feelings of lack that we experience.[75] It is important not to confuse the Lacanian notion of desire with sexual attraction alone. Desire can be directed in a sexual way, but not all desire is sexual. One of the prime starting points for Lacanian theory is that desire is the driving force behind all of our actions: it is what makes us get up in the morning and go about our day. So, the fact that we are constantly searching for something that is currently lacking is our main drive to go out into the world.

Desire can be explained by the use of three partially overlapping levels. These are 1) desire as an object specific conscious wish, 2) desire on the unconscious level and 3) desire as a demand for the Real..[76] Desire first of all can express itself as an object specific wish that can be articulated on a conscious level.[77] For instance, I desire to hand in a successful thesis before the deadline arrives. This is a wish that I feel quite certain about and that I can easily articulate to myself and to my peers. The source of this conscious wish is however, according to Lacanian theory, in the unconscious, which is the second level on which desire operates. My wish to write a successful thesis can perhaps stem from the desire to be seen by my parents as an intelligent child that is worthy of love.

As stated before, I can only become conscious of this unconscious source of desire through slips of the tongue, or by noticing that I react in a hypersensitive way when my parents make a comment about my efforts at university. However, it can just as much be the case that the source of my desire remains a mystery to me, and that I can only be aware of my object specific wish to write my thesis. On the third level, desire is always the desire to return to the Real, and with that a desire for completion and wholeness.[78] This is again related to our split subjectivity and the Real (the first form of the Other), and the idea that we will spend our

[75] Fink, *The Lacanian subject,* 91.
[76] Lacan does not distinguish between these three levels of desire, this is my own interpretation that helped me understand the concept. Lacan tends to change the definitions of his concepts throughout his work in sometimes quite radical ways. By identifying these three levels, I feel that I have been able to sketch a comprehensive and clear definition.
[77] Leader and Groves, *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide*, 85.
[78] Leader and Groves, *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide*, 87.

lives experiencing a sense of lack that we want to fill. So, all of our desires in the end stem from our desire to return to the state of the Real.

According to Lacanian theory, the Real cannot contain anything that can be symbolized by language. The Real therefore paradoxically entails both the desire for wholeness and fulfillment, as well as meaninglessness because the Real precedes language.[79] The Real is therefore also sometimes described as a void: it is a feeling that has never existed, that cannot contain any meaning, and yet it is what drives our lives.[80]

Since subjects can only form themselves in relation to the Other (that they can never fully know and understand), desire is also always shaped in relation to the Other. That does not mean that desire tries to integrate with the Other as harmoniously as possible. Rather, desire can also push against the Other.[81] Even when desire is transgressive and clashes with social norms and expectations, this transgression is first of all built on the existing Other.[82]

If I, for instance, will start having sex with my sex robot, and start telling my friends abou this, I will break from the social expectation of what a good or healthy sex life should look like. However, without the norm of what a healthy sex life looks like, something like an unhealthy sex life cannot exist. Desire can only be transgressive and push against the influence of the Other within the playing field of the Other. In other words: completely breaking free from the Other is impossible from a Lacanian point of view, since subjects cannot exist without the Other.

Desire as an object-specific wish is always directed towards specific and varying objects and people.[83] We are up to some extent fooling ourselves by thinking that when we buy a new pair of shoes, we will not need new shoes for a long time to come. It is however very likely that there will come a point in time that these shoes do not satisfy us anymore. We will then go out to buy another pair of shoes. This is how the cycle of desire continues. This is why we are, on the one hand, aware that a certain object or person cannot give us complete fulfillment, but on the other hand we believe that satisfaction is possible, hence why we keep desiring new objects and people.

Even if desire is directed towards a person, it can never be directed towards a person as a whole, but it will always be directed to a specific part of the person. There will therefore always be an element of objectification when we desire other subjects, which is also part of

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[79] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 25.
[80] Aydin, *Extimate Technology*, 223.
[81] Mari Ruti, *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings: The Emotional Costs of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 139.
[82] Slavoj Žižek, *How To Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006): 42.
[83] Ruti, *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings*, 140.

the reason why full reciprocity is impossible from a Lacanian perspective. An example of this when it comes to sexual desire is fetishism. Fetishists experience sexual arousal when a certain object or bodypart is present (like a pair of high heels or latex clothing).[84] Lacan's point would be that this is also the case for non-fetishists: we desire a certain body part of our partner, but can never desire our partner as a whole, because there is always an element that escapes us.

The idea that the Real fails to be symbolized, cannot be verbalized and causes our desire is more clearly shown with the example of explaining what it is that attracts us about our partner. It is likely that we will be able to mention certain personality traits, physical characteristics, life choices or beliefs that attract us to our partner.[85] These can be seen as object-specific wishes that can be articulated.[86] However, these ways of verbalizing our desire seems to fall short: stating that I desire my partner because she is physically attractive, she is intelligent, she is funny or she has an interesting job are not completely untrue, but they also don't seem to capture the full picture. There are many intelligent women in the world: there is however one that attracts me more for a reason that I cannot explain.

The particularity of your partner that cannot be put into words and belongs to the domain of the Real is also referred to as the Thing in Lacanian theory. The Thing is what gives a subject their dignity, since it is also the Thing that ensures that the subject can never be completely determined by external influences of the Other (that can always be symbolized).[87] The Thing should not be seen as our 'true self', but as what establishes extimacy.[88] We can never completely understand what our Thing is, because it escapes any form of meaning making. The Thing is also a force that can disrupt us, especially because we do not experience any control over it.[89] From a Lacanian perspective, what we truly desire is therefore not somebody who fits our object-specific wishes (even though this is what we consciously experience), but rather somebody who can, for instance, look at us in a certain way, and whose Thing attracts us.

The gaze and the voice are the prime examples of the Thing. It is very hard to precisely put the way somebody looks at you or the sound of their voice into words, and yet it is what gives a person their distinctiveness since the sound of your voice or the way you look at somebody are not determined by the Other.[90] Interestingly, our own voice and gaze escape

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[84] Leader and Groves, Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide, 81.
[85] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 91.
[86] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 92.
[87] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 220.
[88] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 206.
[89] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 202.
[90] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 92.

us: we can never hear our own voice, nor can we see our own gaze.[91] This can only be done by another, which again shows the idea that even the things that seem intimate to us cannot be completely known by us. Precisely because desire also manifests itself on the unconscious level, we can never fully grasp and understand our own desire. The same therefore goes for other subjects: they can also not fully understand their own desires on a conscious level.[92]

Perhaps most important about desire is the contradiction inherent to it: desire needs to remain unfulfilled in order for it to be sustained, which is what Žižek calls Lacan's bitter lesson.[93] So, a certain lack or a void always has to remain in order for desire to be able to function. Since desire is always a desire to return to the Real, and the Real cannot contain any meaning and is therefore a void, we are always desiring what is lacking, that what is currently not there. The expression 'the grass is always greener on the other side' is an example of this. When we have what we desired before (a partner, a promotion at work, a new car) we tend to be happy with it for a little while. However, the feeling of (partial) satisfaction does not stay for too long. We start to desire other partners, other jobs and other cars. We are partially aware of the illusory nature of our object-specific desires, in the sense that we realize that they cannot give us complete satisfaction, but we need to sustain the illusion that they do (at least up to some extent) in order for desire to sustain itself.[94]

Knowing that desire cannot be completely fulfilled does not mean that we cannot fulfill desire partially. Desire can partially be fulfilled if we experience a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment after engaging with certain people or projects. It also does not mean that because desire can never be completely fulfilled, it is irrelevant to which object we direct our desires. Desire can be aimed at the wrong object, which is the case when it would cause self-destructive or unhealthy behavior. Even if we understand that a pattern of behavior is hurtful to us, we usually cannot simply change it through this conscious knowing, for instance in the case of addiction. Knowing you are addicted is helpful, but usually not enough to get out of your addiction.

One of the aims of psychoanalytic therapy is that by means of talking therapy, the subject can divert desire to objects that are healthier by understanding the unconscious source of their desire better.[95] For instance, if a subject has an obsessive desire for a (potential) partner who does not desire her back, or for a partner who does desire her but

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[91] Leader and Groves, *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide*, 125.
[92] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 18.
[93] Žižek, *How to Read Lacan,* 39.
[94] Ruti, *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings,* 141.
[95] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 62.

treats her horribly, it can be healthier for the subject to divert their desire towards somebody or something else.

Desire should not only be understood in a positive way, in the sense of subjects happily engaging with new people, projects or buying new objects. Rather, we tend to experience desire as something that shapes us, instead of us being able to shape our desires.[96] If it were a matter of (conscious) choice, we would likely choose to desire the people or objects that are the 'best fit' for our lives from a more rational perspective. Desire however enables us to make choices that transgress what would be the 'best choice' according to the norms and expectations of the Other. We can for instance fall in love with somebody from a different social class, age or religious belief. Desire can therefore also be a rebellious force that allows us to shape ourselves and not be solely determined by the influence of the Other.[97]

What ensures the continuation of our desire is also called objet a. It is one of the concepts that is most elaborated upon (and revised) throughout Lacan's work.[98] He sees objet a as his most significant contribution to the field of psychoanalysis.[99] What most interpretations of objet a agree on (e.g. objet a as the remainder of the desire of the Other, as surplus jouissance or as the lost object) is that objet a is what causes desire and what ensures that the process of desire continues.[100] So, for instance, once a subject has enjoyed a sexual experience, there will be something left (objet a) that makes the subject desire sexual experiences in the future again. Objet a is the surplus that remains after the subject experiences some sense of satisfaction after an experience, and therefore that what causes the continuation of the process of desiring, when desire is understood as the search for something that is currently lacking.[101] In some interpretations, objet a is also seen as the Real, since our desire to return to the Real is also what ensures the continuation of our desire.

[96] Ruti, P*enis Envy and Other Bad Feelings*, 138.
[97] Ruti, P*enis Envy and Other Bad Feelings*, 142.
[98] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 83
[99] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 83.
[100] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 83.
[101] Kirshner, "Rethinking Desire," 84.

1.3. Fantasy, jouissance and sublimation

Fantasy plays an essential role in Lacanian theory as a mediator between the subject and the Other. This already starts with objet a, which is phantasmatic in nature. With this I mean that objet a in itself also does not exist. There is no lost object, not something that we have lost in our infancy and need to find back. Next to that, our object-specific desires are (unconsciously) created by the subject and therefore highly dependent on the structure of their unconscious. For instance, when you are in love with a specific person, it is not the case that you can just as easily be in love with any other person. The subject has created a fantasy (based on their unconscious) that sustains their desire for this specific person. Other subjects do not have the same fantasy for that person, and therefore are not in love with them.

Fantasy as a mediator between subjects and the world can help prevent subjects from engaging in desires that are excessive and potentially destructive to them. This has to do with another important concept in Lacanian theory, namely jouissance. Jouissance is the desire for total and complete satisfaction, which is as discussed before an impossibility in reality.[102] Jouissance is sometimes translated as enjoyment (from French), but this does not completely capture the Lacanian implication to it.[103] There is some sense of enjoyment in jouissance, but jouissance should be understood as an overdose of enjoyment, which in its intensity can become painful and potentially (self)destructive. Comparatively, pure enjoyment or pleasure is a state where tension is diminished and where no discomfort or feeling of overwhelm is present.[104]

Jouissance is partially an impossibility because of the fact that subjects exist in a biological body that imposes certain limits on what they can experience.[105] If certain bodily needs are ignored or bodily limits are challenged, the body will at one point give up on the subject, meaning that the subject will die. There is therefore a biological limit that helps to temper jouissance. Next to that, the Other also limits jouissance by imposing laws and norms onto the subject that regulate the amount of jouissance that a subject can experience.

Fantasy is a necessary condition for subjects to form themselves that enables subjects to experience jouissance in a non-destructive way. Subjects can use their fantasy to experience situations that would cause suffering in real life. For instance, subjects can watch

[102] Kirshner, “Rethinking Desire,” 85.
[103] Interestingly, the term jouissance can be translated both as enjoyment as well as orgasm in French.
[104] André Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (2006: Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam Press): 26.
[105] Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy,* 27.

pornography to experience sexual situations that would not be possible or desirable in their actual lives, or they can enjoy violence in video games and movies without acting out experiences of violence that would cause suffering.[106]

An example of jouissance is the excitement and energy that young children express. When a child becomes overly excited, it struggles to regulate the overload of energy and might hurt her or himself because of this.[107] Adults are (when functioning well) able to regulate jouissance in daily life.[108] However, they still experience jouissance mostly during sexual activities.[109] It is not always possible to distinguish between pure enjoyment and something slightly painful in sexual experiences because of the intensity. An example that clarifies how an overdose of pleasure can become painful is imagining an orgasm that lasts multiple hours. Orgasms in their 'normal' duration are usually experienced as pleasurable. However, if an orgasm would last multiple hours, it would become a painful experience (next to also carrying some pleasure). Unconsciously, we can have fantasies of pleasurable orgasms that last multiple hours, but we could not handle this experience consciously because of our biological limitations.

Jouissance can consciously be experienced as (partially) satisfactory, but is unconsciously always experienced as satisfactory, hence why subjects tend to develop repetitive mechanisms that end up being hurtful to them.[110] Even if they consciously know or experience that something is harmful to them, their unconscious satisfaction makes it harder for them to break through certain patterns.[111] There is therefore something masochistic in the process of desiring (because there will always be the pain of never being able to experience complete fulfillment), but this masochism is unavoidable.[112]

Subjects will, according to Lacanian theory, always develop symptoms (repetitive compulsions towards things that bring partial enjoyment) that help them cope with the impossibility of a complete fulfillment of desire.[113] From a psychoanalytic perspective, the difference is in whether these symptoms are destructive to the wellbeing of the subject or not

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[106] Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy,* 27.
[107] Leader and Groves, *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide,* 147.
[108] Leader and Groves, *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide*, 147.
[109] Sexuality is not the only place where jouissance can still be experienced by adults. Jouissance is sometimes also compared to the Kantian notion of the sublime, and is also thought to be able to be experienced in creative expressions like art and music.
[110] Leader and Groves, *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide,* 141.
[111] Leader and Groves, *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide*, 142.
[112] Lacan also relates jouissance to the Freudian idea of the death drive. The death drive is when there is no limitation (either biological or by the Other) imposed upon jouissance, which would eventually lead to destruction and death. The death drive (like jouissance) should not be understood as something negative. Rather, destruction is also what makes space for creation (Aydin, 2021, 223).
[113] Kirshner, "Rethinking Desire," 85.

that decides whether a subject should seek (psychoanalytic) therapy that could redirect the unhealthy objects of desire to healthier objects.[114]

Therefore, a subject should aim for their desire to be directed towards objects that are healthy for them, even though this is usually not within the subject's conscious control. Most importantly, as stated before, subjects need to ensure that their desire is located at an appropriate distance to the Real. In case the desire functions at too great of a distance from the Real, the subject will not experience any motivation or direction in life. Rather, the subject will feel purposeless and apathetic. When desire functions too closely to the Real, the subject will be overwhelmed by jouissance and potentially engage in self destructive behavior.

Managing the right distance to the Real can also be described as regulating jouissance: ensuring that jouissance can be experienced in a way that is not derailing for the subject, yet still gives enough enjoyment for the subject to engage in life. The desire for jouissance (complete enjoyment and satisfaction) will always be present and should not be eradicated. Rather, it should be managed in a way that the subject can experience (partial) enjoyment in a healthy way.

The process of regulating jouissance can be seen as the process of sublimation.[115] Sublimation is, in the words of Aydin, "[...] to allow the symbolic to move closer to the real by means of the imaginary."[116] So, this means that the process of sublimation is appropriating (by means of self-identification) that what belongs to the Other to experience a glimpse of the Real (and thereby satisfaction). An explanation of jouissance in different words can be found in Freud's statement 'wo es war, soll ich werden': where the Other pulls my strings (acting as my cause), I must come into being as my own cause.[117] So, sublimation is about appropriating the influences that are found in the Other, and make it something that belongs to you rather than to the Symbolic.[118] In more concrete words: you have to 'own it'.[119]

This also means that subjects take responsibility for their own subjectivity and desires, meaning that the subject has some agency (and responsibility) to redirect their desire and shape their own life. The aim of psychoanalytic therapy is then also to make the things that have been done to you by an Other (for instance, traumatic experiences, society or your

[114] So, psychoanalytic theory and clinical practice are (obviously) interrelated, and cannot be completely separated. However, as I stated before, I will take Lacanian theory as a hermeneutical tool to understand more about the relationship between human subjectivity and the influence of technology. Small notes like this about psychoanalytic practice do help to clarify psychoanalytic theory in the way that I am using it in this thesis.

[115] Leader and Groves, *Introducing Lacan: A Graphic Guide,* 146.

[116] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 221.

[117] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 8.

[118] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 223.

[119] This is also meant with my thesis title: Keeping it Real. By means of sublimation, we have to maintain the right distance to the Real and thereby owning or appropriating what the Other brings to you.

parents) your own.[120] Psychoanalytic therapy can be seen as successful when the subject is not fixated upon certain objects that they think embody objet a, the cause of their desire.[121] Rather, the subject realizes that objet a is phantasmatic, and that no object can fill the inherent lack that subjectivity must be constituted around.[122]

When this recognition does not take place in the subject, she or he can also not find partial enjoyment. This can lead to undesirable symptoms for the subject and can cause them to suffer unnecessarily.[123]

The explanations of the key concepts of Lacanian theory that I have provided in this chapter are relevant for the upcoming chapters. In the second chapter, I will start by looking into the psychoanalytic definition of sex, as well as giving a description of what a sex robot is and what the current sex robot market looks like. Based on these Lacanian concepts and my understanding of sex and sex robots, I will answer the first part of my research question: what can reflection on the Lacanian structure of desire show us about sex with robots and sex with robots? This will be done by arguing for the existence of a difference in sex with humans and sex with robots. In the third chapter, I will elaborate on how the relationship between sex with robots and sex with robots is situated in our technological (and capitalistic) society, and answer the second part of the research question: [...] and thereby about our self-formation in an increasingly technological world? I will conclude by sketching the implications of my research for self-formation, as well as for further research in Lacanian theory and the philosophy of technology.

[120] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 62.
[121] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 70.
[122] It is of course not the case that the subject in therapy will use these exact words. It does however express the aim of psychotherapy. The subject should be able to see objet a for what it is, and understand that the subject is able to redirect their desires towards healthier objects, and thereby create a different set of symptoms. The subject should also understand that complete satisfaction of their desire is an impossibility, and that they should therefore learn to organize their life and desire around the Real.
[123] Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets* (New York: Columbia University press, 2016): 160.

Chapter 2: Sex with humans and robots

2.1. What is sex with humans and robots?

> “A guy goes into a restaurant and says to the waiter: “A coffee without cream, please”. The waiter replies: “I’m sorry, sir, but we’re out of cream. Could it be without milk?”.[124]

Apparently, this joke is very popular in the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis, of which Lacanian theorists Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Žižek are a part. This joke might not seem very helpful to understand the Lacanian idea of what sex is better at first sight, but it actually is. As will become clear later on in this chapter, the quote can show that the definition of sex in the psychoanalytic (and Lacanian) understanding is quite different from the more common everyday understanding of sex. According to the Oxford dictionary, sex is: "physical contact between individuals involving sexual stimulation; sexual activity or behaviour".[125] This is also the kind of sexual activity that sex robots are intended for, even though sex robots can also be used for other purposes.[126] A psychoanalytic or Lacanian way of understanding sex is not by seeing it merely as physical sexual contact between individuals, and is much broader and more encompassing than the everyday definition.

Alenka Zupančič notes that seeing sex merely as sexual practices leads us to a reductive view of sexuality, which she finds problematic.[127] In her book titled *What is Sex?* (2017) she tries to understand what sex is beyond this reductive and instrumentalist view. She does that by providing a philosophical perspective on psychoanalytic (and specifically Lacanian) theory.[128] According to her, there is too little attention for the meaning of sex in philosophy, whereas sex has always played a pivotal role in understanding humans and their subjectivity in the field of psychoanalysis.[129]

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[124] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?,* 48.

[125] “Sex”, Oxford Dictionary, accessed Fabruary 25, 2022, https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/176989#:~:text=Physical%20contact%20between%20individuals%20involving,in%20sexual%20intercourse%20(with).

[126] With this I want to refer to the multistability of technologies. Multistabilty means that technologies can always be used in different ways than they were originally designed for, but also not in all ways. Sex robots can, for instance, also be used for non-sexual purposes. Sex dolls are for instance also sometimes seen as romantic and life partners. Sex robots can also be used just to talk to or as a decoration for your house.

[127] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?,* 6.

[128] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?,* 1.

[129] Cassandra Seltman, “Too Much of Not Enough: An Interview with Alenka Zupančič”, Los Angeles Review of Books, accessed April 16, 2022, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/too-much-of-not-enough-an-interview-with-alenka-Zupančič/

For Zupančič, sex formulates a contradiction and a negativity in our reality and our ontology.[130] With this she refers to the Lacanian idea of lack being at the core of our desire, and therefore of what makes us human.[131] Contradiction refers to the idea of the split subject, meaning that the subject can never be complete, and yet always strives for a completion of themselves. According to Zupančič, sex falls in the domain of the Real and therefore escapes symbolization. This is why language will always fail when it comes to sex. Psychoanalytic theorist Joan Copjec describes sex as the impossibility of completing meaning, since what belongs to the Real cannot be symbolized.[132] Also, since sex belongs to the domain of the Real, it can be seen as a negativity (or: lack) in our reality. This should not be understood in the way that sex does not exist or that nobody ever engages in behaviour that is sexual. The Lacanian understanding of sex as an unsymbolizable negativity in our reality can perhaps be better understood in Zupančič' own words:

> "The paradoxical status of sex is the opposite of, say, the status of unicorns: it is not about an entity that is nowhere to be found empirically, although we know exactly what it would look like if it were found empirically; rather, the opposite: empirically, there is no doubt that sex exists (and we are pretty well able to recognize, "identify" it); what seems to be missing—to put this in Platonic terms—is the Idea of sex, its essence: what exactly do we recognize when we say "this is sex"?"[133]

This is why according to Zupančič, that when we come across something that we cannot identify or explain, it usually has to do with sex. Therefore, sex can be found at moments where something does not work and we cannot make sense of it by means of symbolization.[134] She argues that one of the main tasks of psychoanalysis is to bring the negativity at work in sexuality to the forefront. This means making the subject aware of the notion that sex is also a means, like any other means, to make us less aware of the lack inherent to our being. In her own words, this implies that subjects should: "[...] produce sex as absolutely and intrinscally meaningless, not as the ultimate horizon of all humanly produced meaning. That is to say: to restore sex in its dimension of the Real."[135]

[130] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 3.
[131] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 22.
[132] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 43.
[133] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 22.
[134] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 23.
[135] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 8.

She also argues that the idea that we tend to moralize issues around sex precisely because we try to grasp something that cannot be grasped. We opress, regulate and 'oversexualize' in popular culture but simultaneously cover up and hide expressions of sex.[136] This is also where the relationship between sex as the basis of our ontology and sex as the impossibility of meaning making (in the epistemological sense) becomes clear. When something (like the meaning of sex) cannot be grasped and is a void, we feel uncomfortable with that idea and try to cover up that lack. So, to get back to the joke with which I started this chapter: there is always a lack present when it comes to sex. There always has to be a without (milk or cream), and in that sense there always has to be a lack.[137] As stated before, this lack should not be seen as something that is necessarily negative. It is rather what constitutes our subjectivity.

The psychoanalytic understanding of sex can be understood as an extremely broad understanding of sex, compared to the everyday understanding of sex as engaging in sexual activities. It is also the case that sexual interactions with humans and robots appear to be very similar when understood instrumentally. However, when understood psychoanalytically, it can be argued that there is a significant difference between sex with humans and sex with robots. It is therefore necessary to understand the psychoanalytic understanding of sex in order to understand the arguments I will make in chapter 2.3. on the difference between sex with humans and sex with robots.

There is, according to the Lacanian understanding of sex, one main similarity between sex with humans and sex with robots. That is that both can only exist through mediation by fantasy, showing that full reciprocity is an illusion both with humans and with robots.[138] This is exemplified by one of Lacan's famous formulas: "the sexual relation does not exist". This formula has been interpreted in a variety of ways. It should not be understood in the way that sexual interactions literally do not exist, in the sense that nobody is having sexual interactions. Rather, an interesting interpretation of the formula is that sex as the completion of meaning, as a complete fulfillment, does not exist.[139] Sexual enjoyment is always narcissistic, and allows the subject to fulfill their fantasy by projecting it onto the other party. So, the formula shows

[136] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 35.
[137] Enrico Redaelli, "Where does Sexuality Come From? Sex and Institution: A Knot, *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, accessed May 10, 2022,
https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/where-does-sexuality-come-from-sex-and-institution-a-knot/
[138] Christopher Stephens, "What Is Sex?" Pop Matters, accessed May 12, 2022,
https://www.popmatters.com/what-is-sex-by-alenka-Zupančič-2528653807.html
[139] Slavoj Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void* (2017: Massachusetts, MIT Press), 1.

that there is no direct and unmediated relationship between people. Since the moment of language acquisition, there has always been a sense of estrangement.[140]

Lacanian theorist Isabel Millar also argues that there are three necessary elements present in any sexual activity: two partners, as well as fantasy as a precondition and placeholder that lacks any inherent meaning. This fantasy functions as a container for subjects to project their own fantasies.[141] Our own fantasy can never be fully similar to the fantasy of another, since our fantasy is based on the unconscious. In that sense, there can never be something such as full reciprocity and a full knowledge of the enjoyment of the other party. Sex with robots makes this impossibility of full reciprocity especially clear, more clear than when it comes to sex with humans, since when it comes to sex with humans we tend to be less aware of the role that fantasy always plays in order to sustain interactions. Millar states clearly in her own words that:

> "The reason why sex bots are so problematic and yet so fascinating is that they expose precisely the artificial character of the sexual relation. In Lacanian terms the unbearable Real of sexuality. The fact that an artificial doll may act as the representation of a sexual fantasy presents us with the true horror of subjectivity: the fantasy is the only thing that really sustains any of our relationships at all."[142]

So, in order for the subject to have fulfilling sexual interactions, the subject has to recognize that there are always fantasies at play that stage reciprocity and cover up the gap between the subject's own feelings and the reality of the other.[143] This is the case both for sex with humans and sex with robots.

As I will argue in section 2.3, there is (despite this similarity) however one main difference between sex with humans and robots. Namely, that robots 'lack the lack' that humans have, and that the Lacanian structure of desire therefore functions differently when it comes to sex with robots than when it comes to sex with humans.

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[140] I will not get more into the masculine and feminine position in the symbolic order here. The only thing I need to state is that when we look at actual sexual interactions, they can (obviously) occur between more than two individuals, as well as between people of the same gender (or people who identify as non-binary). Lacan does not refer to subject who have male or female genitalia, but rather to subjects who take on the masculine or the feminine position in the symbolic order.

[141] Isabel Millar, "Sex-Bots: Are You Thinking What I'm Thinking?" Everyday Analysis, accessed April 2, 2022, https://everydayanalysisorg.wordpress.com/2019/03/15/sex-bots-are-you-thinking-what-im-thinking/

[142] Millar, "Sex-Bots"

[143] Kirshner, "Rethinking Desire," 87.

2.2. What is a sex robot?

I will focus on having sex with robots as a phenomenon compared to having sex with humans, rather than focus on a specific type of sex robots. Nevertheless, it is still relevant to provide a general sketch of the current state of sex robot development in order to concretize my argument. In this section I will therefore provide a brief sketch of what sex robots are and what the sex robot market currently looks like.

Ethicist of technology John Danaher has provided a definition (central to the academic sex robot debate) of what can be understood as a sex robot. According to him, a sex robot is in the first place any artificially intelligent device that is used for sexual purposes. The device has to adhere to three criteria in order to be defined as a sex robot: it needs to have a humanoid form, it has to be able to move by itself by mimicking human movements and some form of artificial intelligence has to be involved.[144] So, what distinguishes sex robots from other sex toys that these other artificially intelligent devices used for sexual purposes do not adhere to all three criteria. For instance, sex dolls do have a humanoid form, but they do not make use of artificial intelligence nor can they mimic human movements. Other sex toys can mimick human movements (for instance, fucking machines) or use artificial intelligence (for instance, remote controlled vibrators by means of a mobile application), but they do not have a humanoid form.

There are a variety of brands that currently sell sex robots on the private market. One of the first sex robots was introduced at the Las Vegas Adult Entertainment Expo in 2010. Her name is Roxxxy, and she can be bought for a little under 10 000 American dollars. There has been quite some criticism of Roxxxy, stating that she was being overhyped and that she was not able to live up to promised expectations.[145] One of the most popular sex robot developing company is Abyss Creations. Millar mentions that the name Abyss Creations points precisely at the psychoanalytic meaning of sex: sex as something that is inherently meaningless and void any of meaning.[146] The word abyss can furthermore also be understood as a distance that cannot be overcome, again referring to the idea that full reciprocity and overcoming any distance between two parties is an impossibility.

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[144] John Danaher, "Should We Be Thinking About Sex Robots?" in *Robot Sex: Social and Ethical Implications*, ed. John Danaher and Neil McArthur (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 4-5.

[145] “State of the Sexbot Market: The World’s Best Sex Robot and AI Sex Doll Companies”, Future of Sex, Accessed April 14. 2022, https://futureofsex.net/robots/state-of-the-sexbot-market-the-worlds-best-sex-robot-and-ai-love-doll-companies/

[146] Isabel Millar, *The Psychoanalysis of Artificial Intelligence* (2021: Switzerland, Springer Nature): 116.

The Realbotix developed by Abyss Creations is an artificially intelligent head of a sex doll that can be attached to the body of their Realdoll, which is a sex doll body without any artificial intelligence. Her head has fourteen points that can show facial expression. Her personality and the way that she speaks to you can be adapted through the use of a mobile application. A review of the mobile app states that a potential consumer can choose between eighteen personality attributes, ranging from sexual, talkative, innocent and affectionate to moody, quiet, thrill (?) and annoying. It is interesting to note that you cannot only choose between positive characteristics, but also between ones that we usually see as negative (such as annoying or moody). There is a choice between five different voices. Four of them are human female voices. The fifth one is the voice of your phone's operating system[147]

Prices of sex robots differ greatly. One of the cheaper ones offered is Emma. She is being produced by a Chinese brand for around 4500 American dollars. She is able to perform a few basic functions (move her head, blink and have basic conversations in Chinese and English). Customers have the ability to choose between five different heads, and can customize the robot according to their liking. They are able to choose different skin colors, hair styles and heights. Her skin can also heat up to 37 degrees (human body temperature) in order to provide a more realistic experience.[148]

Many companies offering sex robots do not have a steady reputation, meaning that most of them have a nearly non-existent costumer service (according to a fair amount of negative online reviews). It is difficult to credibly check the amount of sex robots that they have sold, as well as to know more about the quality of their robots.[149] For instance, around 4000 Roxxxy's (another type of sex robot) were pre-ordered, but no real customers have ever showed up, which potentially suggests that the 'customers' were used as a marketing trick to hype up the company and that the robots were never produced in the first place.[150] It is therefore difficult to get a realistic understanding of the current sex robot market.

The sex-tech market (meaning all technologies meant to enhance or enricht sexual experiences) is booming but the role of sex robots in it remains quite unclear. Because of the relatively high price of sex robots (compared to sex toys), it is fair to expect that it will take a

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[147] "Realbotix Harmony App Review and Walkthrough, Sex Robot Informer, accessed June 15, 2022, https://www.sexrobotinformer.com/realbotix-harmony-app-review-walkthrough/

[148] "Emma The Sex Robot: Customizable Sex Robot," Silicon Wives, accessed June 15, 2022, https://www.siliconwives.com/products/emma-sex-robot

[149] "State of the Sexbot Market: The World's Best Sex Robot and AI Sex Doll Companies", Future of Sex, Accessed April 14. 2022, https://futureofsex.net/robots/state-of-the-sexbot-market-the-worlds-best-sex-robot-and-ai-love-doll-companies/

[150] "Sex Robots - a disturbing look inside one of the world's fastest growing industries," Business Leader, accessed June 16, 2022, https://www.businessleader.co.uk/sex-robots-a-disturbing-look-inside-one-of-the-worlds-fastest-growing-industries/

while (if at all) before sex robots become available for a wide group of consumers. Another possible use of sex robots in society is in sex robot brothels, next to invididual ownership. Customers could then rent a sex robot for a certain amount of time. This idea is not too far fetched: there are a variety of sex doll brothels that are currently open for business worldwide, but I did not encounter any brothel that offers sex robots as of yet.[151]

The majority of the sex robots that are currently in development sold are mimicked after the female body, and the expected users of these robots are men. Criticisms of the unrealistic physical characteristics of sex robots, following dominant beauty ideals (very skinny, white, long hair) are also present in the current academic sex robot debate. They are similar to long-standing feminist criticisms of unrealistic beauty standars in for instance pornography and adversiting, which can lead to low self-esteem in girls and women who do not fit in with the ideal.[152]

Sex robots could also possibly be used in therapeutic settings.[153] For instance, sex robots could potentially be helpful for some people on the autism spectrum. Since some autistic people have difficulty with identifying subtle and bodily social cues, they are at a higher risk of displaying unwanted behaviour in sexual contexts as well as of being victims of sexual abuse.[154] Sex robots could potentially be developed for autistic people to practice sexually appropriate behaviour with 'others' that are less ambiguous and difficult to interpret than other humans. Eventually, this can lead to better social skills in the domain of sexuality that can also lead to better social skills in other domains of human-to-human contact.[155] Next to that, sexual satisfaction (for all people) contributes to their wellbeing.[156] In my research, I will however focus on sex with robots for the sake of sexual enjoyment alone, and will exclude potential therapeutic purposes.

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[151] "High-Tech Sex Doll Brothels and Sexbot Cyberbrothels", Future of Sex, accessed June 16, 2022, https://futureofsex.net/robots/map-of-sex-doll-brothels-around-the-world/

[152] I will not get further into these criticisms here. As a counter movement, I have found a handful of papers that argue for queer sexbots, meaning that sex robots could and should be designed in ways that are less heteronormative and show more diversity in bodytypes. They also argue that sex robots could be designed in non-humanoid ways. See, for instance: Tanja Kubes, "Let there be pleasure! Gender-Queer Perspectives on Sex Robots and Robot Sex" *Constructions of Gender in Sexrobotics* (2018: Feminist Philosophy of Technology Conference).

[153] Christiane Eichenberg, Marwa Khamis and Lisa Hübner, "The Attitudes of Therapists and Physicians on the Use of Sex Robots in Sexual Therapy: Online Survey and Interview Study", *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 21, no. 8 (2019).

[154] Van Grunsven and van Wynsberghe, "A Semblance of Aliveness," 18.

[155] Van Grunsven and van Wynsberghe, "A Semblance of Aliveness," 19.

[156] María del Mar Sánchez-Fuentes, Pablo Santos-Iglesias, Juan Carlos Sierra, "A systematic review of sexual satisfaction."

2.3. What is different about sex with humans and sex with robots?

In this chapter, I will argue that there is one main difference between sex with humans and sex with robots. Namely, that desire functions differently when it comes to robots than when it comes to humans.[157] This is because robots 'lack the lack' that humans do have, and therefore do not have the Thing. Firstly, I will argue for the difference using the Lacanian theory I described in the first chapter. To illustrate this difference, I will explain the concept of the uncanny, and show that it is likely that humans experience sex with humans or robots differently because they have uncanny feelings.

As stated before, humans become subjects at the moment of language acquisition according to Lacanian theory. A baby becomes a split subject when it realizes that her or his mother also has needs that are not related to the baby. The mother also has the need to spend time on her own and fulfill her needs that are independent from the baby (for instance, a good night's sleep or time with her partner without the baby being present). A baby needs to be able to voice its needs, because these needs are not the same as the needs of the mother. This is when the baby becomes a split subject through language acquisition.

The difference between a robot and a human is that a robot does not at one point acquire language in order to voice their needs and becomes a split subject. The difference becomes relevant because if robots are not split subjects, they also do not become lacking subjects. And because they are not lacking subjects, they also do not have the Thing that belongs to the Real. As explained before, the Thing is that part of a subject that cannot be symbolized and explained by the means of language. It is also what gives a subject their dignity and particularity.

Since the Thing is part of the Real, it is also what sustains our desire (on the third level: desire as a desire to return to the Real). And since robots do not have the Thing, our desire for them functions differently from the desire we can have for other humans. One of the differences is that the Thing can be something that deeply disrupts us, and that we feel we have no control over. When another human we desire gives us a certain look, we can feel completely taken over and disrupted by it. This points to a way this key difference between humans and robots manifests itself: since robots do not have the Thing (or: lack the lack),

[157] Todd McGowan also states that when it comes to love (and not to desire), self-identical objects such as dolls cannot function as love objects because they lack the split subjectivity that makes love possible What we love in other subjects is their failure to undo their split subjectivity, and thereby the impossibility for them to create self-identify. (Todd McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, 185). Another interesting paper idea would be to compare the Lacanian understanding of love for humans and robots, and see where the difference lies.

they are not sexual. This is because, as I argued previously, sex falls in the domain of the Real. The Real escapes all symbolization and lacks all meaning, and is therefore also sometimes referred to as the void. And since sex robots do not have the Real/the Thing, they cannot be sexual in the way that humas are.

This is exemplified by the idea of Zupančič, who argues that sex happens when the flow of the usual is broken by something that not seems to work. When it comes to sex with robots, it is precisely the case that everything seems to be working perfectly. Users can customize their sex robots to fit all of their preferences, both in terms of physical appearance as well as in personality and tone of voice. A robot can also never say no to a sexual request, can never have different sexual preferences than you do and the user of the robot is only limited by the materiality of the robot in what they want to do with it.[158] If understood like this, it might seem as if sex with robots is a more ideal situation compared to having sex with another human, since there will (beyond technical difficulties) not be many 'problems' or inconveniences to be encountered. Since subject's desires stem from wanting to fill their lack because it is uncomfortable to experience, a sex robot can be a perfect object to cover up their lack, precisely because a sex robots 'lacks a lack' that a subject does experience in themselves.

However, because robots are not subjects, they also do not have desires of their own, and can also not desire your desire back. Having sex with robots can also be seen as a form of auto-eroticism, in some sense having sex with oneself because of that.[159] This is also where the criticism that sex robots cannot reciprocate stems from. As stated before, that criticism argues that because robots are not sentient beings that can desire you back, there is an inherent symmetry to the sexual interaction that is morally problematic. The Lacanian twist to counter that argument is however that fantasy also functions as a mediator to project (narcissistic) fantasies onto the other party when it comes to sex with humans. Therefore, it cannot be used as a criticism of robots alone.

An empirical example that can support my argument is an interview with Davecat, a 42-year old man living with three sex dolls.[160] Psychoanalytic therapist Daniella Knafo has undertaken a seven hour interview with him. He considers himself to be a robosexual, meaning that he experiences more sexual attraction towards robots than towards other

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[158] However, there have been papers written on whether it the users of sex robots should be limited in other ways as well. See for instance the paper by Frank & Nyholm (2017) on "Robot sex and consent: Is consent to sex between a robot and a human conceivable, possible, and desirable?" where they question whether robots should be programmed in a way so that they can (or cannot) give consent.

[159] Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco, *The Age of Perversion; Desire and Technology in Psychoanalysis and Culture* (2017: London, Routledge), 102.

[160] Knafo and Lo Bosco, *The Age of Perversion*, 85.

humans. He has tried dating ‘organic women’ before, but this has never worked out for him. He mentioned that he has trust issues with real women, and likes that his dolls could never cheat on him. He does not like the messiness of ‘real’ relationships and sexual interactions with women, and enjoys the fact that his sex dolls are predictable.[161] So, this supports the idea that because sex robots (dolls in Davecat’s case) are customizable and cannot be unpredictable up to the extent that humans can be, Davecat feels attracted towards them.

This idea is furthermore confirmed by a recent academic study where the psychological characteristics of sex doll owners and non sex doll owners were compared. Little major differences could be found according to the study. Interestingly, the differences that could be found were that sex robot owners are more likely to see women as unknowable, to see the world as dangerous, to have more obsessive and emotionally stable personalities and that sex doll owners tend to have lower sexual self-esteem.[162]

However, Davecat along with that also mentions that although he experiences an intimate bond with each of his dolls, he would exchange his dolls for a sex robot without a doubt. He would prefer it if his dolls would be able to talk and act by themselves.[163] He was additionally asked about where ‘the line’ for him would be, meaning when the point would be where a sex robot would become too much like a human. For him, a sex robot would become too human when she would need to go to the bathroom, or when she would start to produce sweat. This is the point where he would start feeling repulsed by her. So, the moment when something would happen that is out of his control (and therefore, shows a potentially disruptive aspect that belongs to the Real that robots lack), Davecat would start to be repulsed. It is also the case that if a doll would go to the bathroom or sweat, she would exhibit behavior that is out of the control of the doll as well. This means that there is a part of her that she cannot control and that is extimate to herself, which would make her too similar to another human.

The sense of repulsion or unease that humans feel when a humanoid looks or acts too much like a human is also referred to as the uncanny valley.[164] Multiple explanations have been offered for what causes these uncanny feelings in humans when confronted with a humanoid. The concept was first coined by psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch in 1919 to describe feelings of unease elicited by dolls. Freud picked this concept up and saw the cause of

[161] Knafo and Lo Bosco, *The Age of Perversion*, 102.
[162] Craig Harper. Rebecca Lievesley and Katie Wanless, "Exploring the psychological characteristics and risk-related cognitions of individuals who own sex dolls," *Journal of Sex Research* (2022): 1.
[163] Knafo and Lo Bosco, *The Age of Perversion*, 103.
[164] Knafo and Lo Bosco, *The Age of Perversion*, 105.

uncanny feelings as a recognition of something that a subject has repressed.[165] So, the subject recognizes something from their unconscious, but cannot find any recognition for it on the conscious level.

Aydin offers an alternative explanation of the uncanny (based on Freud's interpretation), namely that the uncanny is mainly about the tension between what is known and what is unknown to us.[166] Humanoids give us uncanny feelings because they make an uncomfortable idea recognizable that should have remained hidden. This is the idea that there are only minor differences between us and a humanoid. More importantly, we are unable to point at what makes us different from a robot.[167] Aydin interprets the cause of uncanny feelings therefore not only as what a robot is missing in humanness, but mostly as what humans cannot completely appropriate about their own humanness.

This again refers to the extimacy inherent to subjectivity: the idea that we can never appropriate and know what is intimate and human to us, because there is nothing that is completely intimate.[168] We feel uncomfortable with the idea that there is always something that will escape us, which is also symbolized by subjects trying to cover up the lack inherent to their subjectivity. So, when a sex robot would move like a human, make sounds like a human, feels like a human yet still is not human, it reminds us of the fact that we can also not understand what it is that makes us human and thereby fundamentally different from the robot. These (potential) uncanny feelings are also exhibited by Davecat's statement that he does not want his dolls to become too much like a human. On the one hand, it would remind him of the uncomfortable idea that it is not so easy to distinguish between himself and the robot. On the other hand, because the robot is not too much like a human, he is not reminded of his own humanness. For instance, if his dolls would have to go to the bathroom, it would mirror his humanness and thereby his inherent lack which would elicit uncomfortable feelings.

So, paradoxically, because there is nothing that seems to be lacking with robots (because they do not have the Thing), desire functions differently when it comes to sex with humans than with sex with humans. I will get more into the implications of this difference in desire from a societal (capitalist) perspective (in chapter three) as well as what this means for our self-formation (in chapter four).

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[165] Ciano Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 198.
[166] Ciano Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 198.
[167] Ciano Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 199.
[168] Ciano Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 199.

Chapter 3: Sex with humans and robots in society

In the previous chapter, I have analyzed sex with robots and sex with humans from a Lacanian framework, but without taking the role of society explicitely into account. However, society (or the Other) can never be left out when using a Lacanian framework. The subject always constitutes itself in relation to the Other, and can therefore never be understood without it. In this chapter, I will firstly argue that the capitalist society in which sex (with humans and robots) takes place makes use of the inherent lack that humans have. I will argue that where humans have the Thing, robots can only simulate a watered down version of the Thing. Hence, desire for robots and humans functions differently, specifically related to jouissance. Since capitalist systems can be defined in many ways, I take the commodification of things as fundamental to what a consumer capitalist society is. I do this mostly because Marx' concept of commodity fetishism has also been analyzed from a psychoanalytic perspective.[169]

As stated before, maintaining the right distance to the Real (and regulating jouissance) is what a subject ought to do according to Lacanian theory. Capitalism can be understood as a system that effectively plays with the lack inherent to subjects, and the (illusory) desire to fill this lack. This does not mean that subjects are passively submitted to a capitalist system. Rather, they actively take part in it through the consumption of products.[170]

The relationship between products and lack can be better understood through Karl Marx' concept of commodity fetishism. He explains the concept of commodity fetishism by using the example of a table, by first referring to it as a 'normal' table. The point is that when the normal table is presented as a commodity (at the moment that it enters the capitalist market), it becomes a thing (not to be confused with the Lacanian Thing) that can be compared to other things and assigned monetary value. With this comes the aim of generating as much surplus value (profit) as possible.[171] This is the point where Marx sees estrangement emerging between the workers and their products and consumers and their products.[172] Workers become alienated from their own products, because it is the capitalist (the owner of the means of production) who benefits from receiving the surplus value putting the labour of creating the product in. Consumers do not know who has made their products,

[169] I will not get further into what capitalist systems are, because that would be the topic of another thesis.

[170] Steffen Böhm and Aanka Batta, "Just doing it: enjoying commodity fetishism with Lacan," *Organization* 17, no. 3: 345.

[171] Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 348.

[172] Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 349.

and under what circumstances their products were made, and are therefore also estranged from the products that they buy.

The surplus value of commodities cannot be 'objectively' determined: when a thing enters the market, some almost magical quality becomes attached to it. This is the fetishism part of commodity fetishism: there is at first a 'normal' thing (for instance, a table). However, something supernatural or magical surrounds the thing when it enters the market that turns it into a commodity. This is why products of comparable quality can sometimes differ highly in price, for instance when one product is produced by a high-class designer brand and the other is designed by a mass retailer. So, consumers do not pay only for the thing itself. Rather, they pay for the magical and abstract aura that surrounds the commodity. In Lacanian terms, this magical aura surrounding a commodity can be understood as a fantasy. For Marx, fetishism is inseparable from commodities, and therefore commodity fetishism is always present in capitalist society.[173]

The concept of commodity fetishism was later taken up further by cultural theorists such as Adorno, Marcuse and Benjamin, and later on by Althusser, Baudrillard and Lyotard in order to bridge psychoanalytic (mostly Freudian) insights with Marxist theory.[174] Lacan has never directly talked about commodity fetishishm. He was however very much aware of Marx' work and referred to it frequently.[175] A Lacanian interpretation of commodity fetishism is that our capitalist society encourages subjects to project their fantasies onto commodities with the belief that these commodities can cover up the lack inherent to subjects.[176] Simultaneously, subjects know and understand that buying more products will not satisfy them completely, and that they likely already have more than enough products, but yet they will buy more of them.[177]

Brands exploit the lack inherent to subjects by creating an appealing commodity through marketing techniques, in order to generate as much profit as possible. A successful brand ensures that the consumer experiences some enjoyment of their product, but also that they are not completely satisfied (which is an impossibility in itself). This ensures that subjects will again be tempted to buy new versions or varieties of a certain product, since they then can again experience a sense of partial enjoyment.[178] So, the need to fill our lack is not only

[173] Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 349.
[174] Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 346.
[175] Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 347.
[176] Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 354.
[177] Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 355.
[178] Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 355.

something that only manifests itself on the individual level, but rather as something political and economic that is embedded in our capitalist society.[179]

Whilst Marx was highly critical of consumer capitalism and advocated for a communist revolution, a Lacanian interpretation of commodity fetishism is less critical. Where Marx reasoned that commodities create 'false' desires (implying there is also something such as an 'authentic' desire), Lacan would say that all our desires are 'false', in the sense that there is nothing such as an authentic, pure or intimate desire that is not in some way influenced by the Other.[180] An economic system different from capitalism would therefore not change our ontology as desiring and lacking beings, and would not lead to a more 'authentic' way of desiring.[181] Capitalism does however mimic the structure of our desire, whilst simultaneously covering up the true cause of our desire: object a. Object a has never existed, and can never be fulfilled, but capitalism makes us believe that our inherent lack can be filled. For instance, advertisements make subjects aware of their lack, with the hope that subjects will consume more of their products.[182] Underlying this is the idea that a better future awaits, if only certain commodities are bought. Without this promise of a better future, capitalism could probably not function.[183]

This promise of a better future relates to the structure of desire functions on both the conscious and the unconscious level. At the unconscious level, subjects experience some sense of satisfaction in the search for something that can cover up their lack, rather than for the complete fulfillment of their desire. This is shown by the fact that if subjects feel like object-specific desire is at one point fulfilled, they are likely to engage in new projects, new adventures or new relationships. Desire can therefore never be completely fulfilled, since isf that seems to be the case, another object-specific desire comes into play that is at that moment still unfulfilled.

On the conscious level, however, subjects do experience disappointment when realizing that an object did not provide the (lasting) enjoyment that was expected.[184] Without the experience of satisfaction in the unconscious, and the dissatisfaction in the conscious, the capitalist system would not have been as persistent as it is. There is therefore something paradoxical in capitalism at play: it gives enough (partial) enjoyment for subjects to believe in the system, but it never gives complete satisfaction which sustains their desire to buy more

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179 Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 355.
180 Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 356.
181 Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 356.
182 McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 11.
183 McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 12.
184 McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 39.

commodities.[185]

The way that capitalism utilizes the lack that subjects experience to find enjoyment through consumption points towards a core difference between sex with humans and sex with robots in society. Namely, that because robots do not have the Thing, commodities can only give us a watered down experience of jouissance, compared to humans who can give us sexual experiences that offer us a different kind of jouissance. This is because commodities can only provide us with a jouissance that is in service to capitalism's need for production and consumption.

Zupančič for instance argues that finding enjoyment through consumption cannot include the death drive, in the sense that enjoyment through consumption usually does not allow for taking risks and exposing oneself to potentially (self)-destructive situations.[186] As discussed before, jouissance is a desire for complete and total satisfaction, which is an impossibility due to biological and societal constraints. Jouissance becomes destructive when it is not limited by any constraints, and therefore pushes against these constraints. However, jouissance is simultaneously what drives us and can allow us to experience partial fulfillment. Jouissance, as understood as desire for the Real, therefore functions differently when there is Thing that it can be directed towards. This is why jouissance functions differently when it comes to robots than when it comes to humans.

So, when buying new commodities, subjects imagine that they can experience jouissance, but since there is no actual risk and potential self-destructiveness involved, they are never able to truly experience it. Bohm and Batta clarify this in their article on how commodity fetishism can be seen in Nike's marketing by stating that:

> "When one reads Nike's advertising slogans, like 'Heroes are people who believe they can do it' or 'On the field there are no winners; only survivors,' one gets perhaps a short glimpse of this outside, of death, but only in a 'dumped down', easily consumable package."[187]

So, Bohm and Batta state here that consumers can get a safe glimpse of what it feels like to be a hero or a survivor, without taking any of the risks or challenges (in their quote, referred to as the 'death' that jouissance can lead to if unregulated) necessary to become an actual hero

[185] McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 35.
[186] Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 355.
[187] Böhm and Batta, "Just doing it," 356.

or survivor. To experience jouissance, there has to be something that can potentially become too much, and therefore will be experienced as painful.

It can be argued by analogy that jouissance functions similarly when it comes to sex with robots. Sex robots promise sexual experiences that are always available, with a beautiful partner who is customize completely in complete accordance to your liking. However, this seemingly ideal situation is presented in an easily consumable package, that does not need a user of a sex robot to take any potential risks that would come with having sex with a human (rejection, dissapointing your partner or a sexual experience that turned out to be unfulfilling). The difference is that whereas sex with robots can provide pleasure (meaning, a state where tension is diminished), they cannot provide jouissance because the potential threath is lacking. Sex with robots is also, as argued before, completely different from the psychoanalytic definition of sex, which needs something that cannot be symbolized (from the domain of the Real) and something that breaks with the flow and is not functional.

My argument can be criticized by stating that within a capitalist system, humans are treated more and more as commodities as well, so the difference between subjects and objects becomes difficult to maintain.[188] Knafo and LoBosco also identify the times that we live in as perverse times, meaning that we live in a time where "[...] we are becoming more like machines and they more like us."[189] This expresses itself in the fact that subjects tend to form emotional connections to their machines, whilst also dehumanizing and commodifying other people.[190] An example of seeing humans as commodities are dating apps, where it is pivotal to create a profile that is as attractive as possible in order to situate oneself in a good position 'on the dating market'. Others as well as ourselves are becoming commodified and seen as objects that can be compared to other objects, for instance by the option of filtering out profiles that do not fit our object-specific desires.

Lacanian theorist Todd McGowan states nicely that when you approach love (so not sex) like this (in his example, through the use of dating services), "[...] there is no difference between a romantic partner and a vacuum cleaner."[191] The same can be said about approaching sex, and also is what happens when consumers of a sex robot are able to choose exactly what their sex robots should look like and what their personalities should be like. Furthermore, he argues that love (with other humans) becomes more of a well-calculated investment, meaning that we approach it in a way that creates as little risk and as much

[188] Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco, *The Age of Perversion*, 8.
[189] Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco, *The Age of Perversion,* 1.
[190] Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco, *The Age of Perversion*, 8.
[191] McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 186.

benefit as possible.[192] The same can said about Davecat with his dolls, who makes a one time financial investment in his dolls and is ensured of sexual experiences (and in his experience, also love) whenever he wants.

So, since we are treating humans more like objects, it can be convincingly argued that dichotomies such as subject and object become blurred and perhaps difficult to sustain in our capitalist system.[193] Another example of this is that subjects can form emotional connections to their sex robot, and can objectify their human sexual partners. However, as I am arguing for for in this thesis, it can still be the case (from a Lacanian perspective) that even if subjects are becoming more like objects, and objects become more like subjects, a distinction between them can be made based on the argument that I made in the second chapter: namely, that the structure of desire functions differently for robots than for humans since robots 'lack the lack' that humans do have. Humans have the Thing and have something that will always fail to be symbolized, whereas commodities and technologies cannot exist without being symbolized, and can therefore not contain the Real. Technologies and commodities are always part of the Other. So, even if sex robots become more like humans, and humans become like commodities, humans still have the Thing that robots do not have, and therefore desire for humans functions differently, and humans are able to give us a type of jouissance that robots cannot give us.

In the next concluding chapter, I will give a general sketch of some more normative implications of a Lacanian understanding of the difference between sex with humans and sex with robots. I do not aim to provide a conclusive argument, but rather aim to put forward some ideas that could be researched further.

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192 McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 189.

193 Another interesting paper idea would be to investigate Lacan's notion of courtly love, where he mentions that when it comes to medieval (French) poetry, the woman becomes objet a: she becomes the nonexistent cause of desire. He also states that the lady functions as an 'inhuman partner' (see: Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (2004: London, Taylor & Francis), 108). His notion of inhumanness here, compared to love or sex with robots and humans, would be interesting to investigate further.

4: Enjoyable sex with humans and robots

I have started this thesis by stating that my reasons for writing it were, for instance, the philosophical need to reflect upon the future of sex that is becoming increasingly mediated by technologies and formulating a criticism of the dominant academic discourse on sex robots. Whilst these motivations are all valid and true, there is another main reason for writing it that I have not mentioned yet. This is a personal recognition of the Lacanian idea of lack and the idea that 'things' (life) will be better in the future, if only conditions x, y or z would be different. Whereas Lacan's philosophy is often criticized for the use of overly obscure language and for being impossible to understand logically[194], the ideas that he is elaborating upon have struck a deep chord within me, which has motivated me to understand and interpret his ideas.

The promise of a better future is a persistent yet alluring illusion. People (myself included) seem to be aware of the idea that even though it is likely that life will be different in the future, it will not necessarily be better when the conditions x, y, and z have changed according to their liking. As I am writing this concluding chapter, I still have the belief that once I have drank another coffee (even though I had one too many already), I will feel better. And even though it is likely to be true for a short amount of time, after the caffeine buzz has lost its effect on me, I will desire something else, like taking a nap. And, after my nap, I might start daydreaming about the upcoming summer holidays, and about how good I will 'finally' feel when I am drinking mojitos on the beach.

This leads us to the question: how should we relate to what we think that we want, when we are always in the end disappointed by it? Instead of renouncing the structure of desire altogether (as some Buddhist philosophies advocate for) since desire only can only lead to suffering, Lacan's philosophy presents another way of dealing with the suffering that the structure of our desire insurmountably causes. In this concluding chapter, I will get further into how we ought to understand Lacan's structure of desire when it comes to having sex with humans and robots. So far, my thesis has mostly been descriptive, arguing for a difference between sex with humans and robots from a Lacanian perspective, whilst staying away from how we ought to have sex, and from the question whether sex with robots is morally 'good' or 'bad'. Moving towards an understanding of what we ought to do with these Lacanian insights is the aim of this final chapter.

As explained in the first chapter, the Lacanian answer to how subjects should form themselves can be found in the idea of sublimation. Sublimation means that subjects try to

[194] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 71.

maintain the right distance to the Real, so they are able to organize their life around their inherent lack instead of trying to fill it, and thereby embrace it. Subjects should neither be too close to their lack (since this would become too overwhelming and disruptive), nor too far away (since this would lead to feelings of apathy).

The lack inherent to subjects is also sometimes described as a void, as an empty space which can contain nothing, since it belongs to the Real and the Real escapes all symbolization. Lacan often uses examples of art to clarify his conception of sublimation. A clear example that he uses is the shaping of a vase on a pottery wheel.[195] The shaping of the vase should be understood as subjects shaping their life. Subjects have the agency to make certain choices in life, despite being restricted by a certain logic (so the vase will not collapse). The emptiness inside the vase symbolizes our inherent lack and void, and the vase functions as a container for it. Subjects shape the vase in the right way if the vase is able to embrace the void, so if the vase is able to contain the void.

However, filling the vase and thereby filling the void is tempting, and more tempting than embracing the emptiness inside the vase. Capitalism operates on the promise that commodities and objects and subjects are able to cover up their inherent lack, with the hope that their lives will be better in the future. This promise however obfuscates that it is actually this lack that we want and need in order for our desire to be sustained. What is paradoxical about desire is that it needs to remain unfilled. In other words, this means that subjects ought to embrace the lack that constitutes their subjectivity: this is the only way that subjects can find partial (and true) satisfaction.[196] So, instead of trying to fill the lack and aim for complete satisfaction, they should embrace that it is the opposite that can give us satisfaction: accepting the loss.[197]

In the (imaginary) case that desire would be completely fulfilled, subjects would find no direction or meaning in life, which would be highly unsatisfactory. Satisfaction and partial enjoyment can therefore be found in the process of desiring, rather than its non-existent satisfaction. As Todd McGowan shows, what we desire in other humans is their lack (their Thing), and not the object-specific qualities that they do have: “even when we are right next to someone we love, we enjoy what is absent in the beloved, not what is present: that part of the beloved that we can’t decipher.”[198]

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[195] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 224.
[196] McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 29.
[197] McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 29.
[198] McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 242.

And, as I have argued throughout this thesis, it is precisely this lack that robots lack, which makes our desire function in a different way than when it comes to humans. When it comes to sex with robots, it is the case that robots cannot provide us with jouissance since they lack the Thing. The fact that robots cannot provide us with jouissance in a similar way to humans is in itself not necessarily problematic, which is one of the reasons why a complete rejection of sex robots cannot be sustained. However, it can become problematic when subjects do not have a critical awareness of the structure of their desire. When subjects imagine that sex with a robot can fill their inherent lack, or when they imagine that there is no difference in sex with humans and sex with robots, they can be positioned too far away from the Real, and thereby too far away from their lack.

When there is no experience of jouissance, the experience of a sense of 'existential electricity' that sparks a feeling of being alive is also not there.[199] Robots can only provide us with the literal kind of electricity. Pleasure, in contrast to jouissance, is a state in which subjects do not experience this electric feeling, but rather experience a sense of balance. It is also jouissance that makes it impossible for us to experience a long-lasting sense of balance, referring to the idea that there always seems to be something that is missing or out of place. Jouissance is therefore a disruptive force, whereas pleasure is a harmonious experience that makes us feel like everything is in place.

What matters is therefore how a subject desires, and not what they obtain in the end.[200] Subjects can only find satisfaction through failure and loss, because this opens up a space for partial enjoyment. It is therefore not the case that subjects should never be seduced into buying another commodity again, but rather that they have to buy commodities without being invested in the promise that the commodity entails.[201] So, they should embrace and understand that a new commodity can never fill their lack, and thereby not believe in the capitalist promise of a better future.

This is however difficult to do in our capitalist society. Capitalist society (as part of the Other) projects certain ideals onto subjects on what good sex should be. Good sex should be sex with an attractive partner, good sex is sex where both parties have bountiful orgasms, and good sex is sex that occurs regularly. It is the Other that tells subjects that these are the kinds of fantasies that are worth pursuing, so subjects are tempted to pursue the fantasies that they think the Other asks of them.[202] As Todd McGowan states on how subjects should situate

199 "Jouissance," Nosubject, accessed June 6, 2022, https://nosubject.com/Jouissance
200 McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 36.
201 McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 14.
202 McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire,* 47.

themselves as a ‘free subject’ in a capitalist society is that: “the free subject ceases to concern itself with the question of the desire of the Other and pursues its own satisfaction regardless of its relationship to the Other. It neither tries to follow the desire of the Other nor deviate from this desire.”[203]

So, what subjects ought to do is to appropriate and own their desires, leaving aside their relation to the Other. Bruce Fink states beautifully that when it comes to psychoanalytic therapy, a subject should be able to say, instead of situation x, y, z made me cry: I cried.[204] This is the moment when a subject subjectifies their own cause, and takes responsibility for it. Psychoanalytic therapy is seen as successful when a subject is able to understand and embrace that they have an inherent lack, and that they are able to maintain the right distance to it. This means that subjects are not obsessed with trying to fill their lack, but are also not denying its existence.[205] Rather, subjects are able to form their lives around this lack, in a way that allows them the right amount of jouissance.

One of the means through which capitalism plays with subjects’ willingness to cover up their lack is by the means of technological commodities.[206] As media theorist Peter Weibel illustrates: "technology helps to fill, to bridge, to overcome the insufficiency emerging from absence. [...] By visualizing the absent, making it symbolically present, the media also transform the damaging consequences of absence into pleasant ones."[207]

Weibel can here be understood to argue for the potential emancipatory and transformative role that technologies can play when it comes to embracing the structure of our desire and thereby our lack. ‘Visualizing the absent’ can help subjects in order to become aware of their inherent lack, embrace it, and create space for the partial enjoyment that can take place because of this awareness. This way of reasoning leads us away from the techno-pessimistic and deterministic reasoning in the academic sex robot debate. They key is therefore not to renounce certain technologies altogether (such as sex robots), but rather in understanding what certain technologies can and cannot offer us. This implies that technologies can help and enable subjects to critically reflect on themselves and the objects of their desire. With this, I don’t mean to imply that technologies are merely external objects that can be analyzed from a distance. As argued, subjectivation can only take place in relation

[203] McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire*, 47.
[204] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 62.
[205] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject,* 70.
[206] Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy,* 12.
[207] Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy,* 12 (Original: Weibel, 1992).

to the Other. Technologies will therefore always be part of a subject, and should not be understood as external objects.[208]

Sex robots can potentially 'visualize the absent' by incorporating the void into their design, and thereby help subject become aware of the structure of their desire, like Lacan argues certain art works are able to do as well. Can we, for instance, imagine a sex robot saying: "I am a blank canvas for you to project your desires upon, what is on your mind today?" Or, perhaps sex robots can be designed in a way that makes them slightly unattractive. For instance, sex robots could be designed in a way that they have slightly crooked teeth, some pimples or by having the things that she can say be moody and disrespectful at times. It can also be imagined that sex robots are programmed in a way that makes them refuse the sexual avances of the users sometimes. Important to note here is that these design recommendations would not make sex robots have the Thing. This is impossible, since sex robots can never become split subjects. However, sex robots do have the potential to make subjects more aware of their own lack, and thereby allow for partial enjoyment, either with robots or with humans.

When it comes to the psychoanalytic meaning of sex (with humans), Zupančič argues that subjects ought to embrace that sex belongs to the domain of the Real and cannot be symbolized. In her own words, she states that subjects should: "[...] produce sex as absolutely and intrinscally meaningless, not as the ultimate horizon of all humanly produced meaning. That is to say: to restore sex in its dimension of the Real."[209]

As stated by Millar, sex with robots shows us that all of our (sexual) interactions are only possible when sustained by fantasy. The ideal of full reciprocity is therefore an illusion, both with robots and with humans. This is more difficult to see when it comes to sex with humans, since we recognize our own lack in another subject, and thereby are more likely to think that the other party reciprocates our desire. Sex robots are not seen as reciprocal in the first place. This is why they have the potential to make subjects more aware of the lack that is inherent to all sexual interactions. And when subjects are more aware of the structure of their desire, it gives them space and freedom to experience partial enjoyment, either with robots or with humans.

So, the emancipatory potential of sex robots compared to sex with humans is that sex with robots can help subjects embrace their lack, if sex robots are designed in a way that allows for this. This does not withstand the idea that sex robots will not be able to provide jouissance, since they lack the Thing that humans do have. Because of that, sex robots will

[208] Aydin, *Extimate Technology,* 208.
[209] Zupančič, *What IS Sex?,* 8.

only be able to provide subjects with a watered down version of jouissance, or with pleasure. The future of sex is expected to change. However, the capitalist promise of a better sexual future, with robots and with humans, is doomed to remain unfulfilled.

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