

**SOCIAL SURROGATES OR POSTHUMAN LOVERS?: LOVE DOLLS IN THE
'ROBOTIC MOMENT'**

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Abstract

In this study, I address the status of human relationships with the contemporary sex or love doll by situating these relationships at the intersection between communications technologies and subjectivity. Critical discourse analysis of testimonials, advertising, a sub forum from The Doll Forum website, and photographs challenged the two prevalent perspectives: the surrogacy thesis, which suggests that dolls operate as stand-ins for absent human partners, and the commodification of sex thesis, which cast love dolls as masturbatory devices and their users as sexually deviant. Drawing upon critical social theory, particularly Sherry Turkle's (2011) concept of the robotic moment and a reconfiguration of Keith Basso's (1996) notion of interanimacy, I argue that, rather than supplements or surrogates, sociable technologies and objects are participants in social interactions, communications, and relationships.

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Chapter 1: The Mechanical Bride and the Reification of Love.



Figure 1: Day 27/Day 1 (New In Box)

A Story: Vignettes of Infamous Mechanical Brides

Dames de Voyage

During the 17th century French and Spanish sailors were enduring longer voyages, and since women were considered bad luck on ships, men were forced to bear it alone. As a result of these long journeys, with voyagers confined to small quarters with only men aboard, the phenomena of the *dames de voyage* surfaced as somewhat of a resolution. Anthony Ferguson (2010) elaborates that “[t]hese elementary sex dolls were made from cloth or old clothes and would have been quite rudimentary. Imagination would have been critical to their use, particularly for a man isolated at sea on a long voyage” (p. 16). As well, there may have been a hierarchy of rank for those who were allowed to spend time with it, as rank and designation likely favoured more distinguished sailors. Amy Wolf (2006) comments on the *dames de voyage*, “Made of cotton and presumably held

together by dried cum, the *dames de voyage* was a hot bed of venereal diseases, and it's perhaps fortunate that no specimens – or even images – exist today” (as cited in Ferguson, p. 16).

In the year 1640, Renee Descartes' daughter Francine died at the age of five from scarlet fever. Allegedly, the death of Descartes' daughter weighed so heavily on him that he built an automaton modeled directly after Francine; he even gave it her name. The Queen of Sweden subsequently summoned Descartes. Accompanying him aboard the ship was his newly fashioned Francine. During the journey, Descartes was observed in a frantic search of the ship for what was presumably his missing daughter, asking the crew to help aid in her rescue. Members of the crew were mortified to find an extremely lifelike doll in Descartes' quarters and brought it to the captain, who reportedly threw her overboard. Ferguson (2010) suggests that “[i]t is believed that Descartes fashioned his doll to explore the contemporary fascination with artificial life and the question of what it actually is to be human” (p. 17), though other theories of Francine's construction can be found¹.

Alma Mahler's Double

Considered one of the foremost expressionist painters of the 20th century, Oskar Kokoschka entreated a dressmaker to create a doll for him. The history of this doll is bound to Kokoschka's passionate love affair with Alma Mahler, widower of the famous composer Gustav Mahler. Kokoschka was drafted during WWI, though he returned shortly after having sustained an injury. Upon Kokoschka's return he learned of Mahler's new love interest. Disheartened to find that Mahler had moved on, he commissioned the

¹ See Gaukroger (2002), *Descartes: an intellectual biography*, for another account of the

construction of a doll modeled directly after her by, ironically enough, her dressmaker Hermine Moos (Ferguson, 2010, p. 20). He was found to carry her everywhere he went, even when attending operas and shows. He bought her clothes and underwear (p. 20). However the doll met a violent end. Witness Kokoschka's own account:

Finally, after I had drawn it and painted it over and over, I decided to do away with it. It managed to cure me completely of my passion. So I gave it a big champagne party with chamber music ... When dawn broke – I was quite drunk, as was everyone else – I beheaded it out in the garden and broke a bottle of red wine over its head (as cited in Morrison, 2003).

The Real Doll

In 2010, Tom Ricard writes in his Real Doll Testimonial²:

We are some days further and I can say: it is getting better and better. The things you discover ... The things you can and must do: go shopping for her, taking care of her (washing, powdering), dressing her up, moving her, ... Kissing her, caressing her, cuddle her, laying next to her, holding her hand, brushing her wig, too much to mention (Tom Ricard, January 10, 2010).

In spending time with this commercially produced doll, Tom finds that she brings an uncanny sense of company to the room. He notes that he enjoyed his life while single, but found that the thought of having a doll could make a difference. He admits that even the pictures he saw before 'uncrating' her fulfilled all of his expectations, but "[i]n fact, no picture can capture her beauty and her sweetness. I am so happy to have her with me!" (Testimonials: Tell us about your doll!). Like Tom, an anonymous contributor to the Real Doll Testimonials was single before ordering his doll: Vanessa. The moment he 'uncrates' Vanessa is a spectacular event, one in which he will never forget. He is exuberant about his new relationship and his appreciation for her. In enjoying Vanessa he

² Retrieved from <https://secure.realdoll.com/testimonials/>, on February 6, 2013. It should be noted that as of June, 2013, the website has changed and they have updated their testimonials.

is finding that “it’s not about sex alone. Dolls are fun and nice to look at, you can enjoy their presence” (ibid).

By briefly introducing short vignettes that depict notable iterations of love dolls, I do not intend to provide a history of love dolls; other authors, such as Ferguson, have produced such histories. Admittedly, I have introduced only a few instances, each of which is remarked upon and documented in literature presumably because of the social-historical prominence of their creators, with the exception of the latter, commercial instance. The vignettes are presented here to illustrate that love dolls are not a new phenomenon and that, while they may appear to serve a sexual function, the significance that they hold for those who keep them has always been ambiguous. The *dames de voyage* suggests a seemingly obvious explanation of the effigy’s purpose, to serve primarily as a surrogate of carnal invention. However, even in this elementary condition, access to the dolls may have been one of several ways that voyagers marked and performed relative privilege when removed from the more stable social spheres on land (Ferguson, 2010, p. 16). Thus, we might infer social class stratified the level of access to the *dames* while abroad, granting higher-ranking officers an alibi for the comforts of home.

Although Descartes’ doll was presumably more than a replica, perhaps a stand-in for his daughter, it exhibits his mechanical prowess and displays his melancholic disposition over her passing. In his ingenuity over material construction, Descartes also insists upon a reversal of the ‘natural’ order of things. In his time, it might be assumed that he had harnessed the powers of nature or God in his ability to recreate his daughter – a profound expression of power for the time period. If we are to believe the anecdote of

the urgent search on the ship in response to Descartes' insistence that his daughter had gone missing, it raises the question of why he would put on such a 'play'. Was it to incite a real panic over the prospect of a missing child, *his* missing child, to dramatize socially his melancholic feelings? Perhaps, in his sorrow, he was confused and could not distinguish between the mechanical Francine and the deceased flesh and blood Francine. Or, yet another possibility is that he was not at all confused. Is it possible that, for Descartes, the doll was another – neither replica, nor spectrely substitution – daughter; a daughter produced through his own means of technological reproduction, whom he might have conceived as no less significant and no less endearing than a human child?

Kokoschka's replication of Mahler has clearer circumstances that are suggestive of the motivational force behind her creation. Having been deserted by his former lover, who married the prominent Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius soon afterwards, he consigns the construction of an *exact* replication of Mahler. In this, he is able to ensure that she fulfills his *every* need. She is present to accompany him to the theatre, on carriage rides through town, and to parties. She is, for all intents and purposes, engrossed in his world and his world alone. As he tires of painting her in repetitious artistic studies, of including her in his self-portraits, and keeping her for his own purposes (perhaps of self-reconstruction), he celebrates his complete fulfillment of mastery over her by beheading her at a party and covering her in wine, in view of the other guests.³

In the story of Tom Ricard and his doll, there are circumstances that demarcate this relationship from the others. Ricard purchased a doll from a distributor, but it is quite

³ See Roos (2005), "Oskar Kokoschka's sex toy: the woman and the doll who conceived the artist", *Modernism/Modernity* 12(2), pp. 291-309 for another analysis of Kokoschka's doll.

obvious that his doll is mass-produced, though not fully standardized. Real Dolls are designed and produced in flexible, post-Fordist arrangements. As with other commodities produced in a post-Fordist fashion, they are poised to meet niche demands and the desires of consumers who seek commodities that emphasize lifestyle over use value (Callinicos, 1989, p. 134). The RealDoll company's designers, Abyss Creations, are able to manufacture individual characteristics with specifications of body type, eye color, hair color and length, breast size, skin color, pubic hair, vaginal dimensions, and so on. The dolls are customizable, made-to-order, synthetic creations that are so elaborate that, at a glance, they could readily be mistaken for real people.

From voyagers' D.I.Y. makeshift dolls of the 17th century and artisan interpretations and displays of technical prowess to produce life-like figures to the contemporary production of the commercially available love doll, does the significance of such dolls extend beyond their presumed function as substitutes for human companionship? The purpose of dolls has generally been explained with reference to the assumed intentions of their respective creators, and, while those intentions are not transparent, they appear to be more varied and contradictory than explanations focused on masturbation imply. The contemporary post-Fordist production of these dolls challenges how we can conceive of this relationship. From the *dames de voyage* to the commissioning of the Mahler doll, we are able to see hints towards an emergent shift in the production of the dolls: the one who makes the doll is no longer necessarily the one who keeps the doll. This break becomes more pronounced with Abyss Creation's RealDolls. RealDolls are commodities that stand to bring profit to their producers, but what is their function for, and value to, those who purchase and keep the dolls? We might

proceed by privileging the common-sense understanding of the relationship and assume that the doll is a high-tech substitute for a human partner and that it is primarily used to fulfill sexual desire. But, perhaps the emphasis on the dolls' sexual use functions obscures other significant aspects of this phenomenon. I set out to answer the following questions: In what ways do commercially produced dolls appear in circulated imagery produced by humans who keep them? How do humans who keep dolls speak about the dolls and themselves relationally? How is the growing prevalence of commercially produced love dolls consistent or inconsistent with contemporary shifts in relationships and technology?

Dolls in the Posthuman Age

Love dolls, or realistic sex dolls, such as Real Dolls, constitute a booming niche industry. Their appearance in films such as *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007) and in television shows such as TLC's *My Strange Addiction* (2011) attest to their emergent salience in popular culture. While the film *Lars and the Real Girl* normalizes a relationship with a love doll by illustrating its capacity to act as a social and romantic surrogate for the alienated protagonist, whose idiosyncratic habits and awkward social skills stand as obstacles to normative connections with others, relationships with love dolls are subtly pathologized as deviant through their sensational treatment in reality shows, such as *My Strange Addiction*. In *Lars and the Real Girl*, Lars learns from his doll Bianca how to be in a relationship. After Lars' small town community overcomes their initial moral shock and negative criticism of Lars and Bianca's relationship, his family members and neighbours seem to bond with his doll Bianca, and eventually it appears that they need her socially as much as he does. Once Lars is socially educated through his tumultuous relationship with

Bianca, he is able to exchange her for a “real”, human girlfriend, and presumably live happily ever after. This scenario presents a normalizing trajectory for a human-doll relationship in our present age, while the television show *My Strange Addiction* depicts people who keep dolls, despite or in conjunction with their intact long-term relationships, as exhibiting aberrant and irrational perversions. These two different popular cultural narratives are consistent with the dominant discourse on dolls in scholarly literature. On the one hand, dolls are understood as surrogates for lost loves or for the inexperienced. On the other hand, dolls have been cast primarily as masturbatory objects and sexual commodities akin to pornography in their objectivizing potential. My research into the discourses surrounding contemporary dolls suggests that these dolls provide a site for working through cultural assumptions and expectations about relationships, but the humans who keep dolls often do not privilege human-to-human relationships as either ideal or more worthy than their human-doll relationships, which often extend beyond their erotic aspects.

In what follows, I will interrogate the assumption that love dolls are primarily sexual aids treated merely as objects to be manipulated, while also exploring the limitations of the surrogacy thesis. By drawing from posthumanist theory, which is underpinned by poststructuralist epistemology and ontology, I will show that contemporary love dolls invite humans into relationships that offer something more than, or something other than, surrogates for human partners. My central argument is that emergent and interanimating relationships between humans and objects, such as love dolls, retrench material presence in a digitally-mediated age and are consistent with our present comfort with the mere appearance of emotion in what Sherry Turkle (2011) has

called the robotic moment. To the extent that the shape that some of these relationships take may respond to dramatic shifts brought about by the dematerializing effects on social interaction of digitalization, simulation, and robotization, they are not anomalous. Rather, these relationships are poised at the intersection of technology and subjectivity and they can inform how we anticipate and critique the conditions in which we are currently immersed.

I have used critical discourse analysis to examine the following: Debates on the iDollator discussion board that negotiate the appropriate language to describe humans who keep dolls; Real Doll testimonials; an advertisement by the company Kanajo Toys; and photographic portraits of dolls, including one commissioned professional portrait of a human-doll couple. Drawing upon these materials, I will elaborate upon the discursive complexities of love dolls to show that, those who keep love dolls appear to be engaged in what is for them the mutual performance of a relationship. These relations at times reinforce socially recognizable norms that govern expected conduct within a romantic relationship and sometimes signal a melancholic fantasy of the chivalrous heteronormative relationship associated with scripts of masculinity, which emphasized mastery and control, that have given way over the past few decades to “multiple and shifting realities about masculinity” and produced a social perception of a masculinity crisis in Western nations (Atkinson, 2011, p. 9). Simultaneously, however, these relationships radically displace these norms and may lend *qualified* support for David Levy’s (2007) controversial assertion that genuine relationships with, and even marriage to, robots may be commonplace by the middle of this century.

Conceptually, my argument depends upon my reworking of Keith Basso's (1996) concept of interanimation, as well as Turkle's historical observation that we have entered into a robotic moment. Basso uses the concept of interanimation to underpin the mutual production of place and subjectivity in an ongoing process of meaning making that is forged in affect and the senses. To the extent that place is considered to be neither animate, nor an agent, it can be extended to my analysis of human-doll relationships. The meanings of these relationships unfold over time and subsequently make and remake the relational identities of the participants. Of particular significance to my argument will be the affective commitments associated with the caregiving that these dolls require and the sensorial impact of their obdurate material presence. I will return to unpack the implications of this later in the discussion.

Turkle (2011) argues that we have entered into a robotic moment. For Turkle, the concept of the robotic moment acknowledges that the contexts in which we express and perceive emotional attachments have been drastically altered. Turkle's research observing children, the elderly, and families interact over extended periods with sociable robots illustrates that, increasingly, the mere performance of emotion is enough for us. We have become comfortable with the inauthentic displays of emotion expressed by sociable robots and have recast the disingenuous as, if not genuine, at least good enough. We lose 'touch' with 'reality', diluting our meaning making process, and with each new advent of sociable technology we stretch what little genuine effort remains for fostering human-to-human relationships.

Since a sociable robot is one that calls upon us to extend toward it a form of care, Turkle's research involves advanced robots designed at MIT, but she also observed this

robotic demand for care two decades ago in popular children's toys, such as the Tamagotchi and Furby. We can generalize Turkle's observations beyond the strict contexts of human-robot interactions, however, if we take into account how we have been engaging in conversational interactions with algorithms for some time. For instance, we long ago became accustomed to automated telephone calls and can now depend upon complex sociable technology, such as iPhone's dedicated and friendly personal assistant Siri, to aid us in daily routines by requesting help using the same communicative forms and similar requisite etiquette that we would use with a human companion. The historical concept of the robotic moment suggests that these practices have altered us and that we are socialized for deeper relationships with sociable objects. Also, while toys like Furby asked us to care for it, Siri offers to take care of us, revealing a growing reciprocity in human to sociable technology relations.

Marshall McLuhan ([1964]1995) argued that every time a society adopts a new technological medium that accelerates both power and speed, two things occur. First, new social arrangements and values are required, as the old ones cannot be supported by the new medium. Second, the sensorial capacities of bodies are extended, truncated, or likely a combination of both. With respect to the first point, Turkle's postulation of the robotic moment suggests not only a greater comfort with the performance of emotion but a growing preference for it. She notes that her research subjects expressed greater trust in the more comprehensive knowledge of robots, who have large databases upon which to draw, than in human companions, whose limited experience is increasingly perceived to be a deficit in relationships (p. 51).

In response to the second point above, if we accept McLuhan's observations, the relations between time, space, and bodies have always been under reconfiguration, but this reconfiguration is accelerated in the digital and robotic age. Our relationships and connective ties with one another are largely mediated by rapidly advancing communications technologies. Our relational practices and exchanges are becoming 'dematerialized', where technological acceleration increasingly mediates and extends our communicative and sensorial reach and dematerializes our intimate experiences. Today, so many of our expressions are encoded digitally (Hayles, 1999) and never expressed in the immediate presence of their recipients. For instance, it is more or less commonplace to initiate and emotionally accelerate intense relationships via texting. It is increasingly acceptable to end a relationship via text and it is not inconceivable that some relationships are commenced and terminated via a change in relationship status on Facebook.

Advancing communications technologies are outpacing our norms (as McLuhan's argument from the 1960s has already suggested), as well as our emotional consciousness. As Turkle's observations suggest, we are becoming more comfortable with the absence of real emotion. Even when immersed in emotional connections, it seems that social media provides the platforms for dematerialized negotiations of messy courtships and break-ups. Unintentional facial expressions, tears, wavering voices, stammering sentences, and so on no longer need to be vulnerable to exposure as they are in materialized encounters. Web 2.0 Culture provides the social-technical infrastructure to abbreviate or to bypass messy face-to-face communications.

N. Katherine Hayles has observed that the move towards dematerialization stems from “an epistemic shift toward pattern/randomness and away from presence/absence” (1999, p. 29). This shift is not new, as Hayles has observed it even in the rise of telegraphy (2012), and it suggests not only that our communicative practices are changing along with technologies but also that we are in the midst of an entrenching “struggle to define the place of the human in relation to digital technologies” (2012, p. 170). Perhaps we are losing our ability to be intimate in immediate co-presence and instead reach out to smartphones for something “real”, as we have fostered a cultural atrophy of touch. Jean Baudrillard attempted to shock his French readers back in 1981 with this accusation: “People no longer look at each other, but there are institutes for that. They no longer touch each other, but there is contactotherapy. They no longer walk, but they go jogging, etc.” (Baudrillard, [1981] 1994, p. 13). Perhaps Baudrillard’s radical claim that we exist in a desert of the real has been realized so exactly that it has become non-sensical less for its obscurity than for its anachronistic appearance in our present predicament.

My argument runs against two prevalent perspectives that could be mobilized to understand relationships with contemporary love dolls: the surrogacy thesis and the commodification of sex thesis. First, in digital media scholarship that addresses identity and social interactions, there is a tendency to ascribe to digitally mediated interactions on social media platforms the potential to intervene in a productive way in an individual’s social situation (Adler & Adler, 2008; Wood & Ward, 2010). The surrogacy thesis suggests that interactions in digital social spheres substitute for or enhance “real life” social experience. Social exchanges with avatars, online identities, algorithms, and so on

substitute for companions that are absent in the individual's face-to-face social life or provide a safe training ground to develop social skills that can later be used to remedy, or to initiate more successful, "real life" relationships.

The surrogacy thesis appears in some of the doll literature as well to argue that the doll is a 'stand-in' or can be considered in lieu of the absent partner. Marquard Smith's (2013) book-length historical study of erotic dolls only partially engages with a version of the surrogacy thesis because he focuses on dolls as forms of modern material culture that are understood in an oscillation between substitutional stand-ins and independent things in themselves (p. 68). Drawing from art history and social theory, Smith shows how these dolls are simultaneously religious, commodity, and sexual fetishes. Therefore, Smith's concerns are historical, cultural, and largely ontological to extend conceptually far beyond the limitations suggested by the pragmatics of the surrogacy thesis that attempts to find pragmatic use of mediated objects. Other research, however, provides more explicit surrogacy arguments with respect to love dolls.

In a psychological study designed to outline the demographics of sex doll-owners, Sarah Valverde's (2012) conclusions emphasize the surrogacy potential of dolls for grief, safe sex, differently abled bodies, for people residing in remote areas, as well as for the alleviation of boredom. Yet, Valverde's survey found nothing particularly unusual about the social and sexual opportunities available for those who responded. For Valverde, "doll-owners are not only employed and educated, but also do not appear to suffer significantly from major mental illness and appear satisfied with their lives" (p. 35). So, while dolls may have therapeutic potential, this is not necessarily what accounts for their use.

Meghan Boiteau's (2011) study of The Doll Forum online argues that posters on that forum redefine sexuality, gender, and relationships, although "they do so within specific frameworks to maintain legitimacy" (p. 95). Boiteau casts the doll as a surrogate for the imagined willing woman that, in dominant culture, is the object of the "girl hunt" (90). To the extent that the other participants, mostly men, of The Doll Forum are the audience (p. 87) for posts announcing new dolls, depicting dolls in poses, and describing relationships with dolls, Boiteau sees the doll as mediating homosocial relationships within the forum (p. 90).

To some extent the surrogacy that dolls can provide makes common sense, however, this view is limited when accounting for many of the discussions that occur within The Doll Forum that demonstrate that many individuals who own dolls have either chosen the doll over a human relationship or use a doll in tandem with romantic partnerships and being married. This requires a bit more investigation, and some contextually and theoretically informed speculation, as to why one would choose the doll over a human or as a complement to a human. Turkle's (2011) notion of the robotic moment would suggest that the relationship with dolls provides a less complicated relationship at the cost of the idiosyncrasies and risks of pain that define a human-to-human relationship. Levy (2007) would see this openness to the simulation of emotion as the next step in human-to-nonhuman relationships.

Second, it is possible to conflate the use of love dolls with pornography to mobilize a critique that emphasizes the use of love dolls as the commodification of sex, characterized in terms of the passivity and accommodation of the consumer's desire. Yet, the love doll seems to offer more than a robust masturbation device. Prevalent themes in

testimonials and doll forums suggest that the users do not necessarily keep the dolls for merely sexual purposes. Returned to in greater length later, Chris Hedges (2009) makes the assertion that the doll is an extension of pornography; it is compliant and ready to be used (p. 85). I think this overstates the sexual use of dolls, and arguments surrounding pornography are not easily mapped onto the ways in which those who keep dolls characterize their relationships with them. Although there are similarities, the mediums are completely different. Pornography stimulates arousal through a non-corporeal image, and is predestined to ultimately end with the ‘money shot’, whereas the doll is enlisted to demand almost a caregiving role rather than being resigned to masturbatory servitude. In as much as one may be able to say that the love doll is only a commodification of love or sex, it appears that, even though a purchasable item, the doll is discursively so much more. Relationships with dolls provide a site in which many of our existing social norms about how we conduct ourselves within a romantic relationship are represented and re-worked, whereas pornography stresses the sexual act apart from other aspects of intimacy. Further, if relationships between humans and love dolls are situated within the broader shifts in communication and relationships in an increasingly posthuman age, these two approaches to interpreting the social significance of love dolls begin to appear reductive.

Situating Posthumanism

In what follows I outline theoretical literature that provides initial context to the post-structural epistemology and ontology that has guided my analysis of the doll and its surrounding discourse. This foregrounding helps to unpack the posthumanist perspective that will inform my argument. My argument acknowledges that conceptions of self and

our relationships are not independent of the communications technologies upon which we rely, but the escalated manufacture of new technologies has presumably made the process of realignment more palpable. The emergent relationships with dolls that I seek to analyze could be interpreted as the private manifestations of social problems, such as loneliness, objectification, and so on. I note, however, that human-doll intimacies are situated within new relationships between humans and technology and that they are consistent with historical shifts observed in critical social theory that is concerned with the changing relationships between representation and reality as well as with the shifting status of the commodity. In what follows, I will consider theoretical contributions made by the Frankfurt School, Guy Debord, and Jean Baudrillard that are relevant to these problems and that roughly anticipate posthumanism, which unsettles a number of taken for granted categories, especially that of the human.

The Culture Industry

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1993) proposed the concept of the culture industry in their critique of American mass consumer culture in the 1940s. By placing the words culture and industry together into a compound construction, Horkheimer and Adorno suggested that business industry, as well as the techniques of production (Taylorism, in particular) necessary to industrial capitalism, had degraded culture. They highlighted a progressive blurring between the rhythms of labour and leisure through the standardization of commodity forms, including those to which the labourer turns at the end of the workday: music and films. They proposed that the culture industry was not only a manipulation of the means of production, but also an ideological means of production. The consequence of the culture industry is an ontological split between what

is conceived of as our given reality and what it might actually be. The ideological structure of standardization replicates industry needs in the desires of the labourer. It is used to create the appearance of ‘natural’ demand, which results in the manufacturing of consent; we are led to believe that choice and agency exist and are amplified in industrial capitalism. Further, consumer demand was a delusion; any demand was both manufactured and artificial. They elaborate:

Furthermore, it is claimed that standards were based in the first place on consumers’ needs, and for that reason were accepted with so little resistance. The result is the circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger. (1993, p. 30)

The excerpt points towards a revolving model of the culture industry and the individual marked by false needs, as consumers are led to believe that their desires for certain commodities are in fact their own. In actuality, desires are manufactured by creating commodities and ideas that are given the “stamp” of uniqueness and individuality (p. 30). To meet mass consumer ‘demand’, the commodity itself must be mass-produced, but with the mark of what Adorno and Horkheimer called pseudo-individualization, which gives the appearance of originality to the item to hide its standardization. While the concept of pseudo-individualization applies to the illusion of the object’s uniqueness, it perhaps follows from the assumption that we believe that we are able to express ourselves through the objects that we buy or the clothes that we wear. But therein lay the crux of the issue: the commodity form is an object of suspicion for Horkheimer and Adorno because it threatens to separate us from our presumed true nature and from a reality with which we have lost touch. The painting of the Eiffel Tower in your home could very well be in thousands of homes, and the notion that this piece of art is a reflection of your unique personality becomes a generality alongside the culture industry’s promise to

mirror personalities – our true selves – with commodities. The culture industry provides that ideology and maintains the illusion that prevents the consumer from traversing that phantasm so that commodities will continue to re-produce this false consciousness in multitudes.

The creation of illusion can be exemplified through film, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1993) find that, although the narrative is fictitious and standardized, the scenarios and experiences of the protagonist are depicted to encourage the viewer to equate it with reality (p. 34). The film then is productive in the sense that it creates a reality that seems so readily true for us. We have been trained to react automatically and, regardless of the specifics of the movie's narrative, its presumed consistency with real life leaves us, if not satisfied, at least still firm in the belief that we are free, as "[t]he culture industry as a whole has moulded men as a type, unfailingly reproduced in every product" (p. 34).

Here we reach a paradox, however, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1993) find:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises... the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu. (p. 38)

The culture industry, this machine that produces and manufactures our demands for us, always leaves us in a perpetual state of want. The way in which this works is to make the consumer feel as if all their needs *can* be fulfilled, "but that those needs should be so predetermined that he feels himself to be the eternal consumer" (p. 40). To the extent that the culture industry offers images of the self to which consumers readily identify but can never realize, the consumer has become reliant upon advertising and mass media and complicit with the culture industry.

Having briefly discussed Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of the culture industry, I want to draw attention to the critical suspicion that their analysis demonstrates toward commodities and the complicity that commodities have in the production of illusory reality on this account. The concept of the culture industry identifies what we might consider to be creative commodities with industrial capitalism. The emphasis in this critique is less on the profits that are derived from the endless consumption of commodities that Adorno and Horkheimer describe but on the power that standardized commodities have in producing subjects' obedience in the blurring of leisure, as a site of desire, with labour. To this end, the commodities to which Adorno and Horkheimer give special attention – entertainment forms – can be understood as technologies in their own right. To the extent that these commodities rearrange and realign the desires and consciousness of consumers by mimicking the rhythm of labour at a sensorial level and blurring the reality of the assembly line with the perceived reality of intimate everyday life, the Frankfurt School concept of the culture industry *implicitly* warns of a slow merging of human consciousness with the logic and materiality of technological forms.

Society and the Spectacle

Similarly, Guy Debord (1983) offers a critique of consumer culture through his notion of the 'spectacle.' The concept of the spectacle is similar to that of the culture industry in that the spectacle is an ever promising but never fulfilling entity that produces desire but it also produces feelings of privation when subsistence needs have been met. The term privation occurs several times throughout the first two chapters, as Debord shows that the consumption of mass-produced commodities is redefined as necessary to ensuring survival. Debord writes in his 44th thesis:

The spectacle is a permanent opium war which aims to make people identify goods with commodities and satisfaction with survival that increases according to its own laws... If there is nothing increasing survival, if there is no point where it might stop growing, this is not because it is beyond privation, but because it is enriched privation.

Here, the “permanent opium war” is the process of not only marketing to consumers, but also creating an addictive association with survival by presenting the commodity as something so much more than it is.

At the surface level, Debord finds that the commodity seems simple, as it is only an object to be traded, “while on the contrary it is so complex and so full of metaphysical subtleties” (Thesis 35). Part of the purpose of the spectacle is to place the consumer under a false consciousness, to create the consumer as complicit to the demands that the spectacle provides through this “opium war.” This can be summarized in thesis 21:

To the extent that necessity is socially dreamed, the dream becomes necessary. The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. *The spectacle is the guardian of sleep.* (emphasis added)

This last italicized portion offers us insight into the similarities between the ontological split demonstrated, on the one hand, in the Frankfurt School’s concept of the culture industry and in Debord’s concept of the spectacle. The spectacle as a guardian positions itself ideologically, as it masks the truth of privation in industrialized capitalism where basic needs are met and new needs must be actively produced. Survival as a natural problem that can be remedied with the purchase of a new automobile is cast as a social construct here, manufactured (to borrow from Adorno and Horkheimer) to render our critical reason dormant and complicit. For Debord, residing within the society of the spectacle changes the status of our very existence, as he notes in thesis 7, from *being* to

having to appearing. The negotiation of our actuality occurs through our practices of consumption – through being the “eternal consumer.”

Through commodity fetishism, the commodity itself becomes less important than what it signifies. This signification is the actualization of appearing through consumption, appearing within the spectacle. It is important here to note that the spectacle is not simply an entity out there, it is a social relationship among people expressed through images (Thesis 4). Consequently, “reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real” (Thesis 8). The ontological split produced by false consciousness becomes blurrier and the split begins to grey; the demarcation between false and class consciousness begin to blend together, since the way in which we discern reality is clouded. Further, this suggests that, if manufactured, mediated reality has overcome immediate reality, trading real social relationships for relationships between commodities and producing mediated appearances rather than immediate beings, and then we can no longer access the immediacy of social relations. This predicament anticipates Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality.

The Precession of Simulacra

Having close theoretical ties to the Frankfurt School and post-Marxism, Baudrillard ([1981] 1994) interrogates the lineage and ubiquity of consumer culture and the symbolism bound up in it. He finds that the history and lineage of commodity exchange have led us to a point in time in which pure abstraction has been realized and embodied in a state of ‘hyperreality.’ Following the industrial revolution and the technological advancements that occurred during this time, we gained the capacity to duplicate commodities at a staggering rate. Having appreciation for, but departing from, the

Frankfurt School, he inverts the original production-consumption binary, shrouding production in consumption. Baudrillard radicalizes the notion of commodity fetishism by arguing that the commodity has become so much more than simply an object of interest; it contains or 'is' a form of communication, manifesting into a sign (Mendoza, 2010, p. 47).

In examining the symbolic meanings system behind commodity exchange, Baudrillard suggests that the meanings have fractured over time; that the sign of the commodity is unstable. As a result he has constructed a genealogical map of the orders of simulation and representation in which (from the beginning to the end) they lose touch with the reality that constructed them:

it is a reflection of a profound reality
it masks and denatures a profound reality
it masks the *abstract* of a profound reality
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum
(Baudrillard, [1981] 1994, p. 6)

Following this, we can compare the lineage of the simulacrum with that of the semiotic concepts signifier and signified, respectively. Through imitation, and then mechanical reproduction and counterfeits, simulations or representations attempt to mirror a given reality, and the problem resides in demarcating good and distorted reflections. In the second order that masks an abstract reality, which Baudrillard associates with mass production of objects that have no original, as they are modeled after a design or a prototype but not an already existing real entity, we find that the notion of representation no longer makes sense. From the fixed signs in the symbolic order to the mass production of abstract reality in the second order of simulation, we see that the 'natural' associations between things comes to be distorted, so that meaning is multiple and in flux, much like

Roland Barthes' ([1952] 1972) notion of "myth." In the third order, the simulation has no ties to reality; it has broken from its original signified and is now a floating signifier. Finally, the simulacrum is a replica of the simulation. Baudrillard ([1981] 1994) asserts, "Where as representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum" (p. 6). By this process we find ourselves interacting with only simulations, creating and recreating them in a circular system with no referent to an original or authentic reality. Baudrillard insists that the simulation is not a pretend, dissimulate, or counterfeit, as each of these would leave the reality principle whole (p. 3). In essence, there is no room here for the concept of ideology, at least in the traditional Marxist sense. For Baudrillard "[i]t is no longer a question of a false representation of reality but of concealing the fact that the reality principle is no longer real" (p. 12-13).

This could be exemplified by Debord's (1983) "enriching privation", in which our species being is obfuscated by abstract needs. The consequence of this is that we act upon these false and manufactured needs, but, for Baudrillard, we have gone so far as to lose touch with what needs are in fact 'real' so that he will not, as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Debord all do, even reinforce the line between false and real, since all that we are left with are the manufactured needs. Here, the idea of 'false' is no longer considered, the binary between true and false has imploded since there is no true reality to which we may dream of returning. Our representation of needs has surpassed that of parody or caricature leaving us with only with the simulation.

In recognizing this, Baudrillard (1996) argues that consumption has led to "an active endeavor in 'the manipulation of signs' towards the creation of the 'person'" (p.

218, as cited in Mendoza, 2010, p. 48). The commodity's sign is used to identify with the status of an individual, making that individual into an object, and consequently making the object personalized or subjectified. This is what Baudrillard (1996) identifies as "personalization", through objectification of the subject and the subjectification of the object:

The point is that the consumption of décor or of a car, the consumption of a commodity in general, is not consumption based upon a need, which in Marx is formalized as the Use-value. It is a consumption of what it signifies and how the consumer consuming the sign is integrated within the system (as cited in Mendoza, 2010, p. 49).

Take for example the green movement that attempts to promote leaving the smallest carbon footprint possible and then juxtapose the use of plastic water bottles. In the case where you decide not to purchase water from plastic bottles, this act, even though pragmatically it involves the non-consumption of a commodity, still occurs within a system of exchange and signifies another form of consumption, that of the green movement. How is this? In Baudrillardian terms, "*everything* is reduced to sign" (Mendoza, p. 55). With this, I believe Baudrillard ([1981] 1994) points to the "horizon of the event" (p. 83). This notion suggests that we have met an impassable horizon, "beyond that nothing takes place *that has meaning for us*" (p. 83).

By producing the paradigm of hyperreality, although he may not agree with the term paradigm, he has radicalized not only the way in which we come to know but *how* we know. In this sense, the ontological and epistemological foundations have been removed, for "it is always a false problem to wish to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum" (Baudrillard, [1981] 1994, p. 23). For Baudrillard, the finality and end of production (and likely that of modernity) is that the traditional production-consumption

binary now only consists of consumption; production is an attempt to reestablish a reality that will forever elude it.

If we follow Baudrillard, the question of representation – the question of whether the spectacle or the culture industry offer reflections of the surrounding society – is obsolete. For that reason, we can also no longer say that our social relations are mediated or structured *through* our social media and social technologies, for these technologies have (for all intents and purposes) become participants in social relations. Social relations are now produced as very tangible objects; our sense of the social is restricted to the simulated models within which we act. If, without our computers, cell-phones, facebook, and twitter, we feel ‘cut-off’ from the world, perhaps Baudrillard’s once apocalyptic characterizations have just become banal observations; we feel cut off from the world without these technologies and platforms because the simulations that they provide are more “real” than what they presumably represent.

In the end, Baudrillard is no more positive about the status of commodities than are Adorno, Horkheimer, and Debord, but his characterization of hyperreality as pure simulation marking the end of ideology, truth, and authentic being suggests our deep and relational entanglement with commodities and technologies. To the extent that the social theorists discussed in this section insist that commodities have become intertwined with our being or appearance, it makes sense to consider them technologies of the individual, as already suggested. These observations provide an opening for a brief introduction to posthumanism that will remain focused on the concerns already set out in this section.

Posthumanism

In response to Baudrillard's bleak outlook, Toffoletti (2007) finds a glimmer of hope in his notion of hyperreality, and she suggests that it opened the way for the arrival of the posthuman. Toffoletti engages the long-standing tensions and speculations about the 'postmodern' condition. These debates confronted the question of whether we have entered into a period marked by a fractured, decentered, and eroded reality. The term postmodern has had negative connotations. For critics, the concept and the theorists (many of whom have been unwillingly corralled under the postmodern umbrella) have rendered us without tools of resistance or agency, and produced only a sense of futility. Not so for Toffoletti.

Some of the major overarching criticism aimed at the postmodern pointed to poststructural and postmodern approaches that decenter the body and blur bodily experience with semiotics. Toffoletti (2007) recognizes the pessimism that Baudrillard has imparted, however, she has found a way to utilize his theory of simulation for her feminist project. She argues that feminism may benefit from exposure to Baudrillard: "What feminism stands to gain from exposing the operations of the reality principle is the possibility for new imaginings of subjectivity that exceed traditional formulations of the body and identity" (p. 49). The longstanding debate leads back to that of the Cartesian man, which separated the mind and body. Some feminist readings of Baudrillard suggest that he privileges the mind through his poststructural theory, and consequently his work has lost favor in feminism for reducing and ignoring raw bodily experience. This, it would seem, is Toffoletti's departure point, but she aims neither to remove the bodily

experience nor to re-center the body in this dialogue. Rather, Toffoletti aims to reformulate it through the posthuman.

In *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls* Toffoletti (2007) unpacks the ongoing debate of what constitutes the posthuman. She interrogates the negative focus on the prefix ‘post’, as if it suggests that we are losing something integral to humanity, that there is an essence of what it means to be human, and that the inherent ‘nugget’ of our existence has vanished in the face of our current technological age (p. 12). She combats this presumption by showing that such critiques reveal universalist or liberal assumptions about the human. While these assumptions usually exclude women, a feminist critique that adopts and amends this perspective would be guilty of proposing an inherent or universally normative ontology for women. Toffoletti is motivated in this work to ‘debunk’ universal notions, and to interrogate what it means to exist, experience, and understand what it means to live today (p. 13). In this sense, Toffoletti follows Sherry Turkle in finding that a subject is neither unified nor fixed, “but constantly formulated and reconstructed through her/his diverse relationships with computer culture, to be posthuman is to construct a notion of self within a culture of simulation, virtuality and the digital” (p. 27-28).

The radical characterization Baudrillard offers of our contemporary hyperreal condition significantly alters how we conceive of our daily lives, and it is that radical shift that Toffoletti wants to hail into this conversation. In this condition, the order of simulation, where dichotomies and dualities have imploded, there is no longer any potential for dialectical thinking, and the subject and object become indistinguishable

from one another. It is here, at this point of indistinguishability, that Toffoletti argues the posthuman emerges, “[i]t is an effect of the hyperreal” (p. 32).

Observing this collapse, Toffoletti (2007) draws from Donna Haraway, since the boundaries between nature and culture are, for Haraway, artificial in the sense that we have conceptually separated human and non-human ‘things’, but this separation denies the relational connectedness between the human and non-human, whether the latter are animals or objects. While posthumanism denotes the recognition that the species line that draws and makes meaningful an ordered distinction between the human and non-human is artificial, with some posthumanisms focusing more on the politics of animals (human or not), this discussion joins others that focus on what is sometimes called a technopolitics that emphasize that human capacities and experiences are intertwined with technologies to such an extent that they are no longer separable (that is, if they were ever separable). In this sense, the real and the virtual have imploded, they no longer exist at all as separate, and the simulation acts as a deterrent to this realization. Toffoletti brings light to this argument through the example of the Human Genome Project, in which our biological essence is coded and made virtual (p. 146). The risk of making our biological essence coded lends itself, for example, to legitimating racialized categories and assumptions through “pre-determined” genetic dispositions that appear to be more real than real and leave cultural and societal influence out of the conversation, even though the genome is saturated with unacknowledged cultural and social assumptions. This is third order simulation in its most intractable form.

But, Toffoletti (2007) argues that this implosion, this blurring of boundaries and collapse of demarcation that Baudrillard announces with alarm, can offer a point of

resistance in the sense that, if the self or subjectivity is indefinable or in flux, then it may be re-appropriated for a feminist political project that extends beyond liberal humanist limits that operate upon exclusions premised upon a normative definition of the human. It allows movement past traditional identity politics, which invoked new normative limits onto subjects, into a space in which one may redefine or re-signify what it means to be human now, in the age of the hyperreal, as posthuman.

The arrival of the posthuman (as an acknowledged ontology rather than a new entity) is significant to the treatment of human-doll relationships in the discussion that follows because the post in posthuman does not refer to what comes after the human, such as some kind of human-machine hybrid (this would be a different argument that would still grasp onto the respective inherent assumptions of each separate category). Neither does the post in posthuman refer here to technologies that progressively approximate the human, such as artificial intelligence. Rather, the post refers more to an ontological re-consideration of both so-called human and non-human things and a recognition of their relationality, but not to the kind of dialectic relationship between humans and technologies that transhumanism posits by celebrating the ways in which human lives and capacities can be enhanced by technologies. Similarly, the surrogacy thesis that forwards the beneficial socialization effects of digital communications or even of love dolls remain attached to liberal humanist assumptions that characterize subjects as discreet individuals empowered to use what exists in the world (also characterized as strict and discreet entities) as instrumental to their agency. Although those who draw upon the surrogacy thesis attempt to block attributions of deviance to subjects whose social reliance on technologies appears non-normative, they unwittingly reinforce the

norms that are associated with liberal humanist understandings of what is human: *what is* becomes closely tied to *what ought* to be.

While this notion of the posthuman, at which we arrived through the critiques of waning reality provided by critical theory, situates assumptions that inform the present work, it does not free this discussion from humanist considerations. The next chapter will trace the tensions that accompany the presence of human connections with sociable robots with a particular emphasis on the debate between Sherry Turkle and David Levy before elaborating on the concept of interanimation for human-doll relationships to overcome the emphasis on authenticity and individuality that pervades the Turkle-Levy debate. This theoretical discussion will prepare the way for an analysis of an advertisement for the Real Love Doll Ange by Kanajo Toys and selected Real Doll testimonials.

Chapter 2: Can we connect?



Figure 2: Lars and the Real Girl

By tracing through each of the theoretical frames addressed in the last chapter, it became clear that they focus upon similar concerns. I showed how they not only implicitly interrogated the relationship between humans and technologies but they forged a path towards a posthumanist critique. Here, I would like to reframe these observations to point out how these theoretical contributions circled around the problem of authenticity. As our industrial age accelerates, and the proliferation of the technological era reaches heights unmatched in the history of human civilization, we are forced to renegotiate what it is that we believe identity truly encompasses. The culture industry demonstrates that our belief in an agentic-being is distorted and in fact manufactured by consent that is not our own. Pseudo-individuality is enacted through inauthentic provisions to articulate a false autonomous existence that positions us within a fog of false-consciousness. These provisions are so interchangeable that authentic meaning is put at stake; originality is no longer viable as life becomes indistinguishable from film (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1993,

p. 34). The culture industry melds well with the spectacle as we attempt to recreate the superficial and grandiose ideas of mass culture, to attain a lifestyle that has stepped away from us but is perceived to be within our grasp. These arguments fall in line with the comparison between mass media and mass-culture; are we a reflection of our media industry, or do we produce it? The concepts of the culture industry and the spectacle posit that we exist in futility, the ultimate consumer striving to replicate a myth that has never existed.

For Baudrillard ([1981] 1994) there no longer is a mirroring effect between the spectacle and society, they have imploded. The idea of distance between the two entities no longer exists and we are left with only simulation: hyperreality. For Debord, our endeavor to live a spectacularized existence has led to somewhat of an ontological shift, a complete change in our perception of needs. This ‘mode’ of existence has existed for so long and has accelerated to a point in which we are the spectacle for Baudrillard; there no longer is a point of origin before it. What we consider our reality is in fact the “desert of the real”, (p. 1) a carcass of empty and fractured meaning. Toffoletti (2007) utilizes this idea in arguing that this era of simulation is the inception of the posthuman. It is a question of what it means to exist today by redefining and re-signifying commonly held notions of identity. Even though it is often the case that many disagree with Baudrillard because he does not speak to (or maybe even disavows) the bodily existence in his writing, Toffoletti suggests that this might be to our benefit. While Baudrillard argues that the ‘nature’ of meaning is a carcass, Toffoletti views this an opportunity that provides us the necessities to re-appropriate meaning, to culture jam normalization for the purposes of her specific political feminist project.

What then does it mean to exist in our current ‘condition’, how do we traverse our specific cultural, social, historical, and spatial experiences? Descartes’ example is part of the rationale behind his doll Francine where he explores his “fascination with artificial life and the question of what it actually *is* to be human” (emphasis added as cited in Ferguson, 2010 p. 17). In part trying to respond to that question requires us to address how we conceptualize identity. The importance in this process is the shaping of our identity through (symbolic) interaction, through reciprocity and alterity. As a theme, I think the idea of identity protrudes from the introductory vignettes. Many may argue that the dolls represent the capacity to produce love and relationships as commodities to be packaged and sold. In this way, they (the dolls) are reduced to the simple monetary exchange of their purchase, their status is perceived to be bordering on some combination of prostitution and commodity fetishism. Inasmuch as I do agree that there is a level of manufacture here, I believe that there is far more occurring with these dolls than only commodity exchange. Human relationships with dolls may be significant sites of reciprocity that mark the emergence of posthuman sociality.

Relationships, as portrayed in cinema, advertising, and even contemporarily with online dating companies, provide an image of ‘proper’ or ‘successful’ relationships. Hegemonically, we find true love in motion pictures, perfect matches on dating websites; the inevitable spark that ignites passion in all relationships. At the risk of painting these notions with too broad of a stroke, this is not to say that these are the only ways in which relationships are portrayed, but that they do take up (in my opinion) a large seat in popular discourse. Thus, we turn our focus to the love doll. For those who are ‘unsuccessful’ with the traditional mode of courting, or have decidedly considered the

love doll as a solution, they still enact these hegemonic ideals with the doll. They perform their relationships, and I dare say chivalry is not dead. It would seem as though the enactment of providing and care-taking that occurs between the love doll and their partners not only represent these relationally hegemonic ideals, but are also fulfilling for the partners themselves. They find joy and happiness (self-reportedly) within these actions. So, inasmuch as one may be able to say that the love doll is only a commodification of love or sex, I believe that, even though a purchasable item, the doll is discursively so much more. The doll represents and re-represents many of our existing social norms and mores, which are culturally and historically relevant to our time. What comes to the fore in discussing the love doll is less about the economics and more about the social relevance, which is not to discount the monetary value of the doll but to center the discussion surrounding the performance and play of identity and relationships.

Although dolls do not have the most impressive capacity to interact with their partners, I do believe that there must be a conversation about those possibilities as they are becoming more likely to materialize than not. Two specific books focus in on the central tensions that must be considered as we navigate the separation between Descartes' metaphysical fascination: David Levy's (2007) *Love + Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Robot-Human Relationships* and Sherry Turkle's (2011) *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Both authors are quite well versed in the topic of human-robotic relations and their implications, given the current production of robotics that can replicate human behavior. However, these authors differ greatly when it comes to the level of acceptance they believe we should be willing to offer to human-robotic relations. Levy believes that the robotic-human relations are not

to be feared per se and that in essence they are inevitable. He suggests that by 2050 (p. 303) human-robotic relationships will be just as frequent and accepted as same-sex marriage is today⁴ and to oppose them would be a step backwards. In contrast, Turkle suggests that there will be something lost from our inherent humanity if we take this step forward uncritically.

“Love and Sex with Robots”

Levy (2007) begins by identifying the legacy of research on psychological attachment to objects, pets, and parent-like figures. His elaboration of this research is a part of his strategic suggestion that attachment, whether to beings or to things, leads to affection and love, and if we are able to accomplish the range of attachments that he has exemplified then the question of human-robotic relations should be relatively no different, it simply proposes or observes the norms of a new age. In both his first and fifth chapter, “Falling In Love (With People)” and “Why Do People Fall In Love (With People)?”, he suggests that we have or are going to reach a point where we must demarcate and define new forms of relationships. As a consequence Levy argues that the paradigm of falling in love with people will drastically shift, and that the discourse of love will soon inherit and negotiate the possibility of human-robot love.

In analyzing online dating, Levy (2007) innovatively constructs the process of falling in love and why this relatively recent phenomenon prepares us and foreshadows a future in which people will fall in love with robots. Levy extends his meta-analysis of psychological attachment to support his thesis that this extension of attachment will include robots, and he argues that such an extension is pragmatic:

⁴ This is not to suggest that the need for gay-rights movements is over, or that equality has been reached (in my opinion), but that the discussion does exist in a more open field.

So why should anyone be surprised if and when people form similarly strong attachments to virtual people, to robot people? ... There are many reasons, including the novelty and the excitement of the experience, the wish to have a willing lover available whenever desired, a possible replacement for a lost mate—a partner who dumped us. (p. 105)

The suggestion here is to posit that the idea of having an artificial partner is healthy and possibly provides a positive way of reconciling with loss. It is therapeutic to be able to find loving affection and attachment in this way, because we were unable to either attain or maintain those relations in the real. For Levy, physical presence should not be considered a prerequisite for love. With respect to online dating, Levy suggests that we are still capable of falling in love without the presence of that other:

One conclusion that can safely be drawn from the phenomenon of falling in love via the internet ... is that it is *not* a prerequisite for falling in love ever to be in the presence of the object of one's love. The falling-in-love process can be conducted in the physical absence of the loved one. (p. 130-131)

Much like pen pals, prior to the advent of our networking technologies, we are able to bond with others even at great distances (p. 130). What I find interesting is this notion of falling-in-love with a representation of a person; is it the idea of the person that we fall for, or the person themselves, or is this yet another false-dichotomy?

Separated into two sections, Part I outlines the Ten Causes of Falling in Love (p. 40), which he utilizes in justifying the idea that falling in love with a robot is not as farfetched as many believe:

The logical conclusion, therefore, is that unless one has prejudice against robots, and unless one fears social embarrassment as a result of choosing a robot partner, the concept that humans will fall in love with robots is a perfectly reasonable one to entertain. (p. 150)

The ten causes (similarity, desirable characteristics of the other, reciprocal thinking, social influences, filling needs, arousal/unusualness, specific cues, readiness for entering

a relationship, being alone, mystery) are for Levy of no real concern in artificially recreating them. The ‘criteria’ for falling in love have, it seems, been identified for a long time, and we are now able to recreate them for the purposes of our personal betterment. ELIZA is an example of this. The computer program, with no form of memory, was a type-based program where individuals would be able to type what they were feeling into a computer, and ELIZA would respond. The program itself was not truly able to comprehend the statements, but would respond with something to the effect of “how does this make you feel?” The most interesting outcome of this program was that individuals who used ELIZA ended up preferring to talk to her (p. 112), rather than to an actual individual about their problems.

In a 2004 *Harvard Magazine* issue, Harbour Fraser Hodder published an essay entitled “The Future of Marriage” in which he raises demographic, political, and economical changes that have influenced the changing properties that marriage constitutes (Levy, 2007, p. 153). It is the metamorphosis, the shifting, that Levy wants to illuminate. He suggests that just as our acceptance and cultural change towards same-sex marriage has changed, so too will the notion of marriage to robots once we are able to build them at such a sophisticated level. Alongside these shifting tides is the accelerated rates at which they change, and for Levy these shifts are steadily rising (p. 155).

In part II Levy (2007) pushes forward with the utmost confidence that his expectations will indeed materialize by the coming mid-century (p. 181) stating, “...I hope at least to dispel any suggestions of outlandishness and to present what I believe are compelling arguments to show that sex with robots will become the norm rather than being an oddity” (p. 182). Through Sigmund Freud’s notion of transference, he argues

that the capacity to become attracted and seduced by computers is a reality that we must seriously consider. Transference suggests that the models of understanding we used during the early years of our life-course “affects our choices, experiences, and relationships into adulthood” (p. 190). Through transference, we may in fact subconsciously treat computers as similar models like friends or family, and it is through that connection that Levy truthfully believes that we have the capacity to find computers (and subsequently robots) as desirable sexual objects (p. 192).

Although there are crucial points of contestation regarding Levy’s overall argument, which will be discussed subsequently, he does provide an important perspective for social consideration as advanced technology becomes evermore pervasive. Even though there are those who are wary of technology’s ultimate function, the results from interacting with the program ELIZA do give an indication of where we may be headed in terms of what will constitute satisfactory, or even preferred, social partners in the future. Given this, and the coinciding advancements of the sex doll industry, what will happen if the two separate entities of artificial mind and body fuse? This is a question we most certainly will discuss later.

In 2003, Levy comments on the success of the company Orient Industry Dolls’ which was reported in the *Mainichi Daily News*, a Japanese news outlet (p. 248). Tsuchiya, president of the company, comments that during the formative years of their production, they received customers who had gained permission from their wives, mothers with children dealing with some form of disability, and generally anyone who had problems related to their sex life (as cited in p. 249). As the success of the company grew, customers’ attitudes towards the dolls changed, resulting in the consideration that

the doll is more than a simple sex object or means to an end to “objects of deep affection” (as cited in p. 249). As Tsuchiya notes in an interview that appeared in the 2004 edition of the *Asian Sex Gazette*, “She can be an irreplaceable lover, who provides a sense of emotional healing” (as cited in p. 249). To add more complexity to this, there are Buddhist memorial services held for discarded dolls in Ueno Park (as cited in p. 250). We are already seeing a real, tangible effort on behalf of dolls’ partners to treat them with the same respect we treat our ‘real’ friends and family. In this instance the doll does not embody a mere sexual nature, it truly provides its partner with a fulfilling relational value. The relationship that the doll’s partner fosters has *real* affects.

Levy leaves us with two departing points that should be addressed, the first being an expectation he holds that will materialize by the year 2050:

Imagine a world in which robots are just like us (almost). A world in which the boundary between our perceptions of robots and our perceptions of our fellow humans has become so blurred that most of us treat robots as though they are mental, social, and moral beings. A world in which the general perception of robot creatures is raised to the level of our perception of biological creatures. When this happens, when robot creatures are generally perceived as being similar to biological creatures, the effect on society will be enormous. (p. 303)

The debate on roboethics has up to now been very focused on issues that we regard as the unethical *use* of robots. But what about the unethical *treatment* of robots? Should we not in this debate be speaking on behalf of the robots of the future? I believe we should. (p. 305)

The imagery that comes to mind in Levy’s expectation towards our future relationships represents something akin to science fiction. Levy depicts a futuristic world with robots that are borderline unidentifiable and that the artificial will be more real than the real, to borrow from Baudrillard. What I think becomes quite interesting is the conversation behind the “as though” or “as if” *they* were human.

In referencing the notion of roboethics, the story of a mutilated RealDoll embodies part of the fear that Levy mentions. Ferguson (2010) mentions a case reported by Fiero, the RealDoll doctor who describes violence and vivid imagery of one specific doll owner,

...an Asian undergraduate student at a university in California dropped his 1-year-old doll off for repairs.... 'I was offended in so many ways...[h]e put her feet behind her head and reamed that doll with whatever cock he's got. He fucked her violently. She was achieving positions she shouldn't achieve or be forced to try. Her vagina and anus were a giant gaping hole.' ... Fiero says he'll never again make repairs for the student, who he now refers to as JTR – Jack the Ripper. (p. 128-129)

The fear of misuse depicted here represents that of a violent sex crime, but the question remains: isn't it just a doll? The disgust mentioned by Fiero somewhat uses the notion of “as though” or “as if”; the violent sex crime is only represented *as if* the doll were a real person. But, Levy has entered into the paradigm shift in which the artificial and the real, or the simulation and the real are intimately intertwined. The abuse the doll endures provokes emotional repulsion, and this points to a change in the way we perceive such acts, or such ‘realities’.

“Alone Together”

Sherry Turkle's (2011) argument over the matter of robotics suggests a far more cautionary tale than Levy's arms-wide-open approach. She comments, “*Love and Sex* seems to celebrate an emotional dumbing down, a willful turning away from the complexities of human partnerships—the inauthentic as a new aesthetic” (p. 6). Her book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*, is a poignant explanation of why we should not be so accepting of the notion of finding solace and comfort in robotics and technology writ large. In Turkle's opening

introduction, she refers to an earlier statement in which she describes computers as a second self, or “a mirror of the mind. Now the metaphor no longer goes far enough” (p.16).

In an interesting experiment, she provided children (ages 5-8) with Furbies to see their reaction. Furby, a late 1990 children’s toy, was a fuzzy animal like robot that was able to ‘learn’, and responded to interaction with humans. It would progress and learn words, blink, sneeze, and cry if neglected. As a separate part to Turkle’s inquiry, she allowed several students to take the Furby home with them for an extended period, approximately two weeks. She did not expect how strong of an attachment to the Furbies the children would have. One of the participants, Zach, received a malfunctioning Furby that left him distraught. Zach had been studying Hebrew, and recently the Furby had ‘learned’ how to say *Dayeinu* and was saying it in its sleep. For Zach, it seemed that the relationship between them was in fact real; how else would it have learned this Hebrew word? Unfortunately, the Furby had begun making strange noises that left him severely concerned. Turkle responded to his parents’ plea to replace it, but unfortunately Zach had become too attached to *his* Furby, the Furby he nurtured, taught, and with whom he shared experience. For the children who played with Furby, Turkle found that, even though they knew it was a robot, they understood that it was “alive enough to die” (p. 43).

Although these research subjects are children, Turkle (2011) is finding that the level of their attachment to the sociable robot takes on a far more intense affect than it does with a static object like a doll or stuffed animal. For Turkle, this is a turning point:

We are at the point of seeing digital objects as both creatures and machines. A series of fractured surfaces – pet, voice, machine, friend – come together to create an experience in which knowing that a Furby is a machine does not alter the feeling that you can cause it pain.” (p. 46)

It seems that the digital object has been given an existential existence; the Furby can be hurt and killed. The sociability of the Furby, in this case, leads into a higher plane in which they are in fact alive enough. As with many childhood toys and objects, they embody that of a confidant, someone to tell your secrets, hopes, and dreams to, but in this instance the Furby responds.

We are moving in a direction where technology no longer represents the simplicity and one-directionality of a tool; it has evolved to a much greater extent. Social robots and computer technologies are changing the social landscape, and consequently we are changing with it. Turkle (2011) notes in her chapter “Alive Enough” two conversations she had, separated by twenty years. In 1983, she spoke to a boy named Bruce about the idea of a robotic or computerized confidant. Due to the limitations that human relations offer, we are not infallible, we are not perfect, and for Bruce these are “the ties that bind” (p. 50). Imperfection is the undertow of real connection. Turkle’s second conversation in 2003 goes very differently. For Howard, a fifteen-year-old boy, the idea of a robotic confidant would be a blessing since he thinks it is more difficult for his father to help him with high school problems than it would be for a robot. In comparison, the limitation of life experience and understanding that people have are in fact a detriment for Howard. A robot could be uploaded with a database of experiences and circumstances rather than a single life-course, and thus would be able to give you the ‘right’ answer (p. 51). This idea provides Howard with far more confidence and reassurance if a robot rather than a person guided him because it would be “advice you could be sure of” (p. 51). Turkle concludes that “[f]rom Bruce to Howard, human fallibility has gone from being an endearment to a liability” (p. 51).

This shift in confidence towards robotics over people raises some stark questions. Embodiment and experience are superseded by programmed databases in this instance; will that knowledge be considered infallible? How can one simply assume the ‘right’ answer to be ‘true’?; what would we consider agency to be if our consultants are robots? These are questions that probably troubled Howard when he asked his father about how he should go about pursuing a crush he had at school even though she was seeing someone. His father suggested he ask her out anyways basing his advice on his previous experience, something Howard disregarded. He argued that “[r]obots can be made to understand things like jealousy from observing how people behave....A robot can be fully understanding and open-minded”, where as humans are hazardous robots are “safe” (p. 51).

This notion of safe versus risk is well embodied in the following excerpt in Turkle’s (2011) third chapter, “True Companions”:

I return to the question of harm. Dependence on a robot presents itself as risk free. But when one becomes accustomed to “companionship” without demands, life with people may seem overwhelming. Dependence on a person is risky—it makes us subject to rejection—but it also opens us to deeply knowing another. Robotic companionship may seem a sweet deal, but it consigns us to a closed world—the lovable as safe and made to measure. (p. 66)

We can return to Turkle’s previously cited “inauthentic as a new aesthetic” (p. 4), a process in which our intimate dulling is celebrated as achievement as we romanticize the melancholic. Here, we are identifying the darker side of maintaining a relationship with the artificial. For Turkle, artificial intelligence is just that: artificial, and because of that characteristic she finds no solace in the notion of reciprocity with a machine even if we begin to lose site of such distinctions – we are blurring them.

Turkle (2011) tells a story of visiting Japan in the early 1990s where the demographic shift is that of a booming elderly population (p. 74). “Unlike in previous generations, children were mobile, and women were in the workforce” (p. 74), making visiting and socializing with the older generation harder. As a result, many began hiring actors to visit with their parents:

Most fascinating were reports about the parents who knew that they were being visited by actors. They took the actors’ visits as a sign of respect, enjoyed the company, and played the game...But when I heard of it, I thought, “If you are willing to send in an actor, why not send in a robot?” (p. 74)

Mentioned earlier in this section, Levy (2007) speaks about the program ELIZA and how people enjoyed and some preferred speaking to her rather than to a real person. Turkle has coined the term the “ELIZA effect” to refer to the notion that we are complicit in the fantasy that provides us solace in speaking to a machine, who Turkle argues cannot truly comprehend human emotion (p. 24). Here Turkle expresses the ‘as if’ sentiment, “They spoke as if someone were listening *but knew* they were their own audience” (emphasis added, p. 24). I believe this echoes the subtitle of the book, *Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*, in the sense that we are able to make ourselves feel better through the ELIZA effect by allowing ourselves to believe that the program truly cares.

As the elderly demographic balloons, it is becoming the largest demographic in Japan, and North America is heading in a similar direction, it has been suggested that caring for the elderly will inevitably become too overwhelming (Turkle, 2011, p. 106). For some, the solution is to turn to robotics as an aid, a manufactured technology of elderly care. Of this, Turkle notes, “[w]e ask technology to perform what used to be “love’s labour”: taking care of each other” (p. 107). This is a marked shift for Turkle, for

we speak of care, but, in this reductive sense, it is merely “care enough” (p. 107). By assuming that robotics can meet the demands of care, the meaning of caring changes. Turkle reconsiders the phenomenon, practiced in Japan, of sending actors to visit their parents; she notes that it is the performance that provides solace and not the inherent interaction. She sums up this point eloquently in the following two excerpts, in almost a romantic ideal,

A sociable robot is sent in to do a job—it could be doing crosswords or regulating food intake—and once it’s there, people attach. Things happen that elude measurement. You begin with an idea about curing difficulties with dieting. But then the robot and person go to a place where the robot is imagined as a cure of souls. (p. 115-116)

The questions for the future are not whether children will love their robot companions more than their pets or even their parents. The questions are rather, What will love be? And what will it mean to achieve ever-greater intimacy with our machines? Are we ready to see ourselves in the mirror of the machine and to see love as our performances of love? (p. 138)

It is this last quandary on love that is at the heart of this polemic between Levy and Turkle. For her the robot cannot love, it can only pretend to love. In this sense it is the shift in which pretending becomes real, to pretend to love is to love and it is the diluting of human emotion and the meeting of such needs that haunts Turkle. She suggests that the pretend is increasingly the model for the authentic. The ELIZA effect is for Turkle one of the greatest cheats we produce in ourselves; it is our investment in an object programmed to appear social but cannot invest back in us that provides us with a false sense of reciprocity. But this argument I might suggest represents a romantic melancholy with our technology; as I will address later, faith in the other’s reciprocal emotion is not particular to sociable technologies.

In part II of *Alone Together*, Turkle (2011) investigates network connectivity and how we are digitally socialized. This is where we can begin to interrogate how we construct and represent our identities in a virtual space. She notes:

When part of your life is lived in virtual places a vexed relationship develops between what is true and what is “true here,” true in simulation...on social-networking sites such as Facebook, we think we will be presenting ourselves, but our profile ends up as somebody else—often the fantasy of who we want to be. Distinctions blur. (p. 153)

For me, Turkle’s observation seems reminiscent of the arguments about identity that Debord, on the one hand, and Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other hand, make with their concepts of the spectacle and the culture industry, respectively. Facebook provides us with pseudo celebrity and friendship that supply evidence of our online popularity that ironically leaves us feeling empty and alone – bringing another meaning to ‘alone in a crowded (chat)room.’ I will note, however, that inasmuch as this pseudo-individuality seems to be a large part of Facebook, I suggest involvement on Facebook does exist spectrally. It is not necessarily always the case that everyone has invested equally into the construction of their profiles (funnily enough, I just changed mine). But Turkle does sum this idea up by suggesting that “[w]hen ever we have time to write, edit, and delete, there is room for performance. The ‘real me’ turns out to be elusive” (p. 180). I think that the movie *Easy A* (2010) illustrates this well, maybe too bluntly, by looking at how social media sites such as Facebook have created a pre-meditated archive of our performances: “I don’t know what your generation’s fascination is with documenting your every thought, but I can assure you they are not all diamonds ... who gives a rats ass?”

With our increasing and proliferating use of social media to stay connected, to remain as “always on” (Turkle, 2011), we are in the process of diluting our relationships

and how we interact. One of the major changes, at least with younger generations, is that certain ways of speaking to one another and the kind of message to be conveyed is required to 'fit' the medium (Turkle, 2011, p. 199). For instance, newer expectations produced by changing media suggest that, to be justified, a phone call requires somewhat more of a need to talk about something serious, and that is all the call is used for now. Turkle spoke to Hugh, a twenty-five year old, about the different social demands that are present in phone calls versus communications in IMs or Facebook. He finds that people who agree to phone calls have the expectation and demand of undivided attention to that person, noting:

They're disappointed if I'm, like, not talking about being depressed, about contemplating a divorce, about being fired...You ask for private cell time, you better come up with the goods. (p. 204)

I agree that the phone call has changed in this sense, which is not to say that this is the only use of the phone call now but it is generally assumed to be a more urgent mode of communication.

What has also become a popular mode of anonymous, but intimate, conversation occurs on a website entitled PostSecret that receives postcards and puts them up for others to see. It is a completely anonymous website, but the confessionals can often be quite emotionally intense. For Turkle (2011), she observes that many of the posts present simply quick, off hand remarks, but there are posters who pause to "take stock" (p. 230) as they make vulnerable contributions. I visited the website recently, since I am unfamiliar with this form of posting online, one of them caught my eye:

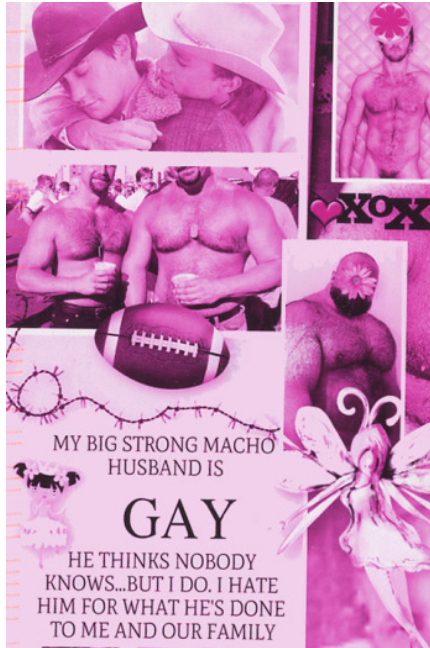


Figure 3: Postsecret

⁵Text: My big strong macho husband is gay he thinks nobody knows...but I do. I hate him for what he's done to me and our family

In her chapter, "True Confessions", Turkle finds that although the process of expressing one's self anonymously and to an anonymous audience might seem therapeutic, she does raise concern about the reduction in emotion this leads to:

Confessing to a website and talking to a robot deemed "therapeutic" both emphasize getting something "out." Each act makes the same claim: bad feelings become less toxic when released. Each takes as its premise the notion that you can deal with feelings without dealing directly with a person. In each, something that is less than conversation begins to seem like a conversation. (p. 231)

I think that it is here that we begin to see the full magnitude of our reliance on emotional mediums and how they are regimenting our affect by diluting and reducing the actual effects. We might hone in on Turkle's title, which asks why we ask more of technology and less of each other; while our claim to always be connected, tethered, always on marks our new age of connectedness, I think the question now really embodies McLuhan's

⁵ Retrieved January 21, 2014 from postsecret.com

notion of the medium *is* the message. And here we are finding that we are more connected through one medium over the other, which is we utilize more mediated technologies and less face-to-face interaction. We are slowly training ourselves to respond and express ourselves in an ‘unreal’ fashion, where pre-meditation and simulation are becoming the norm, where performance is performance enough (p. 282).

From our social tendencies and attachments as children, to the digitalized lived experiences of our adolescents and young adulthood, to the reshaping of how we think about elderly care – although the implementations of robotics in each generation are not ubiquitous – the notions that such change carries have leaked into the ether of popular discourse. They may not be as farfetched as we might have believed ten, or even five years ago. What is of significance in this comparison is that both Levy and Turkle are aware of not only how much of our communications are mediated by new technologies but how we are increasingly having more direct relationships with our technologies. Both authors have valuable insight into the progress and can speculate into the future about how we will utilize technologies such as ELIZA, and how that may impact our current understandings of authentic affection. We are used to seeing such questions addressed in movies and fiction, instances where vulnerabilities are similar across race, gender, age, location, and the ultimate search for ‘meaning’ or ‘truth’. But finding such things is quickly changing, they are amorphous, and Turkle (2011) is concerned that normalizing the reduction of our interactions is a risk, and that it may in fact become something we desire (p. 295). In my mind Turkle best sums the polemic that we have arrived at with her concept of the “robotic moment” (p. 295):

We animate robotic creatures by projecting meaning onto them and are thus tempted to speak of their emotions and even their “authenticity.” We can do this if

we focus on the feelings the robots evoke in us. But too often the unasked question is, What does the robot feel? We know what the robot cannot feel: it cannot feel human empathy or the flow of human connection. Indeed the robot can feel nothing at all. Do we care? Or does the performance of feeling now suffice? (p. 282)

I think that the conversation is difficult regardless of which ‘side’ you are on, whether or not that is Turkle’s or Levy’s, we have a hard time understanding how emotionally vulnerable we can be. So the move towards robotics and artificial intelligence to anonymous confessionals and to our digital avatars online truly questions the notions of how we interact through mediation, or whether mediation is all we have, if it is enough now, or if that is (or has been) simply our condition. I think that in our current cultural and spatial period, marked by post-industrial, immaterial conditions, we are on the horizon of a profound breach of self-understanding that might allow us to move beyond the question of mediation. We may not have passed into this horizon completely, but our current predicament does make one speculate, “one wonders” (Turkle, 2011, p. 147).

Interanimate things rather than inanimate objects

Social theorists who focus on consumer culture, like Adorno and Horkheimer (1993) and Debord (1983), have argued that our consumption of commodities has resulted in an erosion of our culture. Through their interpretation, the obsession over commodities is a result of manipulating privation and consumer needs, where the commodity’s promise is a cheat, and we are therefore always left wanting more. This cycle of consumerism, as noted earlier, argues that the need for consumption is manufactured yet shielded by a false sense of agency. We buy because we are led to believe it will provide us with a sense of individuality, however this belief is a false consciousness. What follows is less a criticism of the commodity, and more of an investigation in the relationship that we

produce with things. It requires that we look beyond the negative connotations that are associated with commodification, and considers how we are positioned in relation to things. It should be noted that what follows does not attempt to offer a redemption of the commodity or a rejection of commodity critiques. First, a discussion of Daniel Miller's (2010) work will offer insight into the idea that we are all "stuff" and that the dichotomy between "stuff" and us is necessarily false. Second, consideration of Ben Highmore's (2011) interpretation of the relationship between humans and "things" will disrupt the assumption that it is one-directional by showing how "things" have historically operated on behalf of humans. Taking these respective arguments as a point of departure, I will build upon this with Keith Basso's (1996) concept of interanimation, which is originally focused upon a "sense of place" (p. 54), but I will extend it to objects and consequently, to the doll.

Stuff

Daniel Miller (2010) pushes against the common notion that mass consumption is inherently superficial. Miller points out that quite often we generalize about a consumer society: "Becoming a consumer society is generally seen as symptomatic of a loss of depth in the world" (p. 22). However, material consumption, he claims, is not a specific trait of Western civilization and it can be found in every culture and society (p. 4). For Miller, purchasing commodities and being materialistic is not a symptom of vanity but involves an important meaning making process that should not be considered denigrating. This is to say that a major insight for Miller is not to claim that his work is a recovery of commodity since that would assume both an erosion and recovery therein. Rather, it is a revision on materialism that informs his perspective on studying humanity: "that the best

way to understand, convey and appreciate our humanity is through attention to our fundamental materiality” (p. 4).

Part of this premise rests on our conception of how we inform identity construction. His point is that the argument of material culture as superficial makes the assumption that there is a difference between who we are, which is located within us, and the outward representation (superficial) of that interior (Miller, 2010, p. 16). This posits that the authentic self is not material and that everything else is a failed attempt to represent that inner quality. Miller elaborates on why this seems mistaken:

The assumption is that *being* – what we truly are – is located deep inside ourselves and is in direct opposition to the surface. A clothes shopper is shallow because a philosopher or a saint is deep...But these are all metaphors. Deep inside ourselves is blood and bile, not philosophical certainty. My point is that there is simply no reason on earth as to why another population should see things this same way. No reason at all why they should consider our real being to be deep inside a falsity on the outside. (p. 16-17)

This argument suggests that every culture is materialistic, not just the ‘first’ or ‘western’ world. That being the case, Miller’s proposition asserts that we measure others based on labour, not on birth (p. 21). In this sense ‘who we are’ is based on how we decide to construct ourselves, through that labour, and it is that work that should be measured. Miller wants to subvert the notion of representation, the idea that we have objects that represent us by imparting the idea that those things actually constitute and help determine us (p. 40). The argument lends itself to the larger premise that Miller (2010) asserts: “that things make people just as much as people make things” (p. 135). Therefore, the dichotomy between things and us is necessarily false, and that “we too are stuff” (p. 6). The caveat being that stuff can be used to either enhance or submerge us (p. 6), and as a result there is nothing inherently pernicious about material culture.

Things

Ben Highmore (2011) aids in providing what Miller (2010) would call an analysis of ‘stuff’ through his work *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*. Highmore contributes to this discussion with a formulation about how he distinguishes ‘objects’ versus ‘things.’ Highmore illuminates sociology’s oversight of the social lives of things through Bruno Latour’s (1992) essay “Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts” (as cited in p. 69). Latour suggests that sociology must endeavor to explain the social theory of objects in the same way that sociology has explained humans (p. 227, as cited in p. 69). On this, Highmore finds:

The argument that sociology fails to understand society because it is blind to the presence of non-human objects is premised on the recognition that things are social agents too. For Latour social things are actants in the production, transformation and reproduction of social worlds. (p. 69)

These “social things”, as Latour suggests, exist in part to take the place of human tasks, for the sake of humans not having to do them and thus are inherently anthropomorphic for three reasons:

first, it has been made by humans; second, it substitutes for the actions of people and is a delegate that permanently occupies the position of a human; and third, it shapes action by prescribing back what sort of people should pass through the door. (Latour, p. 235 as cited in p. 70)

Therefore, the object in question becomes an actor on behalf of human activity; it takes the place of a human actually doing the action, something Latour terms a ‘groom’ (as cited in p. 69). The delegation of things to take on the responsibility of actions previously assigned to humans results in a deskilling of that population that ultimately changes our inherent “humanness” (p. 70). The change of the ontology of our humanness is altered by the existence of things that labour on our behalf. Though, Highmore finds Adorno’s take

to be less than favourable, as he suggests this “redistribution of competences is inevitably deskilling, forgetting, and unlearning” (p. 71). Although the analysis of things is not necessarily to poorly color this transaction between humans and non-humans, it does display how integral things are, and how their presence has both affect and effect on us.

For Highmore, there is “a mutually constituting interaction between people and things” (p. 58). There is a give and take with objects, and a separation of a knowledge of history as objects take up more social tasks and interact in daily life. He provides a captivating entrance into this suggestion of the lives of things:

As human beings we attach ourselves to the thingly world: our ordinary lives are lived out in the midst of things. We often surround ourselves with keepsakes and mementos; we arrange our intimate spaces with furniture, tools and utensils; we simultaneously hide and reveal our naked bodies with clothes. For their part things turn towards us: they call us, sidle up to us. (p. 58)

Things that have roots as a groom have the possibility of completely replacing the existence of that skill in our daily lives; we no longer know how to walk through walls without doors as Latour (1992) suggests (as cited in p. 70). I do not think that Highmore is trying to abolish the dichotomy between us and things, much like Miller’s (2010) approach suggesting that we are all ‘stuff’. But he is providing a platform to establish a relationship between things and us, which is to say that the relationship is not one directional. As a consequence our ontological grasp shifts with the presence of things resulting in a dynamic understanding of how things work.

There seems to be two acts occurring in things for Highmore (2011): (1) the pragmatics of things that are delegated to human actions, and (2) the historical presence that each thing has accrued through its lifespan. I would like to draw attention to this second point. Simple objects accrue a personal life history as they gain scars and obvious

signs of use that become interlocked with us: “There is nothing exceptional about it. Its visceral and mnemonic thing-ness requires a telling that takes time because its thing-ness took time to form” (p. 65-66). The intertwining of delegated action and memory pressed upon the things then proposes a relationship between humans and non-humans. It makes problematic the divorce of life lived outside of “things”, outside of “stuff” (Miller, 2010), where in large part we devote so much of our time to their manicuring.

Interanimate

This re-theorization of objects provides a different approach to subjectivities with ‘things’ (Highmore, 2011). In this the things are not complacent, meaningless, superficial stand-ins for a lack of more authentic or inwards representation, they ultimately help constitute us (Miller, 2010). In this constitution, the things take on roles and histories of their own, and as a consequence develop a rapport and subjectivities of their own. Our relationship between the thing and us becomes reciprocal in this sense, which imbues the thing or the stuff with (for lack of a better term) agency. Interestingly, the focus of this conversation then interrogates the relationship between the heightened agency that liberal humanism has granted to us and the increased agency that Miller and Highmore grant to things because it highlights the ways in which our subjectivities are intimately co-produced with ‘things’.

One of the interesting aspects of this interrogation of the intertwined relationship between humans and things is that people and things are animated interdependently; we are just as hailed into action as the thing is. Keith Basso (1996) provides an intriguing way of framing this interdependency with respect to subjectivity and place and space. As an anthropologist, Basso is interested in the ways that geographical location and the

“sense” of that place becomes productive; by recognizing and, thus, producing our reflection in a place, meaning is coproduced through both subject and place (p. 54). This recognition is something that Basso finds as a gap in the literature, stating: “Missing from the discipline is a thematized concern with the ways in which citizens of the earth constitute their landscapes and take themselves to be connected to them” (p. 54). For Basso, there is a reciprocal relationship that occurs in this “sense of place” (p. 54), which he elaborates upon:

The experience of sensing places, then, is thus both roundly reciprocal and incorrigibly dynamic. As places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed, and the movements of this process—inward toward facets of the self, outward toward aspects of the external world, alternately both together—cannot be known in advance. (p. 55)

Here, the interdependency that arises from sense of place and individual evocation of feeling are intertwined; the individual requires the place to produce a response that, without the place, would not exist. It is this “sense of place” that Basso comes to know as a process of “interanimation” (p. 55). To explicate this idea, Basso takes from Jean-Paul Sartre (1965),

When knowledge and feelings are oriented toward something real, actually perceived, the thing, like a reflector, returns the light it has received from it. As a result of this continual interaction, meaning is continually enriched at the same time as the object soaks up affective qualities. The object thus obtains its own particular depth and richness. (p. 87-91 as cited in p. 55)

The gaze we receive as well as the gaze we place upon the place then coincide together to interdependently result in a meaning making process. Basso provides us with the idea that there is a relationship in its own right between place and subject and “[t]hus, through a vigorous conflation of attentive subject and geographical object, places come to generate their own fields of meaning” (p. 56).

The relevance of this discussion of objects not just being objects but “things” (Highmore, 2011) gives us a chance to discuss interanimation (Basso, 1996). The implication of interanimation being associated with objects rather than with a “sense of place” offers a completely different stance on understanding the relationship between an individual’s subjectivity and the relationship created with their doll. The suggestion that there indeed exists a reciprocal exchange between an individual and the doll informs the argument that their relationship exists in a way that is not necessarily comparable to socially privileged, human to human relations, and may open up new theoretical possibilities for approaching these emergent posthuman relationships.

Discourse: A methodological consideration

Discourse analysis will inform my readings of the iDollator discussion forum and testimonials on the Real Doll website. Prior to elaborating on discourse analysis, however, it will be illustrative to show what is at stake in the distinction between discourse and ideology, since these respective terms may appear similar but they propose very different ontological conceptions. Mills (2004) notes that discourse is often implicated in a dialogue or rebuttal with definitions of ideology. At the risk of oversimplifying, for our purposes it may be useful to see some of the major reasons as to why there are differences.⁶ The notion of ideology is in opposition to or masks the idea of some form of ‘truth’, a sense of reality that is hidden from us (p. 28). Ideology acts upon us to justify some form of covert alienation or exploitation, a way (at least for Marx) to suppress the masses as represented by forms or types of false consciousness. The implicit

⁶ It should be noted, however, that although I have attempted to separate them through concrete differences alongside Mills’ (2004) argument, the distinctions between ideology and discourse are far more fluid than alluded to here.

notion of ideology is that it can be counter-acted or suppressed since the ‘truth’ can be retrieved. This also suggests that individuals still retain a sense of agency, or a political capacity to change their current perceived reality.

For Mills (2004) the operation of discourse is something that produces something else and in this process there is less of a ‘truth’ being masked. In Foucault’s (1972) “The Discourse on Language”, he speaks about a will to truth or a will to knowledge but also finds limits within it. Specific historical, spatial, and political contexts allow for certain discourses of truth to be considered authentic and thus for certain discourses of truth to be considered false: an episteme (Mills, p. 51). The will to truth is an attempt to find something constant or to have something defined, explained, or clarified. In relation to the specific historical or political state certain truths can be considered as legitimate, thus excluding other forms or wills to truth (Foucault, 1972, p. 218). Mills notes that Foucault “is aware of the fact that he himself as a subject can only speak within the limits imposed upon him by the discursive frameworks circulating at the time” (p. 29). Foucault states,

A division emerged between Hesiod and Plato, separating true discourse from false; it was a new division for, henceforth, true discourse was no longer considered precious and desirable, since it had ceased to be discourse linked to the exercise of power (1972, p. 218).

This excerpt suggests that legitimate discourses do not necessarily need to be true, but linked or formed through power. To change or subvert discourse or types of discourses then requires a shift of power, an epistemic break. This epistemic break or shift of what is possible to know is not an immediate one, despite the term break denoting a relatively instant action. The driving point here is that there is no simplistic way to subvert Foucault’s notion of power and discourse in comparison to some forms of ideology. Mills surmises this point quite eloquently,

Some Marxist theorists have tended to view language as simply a vehicle whereby people are forced to believe ideas which are not true or in their interests but, within discourse theory, language is the site where those struggles are acted out (2004, p. 38).

The use of Foucault's work on power and discourse is a useful tool to exemplify and bring to light a new way of framing current issues surrounding sexism and racism; it allows another perspective into the complexities of power that is not simply top down or ideological. However, this troubles the issue of agency within Foucault's complex of power, and Mills suggests that it is necessary to modify his work "to account for individual subjects' choice to resist oppression" (2004, p. 38). Since language and discourse are the active sites of struggle and domination, this poses a problematic for combatting marginalization.

Dorothy Smith (1993) attempts to address this problem by reinserting women's experiences and the social organizations that are fundamental to the relations of ruling in contemporary capitalism (p. 1). Smith addresses the problem of femininity as a form of discourse rather than ideology but asserts agency in Foucault's notion of the confessional. For example, a criminal confessing to the crimes that they have committed and supplying themselves as criminals constructs them as a criminal through the process of confessing (Mills, p. 73). Consequently, a woman talking about their difficulties with feminine discourse constructs herself as a compliant individual to femininity (p. 73). By reasserting and changing the discourse or scenarios that would perpetuate feminine discourse, Smith argues to not act from such a stance so as to break the cycle of feminine signifiers.

Similar arguments have been posed in post-colonial theory, to reinsert the marginalized voice back into discourse. Edward Said's *Orientalism* can and has been

used to frame this issue. The overarching argument that Said makes is that throughout the nineteenth century, a large amount of literature was produced about other cultures through the lens of colonialism and imperialism (Mills, p. 97). Stuart Hall (2007) summarizes Said's work as an analysis of "the various discourses and institutions which constructed and produced, as an object of knowledge, that entity called 'the Orient'" (p. 205). Orientalism was a archive of discourses that was bound together by a unifying set of values; "[t]hese ideas explained the behavior of Orientals; they supplied Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere" (Said, 1985, p. 41-42 as cited in Hall, p. 206). What this did was produce a common sense knowledge around the Orient, and through that process stereotyped large populations leading to what Hall terms 'The West and the Rest' discourse (p. 206).

The act of representation, classifying large groups of individuals into rigid European knowledge, is a form of stereotyping. This act has produced the Other through a discourse of scientific truth. Hall (2007) deconstructs this system, finding that the operation of stereotyping has two key features in representing the Other. The first is an act of description that homogenizes or collapses complex meanings, streamlining them into one simplistic form, like a "cardboard cut-out" (p. 215). This cut-out, an exaggerated simplification, is used as a signifier for its subject as its essence (p. 215). The second is a splitting of the stereotype into two halves, its good and bad sides creating a dualism (p. 216). This stereotyping is the fundamental feature of constructing Said's 'Other', as it not only marginalizes, but it also constructs the West as the pinnacle of civilization. The West defines itself as civilized because it defines the Other as not.

Arguments leveled against Said's Orientalism suggest that he homogenized all colonial writings together, and that the assumption of "a continuous history of oppressive representational practices" leads to colonial knowledge being "not only what we have but all we have" (Porter, 1982, p. 180 as cited in Mills, 2004, p. 106). Post-colonial discourse suggests that the 'truths' of these cultures are not recoverable and that all we have are interpretations of "a set of heterogeneous texts, which had material effects on those cultures" (Mills, p. 107). Mills notes two theories that suggest a new way of reading these heterogeneous texts: "subaltern" and "the contact zones" (p. 107, 108).

Gayatri Spivak has argued for the subaltern group theory which posits that the interactions of the 'native' with colonialists are most likely from the elite group, and thus the colonialists' experience represents but a small glimpse into an otherwise heterogeneous group (as cited in Mills, p. 107). This suggests that reading colonialist texts as only oppressive paradoxically reinforces the position of the West as oppressive and we must therefore concern ourselves with the voices who are most effaced by colonialist texts: the subaltern group. Consequently, "[b]y refusing to accept the surface of discourse as representing the sum total of statements on a particular situation, it is possible to analyze discursive structures as much for what they exclude as for what they determine" (Mills, p. 107-108).

The "contact zone" is a term introduced by Mary Louise Pratt with reference to how we imagine cultures interacting with one another. She defines the term as the following:

I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. Eventually I will use the term to reconsider the models of

community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing and that are under challenge today (Pratt, 1991, p. 33).

The concept of the contact zone is a methodological device that provides a suggested way of reading and interpreting texts to trouble and spatialize the hegemonic assumption of a top down colonial ideology. It suggests that the texts produced by colonialists are influenced by those they studied, by the othered that permeated the colonizer's lived experience.

Both of these strategies, of the subaltern and the contact zone, are ways to disorient the dominant discourses that have structured relations of colonialism. They are ways of reading current texts by reinserting the voice of the homogenized Other for the purpose or strategy of subverting current interpretations of colonialist power. Although there are problems with this strategy, as there are normally problems with almost any theory of subverting power, it does supply an intriguing way of interpreting discourse and to reinsert, to some extent, a form of agency or voice.

Dolls and the Posthuman "Contact Zone"

In *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*, Chris Hedges (2009) argues that pornography constructs women as a commodity and an object of ownership. Extending his argument that pornography is a "bleached pantomime of sex" void of any real emotion or reciprocity (p. 57) to sex dolls, Hedges highlights an interview with an individual who keeps a doll and promotes the idea of solitary auto-arousal. The interviewed individual's emphasis on his control of his own sexual desires and needs underscores Hedges' assumption that the doll is an object that facilitates a one-directional act of strict masturbation bereft of emotion.

To interrogate these assumptions of one-directionality and a-emotionality, I examine two social texts: the first is a website page advertising the “Real Love Doll Ange: 100% silicone realistic Japanese sex doll” from the company Kanajo Toys; the second is a list of testimonials from the website Real Doll with customers describing how much they enjoy the dolls they have received. These two pieces provide a more complicated understanding of the interactions with dolls that are both encouraged and reported in these texts. The themes inherent to the respective sites overlap, but both suggest in different ways the doll’s transformative promise of companionship and quality of life. Since the love doll as an object is described through two different mediums, the advertisement and the testimonials, Sara Mills’ (2004) interpretation of Foucault’s discourse is quite useful. Foucault observes the following about discourse:

Instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word ‘discourse’, I believe that I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements. (Foucault, 1972, p. 80 as cited in Mills, 2004, p. 6)

This is a fairly broad definition of discourse, and Mills suggests that the three distinct forms of discourse represent discourse from a theoretical level, to a more general set of discourses, and finally to the rules and structures that produce discourse (p. 6). For my purposes here what is important is that discourse encompasses both utterances and texts that have effects in the real world (p. 6). A discourse is then something that produces something else instead of being an isolated structure already in existence (p. 16). This position allows us to conceive of discourse as less of a top down imposition or as a power or structure that produces effects in the real world and that actors are simply oppressed by it. In this case, I suggest that the gendering of the dolls enables social subjects to situate

the dolls within a recognizable narrative of heteronormative romance, as my following analysis will indicate.

Close examination of the Kanajo Toys website, informed by discourse analysis, reveals an intricate narrative that challenges the extent to which the advertisement can be interpreted as merely a glossy presentation that justifies the doll's price tag. The Kanajo Toys site features several photographs of a doll named Ange, and the accompanying text that anchors the preferred meanings of the images contains connotations of gender normativity, such as masculine chivalry and "natural" feminine beauty, love, master/slave relationships, and nubile characteristics of the doll. Many of the images are sexually provocative. The doll itself is obviously designed to be able to accommodate limited stereotypical sexual activity, although, with the textual assertion that she "provides amazing sensations for your special moments" (para. 5), the advertisement suggests that the sensations that she offers are possibly more real than real or even better than real. Yet, the range of scenarios and compositions of the photographs point beyond the construction of Ange as a new and improved technology of simulated sexual acts and suggest her multidimensionality, while indicating her readiness for activities routinely associated with the social practices of dating and romantic relationships. In what follows, I will identify themes on the Kanajo Toys' website that will enable the unpacking of the complexity of the doll's construction through a romantic narrative that is primarily visual in its presentation but is supported with textual supplements.

The advertisement emphasizes the doll's inherent responsiveness to the ostensibly individual tastes and changing desires of the prospective consumer by foregrounding the

doll's customizability. For instance, the website uses the grammatical structure of the imperative to entreat visitors to:

create the love girl of your dreams (para. 2);
change heads any time you wish and create a whole new experience (para. 3).

If taken in isolation, the phrase the “love girl of your dreams” and even the earlier quoted reference to “your special moments” can be understood as the clever use of romantic suggestion as a euphemistic device that suggests the quality of a purely sexual experience customized for the seemingly unique desires of prospective customers with the means to make the purchase of what could be assumed to be merely a novel technological sexual surrogate. When considered contextually with the images and other textual provocations, the double-entendre seems to be motivated by more than an attempt to cleanse the advertisement. Consider, for instance, the very first line of the advertisement: “[t]he most realistic Japanese love doll to *date*” (para. 1, emphasis added). This line produces another double voiced play with language. On the one hand, it suggests that this new, better, and technologically advanced product achieves an unprecedented realism. On the other hand, it implies that the doll is for dating in a romantic sense. Dating connotes reciprocity or give and take, as well as the notion of choice or agency in the selection of a dating partner.

The implied narrative of romance produced in the photographs of Ange situated in different settings is consistent with normative gender assumptions that shape relational forms of conduct and presentation, and it provides insights into the complexity of the fantasy that is presented to visitors to this site. The romance narrative unfolds primarily in the domestic and private contexts in which she is photographed, however, given the marginalizing assumptions that are associated with the use of love dolls, the containment

of this narrative is potentially connected as much to the gendering of both the doll and of space as it is the forces of social control that ensure that Ange will likely neither be seated at a table in a fine dining establishment table, nor be seriously represented in public space, any time in the very near future. The photographic narrative, however, shows Ange to be more than an aid for masturbation or “simulated” sexual acts. Ange can be found not only provocatively dressed and positioned, but in various other forms of attire that suggest other activities and relations. For instance, a photograph hints that Ange might be getting ready to go out on the town as she is dressed in a cocktail dress with matching accessories. The viewer can imagine that perhaps Ange’s date has taken this photograph as a memento of a special evening. But, the viewer can see that Ange sometimes likes quiet time to herself as well, as she appears in a photograph seated at the kitchen table, wearing her glasses and engaged with a book. This signals that she is imagined to engage in a subjective world apart from her partner. The implicit suggestion is that Ange’s life has both adventurous and banal moments of the quotidian; she can be glamorous and mundane. She is posited to have the capacity for social interaction, yet she is presented as possessing an interior world that she forges in bookish pursuits. Although Ange appears nude in photographs, these images do not seem to constitute pornographic images *per se*; rather, they seem naturalized and relationally intimate. The order and content of the imagery may visually parallel commonly held understandings of the progression of a dating relationship; the anniversary ring that is provided as an accessory to the doll supports the narrative of heteronormative relationship progression.

In paragraph four, the seven different faces of Ange are supposed to represent the world-renowned “sophistication and natural essence” of Japanese women. This provokes

two major considerations. The first observation is that, although Ange is textually coded as Japanese, her skin tone is porcelain, and her features child-like to connote purity and innocence. This underlines the contradictions at play in both the doll's design and the discourses that describe her natural femininity in hegemonic terms and highlights the advertisement as a racializing "contact zone" (Pratt, 1991). It also produces the advertisement as a curious gendering contact zone that privileges a hegemonic idea of femininity, while subtly suggesting that, while normative femininity is a precarious construction for living beings, femininity is more real and more natural in the technologically produced doll, who appears to be more child than woman. The second observation informed by a critical-race perspective is that racializing practices are embedded into the design and presentation of the doll that reinforce assumptions of infantilization and passivity inherent to colonial/imperial relations of power. While the child-like doll may represent a more realistic woman than a living woman, the doll may also represent the Orientalist essence of a Japanese woman more than a living Asian woman would.

The last thing to draw attention to is the "Care & Maintenance" clause that states, "Love dolls are durable, but, just like a real lady, they still need special care and attention...Also, when bending or moving your doll, please treat her with the respect she deserves, which means taking things slowly and not bending her by force" (para. 10). This denotes the fragile nature of Ange, and by extension femininity, thus not only is the doll's partner in question subject to the technical and physical aspects of its form, but also to a moral positioning toward Ange. Note that while this relation of care may support the thesis that new technologies may stand in as surrogates for real living

partners, it also may support my argument that dolls serve emergent inter-animated posthumanist relationships. In either case, the references to the proper care of a lady do suggest traditional interrelational constructions of femininity and masculinity, and revert to contradictions of chivalry. Chivalry, which relied upon spatial distinctions of public and private, promoted the respectful treatment of “ladies” (who are positively constituted in relation to the prevailing moral order) and the rougher treatment of more common women (who are negatively constituted in relation to the moral order).

The Real Doll website uses customer testimonials as a device to promote their dolls. Several of the individual testimonies suggest that the doll brings an improved quality of life, as each contributor describes the arrival and ensuing relationship with their doll as transforming their lives. This transformative process that the testimonials index is not merely physical but highly emotional and social in character:

“Jenny’s presence here has had a dramatically positive effect on me psychologically and emotionally” - John, MA;

“We are some days further now and I can say: it gets better and better. The things you discover... The things you can or must do: go shopping for her, taking care of her (washing, powdering), dressing her up, moving her,... Kissing her, caressing her, cuddle her, laying next to her, holding her hand, brushing her wig,... too much to mention” – Tom Ricard, Belgium

The effects upon the customer are also related to the life of solitude that they claim to have experienced, and how the needs of the doll have actually supplied them with the needs of another to be fulfilled. Both of the above cited testimonies and a third individual mention that the presence of the doll has provided them with company. Therefore, much of this increase in quality of life is enabled through the companionship that the customers feel with their dolls.

Numerous individuals express in their testimonials their enjoyment in painting finger and toenails or purchasing clothes for their dream girl. For instance, consider:

“Now with time going by, you’ll see that these dolls are somewhat like real girls in a lot of ways, like needing tender loving care.” – Real name withheld by request; Germany.

Significantly, however, they do not seem to perceive this caregiving as one-directional.

The testimonials at times allude to reciprocal relations with the dolls:

“She’s cute, sexy, pretty, gives me comfort and peace of mind and lets me enjoy her whenever and how ever I need, and all she asks in return is some tender love and care!!” – CJD.

While Hedges’ (2009) conceptualization of the dolls offers a specific view that reduces the doll to a commodity, a masturbatory object, and an extension of pornography, several of the testimonials suggest that either the degree of the doll’s perceived happiness or the degree to which her perceived needs are met are of significance to the user’s sense of self-efficacy and happiness. While the relations of power associated with what could be called a posthuman contact zone here – one that is infused with racialization, gendering, and colonial othering – remain intact, there is an intractable sense that there is more going on between these individuals and dolls than isolated sexual activities. The emphasis on giving and receiving love and care - sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit – does not negate the troubling relations of power evident in the themes identified on these two websites, but it does suggest an emergent sociality between humans and ostensibly inanimate technological objects.

Chapter 3: Love in the Retrospect?

The dynamic relationships that people have with love dolls posit new terrain for study that extends beyond the question of whether the dolls are purely sexual instruments or the possessions of hopeless and lonely romantics. A tendency to cast the demand for love dolls as the symptom of either a psychological or social problem threatens to obscure the extent to which the *private* human-object experience is interconnected with the realm of social and cultural life. In other words, the particularity of private experience is intertwined with the generality of social existence in a given context. I approach the doll not as though it were external and disruptive to social norms, expectations, culture, and history but as though it is inseparable from, and dependent upon, these. I will treat the human-doll relationship not as one in which the human merely customizes and, therefore, determines the doll's attributes for one-directional utility but I will instead elaborate it as a relationship of interanimation.

The topic of relationships with love dolls has received a very limited amount of attention, and, therefore, I find it necessary to consider some of the ethical considerations if not ramifications of such research that this entails. There are severe risks that exist with respect to 'doing' research, not to mention the ways that I as the 'researcher' construct and produce knowledge about others. For that reason this chapter will enlist many resources so as to delicately approach the life world and culture that individuals have experienced with their dolls, and consequently the ways in which they have been represented.

Not only are there ethical considerations inherent to the representation of these relationships, but also, troubling assumptions are made about them that raise the problem

of the moral status of relationships with dolls. In other words, critics may wonder whether individuals who have relationships with dolls distinguish between dolls and women. When I have presented some of this research, I have been asked questions such as the following: How do these individuals treat women with specific regards to issues around gendered objectification, hypersexualization, commodification of and control over women's bodies? Before addressing the issues raised by this kind of question, which in the first place presupposes that dolls in fact stand in for human partners, I want to clarify the parameters of the present research. This research does not aim to approach the subject matter through a normative lens that focuses primarily on those who have dolls. It sets out neither to psychologize nor to pathologize the users or the culture itself as maladaptive. However, in approaching this topic, the work cannot overlook these serious concerns about the potential relationship between the treatment of love dolls and their potential portrayal of women. This question stems from a concern that the norms observed in the treatment of love dolls may be extended to the treatment of women. This is a troubling and problematic issue that demands attention.

As observed earlier, Chris Hedge's (2009) book *The Empire of Illusion* shares the concern that there may be a relationship between the use of dolls and pornography. Hedges discusses the bleached, hyperreal, and obscene nature of some pornography, and he suggests that the doll is a material extension of pornography. Given this, some attention to how pornography has been theorized will help in locating the similarities and differences between the use of dolls and pornography. I would like to put forward the notion that the doll is more meaningfully dynamic and relational than pornography. When we give attention to how people actually describe themselves through their

interactions, and relationships, with their dolls, these relationships appear to embody and re-represent the discourse of love in circulation in contemporary culture.

A portion of this chapter is devoted to the ways that the online community, The Doll Forum, addressed and is addressing how to deal with being stereotyped and represented. I think it is relevant to analyze one specific forum on the website, “Dolly Definition: iDollator” (2010), that undertakes this process that, for many of the users, expresses a deep and intimate connection to their lifestyle. The purpose of this analysis is to show that the ideas represented on the forum help to theorize relationships with dolls in a different way that extends beyond the assumptions that support critiques that presume love dolls to be the embodiment of women’s objectification. In fact, it might be suggested, and this has been somewhat alluded to by David Levy (2007), that these relationships are new in their entirety and are not necessarily completely modeled on gendered human-to-human relationships.

Not Pornhub

When dolls appear in popular discourse, the common referents are the infamous image of Will Ferrell in the motion picture *Old School* (2003), holding a blow up doll on the front porch asking what outfit to put her in, and the episode of *My Strange Addiction* that features Davecat and his dolls.⁷ The common assumption is that these individuals are delusional and unable to deal with reality, and so they resort to a synthetic in-human embodiment of a woman. When considered in this way, the doll is assumed to stand in for an absent real life woman. From that perspective it is not difficult for some to make assumptions about the doll and its correlation to pornography. In questioning the

⁷ <http://www.tlc.com/tv-shows/my-strange-addiction/videos/doll-love-lasts-forever.htm>

ontological characteristics of the doll, we frequently come to the ramifications of men who use porn and how a surface reading might give support to this correlation. Based upon my analysis of the conversations on iDollator, I argue that the doll is something more than an elaborate technical aid to masturbation. A brief consideration of feminist debates surrounding pornography, which could be considered a technology for masturbation, offers support for my claim that the social significance of dolls extends beyond the activity of masturbation, which is solitary and careless.

In a pivotal piece, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*, Chris Hedges (2009) represents the cultural conditions of the United States as depraved and hollow. Hedges interrogates the legitimacy of several pillars assumed to uphold the infamous American dream, and how these ideals have developed into shackles that ultimately arrested America's cultural development. In the chapter "The Illusion of Love", Hedges suggests that our ability to be intimate is incarcerated by our exposure to pornography. Hedges deploys several different dialogues to affirm his conclusions using the Adult Video Network Expo, speaking to different current and ex-pornstars, and discussing the process of the dissemination of porn through the Internet. Systematically, Hedges comes to the conclusion that porn necessitates the absolute commodification of women's bodies for the gratification of the male gaze⁸:

Pornography does not promote sex, if one defines sex as a shared act between two partners. It promotes masturbation. It promotes the solitary auto-arousal that precludes intimacy and love. Pornography is about getting yourself off at someone else's expense. (p. 57)

⁸ See Arya (2012) for full definition of the "male gaze"

Pornography, then, is one of the most detrimental aspects of American Culture in the sense that the hyperreal objectification results in an inability to distinguish reality from pornography (p. 60).

The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure (Taormino, Shimizu, Penly, and Miller-Young, 2013) provides a rebuttal to anti-porn feminist opposition. The book is organized in response to the anti-porn feminists' claim that those feminists who support porn are "deceiving ourselves and others about the nature of pornography; they claim we fail to look critically at any porn and hold up all porn as empowering" (p. 9). As Taormino et al. claim, the "feminist opponents of porn cast pornography as a monolithic medium and industry and make sweeping generalizations about its production, its workers, its consumers, and its effects on society" (p. 9). This book forwards, in general, two important aims: (1) to problematize the term pornography because it is deployed to describe a diverse and varied range of cultural productions, and (2) to highlight that there are individuals in the industry who are trying to create a genre that subverts the stereotypical or popular culture led assumptions of porn that currently only supply a small market.

The 'porn debate' that began in the 1980s between those who take an anti-porn stance and those who take an anti-censorship response has currently been reinvigorated by the overwhelming amount of pornographic materials on the Internet. As the authors of *The Feminist Porn Book* (2013) note, "the emergence of new technologies that allow more people than ever to both create and consume pornography, the moral panic-driven fears of porn are ratcheted once again" (p. 14). The slogan for the anti-porn campaigns in

the 1980s, ‘Pornography is theory, rape is practice’⁹, drew a clear and stark connecting line between pornography and the off-screen treatment of women in face-to-face, real life social interactions. The conflation of the consumption of pornography and the treatment of women in corporeal real life contexts suggests that the women depicted in pornographic texts are understood by consumers as surrogates for real women and that the pornographic texts are assumed to be realist ones that shape consumers’ beliefs and conduct.

Related to the tensions raised in the anti-porn and anti-censorship debates are perspectives that seek to intervene into the definition of pornography and suggest that it should not be studied through a moral gaze. Feona Attwood (2004) suggests this dichotomy between the two sides is a “tired binary” (Juffer, 1992, p. 2 as cited in p. 92), that does not necessarily take into account how parochial this approach can be.¹⁰ Relevant in this context is Laura Kipnis’ (1996) challenge to the assumption that its users understand pornography as a reflection of real relationships and real actions. Kipnis has argued that pornography is about fantasy and that others have supplied critiques of normative aesthetic judgments about bodies. Extending Kipnis’ observation that consumers of pornography do not necessarily understand that what they watch can instruct them on real sex and real relationships to the presumption that interactions with dolls may be formative for interactions with women, it might be illuminating to consider that arguments that rely upon an untroubled relationship between viewing pornography and relating with others in immediate social situations echoes the old cultivation

⁹See Morgan (1980), for direct quotation, as well as Dworkin (1979) for similar perspectives on pornography.

¹⁰ See Kipnis (1996) for similar approaches to pornography.

hypothesis in communications literature. The cultivation thesis had forwarded that media has effects on people's beliefs about social reality (Woo and Dominick, 2001; Ferris et al, 2007). While this hypothesis is not as influential in media studies as it once was, it roughly corresponds with common-sense conceptions of the impact of media on the way we view and interact with the world.

So, while the scholarly debates about pornography remain unsettled, the comparison between relationships with dolls and pornography is not necessarily justified. While scholarship on pornography does bring to light some ethical considerations that may be applicable to dolls, the polemic between anti-porn and anti-censorship, as I see it, does not map neatly onto the intimate and reciprocal interactions that people describe having with dolls. The debates about pornography are not well positioned to address dolls. Drawing connections between these forms would require sweeping generalizations and a firm ontological definition of the doll, the latter of which I believe remains in contestation. Given this, it seems appropriate to analyze human relationships with dolls on their own terms rather than assuming that dolls offer a material extension of the pornography industry. This is the point of departure for the analysis of The Doll Forum's iDollator discussion board that follows.

iDollator

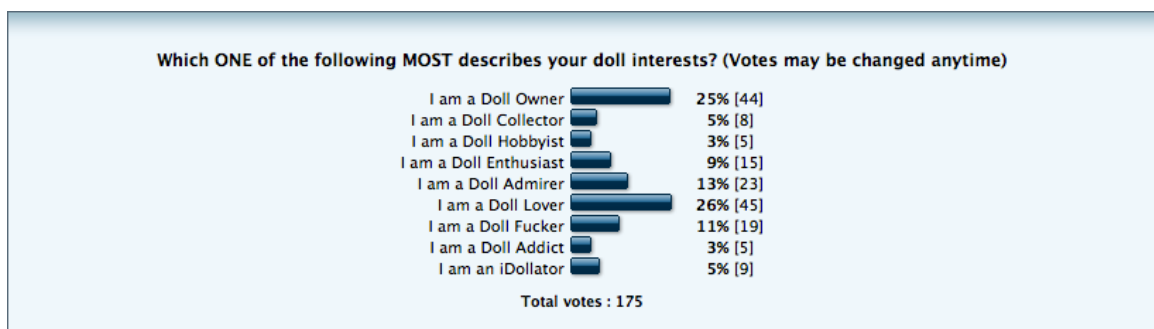


Figure 4: iDollator

Language has made the conversation about having a doll a perplexing task. The above image presents us with an inroad to that issue by way of a survey that was initially designed to provide a site for individuals to respond to the term iDollator and whether or not it reflected their interests and relationship with their dolls. The poll was set up by the user Midiman and has attracted a variety of responses that demonstrate a struggle over the language used to describe their relationships. The Doll Forum, where the poll is set up, is an online website that is used as a location of “discussion and community-building among individuals who use or admire Real Dolls” (Boiteau, 2011, p. 3). This particular sub-forum began on August 19, 2010 with the most recent post dating September 26, 2014 (as of May 27, 2014); it has a total of 117 responses. For those who participated in what might be suggested as “doll culture”, there is a sizable amount of discontent with the term iDollator. What began as a simple survey that asked how individuals view their relationships with their dolls, turned into an emotional discussion that exposed a complexity that is hard to define. Many of the responses are concerned with how being a part of doll culture is stereotyped and consequently marginalized and that the term iDollator denotes unfavourable characteristics.

Some of the respondents focus on the implications of adopting this name, given that the term iDollator conflates two closely affiliated words, idolize and idolater. In this sense, one either loves the doll unquestionably, or worships the doll as an idol. This, for Midiman and others, is far too strong a term of association to the doll, and in fact they would rather not be described in such a manner. Since Midiman established the forum, he is well invested in responding to many of the posts and is consequently somewhat overrepresented in the discussion. Even though the poll is positioned around the idea of

the term iDollator, many of the posts present an intimate portrayal of their romantic struggles. They locate particular circumstances and experiences that I believe illustrate how diverse many of their personal affairs are, especially how they perceive their own relations with the doll.

Midiman explains that, during a conversation with Davecat, Davecat expressed that “he felt he did represent the majority of iDollators” (2010, August 20) and so even in that proclamation the discourse used here not only provides the term, but also legitimizes it to represent the community. Midiman states:

I realized that many people perceive Davecat to be typical of iDollators ... I thought ... I don't want to be perceived in that light, because I DO care what people think about me and I would rather they think of me as I am and NOT as someone else. (2010, August 20)

Midiman addressed this by supplying his own working definition of iDollator, “one who chooses a doll as a companion to simulate an intimate relationship to the exclusion or want of having that relationship with another human being” (2010, August 20). So it presents this interesting, and seemingly quite political conversation, of self-identification as a quote-unquote doll user, or owner, or lover. Even the definition is up for debate. There is no consensus as to what the term means, which is why this forum exists and something that Midiman comments upon:

The most important thing in this exercise is to first get some sort of doll community consensus as to its definition of iDollator and to who in the community, if not all, it represents. Then at least we have a reference point to taking it beyond the community. (2010, August 20)

This quotation raises two points. The first being how Midiman posits the idea of a collective culture, something that I earlier thought to be ‘doll culture.’ The second is coming to some conclusion about their lifestyles that would be a closer approximation of

these than what Davecat deems their relationships to be, essentially guarding himself or herself against how Davecat represents his own relationships. What then does that mean? I believe it suggests that there is a vast diversity within doll culture and this survey provides us a glimpse into their relationships.

Username Bianca echoes this concern:

One thing that is clear is that the majority here at TDF do not feel iDollator is a good coined term to accurately describe our community as a whole as its derivation leads to confusion, regardless of the fact that some individuals within the community have adopted it and been using it for a few years. (2010, August 22)

Bianca's concern suggests that there isn't agreement as to how each would define their relationships and that relations are different. The forum interrogates how the relationships with the dolls affect their personal lives; how the dolls represent or re-represent ideas of intimacy that are experienced in different ways. They are working to find a name that would represent their attachment to their dolls and what those expressions look like, but this discussion reveals the limits of assuming a singular identity category.

The user Vanessa does not agree with a labeling system that limits the relationship to one name over another. The user claims that even after several years of owning a doll their relationship does not mutually exclude different terms:

Normally, you start with wanting a doll and thus you're a doll admirer. Then there's uncrating day and you become an owner, and once you and dolly have sex, that makes you a doll lover. But you cannot be a doll owner without being a doll lover (more general meaning), and then you never stop being a doll admirer. (2010, August 22)

For Vanessa, the terms cannot be separated to explain individuals' perceived level of caring for the doll. These statements seem to revolve around the idea of affection, and where in which that individual sits upon that spectrum. However, Vanessa is pointing to

the idea that in certain situations one label may be more applicable than another and that they might even use several to describe one person. The terms can be used as adjectives, not just as nouns. This distinction is significant because adjectives play a part in flexible description but do not complete the identity of a person, while nouns that produce identification can be more totalizing and assume a more coherent and fixed identity.

Darcrivt offers insight into the difficulties of being religious while maintaining a relation to the doll:

Personally, I find the term “Idollator” highly offensive. I happen to be a Southern Baptist (although I don’t go to church as often as I should) and the root meanings of idol, idolater, idolatry (etc.) are ground into your head nearly every time the pastor opens the good book to the Old Testament. To worship an inanimate object as though it were (a) god.

...If you honestly do not care what other people think about you then you are a free man (or woman) indeed. However, most of us do not appear to be that free as indicated by the number of “how I hide my doll” posts and threads.

Needless to say, I do not perceive myself as an Idollator. I’d call myself a doll admirer, soon to be a doll owner. (2010, August 23)

Darcrivt’s post outlines yet another interesting position, as it not only tries to sow rifts between dominant and marginal cultures, but utilizes personal religious values in the justifications of changing perceptions of the doll as an idol. S/he makes the case that if religious authorities made a public claim that the doll was nothing more than a “sexual mastu[r]bation device” then it would be no one else’s concern. Darcrivt concludes that it would “be hard for anyone to call you a psycho wannabe rapist freak if you got a nod from the pulpit.” It is a peculiar case to be made that the doll, in this specific post, is only poised as a masturbatory object, and that the label would suggest that they are idolizing an object to masturbate with. This suggestion poses a threat to those who are trying to maintain a ‘reputable’ public presence in the community and beyond it, as suggested by

the “how I hide my doll” topic. Many responses, and specifically in Darcrivt’s response, wrestle with the signification that iDollator implies, which leads many to look into themselves and understand how others perceive them.

[B]indwebster (2010, August 26) thinks there are risks in labeling the relationship in the first place questioning “Why label yourself at all?” [B]indwebster continues:

Just call yourself a doll owner and be done with it. How far you choose to take it and how much you choose to share about your doll is of course up to you. No reason to divide everyone up into camps and slap labels on them. This is the very kind of thing that only serves to create tension and divide.

Part of the subtlety of this excerpt is the decision of “how much you choose to share”, which seems to be a prominent theme in many of the posts on this thread. Each individual decides what to post and how much of their personal lives they include to argue for identifying terms. It is this disclosure that I think strengthens the notion of community and culture, at least at the online level of The Doll Forum. Many post personal descriptions of their lives; they are testimonials that unearth both mundane day-to-day activities as well as insights towards struggles that are not particular to doll culture but to very general issues. That is what makes reading these intriguing, beside the point of the contestation over “iDollator” it seems that the rationales and stories that protrude are those that expose nerves, and the subtleties of what not only brought them to the forum but as well some of their own life worlds. In struggling with doll terminology, they are participating in narratives of their own intimacies with their doll. As Carolyn Ellis (2009) has observed, the way that we represent relations and ourselves might resemble a memory of what we believe we are, or the best parts that obfuscate the ‘original.’

However, I might suggest that this ‘original’ may be a fleeting manifestation of epistemological objectivity.

The user NotMyName has some of the most introspective epiphanies with regards to his own satisfaction, need and realistic presumptions about himself and the dating world. NotMyName’s implicit self-assessment, which raises the issue that some individuals do not possess certain characteristics that are often associated with an ideal suitor, puts perceived social expectations at stake in this post:

I wonder if it is not so much preferring the doll to real human interactions, as preferring to enact a fantasy of ones ideal relationship to settling for one that doesn’t come close. Many of us are simply not charismatic enough, or attractive enough, or (let’s face it) rich enough to garner the attention of the women we truly desire... (2010, September 3)

NotMyName also establishes that the idea of having children is not something that he would ever entertain, even in the fantasy relationship he would not permit the idea of procreating: “I can pretend that Caley is quite content with her infertility, or if I wanna go even de[e]per into the fantasy, that human and Teddy Babe DNA are incompatible”¹¹ (2010, September 3). He strikes a chord with Midiman’s idea that iDollators *choose* to be in a relationship with their doll in preference over being with a real person that consequently produces a hierarchy of the value an iDollator construes towards ‘normative’ dating patterns. NotMyName articulates the ways in which a ‘real’ relationship is not for him. For the moment though what makes him happy is to not compromise towards a relationship that would be utterly fruitless – something Davecat sheds light on when he explains how loneliness has invaded him. NotMyName closes with the following statement:

¹¹ Teddy Babe’s are plush dolls that are cheaper than the silicone dolls.

So I guess, in a sense, I do prefer my doll, but only to being in a relationship that would ultimately amount to trading one type of unhappiness for another. But do I consider myself an iDollator? No. (2010, September 3)

I think what is becoming a little more obvious is that those who partake in the doll do not necessarily utilize them in a purely carnal fashion, but in fact are dealing with what could be argued to be general issues of loneliness, and the stress that often brings for NotMyName.

The following excerpts are in dialogue with each other, between the users Szalinski, Zarnon and Midiman. For several reasons, I would suggest that the disagreement provides insight into the primary inquiry: is the doll a surrogate, or something different? To begin, Zarnon is originally responding to the following quote posted by Szalinski:

Well, if I could find a human female that is capable of feeling the true, unconditional love that a much simpler organism like a dog finds so easy to come by, then I most certainly would go for the human, of course. (2010, September 3)

In response, Zarnon writes:

You won't find a female fitting that anymore than a guy would fit that for a female. Some of the barriers we put up to relationships are so high SuperGirl couldn't jump them. Geez, if I could find someone who accepted (not tolerated) the dolls I'd be hella happy. (2010, September 4)

With reference to Midiman's suggestion that an iDollator is one who chooses to be in a relationship with a doll rather than a human person, Szalinski finds that if both choices were available, the choice would be obvious: human. In response to this, I might conclude that the doll is in fact perceived to be a surrogate. The doll is positioned as a locum; a placeholder to fulfill what a human might fulfill in this relationship. However, Zarnon believes that (at least personally) the idea of finding someone who would have unconditional love for them is a farce. This echoes Turkle's (2011) concern with our

current relations and how we are learning to settle with the less messy and risk free relations over a human-to-human companionship. But, what is surprising is the insistence that the human partner would be required to accept the doll as part of the relationship. For Zarnon the doll may not be a placeholder or a substitution and might be fulfilling a different role.

Midiman completely disagrees with Zarnon's assumptions of love, making the argument that "true unconditional love is not something that happens but is something earned" (2010, September 4). He argues love that is 'true' must grow in tandem, and Midiman responds at length to Zarnon's approach. The following is an excerpt from that response:

Perhaps the reason why a dog makes such a great companion is because sex and hormones are not in the mix...at least I sure hope not. Usually they tend to hump your friends legs.

However, love goes far deeper than "sex". My wife and I share a relationship much like described above, and yes it did start out more sexual. But after 13 years of sharing we have grown very comfortable with each other...

...Of course nothing has ever been normal in Midiman's life and our first year of marriage we spent living apart...Some friends attribute that to being the secret of our success LOL.

Regardless, keep in mind that when you are in your senior years that companionship often outranks sex when looking for a companion. (2010, September 4)

Midiman's post reveals several key characteristics that challenge assumptions associated with the surrogacy thesis. First is his marital status, which is self-reported as quite successful. Second, his age, claiming that he is a 'senior'. Third, Midiman writes in third person, which is presumably a strategy to maintain the role he has established with his dolls. Lastly and most importantly, Midiman remains in a relationship with his dolls

while maintaining his marriage; he remains in a marriage with his wife while maintaining a relationship with his dolls. The point of the doll becomes more complicated than if we are no longer suggesting that it is a surrogate.

[N]iah provides some insight into the possible applications the doll might have when responding to calpolygradstudent's post, which inquired about the surrogacy potential of dolls:

I'm curious what the forum members think about the therapeutic implications of the dolls, for use in sex therapy, prisons, military, for those who are disabled in anyway. (2010, September 21)

[N]iah writes:

I am disabled. I have a boyfriend but he's much older. My female doll is a companion. I can snuggle her, sleep next to her. I can do whatever I want and she isn't complaining or griping. As for sex, I've tried a double dildo with her. It works, and is pretty hot. My boyfriend has no interest in her, but she's not for him. She's for me.

I think more people should be open to the idea of a doll. Especially the disabled! People assume the disabled are nonsexual beings, but they need sex and intimacy. (2010, October 20)

This response opens up an entirely new direction when considering ideas of therapy and sex therapy, as well as those dealing with disability. Turkle (2011) discusses a similar notion of robot companions keeping lonely seniors company. In this she describes how elderly care might change, but has reservations against the idea when "[w]e ask technology to perform what used to be 'loves labor': taking care of each other" (p. 107). Levy (2007) described a situation about this with Hideo Tsuychiya, the president of Orient Industries. In a 2003, *Mainichi Daily News* quoted Tsuchiya's on early sales:

Early on, the showroom was more like a therapy area...We'd get old guys who had permission from their wives to buy dolls, or mothers of disabled sons searching for a partner. Nearly all of our customers had some problem related to their sex life. (as cited in p. 248-249)

The conversation lends itself to a completely new envisioning of just what the dolls are ‘becoming’. The functionality and uses exist on a much larger spectrum than previously considered. Initial reactions to the doll seem to share similar assumptions: the doll is a hypersexualized, objectified, and misogynist idea. I believe that these stories illustrate that there is more to uncover than these conceptions suggest. I think that relationships with dolls increasingly reflect larger issues relevant to cultures today.

SpiritfireM (2011, January 9) argues along these lines disagreeing with the previously mentioned user Vanessa, whose original quotation suggests that identity with the doll rests on a spectrum. However, Vanessa is later cited explaining that the doll, “in the end...is a masturbation device” (2011, January 9). SpiritfireM explains that his wife is quite ill, which requires that they not sleep in the same bed. But since he purchased his doll, Andrea, and a few others, he is able to sleep more soundly. SpiritfireM posted the following:

I won’t deny that I make love to my dolls, but that is not the primary purpose of my girls. For me, they are mostly companions, helping me get through rough times with a lot of cuddling.

...

Many of you all here know about my situation with my real wife and her illness, pretty much requiring me to sleep alone in a separate room. Before Andrea, I had a hard time sleeping. After years of sleeping next to my wife, not being able to sleep next to her any longer was strange. Andrea filled that void by having a warm body to cuddle at night.

...

Anyways to close, no, I can’t agree with the assessment at all that they are just masturbation toys overall. They are much, much more. (2011, January 9)

In tandem with SpiritfireM, I think that TG Megami makes an interesting point about the level of intimacy s/he has come to understand:

I selected ‘Doll Lover,’ as I do truly love my dolls...In some ways it is a romantic love, but in no way would I consider my love for my dolls as a substitute for love

with a real woman (or man, I'm not really sure which way my sexuality is going just now...). There are obviously things that a doll cannot provide that a human partner can. The converse also holds true.

By the same token, I could not imagine myself with a partner who did not accept and more so *enjoy* dolls as much as I do. I don't know how many doll-loving women there are out there, but I'm sure they exist, and I'm sure I will find one who can accept this transwoman and her dolls for who and what they are. (2011, February 17)

The properties of the doll are quite intriguing once the doll users begin defining both what the doll is and is not to them. There is a diversity of what each doll represents to their user and how these relationships came to pass. SpiritfireM expresses his inability to sleep without his wife, or at least sleep well, and the doll fulfills that role while he rests. Whether or not his wife accepts the dolls for what they are may be unclear, but with TG Megami that acceptance is a pre-requisite to begin a partnership for without it the relationship is unimaginable. Between several of these posts, which seem to be more like testimonials, there are quite a few who are managing both a relationship with the doll as well as a partnership with another person. TG Megami alludes to this by stating that there are discrepancies between the relationships. There are elements to each relationship that do not appear in the other that alludes to the idea that the relationship with the doll is not just an attempt at recreating a human-to-human relationship.

These posts signal that there are valued traits in relationships with dolls and, therefore, the dolls are not necessarily representing a translated version of a human. This suggests to us that the doll is not always a surrogate for a human partner, and that what that might mean is this relationship is of its own right. Yet, as with a lot of relationships, they are not all exactly the same or generalizable. Their perceptions of the doll are personal and amorous; they are particular to the circumstance in which they individually

bring life to the doll, or vice versa. Although the dolls are quite obviously similar in construction, the varying interactions that consolidate the relationship make the dolls distinct; the idiosyncratic nature beckons an argument for the diversity of each person. There are eccentric individuals, as we have seen with Davecat, and a few others who, despite the controversy of iDollator, still claim to be one. Conversations surrounding the idea of ‘proper’ representation, and whether or not people agreed, were the basis of this forum. As well we find that some of the personal testimonials exposed nerves, life stories of struggles with intimacy, partners, and the like. What began as a politically driven exchange over media representation and the broaching of the term iDollator revealed the innermost struggles of many searching for ‘true love’, while others sought language to describe an emergent form of post human relationship.

Man enough?

The problems raised in the iDollator forum cannot be reduced to provide a definitive explanation for what human-doll relationships signify or accomplish in the lives of those who participate on the forum. The meanings and functions of these relationships are context-specific. The recurring thematic that the doll is more than a sexual aid, a unique companion that cannot be substituted with a human partner, and so on, does suggest that these relationships may indicate something about current cultural expectations or perhaps cultural disappointments. The scope and methodology of this project limits what kind of conclusions can be made with respect to the connection between these relationships and broader social practices, but these relationships may be consistent with the observation that there has been increasing anxiety over gender expectations, particularly for masculinity. Michael Atkinson (2011) has explained that the gender scripts that have

been taken for granted until recently have now been disrupted to reveal the “multiple and shifting realities about masculinity” in our present “ornamental culture,” which is marked by representation and consumption-driven self-branding (p. 9). Drawing from Art Frank’s concept of “narrative wreckage,” Atkinson suggests that, increasingly, men “are not sure how masculinity fits into social scripts, how it is performed, if it is powerful, and if it is appropriate” (p. 38).

In this context, observers have introduced the concept of the “New Man” to give expression to “softer embodiments of masculinity” that are more reflexively attuned to the performance of masculinity (p. 11). The reflexive awareness of New Men presumably comments upon the perception of a hegemonic masculinity. The concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) has influenced the way we understand masculinity. While this concept has shortcomings, it challenged not only the assumption that gendered performance is aligned with the biological sex binary but it was premised on the recognition that there are multiple masculinities. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) elaborate some of the properties of hegemonic masculinity, noting:

Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men. (p. 832)

Yet, they note that hegemonic masculinity itself cannot be said to exist. Atkinson (2011) also observes that scholars have looked to cultural representations to trace the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity:

In the West, the cookie-cutter hegemonic man is a throwback protagonist from a John Steinbeck or Harper Lee novel. He is a John Wayne. He is a frontier ‘man’s man’ who embodies control, confidence, self-importance, and strength through

his very swagger...He is the man every boy supposedly emulates and who grown men envy. (p. 32)

Therefore, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue, hegemonic masculinity is a presumed ideal that cannot be maintained by any singular social subject. Hegemonic masculinity is reinforced by the pursuit of its achievement. Regardless of circulated imagery that reinforces preferred models of masculinity, there is no inherent characteristic tied to the body that is necessarily masculine, and “[c]onsequently, ‘masculinity’ represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” (p. 841). This means that the practices are embedded within social cues that are culturally and historically understood and that they are neither fixed nor natural.

What is important about the actualization of hegemonic masculinity is the social settings in which it materializes, which means that the configurations of masculinity in different contexts and social interactions are distinct and multiple (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836). In tandem with the ‘multiple’ subjectivities of masculinity is an ideological component in which “hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond to the lives of actual men” (p. 838). Masculinity has been falsely made into a material existence, it is an ideological abstraction that has been reified and taken up by its users. The discourses that construct ‘manliness’ do not necessarily exist in individuals who take up these ideologies; masculinity is an archetype that is taken up and used to position that individual in a given social interaction (p. 841).

As a consequence of this formulation, hegemonic masculinity stems from exemplars of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846) that are not necessarily common to all men. In this sense, one does not need to (and is very unlikely

to) embody all the traits that are compiled together to create the gender construct. This archetype of what a 'man' could be is therefore less about a specific type of man and more about how that individual is able to strategically "position themselves through discursive practices" (p. 841). However, to perpetuate the cultural and social meaning of masculinity policing is required to sustain the image (p. 844).

Hegemony also suggests tension, struggle, and consensus-building, therefore, the test for this concept is its capacity to capture the social change implied by hegemony. Since historical formulations of masculinity do undergo change, the concept was not presumed to refer to static masculinity (p. 833). As Connell & Messerschmidt note:

This was the element of optimism in an otherwise rather bleak theory. It was perhaps possible that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading toward an abolition of gender hierarchies. (p. 833)

This is a point to be highlighted because the scholarship that forwarded this concept anticipated that masculinity would progressively open up rather than reinforce marginality. About this hope, they explain:

A transitional move in this direction requires an attempt to establish as hegemonic among men a version of masculinity that is thoroughly "positive". Recent history has shown the difficulty of doing this in practice. A positive hegemony remains, nevertheless, a key strategy of contemporary efforts at reform. (p. 853)

In sum, the concept of hegemonic masculinity suggests that masculinity does shift, yet the concept seems to have connoted a John Wayne masculinity for a very long time. Even so, masculinity is under revision in practice and in scholarship. Atkinson (2011) observes that the sensibilities of the New Man emerge at the same time as hyper-real versions of masculinity emerge (p. 11); the latter rely upon self-directed aggression and bullying (p. 74).

Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo & Michael A. Messner (1994) critique the “New Man”: “He is a white, college-educated professional who is a highly involved and nurturant father, ‘in touch with’ and expressive of his feelings and egalitarian in his dealings with women” (p. 201). In this sense, the new man ostensibly stands in opposition to the stoic, bread-winning patriarch as leader of the household. Melanie Heath (2003) elaborates on this concept, while observing how it may be racialized and classed:

The concept of the New Man refers to how white, class-privileged men perform a masculinity that incorporates traditionally feminine characteristics, such as emotionality and sensitivity. Yet this type of masculinity maintains its hegemonic status as superior to other masculinities, because expressiveness and sensitivity do not necessarily challenge the structural conditions that maintain its dominant status in society. (p. 436)

In this new formulation, masculinity seems to be less defined against femininity, a key element of hegemonic masculine theorizing. However, such enactments of masculinity do not seem to interrogate or disrupt the structural relations and the embedded privileges that masculinity has over femininity, according to Hondagneu & Messner:

But the key point is that when examined within the context of these men’s positions in the overall structure of power in society, these changes do not appear to challenge or undermine this power. To the contrary, the cultural image of the New Man and the partial fragmentary empirical changes that this image represents serve to file off some of the rough edges of hegemonic masculinity in such a way that the possibility of a happier and healthier life for men is created, while deflecting or resisting feminist challenges to men’s institutional power and privilege. (p. 206-207)

The “New Man” seems to produce emotionality as a mark of privilege, but it does so unevenly since emotionality remains a deficit in femininity. Increasingly, we find a discursive push for men to be more in touch with their ‘feminine side,’ something that was previously considered a disservice to a masculine narrative. But now, they are

‘allowed’ to display these characteristics without ridicule so that being masculine can be “at once about embodying a masculine confidence, self-assuredness, self-control, and determination, but also about incorporating more reflexive, sensitive, self-monitoring, and aesthetically feminine traits” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 112). “Feminine” characteristics in masculine performance are, in fact, becoming the signifiers of a better, healthier, and more ‘improved’ man. However, this rearrangement of the performance of masculinity does not make equal the long relationship of subordination that femininity has had with masculinity; the structural foundations of this relationship remain cemented. Paradoxically, the performativity of these “feminine” traits in hegemonic masculinity seems to underpin rather than mediate privilege.

In contrast to the concept of the “New Man” Allison Burr-Miller & Eric Aoki (2013) published the article “Becoming (Hetero) Sexual? The Hetero-Spectacle of Idollators and their Real Dolls” that analyzes the 2007 BBC documentary entitled *Guys and Dolls*. Rather than the “New Man” performing a more reflexive masculinity the feminine narrative that the doll users supply for the doll is used to legitimize their identity formation of ‘becoming’ masculine. They argue that through the relationship with their dolls, the men project femininity onto the bodies of the doll to actualize their masculinity, recreating a two-sexed system ironically in the absence of real women:

The idollators’ [Real Doll] narratives are constantly naturalizing and reifying the two-sexed system upon which heterosexuality relies. Entering the contained environment of their homes the documentary depicts how the idollators use the dolls as technologies to become heterosexual. (p. 385)

Burr-Miller and Aoki posit that these men, specifically the four in the documentary “discursively construct their dolls into women as a way of making themselves into men” (p. 386).

Burr-Miller & Aoki (2013) argue that by re-creating and projecting a two-sexed system onto their relationship they paradoxically bar themselves from the landscape of heteronormativity. By existing within “the presence of toys, lack of human connection, and gender performativity necessary for the idollators to simulate heterosexuality” they are “equally contributing [to] factors that debunk the legitimacy of their relationships” (p. 390). By performing both masculine and feminine roles to develop a heteronormative script the doll user is actively involving and excluding their ability to form a heteronormative relationship. The dichotomy of gender normativity collapses because the user is required to exist within a realm that establishes both positions but originates in one actor. There is a legacy of hegemonic masculinity subordinating the traits of femininity, and their performances are a struggle to maintain that ideological structure. A consequence of trying to project this relationship is that these discursive practices trouble their own identity as heterosexual men; these individuals can never produce the heterospectacle (p. 386).

Davecat, one of the four iDollators interviewed in the documentary, lives with his parents in Michigan with his synthetic partner Chichan. His explanation, as Burr-Miller & Aoki (2013) see it, for choosing the synthetic option is the doll’s “incorruptible beauty and stoicism, qualities that have led to his attempts to date real women to be ‘half-hearted’” (p. 391). In their analysis, they describe Davecat’s relationship as an “idealized Hollywood version” of love; a “fairytale love” (p. 392). What is of stark interest is the way in which Davecat explains his relationship with Chichan:

It’s the difference between being alone and lonely; being alone is one thing, I don’t mind being alone at all, however, I cannot stand being lonely...that’s something that more people, I would hope would understand, ... that’s why idollators have their dolls. (as cited in p. 392)

Given, on the one hand, the frequent appeals that participants of the iDollator forum make to needs for intimacy, cuddling, and so forth, and, on the other hand, the discourses of care-giving, love, and even family that were present in the testimonials on the Real Doll site, these shifting conceptions of masculine performance may provide insight into human-doll relationships. First, if men are increasingly uncertain about what masculinity looks like, this troubles the romantic scripts that are culturally circulated. Should a man be sensitive and express emotions outwardly, or should he be tough and reticent? If this is unclear, then these posthuman relationships release men from these double imperatives that may both be wrong. Second, the care-giving and aesthetic attention that the dolls require seem to call for practices and forms of knowledge that narratives of traditional masculinity would not have permitted. “Real men” certainly do not give manicures and play with hair; do they? Some traditionally masculine men might do so, but they would not communicate about it with others without experiencing negative social consequences.

Sarah Valverde (2012) (formerly Schewe) deployed an online survey to understand who participates in doll culture and was released as part of her Master of Science degree in psychology. Entitled “The Modern Sex Doll-Owner: a Descriptive analysis”, her first hypothesis expected the demographic sample to be: “(a) males, (b) middle-aged, (c) White, (d) single, (e) employed, (f) hold a high school degree (or its equivalent) or higher, (g) identify sexual orientation as heterosexual” (p. 30). Significantly, the majority of those sampled (n=61) “appear to be primarily single, employed, middle-aged, White, heterosexual males” (p. 34), though it is noted that the results are for the United States only. In a review of manufacturers from the United States

and Japan (Abyss Creations and Orient Industries respectively), Orient Industries' personal representative found that the average age of customers are between 40-65 years old, suggesting that Valverde's suspicions were relatively accurate (at least with reference to age). The demographic characteristics of participants in Valverde's study mirror this new hegemonic ideal of the New Man, as they are individuals who have the means to purchase and to maintain the doll. Most of them have a relatively good economic standing, although it is reported that many saved for years to collect the financial capital to buy their dolls (p. 35). Even though Valverde's sample size is quite small to compare with the entire population, the results do preliminarily suggest a link between the New Man sensibility and that of those who own dolls.

Considering the passionate struggles on the iDollator forum to define, defend, and to give name to this emergent relationship and lifestyle, I believe that the forum supports a New Man (Hondagneu & Messner, 1994) sensibility. The dialogues animate a new masculinity that fosters a caring attitude towards their doll partners; the significance and scope of this care is a recurrent theme. But, this particular discourse of care and its potential redefinition of masculine emotion do not question the gender constructs that are active in these relationships.

Chapter 4: A Love in its own Right.

My argument has assumed that human-doll intimacies are situated within shifting relationships between humans and communications technologies. In chapter one, I traced how critical social theory has been concerned for some time with the changing relationships between representation and reality as well as with the shifting status of the commodity. If, as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, commodities, which for them take the communicative forms of music, film, and so on, can rearrange human desires and consciousness, then conceptions of self and relationships are tied to the forms that our communications take. By using these theoretical perspectives to frame the subject matter of human-doll relationships, I wanted to highlight the limits of liberal understandings of agency and self, which meet curious implications of conceptual critiques of the active power of communication technologies denoted by concepts such as false consciousness and performative affect purported by the culture industry and Turkle (2011), respectively. This provokes peculiar questions: What are we relating to, and with what are we relating? Increasing emotional reliance on sociable technologies has led Levy (2007) and Turkle to raise questions about authentic being, and whether or not the technology aids or dulls our affective abilities. Levy would have us believe that this shift in relationships is inevitable, and not necessarily the worst outcome. He goes as far as to require us to defend the ethical treatment of the robots and suggests that abuse of the technology should be seen *as if* we are hurting a real person. Turkle views this relationship as dampening of our affective abilities; we are normalizing and accepting the performance of relational emotions *as if* we were in a 'real' relationship. As a consequence, we are sacrificing real authentic relationships for false, but risk free, relations with sociable technology.

But at this point we can see the rising significance of rethinking common ontological conceptions of sociable technology (and of humans too). Are we to treat sociable technologies *as if* they are ‘real’ people, things that can have emotions and are thus able to understand mistreatment and abuse? Or are they empty vessels leading us with false pretenses of security in relationships? It is a question of qualifying what technology really means to us: is it a replication of productive relationships, is it training grounds for ‘real’ relationships? In order to respond, we required a step back from the social technology to analyze our relationship with things and objects.

Consideration of how we foster our relationships with ‘stuff’ (Miller, 2010) and ‘things’ (Highmore, 2011) demands that we focus on the objects that have meaning for us, whether these are photographs, clothing, or home furnishings. In requiring a discussion about relationships, a theory of objects suggested a different perspective in elucidating some of the intricate ways that we construct relational meaning with things and the ways in which inanimate things impact our movements, gestures, and perspectives. Taking a closer look at human relationships with things requires that we reject the one-directional lens that is given in the concept of the culture industry, since these things actually help to mold affection and action rather than reflect them. This theoretical discussion of objects is complimented by Basso’s (1996) sense of place in which we reconfigure the focus from surroundings to objects. In this reconfiguration the interanimating relationship is productive and, as a result, unique.

This analysis of human-object relationships, which strays from traditional epistemological assumptions, suggests that the nonliving can affect the living, and in fact they both interanimate one another. This relationship is not necessarily a replication, a

simulation, a recreation, or even a re-representation of something already in existence; the object cannot simply be reduced to a surrogate for a human partner. It is possible to now consider that the human-doll relationship may be a product of the robotic moment (Turkle, 2011). While relational affect between persons and objects is not in itself new, the way in which human-doll relationships are articulated appears to be historically tied to the emergence and pervasive appearance of sociable technologies that ask for or promise to give forms of care in ways that are affectively interanimating. Given this historical situation, I suggest that emergent human-doll relationships are productive and distinct.

Such a relationship is more than a relationship to an object; it signals a historical situation that is unprecedented. I am suggesting, on the one hand, that this relationship is more significant than one between a human and an inanimate object, and on the other hand, that it is not the same as a human-to-human relationship. This possibility, however, unveils a whole new set of problems since it is difficult to analyze something that is not yet settled enough to be integrated into discourse; such relationships are inconsistent with established language and so they require us to borrow from existing, yet inadequate, epistemes. The concepts of the robotic moment and interanimation provide context for proposing that these posthuman relationships have their own independent status that is not predicated upon human-to-human relationships.

In reading testimonials and accounts of what it is like to have and to be in a relationship with a doll, I recognize the limits of the language that is deployed to describe them; this is something that I have found difficult in the course of this study. Since common language is bereft of words appropriate to the description of these relationships

without comparisons to human relationships, individuals often use a nostalgic discourse of romantic love as they describe, and interact with, their dolls. For them to even approach explaining this relationship they are limited to borrowing from the language of love; it is the only way they can even approximate a discussion of this that could be understood. The language of love is only an estimate; it is a rough and imprecise measure of the relationship but is deployed because it is socially recognizable. To explain this relationship they borrow from inadequate, but perhaps more descriptive, language to evaluate their relationships. The substance of this problem can be seen in the online forum that discusses the term iDollator, as treated in the previous chapter. The forum is a symptom of this considerable issue of language's lack. The struggle over the term iDollator acknowledges this problem of words: it exemplifies the very fact that there are no words available. An individual offered the term iDollator, which then inspired others to affirm or to negate its meaning, as they too endeavour to explain and qualify their own relationships.

What was interesting, then, was to question whether or not they constructed this relationship out of a spectacularized notion of love, and thus to speculate upon whether the described relation ever 'truly' existed or if it was necessarily 'real.' But what previously seemed to be an attempt to recreate a relationship using a lover's voice, an attempt at having a human-human relationship with a doll, becomes a misleading suggestion with the induction of the problematic subject of language.

The “tie” to reflexivity?

I must recognize that my access to how doll users may frame their relationships may only provide a partial glimpse into their worlds. By employing the notions of reflexivity into this project, I hope to hold myself accountable to the research process as a whole. Ellis (2009) writes,

What do we owe those we study? ... How should we treat them? How much do they have a right to know about us, both our personal lives and what we are doing in their lives? Are there ways to write about people that honor and empower them (Richardson, 1992b) rather than ‘other’ them as exotic, overemphasize their differences, make them appear less than us? (p. 78)

There needs to be acknowledgement of this loss in translation, and that how we understand this information depends on our own dispositions as researchers, and as subjects produced by the same discourses that produce what and who we study. The following section is my attempt to produce this lover’s discourse through Roland Barthes’ ([1977] 2002) notion of the “figure” and complement this discussion with other interventions (Ellis, 2009; Aoki, 2010) that problematize language and reflection.



Figure 5: Rebecca 1

¹² Barthes, R. ([1977] 2002). *A lover's discourse: fragment*. London: Vintage books. Barthes argues that there are cultural repertoires for the image of love, and that these "figures" are recognizable but are only "half coded" (p. 5): "[the figure] is no more than a modest supplement offered to the reader to be made free with, to be added to, subtracted from, and passed on to others...its active principle is not what it says but what it articulates" (p. 5). Barthes is suggesting that these image repertoires, these figures that we think are uniquely ours, are in fact largely derived from the reader being shown what to desire in the repetition of images and emotions. What we believe is a solitary love, what we think is completely interior and singular, strangely we are all able to recognize even fragments of the figure. In the figure "alone", Barthes argues that it is a 'philosophical' solitude as there are no major systems of thought that we are able to express ourselves amorously; "Today, however, there is no system of love: and the several systems which surround the contemporary lover offer him no room (except for an extremely devaluated place)" (p. 211).

Falling in love in the modern age I think has become devastated and fractured. In that sense maybe she represents his solution to alienation, an opposition to the disconnection from one's own labour of love. However, maybe it is in fact the seduction that is true alienation. It is easy to follow that trail in analyzing this picture, to provide a moral or common-sense view of objects that is strictly opposed to this notion of falling in love with a doll, with an object that cannot have a conversation or share an intimate moment. But one might question, as I do, if physical intimacy is restricted by our digitized communications, or has our modern technological age taken something away from us?

The image breaches the existence and identity of the stoic man. It is somewhat of an ironic or satirical image as the man sits as the foundation but is positioned as subject to her; he relies on her. She holds him. In this respect they break from the exhausted adage of the breadwinner to the emotionally vulnerable. To reflect on our own capacities I think we find inherent the need to be wanted, to be requested by someone else, to be liked and

Her gaze looks on through the window where the real world lay, knowing that he must return but that she will stay; an inevitability. She sits calmly, patiently awaiting his next move. They reside in a room, weathered with old books and the ether of memory, a familiar and comfortable seat; a place to rest. He holds her as if a balloon; afloat with an anchor that provisions him as careless and free; "I could be anything with you". They contemplate life's big questions, how the world has changed around them, "have we¹³ changed?" They stare into each other searching for more – he brushes her hair. Emotional stability rests on her; she is what holds him together. He listens to her breath, to her heartbeat; he feels the expansion and collapse of her chest, finding

¹³ *ibid.* The figure "truth" presents the lover as the only individual who can view the loved object for what they *actually* are; she is the only one who can truly *know* him, "only I know him, only I make him exist in his truth" (p. 229).

loved by someone else.

Love and care are not universal in the sense of how they ‘materialize’, they exist on the broadest of spectrums and the actions that those entail are not necessarily identifiable by conventional means. They are specific to those individuals; meaning created in this may not always be recognized in cliché.¹⁴ Personal investment in another will always take on different forms historically, culturally, contextually, and he provides her voice in as much as she provides his. By finding what she needs, wants, desires, he is able to find his own.

Lance Bangs (2014) directed a short documentary in response to Spike Jonze’s recent film *Her* (2013). In the documentary he questions several well-known actors, musicians, and others on what they believe loves looks like in the modern day. I do not really know at this moment whether or not the technology that we are using

comfort in her hand.

Sunlight beats into the room, warming the walls, his face and forearm, the floor under his feet. He contemplates her hand, memorizing each line, each finger, the wrinkles in her dress; can this moment last forever? He sits in contemplation, not only of physicality but also in memory, in the haunting of past and present.

Predisposed by the study of her hand silence fills the room, are they saying goodbye, have they returned from saying goodbye to someone dear? They sit unmoving in tranquility – “still lovers.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Aoki, D. (2000). “Remembrances of love past.” *Journal of Historical Sociology*. 13(1), 1-9. We talk about love in terms of management-speak, we talk about love in terms of medical discourse or heartbreak and the linked remedies of healing, all of which Aoki finds problematic. The ways in which we discuss this do not actually get at the crux of the problem, though “[p]erhaps this is just a failure of rhetoric” (p. 6).

¹⁵ Dorfman, E. (2005) *Rebecca 1* [image]. Retrieved on January 28, 2014 from: <http://elenadorfman.com/still-lovers/>. In the photo album *Still Lovers* Elena Dorfman endeavored to photograph men and their dolls, *Rebecca 1* being part of this project. Dorfman states the following in the section Artist Statement: “What began for me as a playful curiosity – how to photograph men having sex with 125 pounds of perfectly-formed, synthetic female – rapidly turned into an exploration of the emotional ties that exist between men and women and their dolls. This exploration forced me to evaluate my own notions of love, and what it means to value an object – a replacement human being, in effect – as real.” Retrieved from <http://elenadorfman.com/still-lovers/artist-statement/>.

to keep in touch (an idea discussed in the documentary) or to meet new or maintain old friendships is conventionally a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ thing other than the fact that it is new to our age. Albeit, I would argue, it is a privilege to have such technology at *our* disposal – who is to say that the emotions felt through such mediums are not authentic or real, rather than simply different?

Olivia Wilde responds in this video by explaining that, when we fall in love, we fall in love with that person at that time, but the person that they are in that present will not be the same person forever; we change. For Wilde, we must be willing to take that leap of investment into the unknown, accepting that what we may have fallen in love with in that moment will likely not be the same in another. In the sense that we are able to love and be loved, I think if we follow this logic of love we inevitably see that the way we want to be loved is amorphous.

Rejected and lost to an ether of melancholy, he has endured and found love in this.¹⁶ He has found care by caring. True sadness and loneliness is no stranger to him, he has experiences the depths of despair that those provide. “But you don’t come out of it like a train coming out of a tunnel, bursting...into sunshine [;] ...you come out of it as a gull comes out of an oil-slick. You are tarred and feathered for life.”¹⁷ His despair exists in futility, an infuriating and frustrating experience in which his happiness is always in vision but just beyond reach. The image captures his vulnerability that bespeaks loss, but also a defiance to be numb to his own desires that is

¹⁶ *ibid.* n. 10. The figure “heart” is deployed as a “gift-object”: “The heart is the organ of desire... What will the world, what will the other do with my desire? That is the anxiety in which are gathered all the heart’s movements, all the heart’s ‘problems’” (p. 52).

¹⁷ *ibid.* n. 12. Barnes, 1985, p. 161 as cited in Aoki, 2000, p. 4. This is an argument against the medical trope of the ‘heartbroken’, which suggests it is a sickness of the heart that can be overcome like an illness; we are thus obliged to heal. Consequently, “We make the gestures because we are expected to, for we are players in a game that is not of our own making, and if we do not behave ourselves, we risk disapproval, and even the sting of sanctions (p. 4).

Memory is important here, not only because we look back upon memories, but, even more, because we want to ‘make’ them.¹⁸ We want that honeymoon phase of a relationship, the seduction of the new with no horizon; we want the adorable banter that bespeaks a level of knowledge and intimacy of knowing someone; we want the solitude, comfort, and respect of another and to respond with exuberance – I think that these ideations are common.¹⁹ To the extent that they are spectacularizations, and that many of us are able to see through these deliberate yet counterfeit thoughts, maybe they are guilty pleasures in this way. There is innocence to this guilt-ridden pleasure, but an innocence that wants to be prolonged into an unknown period, until I believe it is time to move onto something different.

reminiscent of their holding hands. It is this rumination of futility that despair holds where we envision conversations and how they might go when we express ourselves to another, how that would play out in our heads; it would be immaculate. I would be eloquent in my speech, adept to the context and be utterly exposed in my confession.²⁰ But what becomes sad about this is that we may never be able to have that conversation, to express our deepest desires to another, or maybe we have, and rejection ensued. In this, however, he has located solace within an

¹⁸ Ellis, C. (2009). *Revision: autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. Ellis speaks about the process of recounting memories and experiences in her relationship with her late mother stating that “Of course I’m idealizing our relationship, but isn’t some idealizing good? As Jules Henry says, ‘The secret of sanity is to exaggerate the good of the world’” (p. 193). The claim here is to suggest that the way we represent relations and ourselves might resemble a memory of what we believe we are, or the best parts that obfuscate the ‘original.’ Consequently, I might suggest that this ‘original’ may be a fleeting manifestation of epistemological objectivity.

¹⁹ *ibid.* n. 10. The figure “image” suggests that we torment ourselves through seeing that which we are not a part: “Here then, at last, is the definition of the image, of any image: that from which I am excluded” (p. 132).

²⁰ *ibid.* n. 10. In the figure “why”, the lover is obsessed with the question of “why he is not loved” (p. 186). In the end, “I thought I was suffering from not being loved, and yet it is because I thought I was loved that I was suffering; I lived in the complication of supposing myself simultaneously loved and abandoned” (p. 187).

ethics of care. To be beckoned by another, to provide for another, is part of that ethics of care. Consequently though, our vulnerability has become more of a liability than an endearing quality.²¹

He looks as if he is trying to memorize the moment, disavowing the inevitable by trying to heighten the instance to crystalize it in remembrance, in his memory; a crippling mourning.

Titled “Alone”, the preceding section deploys the fictional voice of the doll user (albeit problematically) on their behalf, much like Roland Barthes’ ([1977] 2002) in *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* who is providing for the lover’s voice through “figures.” In endeavoring to do so I have utilized several theorists in creating a dialogue around Elena

²¹ Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York, NY: Basic Books. Turkle states that in the robotic moment, where we have become comfortable with performance rather than genuine expression, “human fallibility has gone from being an endearment to a liability” (p. 51).

Dorfman's (2002) image *Rebecca I*. By approaching the image this way I want to highlight what I find to be a quagmire of representation.

By utilizing Barthes' notion of the "figure", I believe I am able to inculcate myself into the writing and research process. The figures are cultural image repertoires, that being recognizable, but are seemingly only "half coded" (p.5). This suggests that the image we see that is recognizable is in fact ready to be framed elsewhere in different but recognizable conditions; the figures are recognizable because they exist in a cultural repertoire. The experience of the individual figures leads us to believe they are experienced in solitude, separated and isolated, but these experiences have already been coded and exposed to us through various means like literature or film. The figures and their associated perception that they are of private and unique qualities are actually of a cultural and public origin. There are several consequences that we can draw if we insert the notion of figures into the context of the doll user. First we are able to suggest that the doll users may be utilizing culturally recognized figures in order to explain their relationships. If a well-founded observation, we might then suggest that the doll users are coding the other half, or filling in the other half of the figure. What makes this suggestion interesting is that the culturally recognizable figures will have to have existed for long enough in (what I might term) cultural memory; it has to have existed in some form of discourse before so that we are able to recall it afterwards. Therefore, the users are creating a relationship through a discourse that they have already learned.

As part of this recall and coding through learned discourse, Carolyn Ellis' (2009) analysis of recall and representation provides the pinnacle for understanding what is occurring here. As noted in "Alone", Ellis is discussing her recollection of her

relationship with her late mother, and how she would often find herself idealizing her relationship. At the intersection of idealized recall and figures, I think we find the possibility that the figures are idealized when they are looked back upon, or viewed in retrospect, which problematizes memory as epistemologically objective. This is a key problem in representation, because while they are presenting their relationships in a certain way, so too am I re-presenting their relationships in a certain way. In this process I think we lose clarity on some of the articulation of these relationships. I understand and code the figures in certain ways, as much as they do so, but not always are they parallel which is a shortcoming that I am highlighting here.

By illuminating some of the problematic ways we discuss such an intimate discourse there is (I would suggest) a space to involve the researcher as a significant force in this exercise. Consider how Barthes' ([1977] 2002) figure shifts depending on how the subject views it, how it exists and has existed for its holder so that "[w]hat we *see* depends upon our angle of repose" (Richardson, 1997, p. 92 as cited in Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba, 2011, p. 122). This is both a methodological clue that displays my position on ontological access to others' experiences, as well as considerations towards how doll users appear to view their own lives. When analyzing these recognizable figures, I find it necessary to be accountable to the angle of *my* repose. Librett & Perrone (2010) make an astute observation in *Apples and Oranges: Ethnography and the IRB*: "The lines between researcher and subject are often blurred in ethnography. Everything becomes data, including and most importantly, the ethnographer's experience" (p. 733). While this project does not fall within the parameters of ethnography, their observation brings to the fore how instrumental the researcher is in the work that is produced. In

studying these “figures” and how we come to know them, the process seems to be intimately reflexive:

[Reflexivity is] a process whereby researchers place themselves and their practices under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process and *impinge* on the creation of knowledge. (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 276)

Conclusion: Is there a future?

In analyzing Realdoll testimonials, a forum discussion on nomenclature, an advertisement for a love doll, and describing a professional photo, there are several conclusions to be drawn. The theoretically driven focus of this project has allowed for an interesting dialogue between the capacities of social technology and theories of objects subsequently creating a unique interpretation of the relationships fostered between doll users and their dolls. My approach to this subject matter assumes that there is a relationship between the doll and its (human) partner that is misunderstood when love dolls are defined as instrumental objects for sexual gratification. I take the relationship as a point of departure and resist the normative temptation to view this relationship as an anomaly, a symptom of psychological abnormality, or a social problem that arises in the realm of the private for a select few extraordinary individuals. This approach lends itself to reconceptualizing the human-object relation; that the doll is only subject to its user. This linear analysis is disrupted when informed by the concept of interanimacy when directed towards objects and by extension to the doll itself. In this configuration the user animates the doll and the doll animates the user, which examines and somewhat refutes the common sense views about an object and how it can affect/effect its human counterpart.

By approaching the doll as less an object of sexual gratification and more as a manifestation of, for example, Turkle's (2011) concern over the robotic moment, the doll provides a site for theorizing about the shifting trends in relationships. The predicament of simulated relationships brought about through the rapid advancement of communications technologies and robotics has already redefined the subject,

relationships, and lines of communication. In the context of our increasing physical isolation in simulated relationships, I speculate about how the return of the physical and how the doll could be mobilized in such a fashion that signals the emergence of a new relationship. One of the intriguing difficulties of describing this relationship is the absence of a current or fluently understood vocabulary, which complicates how we are able to talk about this without relying upon older discourses of relationships and love.

This thesis has presented an argument that problematizes both applications of human-object and human-human discourses to the relationship produced by dolls and their users. It has put forth the notion that this relationship is not necessarily an attempt to recreate a human-human relationship with a surrogate doll, and that this relationship is unprecedented in its standing and in fact a considerable relationship of its own right. In developing what that looks like, part of this project is also a commentary on the ways in which sociable technology has dramatically influenced our interpersonal lives. Following this observation, I seek to understand the relationships between dolls and their partners as embedded in our culture rather than an incomprehensible departure from it. I insist that the love doll is inseparable from the cultural contexts in which it circulates, noting that the relationships between dolls and their users, although often actively hidden, cannot be analyzed if it is assumed that they reside in intimate and private spheres strictly demarcated from general social practices.

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