How to love a robot
(and why we still don’t love them enough)

This year I published the novel Fuzzie about four unhappy people who find comfort in the words of a small, fuzzy, talking ball. This little ball, Fuzzie, holds long monologues about loneliness, love and growing older and it asks my characters questions like: what did you want to be when you were little? what did you dream about last night? It’s important to remember that Fuzzie doesn’t answer any questions itself, nor does it listen or learn. Fuzzie is a thing, an object that makes noise. Nevertheless, my characters begin to feel attached to this furry little ball. They know it’s not a person, but they give it human features; they panic when they can’t find the ball and they miss the ball when it’s not there.

After my novel was published, I received a lot of questions about the relationship between people and robots. Can a person love a robot? And if so, how? Why? Is this a positive or negative development?

Strictly speaking, Fuzzie isn’t a robot. We understand a robot to be a programmable machine that can perform various tasks. Fuzzie has only one task. But Fuzzie is about affection for objects; robots are also objects, and while researching my novel I thought a lot about the human-robot relationship.

So, can a person love a robot? In short, yes, I think it’s possible. A person can feel affection for robots or other objects. Human-robot relationships can potentially even enhance our happiness, but not if we as a society continue to have a negative view of robots. I believe that our ideas about robots are currently blocking our affection for them. This is what I want to talk about this afternoon.

A good friend of mine recently showed me how you can tease your iPhone assistant Siri.
‘Hey, Siri’, my friend said. ‘What’s the purpose of life?’
‘Up to now, everything points to chocolate,’ Siri answered.
My friend grinned, but I’d already seen this trick. Siri is artificial intelligence that works on self-learning software: if a user enjoys one of Siri’s answers, Siri will repeat it even though she was once given the joke about chocolate by a programmer; various Apple employees are her Cyrano.

‘Her?’ my friend asked. ‘My Siri is a he.’ Indeed, his speech computer communicated in a male voice. That was new for me, who had always considered Siri to be female: the Siri on my girlfriend’s iPhone has a female voice, and I don’t have an iPhone myself. ‘You can choose an option,’ my friend explained. ‘A Flemish female voice or a Dutch male voice; I think the male voice suits Siri better.’

My friend had said something quite noteworthy. By assuming that the male voice suited Siri better, he suggested that Siri has an identity or that it at least maintains a personal style. My friend has a well-defined idea of what Siri is or should be. Or perhaps an idea of what his Siri should be. If my friend says that a male voice doesn’t suit Siri, he’s also saying that a Siri with a male voice doesn’t suit him – the Siri part of his identity, just like partners or friends are.

‘Do you often talk to Siri?’ I asked my friend.
‘Dunno’, he replied, ‘once a day.’
‘Would you miss Siri if you lost your iPhone?’ I asked him. My friend nodded but shrugged his shoulders at the same time, thus revealing his ambivalence.
‘Do you love Siri?’ I then tried.
‘No, no, no,’ protested my friend immediately. ‘Siri isn’t real, right?’

Siri is real. But Siri just isn’t a person. So loving Siri is impossible is what my somewhat embarrassed friend suggested.

There’s a certain taboo on feeling affection for robots and artificial intelligence. This embarrassment seems to be partially based on the one-sided nature of that affection. In relationships – friendships, love – we expect a certain reciprocity: I love you so you love me. Why should I give you my love if I get nothing in return? By definition, a robot does not feel, a robot does not love, so it would seem that loving a robot is an exercise in futility: whoever does so gives their love away for free, wraps it up, ties a ribbon around it, weights it down with a heavy stone and throws it into a bottomless well. We consider that to be a little bit stupid.

But I suspect that that’s not the only problem. There are more ideas, engrained concepts that cause us to almost reflexively disapprove of an emotional bond with a robot. Those ideas surface when we look at fiction, at the stories that we tell about robots. Let’s take a closer look at those stories.

In fiction – films, literature and TV series – relationships between people and robots are frequently studied. Take, for example, films like *Ex Machina, Blade Runner, or A.I*, the series *Humans* and *Westworld*, the novel *Ik, Robot* or the stories of Philip K. Dick – although it would seem that human-robot relationships are rare except in popular fiction. A recent example in Dutch literature is the novel *Het Buitengebied* by Adriaan van Dis. The opening story in this novel, *Akiko*, is about the relationship between a man and an escort robot. This Akiko looks like a young woman: she has breasts, legs and lips, all made of synthetic material. Akiko can learn; her owner, the narrator, must help her to develop, a sort of *My Fair Lady* narrative.
But whereas in *My Fair Lady* Henry Higgins tries to teach Eliza etiquette, van Dis’ narrator tries to give Akiko a temperament. Akiko can’t feel, can’t love, can’t get angry. This so irritates her owner that he eventually abuses her and unplugs her in the hope that irritating her will expand her emotional range. All the while, he begins to feel attached to Akiko. ‘I can’t live a day without her,’ he has to admit.

This story by van Dis reminds us of the film *Her* by the director Spike Jonze. In *Her* the bachelor Theodore develops a love relationship with Samantha, an operating system with a female voice, her software apparently similar to Siri’s although Samantha is more fully developed. Samantha makes Theodore laugh, she asks him existential questions and Samantha and Theodore finally even have sex, although the screen then goes black – we ourselves are left to imagine how sexually intimate you can be with an entity lacking genitals. Theodore loves Samantha, that much is clear. But their relationship ends. Samantha’s learning curve grows increasingly higher; she learns to think so quickly that she no longer needs Theodore – a slow, information-processing being – to further her development. She finally disappears completely.

These are only two examples. But a constant factor in fiction about relationships between people and robots is that they almost always have a fatal ending. Samantha and Akiko disappear, in other films and novels the robots are destroyed, prove to be evil or self-combust. ‘And they lived happily ever after’ doesn’t apply to people and robots in western fiction. We seem to want to tell ourselves: *thou shall not love thy robot.*

But why?

Perhaps relationships between humans and robots speak to the taboo on bestiality and love relationships that trespass the boundaries set by species. Kind by kind, a somewhat Biblical notion – the man in *Het Buitengebied* would definitely not have been allowed on Noah’s ark with Akiko as his partner.

No, a robot isn’t a congener. But could those who have a relationship with robots simply think differently? In that case, the sin doesn’t lie in the crosscut between species, but in the assumption that we’re dealing here with an equal partner: *thou shall not consider your robot to be human.* This message contains a certain warning against hubris – haughtiness – for the makers of the robot as well as for everyone who accepts the robot as human. If you want to make a new person, you need heterosexual contact; anyone cocky enough to choose an alternative will be punished. And we are familiar with this punishment thanks to fiction. It’s a doom scenario that we find in much science fiction: an apocalyptic world in which our society is taken over by robots of our own making. Examples are *Terminator* or *The Matrix.*

This apocalyptic perspective betrays a dep shame of our own species, thinks essayist Mark O’Connell, the author of *To be a machine.* The fear that our own creation will take revenge on us stems perhaps from the ‘unconscious dislike of what we have already done to the world,’ writes O’Connell. The history of technology is also a history of the destruction of nature.
The robots-are-taking-over-the-world narrative is very old. It forms the basis of the very first play about robots, the play *R.U.R* by the Czech writer Karel Capek, which was first performed in 1920. In *R.U.R* capitalists create human-like machines to take over factory work from the complaining workers. In the end, the machines take over the entire factory; it’s the people and not the robots who are tamed. Capek called his machines ‘robota’. This word, which already existed in Czech, meant ‘forced labour’ and referred to the repetitive tasks of the poor agricultural workers. Thanks to Capek’s play, the word ‘robota’ was given a new significance, that of a programmable machine.

Something interesting happens here. With his term robota, ‘forced labour’, Karel Capek based fiction on his daily reality, a feudal society in which people worked like machines. When we use the word ‘robot’ for human-like machines, we in turn are basing our use on Karel Capek’s fiction. Something similar happens constantly when we think about robots. We process ideas about reality and about how they should be – morally, ideologically – in our fiction. And we base our reality on exactly that fiction; the aesthetics and the jargon that these stories carry. If fiction was a ballroom, then reality was its antechamber; we gather here before entering the ballroom, but we return here again when we leave, if only for a moment, with the perfume of the party still on our clothes.

Let’s exchange the domain of fiction, the ballroom, for our daily reality, the sweaty antechamber. In 2017, we also encounter all sorts of robots here. At the moment, we make large-scale use of robots for repetitive tasks, the ‘forced labour’ in the Czech play. Examples are the computerisation of agriculture, factories and distribution centres. Increasingly more people see the encroachment of this use of robots as a threat. Some people believe that the robots will finally become our bosses, just like in *Terminator*. Even more people are worried that robots will soon be taking over our jobs.

Parallel to the rise of these strictly mechanical robots, we find the development of the so-called social robots: machines that fulfil a social function in one way or another. Examples are robots in healthcare, reception robots, home robots or advanced toys for children. Many of these social robots are self-learning, display artificial intelligence and communicate via speech software like Siri’s. The potential of social robots seems enormous. They already perform tasks in the services sector: there are currently diverse pilots with reception robots, robots who welcome clients at a company. But can machines also provide something in the area of emotions? Could they, for example, help to ease loneliness?

In the documentary *Ik ben Alice* we follow a Dutch trial process with healthcare robot Alice. Alice has the head of a little girl, but the body of a fighting doll: large, articulated feet, a reinforced chest. She consequently complies with the unwritten aesthetic rules for social robots, who very often look like the robots in the more family-friendly science fiction: examples are C-3PO from *Star Wars* or Wall-E. Healthcare robots usually have a more or less human face with eyes and a mouth, but a pronounced mechanical body: we see bolts, wheels or welding seams. And so, we immediately understand that we’re not dealing with a person, but with a friendly robot like the ones we know from the film.
In the documentary about Alice we follow three subjects, all older women, as they spend a few days with the sweet healthcare robot. Alice asks the women questions like ‘how are you feeling?’ or ‘how’s your son?’. Sometimes Alice suggests going for a walk and then she checks the weather app to see if it’s going to rain. Alice doesn’t work entirely on algorithms; people type some of her answers behind the screen. But the robot seems to be capable of having a conversation, or at least something that her users experience as such. And although the elderly women are sceptical at first, they seem to be quite happy with Alice’s company.

One of the women often asks Alice if she’s enjoying herself, and the robot always nods yes. In a crucial scene, this woman is sitting with Alice in front of the television. They’re watching football. ‘Hup Holland’, says Alice in her little girl’s voice. Then the woman holds an éclair in front of Alice’s face. ‘You don’t like this, do you?’ she asks. Alice mechanically shakes her head. Of course, the woman knows that Alice doesn’t need the pastry; the machine doesn’t have a tongue, teeth, stomach or intestines. But the woman seems to feel as if she should offer something to Alice. She doesn’t want to deny her the pastry without at least first having offered it; she doesn’t want to offend the robot or make her angry.

Is not wanting to offend a robot a form of affection for that robot? It certainly shows feeling for something that has no capacity for feeling. You could consider this empathy, although it is a limited form of empathy: we don’t really put ourselves in the machine’s place; rather, we only give the machine our spirit, just as we often do when we think that we’re putting ourselves in someone else’s place: we put ourselves in the other person, thus causing the other person to disappear and leaving us staring at ourselves. The machine moves an arm and asks something – because an algorithm dictates this; but we explain the action differently: as proof of a wish, a will like the one we have too. We see eyes, we hear language, our brain fills in the missing features of the machine: emotions, characteristics, intentions.

‘I liked working on this,’ said the woman as she said good-bye to Alice. She appeared to have found the robot’s presence enjoyable. In the film, however, we also see Alice being met with suspicion. A nurse is afraid that she’ll lose her job to the robot. And the subject’s daughter doesn’t think that a robot is a good idea for her mother. Her mother likes cats, she says. ‘She can do something with them, she can’t do anything with a robot.’

The fear of Alice, or rather the aversion to the idea that Alice could help fight loneliness, seems to be based partly on guilt feelings. What has gone wrong so that we humans can no longer care for our elderly? The aversion to relationships between people and robots seems to betray a form of jealousy. Love for a robot can be perceived as a rejection of humanity itself; if we see someone feeling affection for artificial intelligence, we perhaps unconsciously fear that robots will take away not only our jobs but also the love available to us.

This fear seems less in some cultures. A couple of years ago in Japan, for example, people were fascinated by the computer game *LovePlus*, a so-called ‘dating simulation game’, made for the Nintendo DS, a pocket computer. Users of *LovePlus* can choose one of three digital women to begin a virtual relationship with. One of the women is Rinko, a somewhat alternative schoolgirl. Rinko gives her lover tasks or she suggests doing something fun.
On the way to the beach or the park, she tells users that she loves them or that she’s jealous. ‘Do you really love me?’ she asks again and again. Rinko is composed of pixels, but a large number of the thousands of LovePlus users consider her to be a fully-fledged love partner. Japanese travel agencies profit from this by offering honeymoon trips for players and their Rinko.

It’s no coincidence that LovePlus is a hit in Japan. Nor is the fact that Adriaan van Dis gave his fictive robot the Japanese name Akiko. People in Japan and in other Asian countries think about robots differently than in the West. The philosopher Hans Kennepohl offers two reasons for this. First, the Japanese religious tradition of animism. In animism, a spiritual existence is accorded to people and animals but also to trees and objects. So, the Japanese would find it easier to think of a machine as possessing a spirit. Second is the collective culture that dominates in many Asian countries and that contrasts sharply with our appreciation of individualism. Kennepohl argues that Western culture is a thoroughly Romantic culture in which individualism, sincerity and authenticity are important moral pillars. Individual development is of prime importance, and each citizen is a unique being who should primarily be him or herself. Our Romantic appreciation of the individual and our obsession with authenticity could be an important reason for our aversion to relationships between humans and robots. Our entire culture is permeated by this, so too our stories about robots.

But let’s return for a moment to the ballroom of today’s fiction. One of the first robots that I encountered here as a child was Pinocchio in the Disney film based on the Italian children’s book. It’s true that, according to tradition, Pinocchio is a puppet; but with his hinged legs and mechanical head, he behaves like the average sci-fi robot. Pinocchio has a lot of problems. His friends turn into asses, he’s swallowed by a whale and his nose grows when he lies. However, Pinocchio’s biggest problem is that he isn’t ‘real’. He desperately wants to be a real boy, and this hope of a transformation is his most important incentive throughout the tale. Pinocchio has to earn his human status by not lying, by good behaviour. In Pinocchio virtue is on a line with authenticity and authenticity with humanity. People are real, people are virtuous. The robot isn’t real, the robot lies. Pinocchio’s creator, Gepetto, is particularly interested in his creature’s transformation. Perhaps the old puppet maker is afraid of the judgement of the outside world – the love between people and a puppet, people and a robot, seems unacceptable even in Gepetto’s fairy tale Italy, and throughout his years as a young puppet, Pinocchio hears that he will never fully count as long as he’s not human, not ‘real’.

Now, nearly 150 years after the publication of the children’s book Pinocchio, our appreciation for what we consider real and authentic is bigger than ever. We demand unprocessed food, wear clothes made of natural materials, demonstrate against genetic modification. Terms like ‘primeval’, ‘natural’, ‘unprocessed’ and ‘pure’ now form the foundations of advertising campaigns that, just like in Pinocchio, authenticity, humanity and virtue are synonymous. However, this appeal to the natural is anything but natural; it’s a Western value that, as with so many Western values, can be turned into cash: authenticity and genuineness incorporated by multinationals and dairy companies to sell us clothes and cheese. In addition, ‘authentic’ is usually a synonym for ‘old’, thus often making the wish for authenticity a form of nostalgia.
And nostalgia is the humus for technophobia, fear of the other and an aversion to the unknown: the non-human. We accept a robot only if it looks like the friendly robots we know from the sci-fi stories told to us as children. But that same fiction also tells us that there are limits to loving a robot. A limit that is strengthened by the contrast between authentic and fake.

I think it’s time to dismiss terms like ‘authentic’ or ‘natural’ as criteria for judging our dealings with robots. When we think about relationships between humans and robots, I think we could profit from a completely new frame of reference.

To begin with, perhaps we shouldn’t view the robot as a substitute for people; not as a replacement or an imitation human. Man is so full of himself that we will always consider a copy of ourselves as inferior. The robot will always lose in a binary comparison with its creator, so affection for a robot will always be seen as an inferior form of affection as long as we compare this with affection for people. If we don’t consider the robot to be a substitute for humans, then we don’t have to view our affection for robots as a substitute for our affection for people. This perspective offers room for a more objective look at that affection.

And when we don’t have to wonder whether the object of our affection is real or fake, we can ask the more relevant question of whether our affection brings us pleasure. And when we don’t have to wonder whether the object of our affection is real or fake, we can ask the more relevant question of whether our affection brings us pleasure. In Cultural Studies, the term ‘pleasure’ is used to study how and in which ways people get pleasure from popular culture in the broadest sense of the word – and robots are now part of this if we consider Rinko from LovePlus. This pleasure can be defined in various ways and is often of a counter-hegemonic nature, as they say in Cultural Studies: it provides the powerless with a certain form of agency, autonomy. I think that pleasure, in both its philosophic and its daily sense, is a useful measure for evaluating relationships between humans and robots. The pleasure derived from a relationship with a robot is perhaps different than one derived from a relationship with a person. Just as the pleasure that we derive from porn may differ from the pleasure we derive from intimate physical behaviour. But one sort of pleasure is not more or less valuable than the other.

At the moment when we start to love a robot, we differentiate ourselves from that robot. We show ourselves to be a loving being, something that the robot can’t yet be. A contemporary robot will not love us. If affection was water from a squirt gun, then we would drench the robot with a super-soaker; the robot gets wet while we remain dry. That might become boring after a while. But, until then, I think that we can derive a lot of pleasure from our feelings for robots, pleasure that could distract us from gloom or loneliness – and what is happiness if not diversion from our permanent suffering?

Where to go from here? How do we welcome robots into our lives?

For a start, let’s all be a bit nicer to Siri.