

Book review

Edited by Jason Lee

Palgrave Macmillan, Palgrave pivot

2017

Review DOI

10.1108/JTF-07-2017-0038

Jason Lee's book, *Sex Robots: The Future of Desire* invites us to consider a future in which sex robots feature in everyday life. One of the key issues addressed in this volume is "how will robots affect our humanity and in particular our sexuality"? This question is an iteration of the pleasure/danger dichotomy often applied to sex acts and sexual phenomena. However, Lee also addresses the question of the pleasure in the danger. The idea that we are at once attracted to and repelled by the idea of sex with robots.

To begin with the danger, throughout the book the spectre of the sexual techno-monster looms. Such monsters reflect a prudery and fear around machines when it comes to sex. If we can suggest that sex machines may be capable of producing some form of social good then their existence becomes acceptable. However, when considered on the basis of their capacity to enhance sexual pleasure or to provide opportunity for new experience sex robots become abject. This social and cultural prudery masks a fundamental contradiction in that sexual imagination encompasses and even embraces the abhorrent. Porn works best when it crosses the border of what we would or could do or imagine. The pleasure is implicit in the danger. This fundamental tension is implicit in Lee's analysis throughout the book.

This short book is divided into four ambitious chapters. The author draws from a range of theoretical traditions and bodies of knowledge firmly locating his analysis within the academic literature. The audience for robots and sex is wide, spanning the social sciences, the business community and of course those who like to contemplate the technologized future. The future of desire

in a technologized world is not a simple topic and this book is written for an educated and contemplative audience.

Chapter 1 introduces the robotic evolution, delving into morality, the pleasure/danger dichotomy, objectification and its corollary dehumanisation, the teleological march of science, fear and corporate greed. Donald Trump even gets a mention. Difference, otherness and alterity make an entrance on the first page, setting up a dichotomy between what it means to be human and alluding to the absolute otherness of the indifferent machine.

A common question in the sex and robots arena is, "will our othering of a humanoid entity change us? Will humanity become more reprehensible in relationship with robotic others"? This question does, as Lee suggests, make us consider the nature of our humanity. "What does it mean to be human"? "How will non-human others change us"?

Chapter 2, Robot culture, is a synopsis of what it means to be human in conjunction with cultural and philosophical theory. Many issues found in the popular culture are addressed in this chapter, sex bots, love and sex with non-human others, our perverse narcissism, given the post twentieth century drive to understand ourselves via psychoanalysis. Drawing on Kant and Plato, Lee evokes the idea of humanity living in the shadow of the real, a concept bought to life in *the Matrix* seeking to provide some of the answers to the question of a technologized humanity. This dense, thoroughly researched chapter is fertile ground for anyone researching the robot culture.

Chapter 3 further science fictions takes on the sexism, objectification and violence aspects of robot sex questioning the conflation of sex robots with moral issues. Lee refutes claims that technology is responsible for the sexualization of society, increases in prostitution, sex addiction and other moral artifacts, arguing instead that society is becoming more prudish.

Sex Robots: The Future of Desire

© Michelle Stella Mars. Published in the *Journal of Tourism Futures*. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial & non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/legalcode>

In Chapter 4, Science fact and conclusion, Lee argues that technophobia and technophilia are simply two sides of the same coin. This argument rests upon his assumption of a clear divide between the human and the non-human. I find this distinction artificial; devise implants are increasing at an exponential rate and out interface with technology becomes ever closer. We are headed towards a cyborg future where, neural laces, medical implants and other technologies will increasingly augment our humanity. We humans will become increasingly cyborg.

Lee also argues that robotic vaginas and dildos are, “of course”, not sex robots. I disagree with this. First of all, numerous machines capable of enabling female orgasm that are not dildos exist. Second, mechanical aids to enable female sexual pleasure have existed for more than a century. These efficient and effective machines are a mainstay of many women’s sex lives. Haptic technologies, a more recent edition to the mix are enabling interactions with non-present others and other robotic technologies. Sex robots exist and will continue to exist beyond our current narrow anthropomorphic imaginations.

Like it or not anthropomorphic sex robots exist, they are here to stay and they will soon be a part of the sex tourism market (Yeoman and Mars, 2012). Tourism and sex have always been linked (Mars *et al.*, 2017). The future of desire includes sex tourism. In this market niche, the law and cultural acceptability will initially drive supply side offerings. The sex robot market aligns with the luxury market, attractive to early adopters, fetishists and the sexually curious. Given the high cost of robots, it is likely that a few destination-specific sites akin to brothels will first emerge. A sex doll brothel opened up in Spain in early 2017 and is likely that sex robot brothels will very soon follow (Rodriguez, 2017).

The first wave of sex tourists entering the market will be seeking the varieties of love found in liminal, transitional states; robot sex as an experience rather than a lifestyle choice (Birgit and Ryan, 2005). However, the experience will also drive new understandings of intimacy and further understandings of the psychology of human/machine relationships. As our understanding

of the experience deepens and fear diminishes, the market will change expanding quickly, with haptic technologies and the female consumer rapidly entering the market. Destination-specific sex robot tourism will pave the way for deeper market penetration. Sex robots will become normalised and as we become more comfortable with our cyborg selves and the advent of non-human others the initial technophobia/technophilia, compulsion/revulsion divide will soften providing space for an ongoing investigation of our humanity. In the age of block chain, digital currency, biometric identity, practical quantum computers, and botnets, the tourism industry should indeed consider the robot culture, the future of desire and what this means for consumption choices. Lee’s book helps us to consider not only the future of desire but what it will mean to be fully human in a cyborg future.

Michelle Stella Mars

Michelle Stella Mars is a Senior Lecturer at the Jansen Newman Institute, Laureate Universities Group, Sydney, Australia.

References

- Birgit, T. and Ryan, C. (2005), “Destination image, romance and place experience – an application of intimacy theory in tourism”, *Tourism Management*, Vol. 26 No. 4, pp. 481-91.
- Mars, M., Yeoman, I. and McMahon-Beattie, U. (2017), “Ping pong in Phuket: the intersections of tourism, porn and the future”, *Journal of Tourism Futures*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 39-55, available at: www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/JTF-06-2016-0016
- Rodriguez, C. (2017), “Sex-dolls brothel opens in Spain and many predict sex-robots tourism soon to follow”, *Forbes*, February 28, available at: www.forbes.com (accessed July 11, 2017).
- Yeoman, I. and Mars, M. (2012), “Robots, men and sex tourism”, *Futures*, Vol. 44 No. 4, pp. 365-71, available at: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016328711002850

Further reading

- Atwood, M. (2015), *The Heart Goes Last*, Bloomsbury, London.
- The Matrix* (2000), Sandrew Metronome Video, Denmark.