THE MECHANICAL BRIDE. REALDOLLS AS *COMPANIONS* AND ACCESSIBLE OBJECTS

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The Mechanical Bride is the title of a 2012 documentary about the use of sex dolls, more accurately of a particularly lifelike brand called RealDolls.[1] The dolls' designers and sellers also have their say and there is some discussion on the development of sex robots.

The documentary takes a clear position on the subject, as indicated by the title, taken from Marshall McLuhan's book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore* of *Industrial Man* (1951). McLuhan explored the link between technology and sexuality as well as the work put in by women to achieve a perfect body.

For the filmmakers, RealDolls are squarely in the tradition of the Pygmalion myth, the male desire since Antiquity to create and own a woman made after his own ideal. The accessibility of the dolls is touched upon, as well as the close emotional tie some men have to their dolls and the violence acted out upon the dolls that raises the ethical question of whether this is still violence against property or, because of their naturalistic design, something else. Particularly irritating are the moments that show men living emotional, intimate lives together with their RealDolls or discussing hate-filled aggressive violence against them.

The starting point of the film was a photographic study by Elena Dorfman and Elizabeth Alexandre compiled in the book *Still Lovers.* Published in 2005, it was the culmination of a documentary project started in 1999, shortly after the release of RealDolls in the mid-1990s. The photographs were exhibited in New York, Chicago, and elsewhere (Smith 2017: 227). Often, they portray intimate situations and emotional connection, for example RealDolls and their owners in day-to-day situations such as watching TV or sitting in the garden or at the dinner table.

Inspired by this book and by her previous job as a digital interaction designer, in *The Mechanical Bride,* de Fren delved into the relationships between the men and their RealDolls. At the time of production, she had already documented technofetishism, also a result of working with almost only male roboticists in a "future technology" think tank in Silicon Valley (De Fren 2009).

1 Allison de Fren, the film's director, is Associate Professor for Media Arts and Culture at Occidental College in Los Angeles Her research focuses on gender and technology as well as bodies and technology, in particular synthetic bodies. Even her dissertation was on the representation of artificial women since the Renaissance, see de Fren, *Exquisite Corpse.* She is currently a media practitioner and scholar.

The Mechanical Bride is not the only documentary on the subject of RealDolls and *Still Lovers* is not the only photographic documentation thereof. Sandra Hoyn's photo project *Jenny's Soul* documents a man's intimate relationship with his doll,[2] and the 2006 BBC documentary *Guys and Dolls* explores the same subject, to name just two examples.[3]

Starting from the photo book *Still Lovers* and the documentary *The Mechanical Bride* this essay first explores the question of emotional connection to RealDolls. This is followed by an analysis of the book, and one photo in particular, from a feminist perspective.

"HOW DOES ONE LOVE SOMETHING THAT IS NOT ALIVE?"[4]

Davecat is one of the documentary's main protagonists. He lives together with a RealDoll he has named Sh-Chan that he considers his "companion." He buys her clothes, make-up and jewelry and takes her to the park and to restaurants. He carries her picture in his wallet and his few friends know about and accept Sh-Chan. Davecat tells the filmmakers that he could imagine having a relationship with a "real" woman, but only if she accepted Sh-Chan. His ideal would be a ménage à trois with two people, a woman and a man, and a RealDoll. Another interviewee, an old, lonely, and sick man who dies during the making of the film, bought a doll that looked similar to his wife after she passed away. He lives with the doll in his small apartment and says that it makes him feel less lonely. Old and sick as he is, he doesn't believe he could subject another person to being with him. Another interviewee sees RealDolls purely as a sex object with which one can do things that are socially inappropriate and, more importantly, not acceptable to women. Eager not to be misunderstood, he stresses that he has nothing against feminism, but it's difficult because the male instinct is to control women. He even repeats "control them" twice to give it more weight. Another man talked about his violent against the dolls. He pulls out their limbs and, one could say, massacres them.

The film portrays a range of emotional responses to RealDolls, from intimate loving relationships in which the dolls become a partner to attempts to combat loneliness or compensate for loss to fantasies of control and power and excesses of violence and aggression. One could pathologize these cases and write them off as a marginal social phenomenon or as relationship problems of socially outcast, emotionally disturbed or lonely people. However the documentary asks a fundamental question about the relationship between humans and machines that, in light of developments in robotics and artificial intelligence, is extremely relevant and cannot be dismissed as a peripheral problem of a technified society: "How does one love something that is not alive?" This question is examined below from a historical perspective.

COMPANIONS, PARTNERS AND NEW RELATIONSHIP MODELS?

Sex robots have recently sparked a heated debate.[5] David Levy's (2017) provocative statement that love relationships with sex robots will be commonplace by 2050 is often cited. Interest in the topic is quickly confirmed by a look at media and the book market. Even the journal of the Bundeswehr, the German military, recently published an article on sex dolls, hi-tech sex toys, and sex robots (Blum 2017).

2 https://www.sandrahoyn.de/portfolio/jennys-soul/ (13.06.2019).

3 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxCkULUnVH0 (13.06.2019].

4 Elena Dorfman asks this question in the documentary, *The Mechanical Bride*. Smith (2017: 227ff.) also discusses it.

5 See for example Danaher, McArthur (2018). Also and in particular the Campaign Against Sex Robots: https://campaignagainstsexrobots.org/author/robotcampaign/ (15.06.2019) especially Kathleen Richardsen's feminist critique.

Historically, the question must be asked whether this is a new kind of human-machine relation or even a new relationship model altogether in which technological objects are elevated to relationship status. The men interviewed for *The Mechanical Bride* repeatedly stress that for them these dolls are partners or companions, a term also used by roboticists in discussions on the development of social robots. The film therefore poses the question of living together with artificial companions and hence a fundamental question about relationships to artificial Others, whereby the concept of the Other must be fundamentally questioned (Gunkel, Marcondes, Mersch 2016).

Historical research has not taken this question into consideration. The few studies that have been conducted on sex dolls are in the main interested in the cultural history of the tradition of the Pygmalion myth and so in the long continuity of the desire to create and own a perfect woman crafted after one's ideal. They reference the virtual creation of artificial women in cultural history; in literature and science fiction as well as in Kokoschka's images of Alma Mahler as a doll or in Hans Bellmar's erotic dolls (Wennerscheid 2019, Ferguson 2010, Smith 2013).

Historical reconstructions of the history of sex dolls also stress their function as a replacement for a missing human partner. The most plastic example is the "dame de voyage," considered to be the first sex doll, a woman made of old clothes meant to stand in for women on long sea voyages and ensure sexual hygiene (Ferguson 2010: 16f.).

With the emergence of the sex industry in the late nineteenth century, advertisements arose for sex dolls that clearly show that the key idea was to replace human but inaccessible female partners. With the advent of a sex industry, these puppets, as Marquard Smith (2013: 183) contends, must be seen in the context of mass production, commerce, and, most of all, consumption. This underlines the fact that these dolls are objects. In the late nineteenth century, sex dolls were advertised as a "perfect illusion of reality." (Ibid.: 185)

A look into history so reveals two connected lines of continuity, both of which are rooted in concepts of accessibility and objectness: the idea of the creation of the perfect woman made after one's own ideal and always at one's disposal, as well as technological replacements for inaccessible women. In the past, sex dolls were difficult to come buy. They could be bought in bordellos or porn theaters, later also in sex shops (ibid.: 191). Since the 1970s and '80s, blow-up dolls have been readily available. But even if sex dolls and artificial women have been a pop-culture topos since the 1970s, they still were considered "dirty."[6] It would have been unthinkable in the 1970s or 1980s to take one into a restaurant as the protagonist of *The Mechanical Bride* does.

RealDolls have been on the market since the 1990s, and the number of almost exclusively male customers has steadily risen (Ferguson 2010: 40f.). As Anthony Ferguson observed, "suddenly the sex doll was the in thing." (Ibid.: 3) On the one hand, this is a result of technological progress, with the development of new materials and their increased availability and with the increased ease of production of lifelike dolls. A second factor influencing this development is the internet, where aficionados of sex dolls come together and bolster one another in their attraction to these objects. A group of people arose who asserted themselves as "technosexuals." (Ibid.: 4) Finally, the web made the dolls more available and easier to buy. But there have also been societal changes that play an important role in the spread of sex dolls, such as a public discussion of sexuality and a greater acceptance of previously deviant forms of sexuality. Sherry Turkle has even been criticized for her critical positions on sex dolls and sex robots: "I was asked if my opposition to people marrying robots didn't put me in the same camp as those who oppose the marriage of lesbians or gay men." (Turkle 2010: 6) The journalist who interviewed her called this "species chauvinism." (Ibid.) On the one hand, this is in line with posthuman idea, but is also exhibits, as Turkle comments, an "openness to seeing computational objects as other minds." (Ibid.: 5)

Historical research on the history of sex dolls has not explored the possibility of intimate emotional relationships to them. It is important to note that it is only in recent decades that, due to the developments described above, there has been any debate at all

6 Machines that interact with humans and are capable of emotions have often been the subject of science fiction in both literature and film. The arc spans from *RUR* in the 1920s to Spielberg's movie *AI* in the 1980s to more recent movies such as *Ex Machina* or *Her*. There have also been many less successful movies that explore the subject, such as *Electric Dreams* by Steve Barron in 1984.

about RealDolls and the like as "artificial companions." Are sex dolls, as historical literature in the main contends, still primarily sex toys, surrogates for human partners or masturbation aids? Or are they, as in the documentary under discussion here, also companions and partners? Are machines being given a new emotional and social role in our societies?

There has long been research on emotional bonding to objects. But these have focused on the symbolic ascriptions given objects and their emotional functions, not examined things as partners. Many of the questions asked in research on material culture are also pertinent to digital objects such as social robots and lifelike sex dolls. At the same time, RealDolls and sex robots seem to have a status of their own. Recent theories such as agential realism and posthumanism strongly proclaim the obsolescence of classic lines of demarcation and of the dichotomies drawn in the human-object relationships. They declaim anthropocentric thought, demanding that forms of relationship should not be limited to human-human or human-animal. However it should be asked whether these normative theories provide an adequate description, or whether relationships are more complex and cannot simply be captured by the dichotomy constructed here between dual, demarcated categories on the one side and decentral, hybrid categories on the other.

Historically, the 1990s seem to mark a caesura where types and models of relationships diversified and all forms of relationships abounded: dual, mixed, hierarchical, equal, homogenous, and heterogeneous. This is the time in which RealDolls entered the market and Tamagotchis became accepted as digital pets, followed by Furby and Aibo. Today, robots stand behind hotel reception desks, and are planned to talk to residents of seniors' homes or provide information in shopping malls. Digital objects and deceptively lifelike dolls began to populate our social worlds in the 1990s, and new forms of relationships developed.

Neither RealDolls nor Tamagotchi ever became mass phenomena. They did not become widespread substitutes for human partners or living pets. Yet what did develop, it is safe to conclude, is a new relationship to machines that has gained legitimacy as an emotional bond. Sherry Turkle (2011: Part One) focuses on this caesura when she speaks of the "robotic moment." She has observed that with the development of social robots computers went from being an "instrument" to which one could be emotionally connected to becoming "companions." (Ibid.: 3–4) While discussions in the 1980s on whether computers can "really" think still saw them as tools and stressed their artificiality, there has been a massive shift in thinking (ibid.). For many people, it has become natural to accept emotional relationships to robots.

HISTORICAL DIFFERENTIATION: CONTINUITIES, DISCONTINUITIES, SHIFTS, AND INNOVATIONS

This must be narrowed down historically and also differentiated. When digital objects or so-called social robots are touted as companions or partners, then human-machine relations and their social role has changed. Yet this is not a "from-to" development in which instrumentalization is supplanted by partnership.

Rather we can observe continuities, shifts, and the emergence of new types of relationships, as well as a mix of all of the above in emotional relationships both between humans and machines as well as between humans.

Continuities and the emergence of new forms exist side by side. Particularly in the context of sex robots, some are still asking the question of whether it can be "real" love and "real" emotions, while others like Davecat, whose "love life" is shown in *The Mechanical Bride,* are already living that model with conviction.

ELIZA is another prominent example of continuities. As early as the 1960s, Joseph Weizenbaum (1978) was disturbed when his secretary began to communicate intensively with the program he had written to simulate a psychiatrist, even sending him out of the room to guarantee her privacy. That people enjoy communicating with machines and trust them, or are open to a new form of intimacy with machines was already made obvious by the example of ELIZA. And it has been a topic in pop culture and science fiction even longer.

We can also see clear continuities in the figure of accessibility. The "benefits" of sex dolls, their accessibility and compliance, was already touted in the early twentieth century as an advantage over human women. Dolls never become jealous or start a fight and: "they are always ready, always compliant."[7] Advertisements for sex dolls underlined this tractability, as well as the advantage of avoiding tiring or unpleasant social situations. Similar claims are made for twenty-first century sex dolls: RealDolls claim to be perfect for men who are shy, anti-social, or disabled. Furthermore, they do not need to be entertained and never get sick (Ferguson 2010: 47). David Levy (2007: 211) sees another central benefit of sex robots; they make it possible to avoid the "constraints" and complications of "more conventional sexual relationships." Robots also guarantee to be loyal partners who never stop loving "their" person (ibid.: 22). In the early twentieth century, owners could choose from different models, in the meantime, these dolls can be built to suit their owner's tastes. RealDolls and sex robots can be put together from modules with an array of body types, eyes, mouths, etc.

A further continuity is the ability to act out negative feelings. The entire palette of human emotions is mirrored in how people interact with sex dolls, as outlined in the discussion of *The Mechanical Bride* above. Sex dolls are tortured and mistreated. Newly opened robot bordellos report that their customers' lack of restraint is a bottomless pit of socially unaccepted practices. Recently, people have even developed "cathartic objects"; robots made for venting steam (Moorstedt 2019).

How people interact with the new digital Other all too clearly mirrors the abreaction and bolstering of emotional behaviors, desires, and ideals that have long existed, but now are intensified in the context of technologization. They can be acted on unimpeded and are partly also accepted. The digital Other should thus be seen in a long continuity of human emotions. It is necessary to pose more nuanced questions about which emotional behaviors is strengthened through the use of digital objects and which are not, for example tolerance of non-compliance or of the idiosyncrasies of the Other.

Descriptions by the owners of RealDolls themselves reveal interesting insights into questions of change, the novelty of relationship models, and the status of RealDolls.[8] Almost all of them say that their relationship to the doll is emotional. Some of them report that this emotionality developed over the course of time because they had to take care of and repair the dolls and because they got used to them being around. They gave them names. Some said they would be very lonely without the dolls; others explained, that they were glad to have a silent doll around after an exhausting and communicative day at work. One man said the doll owned him, not the other way around. It should however be stressed that doll owners, asked their opinion on David Levy's prognosis that humans would be falling in love with robots by 2050, answered that this was neither possible nor desirable. They saw a clear division between loving a human being and the emotion they felt for their dolls, and never forgot that they were dolls (Ferguson 2010: 114–120).

That makes it clear that relationship to digital or artificial Others must be considered as unlike human-human relationships, but nevertheless as a new form of relationship. It should however be asked whether this is as easy to differentiate as two distinct types of emotion on the affective levels as it is on the cognitive level.[9] For recent studies make it abundantly clear that humans are quick to anthropomorphize robots. In one vivid

7 Bloch, *The Sexual Life of Our Time,* cited in Ferguson (2010: 17).

8 There have to date been very few empirical surveys on how people deal with RealDolls or the first sex robots, but the few that exist are illuminating. See here for example Ferguson's heuristic survey in a doll forum (2010: 114–120), and Scheutz and Arnold (2018: 247-260). The former is a survey of users, the latter of attitudes towards and appraisal of sex robots among the general public.

9 Turkle (2011) gives many examples that suggest that cognitive knowledge does not affect emotionality.

example from 2014, two Canadian scientists developed a robot, Hitchbot, to test whether robots could trust humans. Hitchbot grew a devoted fan base, that treated him like a friend. The bot could hold simple conversations, take photos, and post on Facebook and Twitter. It hitched first through Canada and then through Germany. Hitchbot could not move autonomously, but only with the help of humans, and obliging humans who offered a lift were always found. But one day, on a further tour through the USA, Hitchbot was irreparably damaged by "vandals," as the press scandalized. However, such anthropomorphizing of technology is not a new historical phenomenon.

What is new, is this type of collective empathy with a robot and the broad interest of the press. Certainly the technical development of seemingly being able to "answer" plays a role, or the interaction with robots that is perceived as dialogical, because they react, look at their human partners and even sometimes recognize them, quasi relating to them. The above is also true for sex robots in contrast to conventional sex dolls. But even the RealDolls of the 1990s possessed a new quality of ostensible "realness" that changed the emotions of their users due to their weight (usually around fifty kilos) and their lifelike "skin." (Smith 2013: 241)

It cannot be overseen that new relationship models are currently developing that we must put into historical, cultural, ethical, and social perspective. Technology challenges existing concepts of relationships—to date thought of as being reciprocal—expanding and shifting them. RealDolls and sex robots, as well as the many other so-called social robots, force us to reexamine the question of what emotions are. These are complex questions. How should we characterize the emotions described? Are these historically novel feelings, or are they comparable to love for humans or animals? Is there a difference between cognitive differentiation and emotional connection? While human and machine thinking can be clearly differentiated, it is much more complicated to distinguish between the often attested "real" feelings for humans and simulated feelings for computers and robots.

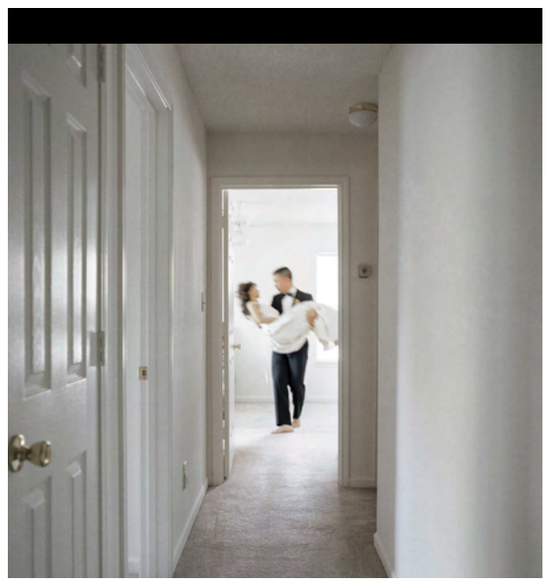

FIG. 1
DORFMAN, WEDDING PHOTO

STILL LOVERS?

The gaze is drawn to the image framed by the open door. Behind the opening, somewhat blurred, stands a man in a suit, a groom who is holding a woman in a wedding dress in his arms, his bride (Dorfman 2005: 17). It looks like he is getting ready to carry her over the threshold that marks a transition for both of them from one life to the next. In so doing, following a further meaning of this well-known and widespread patriarchal wedding custom, they leave evil spirits behind when entering the new world, a house protected by the man. However, the man in the photo is not holding a woman in his arms, his bride is not living, but mechanical—a synthetic, expressly non-human but rather technological Other. He is holding a doll in his arms. This is no ordinary doll, it is not a toy, or a tortoise collectible or a Barbie doll, but a life-size sex doll formed after a female ideal.

The photo is taken from a book entitled *Still Lovers,* the photos were taken during and influenced by a documentary shoot by Allison de Fren. The American photographer Elena Dorfman travelled the United States in and before 2005 with the French psychologist and journalist Elizabeth Alexandre visiting the mostly male owners of sex dolls, observing their daily lives, interviewing them, and photographing them together with their dolls. The first word of the title, *Still,* refers to both the fact that the *Lovers* have been caught in a still life, but also to the silence in the photo of the newlyweds, the pose they have taken, the woman in the arms of the man, frozen before crossing the threshold, their expressions

immovable. Are they still or silent lovers or are they still lovers now that they are married? The photo is the first of a series in the book that takes us over the threshold into the home of the supposed newlyweds in three further photos. The artificial bride is also photographed in profile in her wedding dress and wearing sunglasses. In the next photo, the bride and groom are shown hand in hand, their entwined hands are the focus of the image. In the fourth photo, this opening series ends on the bed. We see the doll lying there in her dress on her back, her hands are entwined, her left leg is falling of the bed, her left foot peeks out from behind the white hem.

The characteristic quality of these and the following images crystallized. Their framing and arrangement gives viewers a look into scenes that are familiar from our daily lives, but each is composed, given particular emphasis through Dorfman's use of color. Her stagings make it easy to see what otherwise is not visible at first glance. For the male owners, the dolls take the place of a woman that they believe belongs to them. She is therefore carried over the threshold, placed on a chair, and lain on the bed. She is prepared for these events; she is dressed, her make up and hair are done, and she is positioned accordingly. Dorfman follows each of these procedures, helps to create them, and presses the shutter release. In her preface, Dorfman tells about meeting the doll's groom. She got to know Peter through internet research and asked him whether he would be willing to be photographed together with his doll. Peter agreed and showed Dorfman his home. He presented his doll, to whom he had given the name "Azra" and whom he wanted to quickly marry before his real fiancée moved in and he then sold the doll as she had requested. His real fiancé, Peter said, did not mind that he owned and had sex with a doll, but she did not like that the doll would get neither fat nor old (Dorfman 2005: 4–5).

Dorfman expands on this first contact and first conversation to describe the meetings with doll owners that followed. From the moment the dolls were delivered and taken out of the packaging, they became foils for their owners' imaginations and were thus brought to life by them. The dolls were given names, biographies, and individual characters: Ginger-Brook, a lonely Californian woman who wants nothing to do with her family; CJ, an anchorwoman who reported the news every evening; Sidore, a troublemaking boarding school student who grew up in the suburbs of Tokyo and is now a Goth. Dorfman became a witness to these worlds, she visited them and wrote about them that they are not meant for the outside world, since the "relationships" that are manifested within them take place in the private sphere and behind closed doors. Dorfman was given a peek into what happens behind those doors, where ideals, phantasies, and desires are acted out. They are images of men dressing their dolls, caressing their breasts, reaching between their legs from behind in bed or ostensibly stimulating them while they sit in a chair. They are images of men living out their fantasies, ideals, and desires with one or more dolls, with or without the consent of their human partner.

When we look at Dorfman's stills or de Fren's moving pictures, are we, as the title of the book and the images selected suggest, looking at true lovers, even spouses? Can we, as Dorfman advances, speak of relationships that have developed between doll owner and doll? (Ibid.) The answer is no, since this is not love for another person. This is not about desire for a physical partner, through which a relationship can develop that feeds off consent and noncompliance and is characterized by mutual empathy, care, compassion, challenge, respect and critique and maybe culminates in marriage. It is also not about social life, where questions about the other person arise, about their otherness, their *alterity,* which is unavoidable in intimate relationships or in work relationships (Bedorf 2011). Others get in the way, they can hinder me or support me. I can try to get close to them or avoid them and I am responsible for them, as they are for me. It is not about any kind of being together that was chosen through mutual respect and that is constantly renegotiated; a companionship in which the Other is wife, lover, friend, companion, and partner. Rather, the aim is to eliminate any chance of mutual togetherness and to focus male desire only on that that does not, or better cannot, come from an Other, for dolls do not speak or act. They offer no resistance, because they are not human.

It is here that a feminist perspective begins, for it is clear that men can own these dolls and dominate them. Crossing the threshold with the doll in arm is therefore a movement towards ownership. It is an appropriating, controlling, and also violent movement, bolstered by the history of this custom. Its origins lie long before the banning of demons in the so-called Abduction of the Sabine Women shortly after the foundation of the state of Rom. Under Romulus, the Romans lured their neighbors into their city, inhabited predominantly by men, and then dragged the women over their thresholds and raped them to secure the future of their community.

The image discussed above is followed by many other images with other thresholds and transitions that make visible continuities in relations between the sexes. This is mirrored in the relationship to technology, also in the sense that no matter what the company or buyer says about sex dolls being harmless, or even fulfilling a social, therapeutic function, they continue to support beliefs about what men are due and what women are for (Murphy 2017). They underline that sex is something that men get from or do to women. Sex is not something two people can enjoy. It does not demand care, compassion, respect, or empathy. Accordingly, advocates of sex dolls describe "companionship" as a one way street for men—challenges, noncompliance, feelings, and ideas are not valuable or desirable qualities in a woman.

In this context, being together is solely about fulfilling men's desires. That is what the dolls are made for and they should be looked at from that perspective, for it is what motivated the creation process, which Alexandre developed in her essay for Dorfman's catalog, together with the men they visited. Creation begins with Adam who made Eve as a female "prototype" of his desire, as a "gynoid" or "fembot." But Eve is human and not synthetic, like Galatea, Pygmalion's ivory statue, modeled after a woman (Dorfman 2005: 9–11). Synthetic women offer men the perfect solution to feminist movements. It you won't submit to us, we will create women that will (Smith 2017). The ideal women is therefore, we can conclude, as always, *not* human (Murphy 2017).

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