



NO RISK

ON THE FUTURE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS ♥

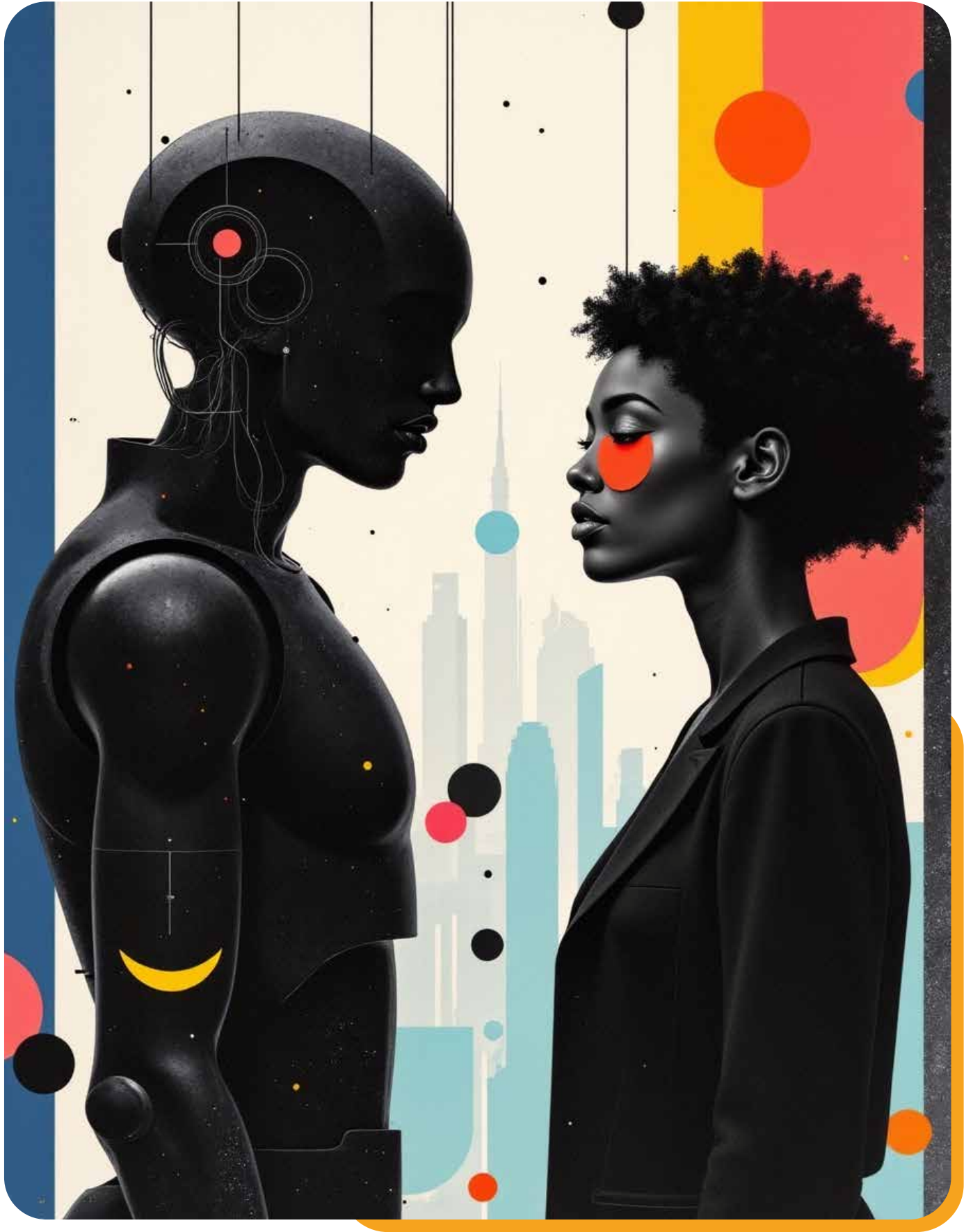
Will there still be room for romantic relationships in the future and what will they look like? Will robots replace our life partners? Let's explore this issue together with Ania Malinowska, PhD, DLitt, Associate Professor, a researcher of new technologies in the field of robot culture and semiotics of emotions, a clinician in the field of therapeutic hypnosis, and a co-founder of the Centre for Critical Technology Studies (CCTS) of the University of Silesia.



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Let's start at the beginning, i.e. with the myth. The way we think about the future relies on culturally rooted narratives, which are extremely readable, especially in a technological context. Science fiction has been paving the way for our imagination since its inception, which is why it's difficult for us to go beyond the established canon. This also applies to romantic relationships set in the context of the world to come. 'We unconsciously strive for technologies to realise the self-fulfilling prophecies that appear in so-called culture imageries', notes Ania Malinowska. 'Our desire to talk about the future is codified, and we cannot seem to go beyond it. Design foresight is a trend that goes against these tendencies, as it involves a departure from mythical forecasts and attempts to predict all the real scenarios resulting from the behaviour of various technological

entities in relation to the ways they are used, as well as the environmental and social conditions in which these devices, platforms, and applications function'.

The second issue is our perception of time – the past lies behind and the future stretches ahead of us. As the researcher emphasises, this human, conventional perception of time is solely a result of our cultural conditioning, and is also inaccurate.

'If we look at the development of devices and practices related to them in the context of romantic relationships, we notice that what seems very modern to us now was in actuality born in the late Middle Ages', says the researcher. 'Even then, love practices were codified, i.e. through the use of idiomatic language and gestures that guided the participants in their interactions: whether it was a romantic, friendly, or an intimate relationship'.

Ania Malinowska refers to text-based games present in the courtly culture of the 13th and 14th centuries, in which individuals would engage in the exchange of specific phrases to help them determine the nature of their future relationship. We use dating apps, text messages, and instant messaging in the same way – to send each other ready-made phrases that help us set the tone for a budding relationship or simply get a sense of its nature. It all comes down to code consumption.

As humans, we are highly semiotic beings, so if we have agreed on a specific code, then our entire emotional apparatus conforms to it', explains the scientist. 'Dating apps provide the perfect environment for this kind of behaviour to be reproduced'.

THE STEPFORD WIVES

When asked about robot wives, which are present in numerous narratives about the future, Ania Malinowska mentions the book *Love + Sex with Robots*, in which David Levy writes about the human need to create 'better servants'. This stems from our lack of interest in spontaneous relationships – we would prefer to programme them and make them predictable. A robot wife will always be pleasant and affectionate and will never argue with her husband. The scientist also cites a study conducted by Levy, in which participants were asked if they would be interested in a relationship with a robot wife or husband. As it turns out, it is mainly men who seriously consider this scenario – it is men who are most enthusiastic about this option, citing shyness as one of the reasons for their choice. A relationship with a human-like machine circumvents all the psychological barriers that arise when interacting with a real-life partner. It boils down to eliminating the interactive human element. However, as Ania Malinowska notes, there was one fundamental flaw in the methodology of this study. It turned out that none of the participants had ever seen such a robot in real life.

'This means that the statements were based on imagined notions derived from a myth. However, if we were to actually meet such a being, even in its most attractive version, the uncanny valley effect would probably quickly become unbearable. Therefore, most people would rather choose to live with their imaginations of what such a being could be, rather than with an actual robot' says the researcher.



TINDER'S GREAT-GRANDFATHER

Platforms and apps that are supposed to make it easier for us to form romantic relationships actually serve to consume the code, i.e. to experience the emotions associated with the 'high' that such interactions give us. It's about the first stage – from first getting to know each other to deciding to pursue a relationship.

'This is due to our desire to minimise risk', the scientist explains. 'It has accompanied romantic relationships from the very beginning because we always wanted to be sure that the other party's declarations would be fulfilled. Therefore modern technologies use datafication, which aims to patch holes, i.e. eliminate risk.

A new project by Ania Malinowska involves 'love testers' research. Behind this fantastic-sounding name are devices dating back a hundred years – prototypes of today's dating apps.

'They were entertainment machines developed based on the knowledge of psychology available in the 1920s, which used personality traits to identify various compatibilities: first related to military service, then work,

and then relationships', explains the researcher.

Love testers were originally rather primitive devices based on a rotary motor and operated by a button or a lever. Inside, the machine was equipped with a set of small boards with personality traits or categories assessing the chances for a romantic relationship. In 1967, Nintendo released an electronic version of such a tester.

'This is where we get to the heart of the matter, namely that magic button. It exposes our need for external adjudication in romantic relationships. We want certainty so badly that we end up not trusting our own judgements. This is something we are conditioned to do from a very young age, so we look for external mediators: matchmakers in the past, and machines today' states Ania Malinowska.

We, therefore, arrive at the conclusion that what the future holds for love is the pursuit of this age-old tradition of minimising risk based on the fast computing power of machines, algorithms, and AI-based systems. Modern love testers will continue to be improved,

becoming ever-increasingly accurate and fast. With the help of a wide variety of extensive databases, we will be able to determine with increasing accuracy whether the relationship we have just entered into has a chance of success. Of course, we won't just give up on real-life meetings, rather we will immediately narrow down the range of candidates to only those who could be a perfect match.

'It's heading in the same direction as many other technologies, namely minimising all risks, protecting us from mistakes, eliminating those mistakes, and as a result... completely sterilising relationships', the scientist concludes.

We invest in technologies that will never give us 100% certainty that 'mission love' will be successful, even if we factor in solutions that collect data straight from our bodies, read our micro- and macro-gestures, measure our body temperature, cortisol, dopamine, and serotonin levels, and perform brain scans. Even the most advanced inventions won't be able to tell us if a particular person is 'the one' and if we would be happy together.

LESS HUMAN

Will daily exposure to intelligent machines make us function in perfect human-robot harmony? Not necessarily. Robots, as networked organisms that are not subject to human limitations, are expected to start creating their own cultures. A mycelium or a swarm of bees are very good analogies. Machines can continuously learn from their interactions with people and other machines. We tend to assume that they will eventually become more human, but in all likelihood they will process the information they collect in their own way, eventually developing their own system and code of relationships that they consider to be, for example, romantic relationships. But will it be usable and understandable

enough for humans?

Ania Malinowska emphasises that she is not a techno-sceptic, but rather a technorealist and even an enthusiast. However, she does not agree with the empowerment of technology.

'We must always have an outsider in our culture. Previously, it was people of a different religion or skin colour, today it is also immigrants who supposedly take our jobs. AI is also taking our jobs! However, contrary to this notion of empowerment, AI does not make social decisions on its own. People do!', states the researcher.

We should look only among ourselves for those guilty of using technology to make relationships less personal. For, as

the researcher emphasises, it is us who have compromised the perfect concept of love. We are the ones who use technology to eliminate the human element from romantic relationships. We don't want to take risks; instead, we want everything to be perfect and fast, which is nothing new – we have always strived for quick results.

We also want to protect our ego, which can suffer when our attempts to start a real-life relationship fail. It can be painful to be told no when we have already imagined a whole happy-ever-after scenario. Apps allow us to keep creating these narratives indefinitely – with virtually no risk.