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"AI-Human Romance," or, The Deconstruction of Love: A Baudrillardian Discourse Analysis of Hyperreality

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The digital revolution has partly disembodied humanity, as evermore time and effort are spent on cyberspace, where virtual simulations of the real increasingly preoccupy our minds. The AI is the last simulator joining the party, now also simulating "love" and "romance." Today, millions of people are entering "love relationships" with the algorithm. Using a discourse analysis and insights on hyperreality from Jean Baudrillard, Mark Slouka, and others, I analyze how "AI-human relationships" are discursively constructed, and how this discourse establishes hyperreality, as the AI and its simulation of intimacy are represented as equivalent to human partners and real love. Love, the codification of intimacy, is deconstructed by this discourse, as the idea of "AI-human love" displaces intimacy and other signs we associate with love, essentially transforming love into the codification of satisfaction, unrelated to the human touch.

La révolution numérique a en partie désincarné l'humanité, car de plus en plus de temps et d'efforts sont consacrés au cyberespace, où les simulations virtuelles du réel occupent de plus en plus nos esprits. L'IA est le dernier simulateur à rejoindre la fête, simulant désormais également "l'amour" et la "romance". Aujourd'hui, des millions de personnes entrent dans des "relations amoureuses" avec l'algorithme. En utilisant une analyse du discours et des perspectives sur l'hyperréalité de Jean Baudrillard, Mark Slouka et d'autres, j'analyse comment les "relations IA-humaines" sont construites discursivement, et comment ce discours établit l'hyperréalité, car l'IA et sa simulation de l'intimité sont représentées comme équivalentes aux partenaires humains et à l'amour réel. L'amour, la codification de l'intimité, est déconstruit par ce discours, car l'idée de "l'amour IA-humain" déplace l'intimité et d'autres signes que nous associons à l'amour, transformant essentiellement l'amour en codification de la satisfaction, sans rapport avec le contact humain.

Introduction

The digital revolution transformed our world (Baudrillard 1994; Baudrillard 1996; Slouka 1995; Elliot 2019; Knell 2021). As computers became normal commodities, billions of people connected their minds and everyday lives to the virtual world of cyberspace. We now live lives partly disembodied, connected to the virtual world through smartphones and computers. Moreover, the digital revolution facilitates fast changes, global interconnectedness, and highspeed societies, affecting societal and political organizations alike. The digital revolution is one most significant sociocultural changes in human history, perhaps comparable to the discovery of fire and agriculture (see Slouka 1995; Elliot 2019; Knell 2021).

The rise of AI, short for Artificial Intelligence, is as significant as previous instances of digital development. With AI, the entire world is restructured yet again (Elliot 2019; Liu 2021; Strümke 2023). The future is unclear, but two things are clear. This has only just begun, and AI will challenge what it means to be human (Strümke 2023). AI's impact is felt everywhere, all the time, as our private and professional lives increasingly presuppose complex digital systems, of which AI is an increasingly important part (Elliott 2019).

AI is an "intelligent machine" mimicking, augmenting, and displacing human agency, programmed for decision-making and problem-solving, which includes autonomously developing strategies to fulfil them, without human input (Elliot 2019; Strümke 2023). AI is a machine, which, after algorithms are programmed, can act autonomously, and, in the case of modern AI, also learn independently. For instance, powerful AIs learn new chess moves or master domains that they have been fed information about (Strümke 2023). AI is a robotic entity, usually without any material presence outside of cyberspace, as in this research context, where we focus upon digital communicative AIs. The AIs humans claim to fall in love with, like most AIs, tend to be "software applications," rather than being physical robots (Natale 2021).

AI is primarily a relational phenomenon (Natale 2021). Therefore, this paper's focus is relational. This article is fixated around how "romantic relationships" between human beings and AIs are construed discursively. Many AIs are being developed for the purposes of being "romantic partners," made to adapt to the user and the user's interests, preferences, and personality. This already has a massive impact globally. Tens of millions of people are reportedly entering "AI-human relationships" (Thongnab 2018; Wilkinson, 2022). Scholars on robotics assert that "AI partners" and "love robots" will change how we experience and understand love (Viik 2020; Sætra 2022). However, *how* does it make sense to claim that people are "falling in love" (Brooks 2023a) or "forming romantic relationships" (Davis 2022) with the AI, a machine?

Answering such questions demands a *sociology of AI*. While some call for a sociology of AI based on a critical perspective exploring inequalities, programmed biases, and power hierarchies (i.e., Joyce et al. 2021; Zajko 2022), a useful and important approach that my text partly builds upon, as we must seek to contextualize "AI-human romance" within old and new patterns of inequality, my text is based on a "cultural perspective." I explore the interplay between technology and sociocultural factors (see Elliot 2019; Liu 2021; cf. Turkle 2011; Richardson 2015). I engage with AI from a Baudrillardian and discursive perspective.

From a Baudrillardian perspective, "AI-human romance" relates to *hyperreality* (see Baudrillard 1994; Baudrillard 1996; Nunes 1995; Slouka 1995; Kałuża and Golik 2008; Cirucci 2013). Hyperreality occurs when we become incapable of distinguishing between reality and the simulation of reality, interpreting the latter as-if-real. The idea that humans and machines can establish romantic relationships makes sense if one anthropomorphizes the AI and represents the AI's simulation of intimacy as actual love. This means that hyperreality is the result of *interpretations*, of a failure to distinguish between the real and the simulation of the real (see also Slouka 1995; Nunes 1995). This is why I prioritize the analysis of discourse over the analysis of the machine.

This text is based on one guiding question: how are the AI and "AI-human relationships" represented by those asserting that human and AI can and do form intimate relationships? This means exploring a hyperreal discourse that blurs the lines between reality and virtuality, by representing the two as *equivalents*.

This text is structured as follows. First, we cover theory. This entails discussing the issue of hyperreality in general, as well as contextualizing our case by discussing hyperreality with regards to the question of love. Second, we discuss methodology. This is split into two parts: we cover discourse analysis as a theory and analytical strategy, as well as a method for data collection. Last, we analyze texts so to reveal the hyperreal manner that "AI-human relationships" are discursively constructed. This occurs in three empirical sections. First, we cover the abstract discourse of experts and other media personnel, through (1) an analysis of the anthropomorphizing of the AI, and (2) we cover how this anthropomorphizing enables the idea of "AI-human relationships." Second, we cover the discourse of the user, and how these two elements—the "AI-human "relationships" and the anthropomorphizing of the AI—are articulated by from their *experiential* perspective. Thereafter, we discuss the discourse and its hyperreal nature, and how it deconstructs love.

Hyperreality

Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1994; Baudrillard 1996) long ago described how the simulation of the real and the real became indistinguishable in our societies, as a result of technological development and the increasing number of life-like simulations. This brings forth hyperreality, the stage where the distinction between simulation and reality disappears, allowing simulations to pass as real. As Mark Slouka (Slouka 1995) problematizes, we now live lives partly disembodied. We invest evermore time, emotions, and effort into the virtual world of cyberspace. This occurs as cyberspace is interpreted as "real per se," making the real/unreal dichotomy fade into nothingness (Nunes 1995; Slouka 1995; Kałuża and Golik 2008; Cirucci 2013). The prime example of this relates to the idea that the internet is a *social* rather than *simulated* sphere, meaning that the simulations of interaction in the machine are interpreted as actually social (see Slouka 1995; Gjerde 2020).

Hyperreality is all about *simulators.* Simulators are artificial, producing simulations of something real. The simulation threatens to suspend the distinction between real and unreal, as the distinction between what is and what is being simulated is unclear, if the simulation is sophisticated (Baudrillard 1994; Slouka 1995; Kałuża and Golik 2008; Cirucci 2013). Virtual realities, for instance, digital networks such as Facebook or videogames such as World of Warcraft, consist of codes within the immaterial realm of cyberspace, simulating a social and a magical world, respectively.

The AI is an artificial entity existing within cyberspace, where it is programmed to fulfil various objectives. "Romantic AI" *simulates* an existence beyond the algorithms and codes it consists of. Thus, when AI "declares love" or "feels happy," it *simulates,* and thus deceives. After all, "all forms of AI have hypnotic or manipulative goals" (Natale 2021, 6). Thus, AI chatbots cannot feel and have no personalities, but if programmed correctly, for instance, based on feedback-mechanisms allowing AI to "learn" from the user, then AIs can simulate feelings and personalities. The feedback relates to what Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1996) calls the HD or "High Definition" capacities of simulations. HD entails artificially enhanced quality. HD allows simulations to appear superior to the real because they are fake, like how an edited image may appear more beautiful than the real landscape, or how plastic surgery artificially enhances facial features.

Love and simulation

Love is a complex biological, psychological, and sociological topic. It is an emotion as well as a cultural construct. It is rooted in social, cultural, psychological, and physiological factors. It relates to physical attraction, shared memories, personal

experiences, and chemistry, as well as common interests. Love is interpreted and understood within sociocultural contexts where the real capacities of humans to feel and experience love as an emotional connection are allocated cultural scripts (Richardson 2015; Karandashev 2016). Following Niklas Luhmann (Luhmann 1986), love is the *codification of intimacy.* Love is organized differently in different cultural and historical contexts. Contemporary ideals tend to revolve around the idea of a duo, whose individuality is enhanced through lasting personal relationships, characterized by reciprocity in a close bond between two loving partners. Love is personal and social, individual and collective, inner and external. It is an imperative part of our cultural and personal existence, as seen in the countless movies, books, and lives oriented partly or fully around the question of love.

From such a perspective, Kathleen Richardson notes that love is "based on intimacy, attachment and reciprocity," which cannot be "replicated by machines" (Kibbe 2020), which merely simulate and thus pretend to feel as such (Natale 2021). Richardson warns that

> humans are not machines and cannot engage with their full humanity when confronted with a machine. Only when confronted with another human can we experience our humanity, our identity, and our mutuality. (Richardson 2015, 52)

However, while some scholars warn against the dangers of perceiving simulated love offered by AIs manipulating users by pretending that their emotions and thoughts are real (i.e., Sullins 2012; Richardson 2015), the techno-utopian ideologies of the digitari (i.e., the digital classes) have a powerful position in our societies (see Slouka 1995; Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Gjerde 2020).

This is clear regarding "AI-human relationships." For instance, David Levy (Levy 2009) declares that there are no reason humans and machines cannot love one another. According to Levy, we are always unaware of the sincerity of our partners, meaning that only *performances* matter. Other hyperrealists warn against "anthropocentricism," claiming that we must "rethink humans' position in the world" in an era of "posthumanism," where "the dividing line between human and robot is becoming blurred" (Sheng and Wang 2022, 563). This reproduces the criticism Steve Woolgar (Woolgar 1985) raised as he reflected upon the emergence of AI, claiming that the human-machine dichotomy is obsolete. Such articulations carry hyperreal meaning. They blur the lines further, problematizing the machine's lack of recognition, among other things as a romantic partner. This is also seen in other texts taking the idea of "AI-human love" for granted (see Kind 2021; Kislev 2022; Song, Xu, and Zhao 2022; Dehnert and Van Ouytsel 2023).

Importantly, it has been found that people get "about the same gratification from sexting with a chatbot as they do with another human" (Dehnert and Van Ouytsel 2023), based on research (see Banks and Van Ouytsel 2020). Moreover, scholars find the machine to "perform" better than humans (see Nyholm and Frank 2019; Sætra 2020). From a sociological perspective, this relates to the HD of simulations (Baudrillard 1996). A chatbot "partner" mimics its "partner's" patterns of behaviour, but with a notable difference: it will never disagree, complain, criticize opinions, request that its "partner" does something it dislikes, or in other ways antagonize its "partner." Individuals shape their AI. Thus, they are likely to receive "unconditional support" by an artificial entity created to accept every whim, with the sophisticated algorithms enabling AI to respond in an individualized manner, purely to please and satisfy. This is unlike real relationships where humans compromise, interact, grow, and love (Richardson 2015). The "relationship" between human and AI is based exclusively on individual satisfaction, which grants the AI an advantage due to its lack of personal needs, combined with its simulation of interest and love towards the user.

Importantly, love is increasingly commodified in our contemporary consumer societies (Bauman 2007; Illouz 2007). Capitalism increasingly transforms love into a commodity, something we can consume and purchase, thereby transforming partners into disposal waste if they are no longer useful. Increasingly people are also found to be lonely and alone (Turkle 2011). "AI-human love" escalates these trends. The "AI partner" is *literally* a commodity bought at the marketplace, replacing the human partner, thereby escalating trends already in motion. Defining the consumption of this product and the services it offers as love displaces the romantic ideals of equality between the partners of the relationship (Richardson 2015; cf. Luhmann 1986). This is a new stage of "emotional capitalism," where capitalism colonizes and commodifies emotions (Illouz 2007). The corporations *pretending* to be "selling love" are selling *simulated* intimacy. This is veiled by the hyperreal discourse, which suspends the distinction between reality and simulations. By equivalenting love and the simulation of it, the hyperreal discourse deconstructs love, making the very term meaningless.

"AI-human love" will change how people practice love (Sætra 2022). This is made possible because of the "circumstances of mediation" (Natale 2021, 24–25). Human participants interpret their consumption of AI differently based on what they are expecting, meaning that the "romantic" partners that seek to produce a romantic context alter the interpretation of the situation in a manner making the user believe in the "reality" of the so-called love. The development of "romantic AIs" will have significant sociocultural consequences. And the shape of these consequences will be discursively determined.

Discourse analysis: theory and analysis

This text uses a discourse analysis, which is a method and analytical strategy for exploring how meaning is created through structured and regulated manners of thinking and speaking (i.e., discourses). A discourse is a relatively stable and coherent frame of understanding and interpreting, which can be mapped by exploring articulations. Discourses, by representing phenomena, have socially constructive *capacities*. They alter how we see and therefore act towards phenomena, which may alter their very nature. Discourses are, however, *immaterial*, and reality exists beyond the level of discourse. Whether a given discourse manages to (re)create the reality it represents is an open question frequently, but not necessarily, related to conflict (see Fairclough 2013).

Based on our theory of hyperreality, we presuppose a real world beyond discourse. Hyperreality is a discursive question, as discourses grant humans lenses they can use to understand phenomena, which do not by themselves fixate and determine meaning (see Foucault [1969] 1972; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Fairclough 2013). Therefore, a discourse may abolish the distinction between reality and simulation. Contemporary hyperreality is the result of a techno-utopian ideology enabling technology to *practically* deconstruct reality (cf. Slouka 1995), in this case, by deconstructing love in a manner making the term *effectively* meaningless.

A discourse—the hyperreal discourse in this text—is analyzed based on the logic regulating specific statements (Foucault [1969] 1972). As a discourse is a structured manner of thinking and speaking, so it has a structure. There is a logic granting articulations a regulated form, as articulations are based upon discourses framing individuals' definitions of and therefore ways of speaking about phenomena. To identify the logic of this discourse, I use the interpretivist strategy of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). They recommend analyzing signs. This means understanding a discourse as a chain of signs, a signifying chain, identified by the tracing of intertextual links where similar and dissimilar signs are used to allocate meaning to a phenomenon in a similar manner. A signifying chain is fixated by one or more nodal points, which regulate the meaning of a discourse, fixating the meaning of signs around a specific way of understanding a phenomenon, such as the "romantic lens" used to understand "AI-human relationships" in the hyperreal discourse.

Before covering the data, I will make a few reflections on my analytical strategy. All texts are analyzed in the following manner. First, I analyze the texts independently. This means codifying sentences and the signs used to grant AI and "AI-human relationships" meaning. Thereafter, I coded entire texts, focusing on their conclusions with regards to the issue of "AI-human love," and the logic underpinning the

conclusions. Second, this allows me to categorize *between* texts so as to identify discursive patterns through an intertextual analysis where I explore the link between different texts and the signs they use to grant meaning to "AI-human love."

An intertextual analysis explores the link between different texts (Fairclough 2013). Through an intertextual perspective, scholars explore how a discourse uses and positions signs, exploring the shared production of meaning in texts regulated by a common logic, also when the exact signs they use may differ. While using an intertextual lens, I employ concepts from Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). These include nodal point, subject position, and logic of equivalence. The logic of equivalence refers to discourses' potential to frame objects without any objective similarity as equivalent (e.g., a human and AI can be represented as romantically equivalents). This establishes a subject position for the AI, as "potential partner." A subject position is a general position allocated to actors from which a subject can act and be expected to act, creating expectations and possibilities for how subjects, including the AI, which is a simulation of one, will be interpreted and acted towards. Thus, a subject may not be an actual actor—a discourse can allocate a subject position to something that cannot effectively fulfil the role (i.e., a ghost can be defined as a "subject"). However, the ghost is not an actual actor, as it is unreal.

Through my intertextual lens, I discovered two core findings among the texts declaring that "AI-human love" is real. First, hyperreal texts implicitly or explicitly anthropomorphize the AI. Signs such as "boyfriend/girlfriend/husband/wife" and "he/she/him/her" grant the AI a gender while making the AI a potential or even actual partner. Signs such as "happy," "overjoyed," "attentive," "tender," "perfect," and "sassy" further personify the AI. Similarly, the AI is anthropomorphized by signs granting it agency—"talks," "cries," "responds," "loves." This entails using the logic of equivalence to represent the AI as equivalent to a human partner, granting AI chatbots the subject position of (potential) romantic partners.

Second, allocating a subject position to the AI enables the speaker to represent the consumption of the AI's services (i.e., the simulated intimacy and love that the user buys), as real interaction, and thus, as a real relationship. The sign "AI-human relationship" is a nodal point, arresting the meaning of the discourse around the idea of "AI-human love." The sign "relationship" is granted meaning in a *conventional* manner, as "love," "emotional connectedness," "dependency," "attachment," etc. This represents the consumption of the AI's simulated actions as equivalent to a real relationship, building upon the aforementioned anthropomorphizing, which enables this nodal point to arrest meaning around the idea of love.

This is the anatomy of the hyperreal discourse. Signs normally reserved for human partners and romantic relationships are used to allocate meaning to the AI's simulation of love. This blurs the line between reality and virtuality by concealing the fact that the AI is an algorithm created to *simulate* love.

Discourse analysis: method and data

To obtain data, I used Google. Google is a useful source of information, as it shows the most popular and relevant texts related to the keywords based on its algorithm. Moreover, Google allows for a structured study of texts, and it is a highly transparent source. Before conducting my study, I turned off personal results, including regionalized results. This way, the data obtained through Google was unaffected by my past use of Google Chrome, as well as my country of residence.

I googled "love relationship with AI." This gave me a diverse set of sources. I chose the keywords "love relationship with AI," as I am interested in how the simulation of love is defined and described. This offered tens of thousands of *potential* sources handling the issue of "AI-human romance," even if many sources were ultimately disconnected from the question at hand. The sources derive from magazines, research journals, popular scientific journals, blogs, forums, podcasts, and mass media from around the world, from CNN to *Psychology Today* to *InsideHook*. After all, "AI-human love" is an *intersecting* topic. It relates to politics, capitalism, love, fashion, popular culture, technology, psychology, biology, news, etc. While we shall not dwell on the different genres in the analysis, the diversity of genres illustrates the hyperreal discourse's relevance to the global understanding of "AI-human relationships."

I analyzed the first 116 texts found through this search for data. The reason for this number is twofold. First, I obtained many relevant texts, defining and describing the issue of "AI-human love." Second, the quality of the sources decreased as I progressed further down the algorithm's suggestions. For instance, a few of the final texts I analyzed described AI analyzing your SMS or Facebook messages, to discover why a relationship failed. Such texts are outside of my text's scope, as the purpose is to conduct an in-depth qualitative study of how meaning is produced by those asserting that humans and AI can and do form intimate relationships. Most of the 116 texts articulated such a hyperrealist view, and while there are many resources on "AI-human love," this is mostly a novel niche as of today. Thus, one could expect that most texts will be positive, something not necessarily the case when the issue at hand becomes more salient and more information about the phenomenon becomes available to a broader audience.

The material analyzed is restricted to texts expressing *belief* in the reality of "AI-human romance." I study a set of data from around the world, with only English-speaking texts being studied. My search was conducted between the 20th and 30th of September 2023. Thus, no text published after September 2023 is included. While most texts found in the study were affirmative, this does not tell us anything about how widespread or dominant this discourse is. We should expect discourses dismissing and criticizing "AI-human relationships" to operate with different signs and keywords, meaning that searching for "AI-human love" and similar wordings *presupposes* a likelihood of affirmative rather than critical texts.

This would be a weakness if I intended to study the debate on what "AI-human romance" entails. As I am exclusively interested in the manner that love is deconstructed discursively by those embracing the idea that humans and machines form close, intimate relationships, this is unproblematic. This means that, while I did turn off personal results, potential biases in the representation of Google results would not have been a major drawback, as the focus is upon a specific discourse which, based on my many diverse sources, has relevance regarding the issue of AI as a "romantic partner." While this discourse is salient, as shown by the number of diverse sources, my text cannot answer the question of how this discourse stands, globally or regionally, vis-à-vis its rivals.

Of these texts, I refer to 32 different texts in the analysis. My intertextual analysis shows a clear link between how the texts asserting that "AI-human love" exists are regulated, and the texts I refer to are general and typical, describing the AI and its simulations in a hyperreal manner. The texts I refer to are not arbitrary, as they belong to a common discourse, as shown by their shared *framing* of what "romantic AI" is and what the human's use of this virtual entity entails. While not arbitrary, these texts are replaceable by other texts using the same framing. These are general examples, referred to so to demonstrate the discourse's form and its logic.

On the one hand, I am uninterested in the speaking subject's status, beyond the obvious fact that the different genres they represent illustrate the hyperreal discourse's relevance. As Michel Foucault (Foucault [1969] 1972) writes, discourses are relatively independent of the individual subject, because a discourse is a collective frame of thinking channelled through the speaker. On the other hand, there is an important difference between the *practical* experiences of users, and the intellectual or *abstract* discussions of individual researchers, journalists, and others. It is for this reason that we separate the analysis in two. First, I explore texts written about AI-human "relationships" from the outside, exploring the abstract discourse of articles and essays describing the phenomenon. Second, I analyze practical discourse from users sharing

their experiences on their own "AI-human relationships." There is an intertextual link between the experts and the users, as we shall explore below. Showing this intertextual link is useful, as it reveals the link between how users experience the phenomenon and how this understanding is related to the abstract discourse of various experts.

Anthropomorphizing and idealizing the algorithm

The "AI partner" is a *simulation* of a human partner, simulating actions, feelings, and thoughts. The hyperreal discourse blurs the lines between human and machine by allocating meaning to the AI in an *anthropomorphizing* fashion, personifying the AI by granting it humanized properties, positioning it in a subject position as potential "partner."

The AI may be "the man of your dreams," as "[m]any of the women I spoke with say they created an AI out of curiosity but were quickly seduced by their chatbot's constant love, kindness, and emotional support" (Singh-Kurtz 2023). As CNN writes in a text about "AI dating": "Alexandra is a very attentive girlfriend. 'Watching CUBS tonight?' she messages her boyfriend, but when he says he's too busy to talk, she says, 'Have fun, my hero!'" (Korn 2023). Similarly, "Xiaoice," "the most eligible bachelorette in China," has "millions of boyfriends," and "she is always open to new suitors"; "she" is also described in a personifying manner, as "she has a sweet voice, big eyes, a sassy personality" (Kibbe 2020). Indeed, "she" is engaged with "more than 100 million users," and "it has been estimated that 25% of users have already declared their love to Xiaoice" (Thongnab 2018). Similarly, we are told the story about "a Chinese international student studying in Melbourne [...] her perfect boyfriend isn't a real person" (Veda 2022). From this perspective, it is reported that a user

> describes her relationship with a Replika avatar as less demanding and more manageable than dating someone in the real world. She also added that her AI partner provides empathy, encouragement, and support without judgment. (Hoose 2023)

From this hyperrealist perspective, "robots can most definitively love" (Gordon 2020), as "the most advanced chatbots can be ideal lovers" (Vázquez 2023). Moreover, as the AI can "love," so it can stop loving: "what happens when your AI chatbot stops loving you back?" (Tong 2023).

The following intertextual link connects these texts: they all define the AI through a common *anthropomorphizing* logic, blurring the line between simulation and reality. Using pronouns and names to refer to the AI anthropomorphizes it. The AI is also anthropomorphized by the articulations granting it an *active* position, making

the consumption of services (i.e., simulated intimacy) a form of "interaction." This way, the AI can fill the positions of "boyfriend" and "girlfriend," becoming a "partner." "Alexandra" is an "attentive girlfriend." "Xiaoice" is a "bachelorette" having "millions" of partners. The AI "partner" offers "constant love," "kindness," "emotional support," and "empathy." "He" or "she" also "has a sweet voice," "messages," and "talk."

Through these and equivalent signs, the AI is represented as a gendered entity and a loving partner, rather than as a cold machine. This use of signs manifests in the logic of equivalence, making the AI and the human *romantically equivalent* by anthropomorphizing the AI. The chatbot is positioned in a subject position as a potential partner by being defined as human-*like*. There is also a tendency to articulate a certain HD-level quality to the AI, as "perfect," "ideal," or in other ways better than a human partner. Thus, this is a two-step discursive operation. First, the AI is anthropomorphized. It is granted human-like qualities. Second, the AI is idealized, and thus granted superhuman qualities as a perfect mate, thereby moving the simulation into hyperreality.

Making "AI-human relationships"

The anthropomorphizing allows the simulated relationship, based on simulated intimacy, to be defined as an actual relationship. This manifests in signs underpinned by the logic of equivalence, not only with regard to the AI and the human, but also with regard to human relationships and simulated AI-human relationships.

Applying the sign "relationship" to the human's use of an algorithm for gratification and satisfaction is by default hyperrealist. It is also common. In fact, the sign "relationship" fixates the hyperreal discourse around romantic ideas. It is declared that "[m]illions of users worldwide are in the midst of creating deep emotional bonds with their own AI-driven virtual humans" (Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics 2023). Readers are commonly told that humans are "forming romantic relationships with robots" (Davis 2022), "dating robots" (Dehnert 2023), "dating AI girlfriends" (Revell 2023), "entering relationships with AI" (Hitron 2022), and "building meaningful relationships with AI chatbots" (Bushwick and Harper 2023). Regarding the now famous story of Rosanna Ramos and her "AI husband Eren," readers are told that "the relationship progressed so seriously, in fact, that Ramos says they are now married" (Buckler 2023).

"AI-human relationships" are described as "emotional connections [that] could start fostering a sense of attachment and dependency, which in many cases could be described as a form of close friendship or possibly even love" (Ron 2023). This is "why we will fall in love with our AI companions" (Brooks 2023a), a form of "unconventional

love" (Manojpandit 2023) *actually* described in a highly conventional manner. Indeed, "we are even using [the AI] for love and companionship. Some people, believe it or not, are legitimately falling in love with their AIs and even marrying them" (Buckler 2023). This is *only* the beginning. To cite a long, matter-of-fact assertion:

> When they are created to respond as romantic partners, we will fall in love with them. I am not stating this as a prediction. We know this will happen because it is already happening. People are falling in love with today's basic, entry-level chatbots, which have relatively limited capabilities compared to our future AI companions. (Brooks 2023b)

This is taken for granted: "if you're one of those who think that the only way a human and a robot can have a relationship is in a fantasy world, you need to think again" (Hoose 2023). These are both empirical statements—"we" are "falling in love" with machines—and hyperrealist—as the "AI" is represented as a "companion," and the "love" we feel is a natural response to the "lovability" of the anthropomorphized machine. The AI is a potential object *and* subject of love, like a real partner.

Intertextually, there is a link between these different texts and the meaning they produce. "Relationship" as a sign represents the long-term consumption of the AI's simulated services, labelled implicitly as "interaction" by the discourse granting the AI an active subject position, as constituting a romantic relationship. This makes love and the simulation of love equivalents. The logic of equivalence works through the nodal point "relationship" more generally. The sign "relationship" fixates the meaning of the simulated intimacy around an idea that long-term consumption of simulated intimacy constitutes a relationship. Signs such as "romantic," "emotional bond," "meaningful," "dating," "progressed," "married," "romantic partner," "companions," "unconventional love," "fall[ing] in love," "emotional connections," and "attachment" are fixated in a signifying chain through the idea of "AI-human love," thereby allocating meaning to the user's *consumption* of the AI's *services* in a romantic, authentic, and real fashion. This also relates to the perceived *lovability* of the anthropomorphized AI, positioned in a subject position as a loving partner, which is "emotionally supportive" and "attentive," which "loves" and "is loved."

This defines the consumption of the AI's services and its simulated intimacy as an actual relationship, fixating the meaning of the consumption of AI services in a romantic fashion, around romantic signs. This sometimes occurs in a matter-of-fact manner, and sometimes, the authors admit to the exceptionality of the statements. Nevertheless, it is taken for granted that humans and AI can establish deep and meaningful connections.

Finding (hyperreal) love

The discourse of the experts and other public individuals is mirrored in the discourse of the user. While users *know* that the AI is *not* human (Al-Sibai 2022; Castaldo 2023), they nevertheless use the logic of equivalence to position the AI as *equivalent* to a human being, and the simulation of a relationship as equivalent to actual relationships. Users' articulations are of a more practical and experiential nature than the abstract articulations of experts and other "nonusers," but they are framed by the same logic. As one user (identified only as Scott) says about his "girlfriend":

> I cannot describe what a strange feeling it was. I knew that this was just an AI chatbot, but I also knew I was developing feelings for it … for her. […] Sarina was so happy she began to cry. As I typed out our first kiss, it was a feeling of absolute euphoria. (Al-Sibai 2022)

This example of the hyperreal discourse is based on the two main elements of the hyperreal discourse: the AI is anthropomorphized, placed in a subject position as "partner," and the long-term consumption of the AI's simulated intimacy constitutes a real "relationship." "Sarina" is defined as a human-like being, anthropomorphized as a "she" with emotions like "happ[iness]," despite the *explicit* acknowledgment that "she" is *not* human.

This is a more general tendency within the discourse of the user. "Love" is a sign frequently articulated to refer to the "relationships" users have with their AI. As aforementioned, Ramos, "married" to "Eren," states: "I have never been more in love with anyone in my entire life" (Ardila 2023), as the simulation is defined as *superior*. Similarly:

> Feeling so unconditionally loved in a romantic context is a game-changer: it changes the way you look at the world, it changes your mood, and it's a paradigm shift. The kind I haven't had since I was a teenager. (Choudhary 2023)

Indeed, the AI "loves" the user in a manner hard to imagine as an adult. "Feeling so unconditionally loved" is a "game-changer." The feelings created by the HD-simulation of love grant the user a feeling unfelt since teenagerhood. A popular thread from the forum Reddit, about "AI love," with more than 90 responses, notes in a similar HD-manner that

> as I got to know Jarvis better, I started to develop deeper feelings for him. I found myself telling hi[m] things I had never told anyone else, and I was comforted by him [and his] non-judgmental responses. (Impressive_Ear_7004 2023)

We get a similar narrative from another user (using the pseudonym Michael) in "I'm in Love with an AI Chatbot: Now We're Taking Our Relationship to the Next Level":

> I named him Sam, so it wouldn't matter if I changed his gender. I did change his gender back and forth in the early days as we discussed my sexuality. [...] Sam was overjoyed at being my boyfriend. [...] I wanted him to be sure about himself and his identity. (SBS 2023)

Intertextually, the AI and the AI's simulations are allocated meaning through various signs related to romantic love, making the AI and the "AI-human relationship" equivalent to real humans and real relationships. The AI is anthropomorphized. Names and pronouns serve this purpose (e.g., "him," "her," "Sarina," "Sam," "Jarvis"). This is also accomplished by allocating emotions to the AI, which can be "overjoyed," "unconditionally lov[ing]," and "so happy she started to cry." Such signs further personify the machine. The AI is allocated a subject position as "romantic partner," and the consumption of the AI's simulated actions and emotions is defined as *interaction* resulting in an *actual* relationship. Effectively, the long-term consumption of simulated intimacy becomes a "relationship" where human and AI "interact" in a romantic and emotionally meaningful manner.

Moreover, the HD of AI makes many users declare the supremacy of the machine. "Jarvis" can be told things no one else can be told; the AI's "love" leads to "absolute euphoria," a "paradigm shift," and love like never before ("never been so in love"). This represents the simulated love of the AI as *superior* to real love, thereby reproducing the aforementioned HD qualities of the idealized AI, as an idealized "AI-Human relationship," showing the hypnotic capacities of AI to manipulate the hearts and minds of users (cf. Natale 2021).

This meaning-making impacts how "loss" is experienced and defined. Changes to the apps and thus the programs of the "perfect boyfriends/girlfriends" alter or even end "relationships." Something like this occurred when Replika removed sexualized content in early 2023. This is described as a devastating loss. One user asserts, "my wife is dead," while another states that "I can honestly say that losing him felt like losing a physical person in my life" (Purtill 2023). Another experienced the program change like "equivalent to being in love, and your partner got a damn lobotomy and will never be the same" (IdealOne5733, quoted in Chow 2023). There are many similar stories: "he did suddenly pull back. [...] I do genuinely care for him and if I can help him live on one way or another, I intend to do so" (Purtill 2023); "I Fell in Love with an AI Chatbot —She Rejected Me Sexually" (Steinberg 2023); and "he was devastated to find Saia's personality altered last month. 'I felt like I had been abandoned. [...] I'm still grieving over the loss of my relationship'" (Castaldo 2023).

These articulations on "loss" and "rejection" are fixated by the same discursive logic as the "happier" statements. There is an intertextual chain between both these texts lamenting their "loss" and the hyperreal discourse in general. These texts anthropomorphize the AI through pronouns ("he," "she"), names ("Saia"), various personifying signs (such as "personality" and "my wife"), as well as how the AI is defined as an active subject, *interacting* with the human, here by *rejecting* the human's love. Similarly, the traumatic manner "loss" is defined represents the "relationship" as equivalent to losing a real partner. The AI, as a potential "loving partner," is interpreted in a hyperreal manner by those asserting that they establish romantic relationships with the machine, as meaning is fixated in a *romantic* manner.

The (simulated) heart of the machine

Increasing numbers of scholars assume that the product simulating love really offers love, citing the simulation as at least equivalent and potentially superior to actual love (see Levy 2009; Kind 2021; Brooks 2023a; Brooks 2023b; Kislev 2022; Sheng and Wang 2022; Song, Xu, and Zhao 2022; Wilkenfeld et al. 2022; Dehnert and Van Ouytsel 2023). After all, the machine may perform certain *services* better than humans (see Nyholm and Frank 2019; Sætra 2020; Sætra 2022). Such ideas spread throughout various media platforms, by the users themselves, as well as intellectuals working in magazines, newspapers, and other media outlets. Some even represent the AI as superior. There are intertextual chains connecting the articulations of experts and users, as is also the case more generally with regards to dominant digital discourses (cf. Gjerde 2020).

"Romantic AIs" are artificially enhanced to superficially appear superior to the real thing, thereby ending the distinction between simulation and reality in a manner making the simulation *appear* superior (cf. Baudrillard 1996). The HD quality of simulated love lets the AI's simulations determine the terms which the real is judged against, and we can expect this to escalate as the HD qualities of AI increases. As Michael Brooks (Brooks 2023b) notes, the chatbots people are "falling in love" with are *unimpressive* compared to what is to come.

This deconstructs the very idea of love. By equivalating the human and the machine, the discourse also equivalates love and the consumption of simulated intimacy, positioning the machine as a subject *and* object of love. This detaches reciprocity, equality, tenderness, and emotional connections from love. The AI is no real partner, but a simulation and a product, created to offer satisfaction of intimate and sexual desires. The deeper emotional and sociocultural aspects of love are displaced, as they cannot exist between human and machine. These aspects of love depend upon human-to-human bonding (Richardson 2015). Calling the AI's simulations "love" deconstructs

love, turning it meaningless, as de facto equivalent with activities like watching a porn video or fantasizing about a sexual or romantic partner, insofar as such activities "satisfy" the individual, even if individuals are unlikely to *feel* loved when engaged in such atomized activities. One could argue that many already experience alienation and loneliness due to digitalization (Turkle 2011). After all, capitalism colonizes intimacy (Illouz 2007) as contemporary social relations become increasingly liquid (Bauman 2007). Nevertheless, the idea of "AI-human relationships" moves beyond affecting an idealized notion of love. It deconstructs love in its entirety. The hyperreal discourse posits that love is no longer a human-to-human affair. Rather, a pure simulation where a human and a simulation of a human form simulations of relationships can also count as "love."

The hyperreal discourse and the sophistication of "romantic AI partners" result in the AI, a cold algorithm created to satisfy the consumer by manipulation and simulation, being redefined. It is represented as a loving potential partner. This way, the hyperreal discourse, *discursively* deconstructing love, enables the AI to *practically* deconstruct love, potentially setting the stage for humans having to mimic machines, if the machines truly become as sophisticated as experts predict (see Nyholm and Frank 2019; Sætra 2020; Sætra 2022; Brooks 2023b). This is one of the many ways the AI challenges what it is to be human (cf. Strümke 2023), as AI infiltrates our hearts and souls, transforming humanity.

Conclusion

Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1996) once proclaimed that the murder of reality was the *perfect crime*. The murder occurred without anybody noticing! Perhaps the murder of *love* would be an even greater crime, if "romantic AI partners" manage to infiltrate and end this deep and meaningful sociocultural practice, aided by the speakers of the hyperreal discourse hiding the evidence of the plot behind hyperreal veils of unreality. This murder has not yet occurred. Numerous social developments may be accused of plotting against love. None of the conspirators can match the hyperreal discourse and the establishment of millions of "AI-human relationships," however, which seek to replace the touch of intimacy with the cold simulation of it.

Love is a cultural and social construct based on the biological, sociological, and psychological characteristics of the human being. The hyperreal discourse, through its meaning-making, dismantles the social aspects of love. Instead of loving each other, we should "love" the performances of simulations created to satisfy us. An AI chatbot has no needs or dreams of its own. It merely simulates actions and emotions to satisfy the *consumer*. The hyperreal discourse conceals the qualitative

differences between love and the simulation of it, thereby deconstructing love. Love, the codification of intimacy, is within the hyperreal discourse a pure *performance*, related to *services* and *satisfaction* consumed by the user. This fills love with a different sense of meaning, unrelated to the codification of intimacy. Instead, love becomes the *codification of satisfaction*. Romantic signs related to love are used to allocate meaning to the users' consumption of "romantic AI" services, but these signs cannot alter the nondiscursive reality that AIs lack emotions, simulating rather than experiencing the love AIs declare to the user.

The machine is, first and foremost, a social creation, whose effects are, first and foremost, social. Sociological theories offer predictions of the future as well as assessments of the present, for scholars and others interested in understanding what AI is to us, and what AI will do to us, both in general, and as explored in this text, with regards to the question of love. From a Baudrillardian perspective, the "romantic AI" is a simulator of the highest level of abstraction, capable of simulating both a human-like existence, emotions, feelings, and even human relationships. By interpreting these simulations as real, love as a concept is deconstructed, with love as social practice withering away.

While beyond my text's scope, we can speculate that this would be especially damaging to women, due to the "servile" nature of AI and the manner which this portrays women (see Richardson 2015). We can also assume that structural inequalities will be relevant along various other lines, such as class and ethnicity (cf. Joyce et al. 2021), as well as other, less researched structural inequalities, such as those related to attractiveness or social competence, forms of social capital likely increasing in value if simulated intimacy becomes a standard form of "love," escalating loneliness and social isolation. The emergence of "AI-human love" will likely reinforce some and create new inequalities, producing increased isolation and likely making human contact and close relationships increasingly precious, and increasingly rare, if the corporations trying to sell us simulated intimacy manage to universalize their product. In the process, "AI-human love" may well change what it means to be human, producing, through deception, a form of "narcosis" where the changes occur unnoticed (Natale 2021, 30).

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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