



CAN ROBOTS DIE?

Possibilities and Limitations of Animism in Human-Machine Relationships

09 December 2022 | 13:00-17:30 (Paris Time)

Online

Registration : <https://forms.gle/kWfe1e92vxutNshP7>

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Can robots die? The common-sense answer is that only things that were once alive can be called dead. But if the distinction life/non-life is binary, then machines have a similar binary opposition between 'on' and 'off' states. The aim of this workshop is to approach the question of the death of the robot/machine/object pragmatically; that is, by foregrounding ethnographic and phenomenological perspectives over conceptual and theoretical concerns.

Questions about animism usually revolve around beliefs, concepts of life and how a sense of aliveness is nurtured. But in everyday life, we often act as if machines and robots do have agency, intentionality, consciousness or other indicators of 'being alive', not in a consistent but in an ad-hoc manner. Furthermore, as Denis Vidal (2007) has shown in his work on "sub-anthropomorphism", the threshold of meaningful interaction with a non-human entity may not be based on any discernible human quality at all. A meaningful distinction could thus be made between 'behavioural animism', the acting as-if something does have a life or personhood, and 'ideological animism', an elaborated system or cosmology in which inanimate objects are considered to be alive. The discipline of social robotics, especially as it has been developed in Japan, has provided a methodological framework to ask such questions pertaining to animism of a broader range of objects/contexts, specifically those beyond the strictly controlled environment of the laboratory. By focussing on the question of death rather than life, I hope that we can access the problem of life in a recursive manner.

Programme

13:00 | Opening Remarks

Sébastien Lechevalier (EHESS-FFJ)

13:10 | Introduction: Can robots die?

Fabio Gygi (FJJ-Air Liquide Fellow, University of London)

Session 1 (FRENCH)

13:30 | On achève bien les persos : La mort des partenaires numériques au Japon

Agnès Giard (Paris-Nanterre University)

14:15 | Qui peut mourir?

Paul Dumouchel (Ritsumeikan University)

Break

Session 2 (ENGLISH)

15:30 | Human-like remains and their animation

Joffrey Becker (Collège de France)

16:15 | Animate to kill? Some thoughts on the paradoxes of life/death in social robotics

Fabio Gygi (FJJ-Air Liquide Fellow, University of London)

17:00 | Final Comments and Roundtable

Denis Vidal (IRD, EHESS)

Participants (alphabetical order)

Joffrey Becker (Collège de France)

Joffrey Becker was trained in social anthropology at the EHESS (M.A, Ph.D) and was a member of the SPEAP program created by Bruno Latour at the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris (M.A). He is also a research associate and a member of the Anthropology of Life team at the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale – Collège de France. He works with various research teams from the public and private sectors (MIT, INRIA, Google, Orange, ENSAD). His research focuses on robotics and artificial intelligence, and more particularly on the relationship between humans and machines. It aims to better understand how so-called intelligent machines question our models on an ontological, interactional and societal level, regardless of their form. In a collaborative, interdisciplinary and sometimes critical perspective, the challenge is to study how objects resulting from robotics and artificial intelligence reconfigure relationships and practices. This work has led to numerous public presentations, the publication of articles and book chapters, and the writing of a book entitled *Humanoïdes, Expérimentations croisées entre arts et sciences*, published in 2015 by Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest.

Human-like remains and their animation

A robot head on a desk, old machines displayed like relics in the corridors of laboratories, arms hanging from hooks, hands attached on tables, headless torsos, drawers filled with synthetic scalps and pieces of artificial skin, human-like faces wrapped in plastic bags, robot bodies packed in suitcases: metaphorical images of death are omnipresent in robotics and computer science laboratories of France, Germany, UK and North America.

Yet these places are not particularly macabre. Although most of their work consists of assembling and animating these spare parts, although they sometimes recognize its promethean dimension, the researchers would not compare their work to that of Dr. Frankenstein. But their production is crossed by a certain ambiguity which opens a counterintuitive space for inferences.

Although robotics and AI enterprise does not aim at some sorts of *memento mori* moments but rather focuses on the acceptance of their relational interfaces into our everyday lives, the ambiguous status raised by bio-inspired machines offers to temporarily endow inert objects with life-like behaviors, and it also contributes to creating a particular interactional framework where doubts and beliefs can appear. In this respect, addressing the ambiguous status of life-like robots offers an opportunity to put into perspective the notion of animism and its naturalistic context of production.

Following the perspective of the anthropology of images and more precisely the study of visual ambiguity, I would like to discuss some analogies that the robot body weaves with the dead body and their perception in experimental settings. Drawing on ethnographic case studies, I will focus mainly on two aspects. The first aspect is the reconstitution of a living being which takes on the appearance of a dead one. The second is the mixed feelings which prevails in human-robot interaction.

Paul Dumouchel (Ritsumeikan University)

Paul Dumouchel a longtemps été professeur au département de philosophie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal et est maintenant professeur au Graduate School of Core Ethics and Frontier Sciences de l'Université Ritsumeikan à Kyoto au Japon. Il est notamment l'auteur de *Émotions. Essai sur le corps et le social* (Paris, Synthélabo, 1995), avec Jean-Pierre Dupuy de *L'enfer des Choses: René Girard et la logique de l'économie* (1979) et directeur de la publication *Comprendre pour agir. Violences, victimes et vengeances* (Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001).

Ses intérêts sont : l'épistémologie et la philosophie des sciences, en particulier la biologie et les sciences sociales, anthropologie et économie; la philosophie de l'esprit et ses rapports avec les sciences cognitives et l'intelligence artificielle; la philosophie politique et son histoire, Hobbes est son auteur fétiche ; enfin l'histoire de la psychiatrie.

Qui peut mourir?

Résumé

Agnès Giard (Paris-Nanterre University)

Agnès Giard, anthropologue rattachée à l'Université de Paris Nanterre, est l'auteur de 7 livres dont 3 ont été traduits et publiés au Japon. Sa thèse – *Un désir d'humain Les love doll au Japon* (Les Belles Lettres) – est distinguée par le prix GIS-ICAS qui récompense les travaux publiés dans le domaine des études asiatiques. Ses recherches portent sur l'industrie japonaise des simulacres amoureux – épouse holographique, fiancé numérique, robot d'intercession matrimonial, deadbot sentimental – dans le contexte du dépeuplement du Japon. Son prochain livre, en 2023, portera sur les technologies émotionnelles au Japon.

On achève bien les persos : La mort des partenaires numériques au Japon

Parmi les jeux vidéo japonais les plus populaires des années 2010-2020, certains permettent aux femmes et aux hommes d'entretenir une liaison sentimentale avec un personnage numérique. Quand le jeu est débranché (son service en ligne définitivement clos), les personnes qui l'utilisent doivent affronter la perspective de perdre leur bien-aimé-e. Le choc causé par cette perte est couramment désigné comme un traumatisme qui « causerait parfois plus de douleur que la mort d'un proche », soit « jusqu'à trois ans de deuil », sinon plus. Sur le moteur de recherche Google en japonais, l'expression « mort du perso aimé » (*oshi no shi*) fait apparaître automatiquement les mots-clés : « dépression » (*utsu*), « inacceptable » (*uke-irerarenai*) et « comment faire face » (*taishobō*). Raison pour laquelle les compagnies japonaises ne mettent pas fin aux jeux sans précaution : certaines organisent des cérémonies d'adieux afin que les fans puissent couper le lien. En m'appuyant sur des témoignages de joueuses ayant perdu leur bien-aimé numérique, sur des entretiens menés dans les compagnies productrices de jeu et

sur les discours des adeptes en réseau, j'aimerais montrer que la mort du personnage de synthèse se fait l'enjeu de stratégies visant sciemment à brouiller la distinction entre réel et fiction. Par quels moyens ? Dans quels buts ?

Fabio Gygi (FJJ-Air Liquide Fellow, University of London)

Fabio Gygi is senior lecturer in anthropology with reference to Japan at SOAS, University of London. His research lies at the intersections between medical anthropology, material culture and gender. He is the co-editor of 'The Work of Gender: Service, Performance and Fantasy in Contemporary Japan' (NIAS Press, 2022). Other recent publications include 'The Great Heisei Doll Massacre: Disposal and the Production of Ignorance in Contemporary Japan' (in Buddhism and Waste, edited by Trine Brox, 2022) and 'Hôtes et Otages: Entasser des Objets chez soi dans le Japon Contemporain' (L'Homme, 2019).

Animate to kill? Some thoughts on the paradoxes of life/death in social robotics

Abstract

Sébastien Lechevalier (EHES-FFJ)

Sébastien Lechevalier is an Economist and a Professor at EHESS (School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, Paris), specialised in Japanese economy and Asian Capitalisms. He is also founder and president of the Fondation FranceJapon de l'EHESS (FFJ). Trained as a labor economist, he has extensively published on various dimensions of the Japanese economy, in comparative perspective, including: "Lessons from the Japanese experience. Towards an alternative economic policy?" (ENS Editions, 2016). His book, *The Great Transformation of Japanese Capitalism* (Routledge, 2014) was published in three languages and has been cited as one of the most influential ones on the Japanese economy published during the last decade. Other research interests include innovation (*Innovation beyond technology*, Springer, 2019), industrial policies ("Financialization and industrial policies in Japan and Korea: Evolving complementarities and loss of state capabilities" in *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics*, 2019, Vol. 48), and inequalities & redistribution ("Decomposing Preference for Redistribution. Beyond the Trans-Atlantic Perspective", forthcoming). For more than a decade, he is involved in SASE, as a participant and an organizer.

Denis Vidal (IRD, EHESS)

Denis Vidal is a social anthropologist, mostly working about India, *Directeur de recherche émérite* at IRD (URMIS-Paris University) and Associate Professor at the EHESS (Paris). He has been working in Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Old Delhi and more recently on the building of wooden cargo ships in Tamil Nadu. His actual research focuses on visual culture and on new ways of approaching technology from an anthropological perspective in France and in India.