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Love Machina

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Love Machina* (2024), directed by Peter Sillen.

Keywords

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Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film since 2011. He is the author of Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservativism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars (Wipf and Stock 2018).

Love Machina (2024), dir. Peter Sillen

This documentary chronicles the efforts of one couple to use technology to create a technological version of one of them, so that their love may survive physical death. It thereby raises multiple questions not just about whether this might be possible, but whether it is desirable.

Martine and Bina Rothblatt have been married for decades, and are still very much in love. They also do not want death to end their love for each other. While there might be millions of couples who could say this, they believe that they *can* live together forever, not in an afterlife offered by supernatural beings, but in a technological existence that they can create themselves. This confidence in their ability to solve problems technologically has some basis, as Martine created Sirius XM Radio through a network of satellites, and made a fortune doing so. When their daughter was diagnosed with Pulmonary Arterial Hypertension, a death sentence at the time, they helped fund research that has made the disease manageable and has saved her life as well as many others. They supported research into transplanting pig hearts successfully into humans, as well as

3D printing organs. With all that, perhaps it is not a surprise that they believe that Bina48, the robot version of Bina that includes a voiced AI, can ultimately house the real Bina's consciousness and so let her live forever.

AI has been much in the news this year with the mass availability of Chat GPT and other Generative AI programs, and futurists sometimes express confidence that the Singularity is near: the idea that all AI consciousness will link up in a self-aware system to which we will all be linked. The Rothblatts speak of this possibility with excitement and hope, as some people do, but there is no indication in this film of the cautionary fears that have also accompanied this buildup. Martine cites the original *Star Trek* as an inspiration for their utopian visions, and old film clips of hopeful futurists from the 1960s and 1970s pop up in this documentary—including the development of cryogenic technology which has enabled people to freeze themselves in hopes of being thawed out into eternal life at some future time. But the perils of all this technology, which have been pointed out for decades, make no appearance there. In 1967, science fiction author Clifford Simak wrote the novel, *Why Call Them Back from Heaven?* which forecast a future in which no one enjoys their actual lives as they spend all their money saving up to be frozen—even though there may be no possibility of them ever living again. The fear of death has eliminated their ability to enjoy life. So far as the hopes of saving one's spouse through an AI creation, the 2013 *Black Mirror* episode "Be Right Back" showed how a grieving widow is ultimately tragically disappointed with the all too perfect AI that replaces her husband; it simply isn't him.

The Rothblatts realize that Bina48 will differ from Bina in many ways, and they admitted as much at the Q and A for the public showing at Sundance. But they are unconcerned; we all evolve, and they believe this is the next stage in evolution for all of us. This begs several questions: what benefit is that to the human who is thereby duplicated? Even if such a being had

consciousness (which is debatable), is it really the same person in any meaningful sense? Will this satisfy the surviving loved ones? And why does one even want to live forever, in this form?

For Martine and Bina, the answer to the last question is that they want their love to go on forever. This is assuming the robot is the same one that one loves. And forever is a long time; can anyone love anyone forever, especially if both change greatly? What is the value in this? And in fact, what is the value in living forever? Many religions reject the desire to life forever in this world as a selfish one: Buddhism even views this desire for an eternal self as being in many ways the root of all our problems. And while a Buddhist monk does appear in the film to comment, his main point is simply to express agnosticism about what this technology will bring rather than to voice any religious or moral concerns.

The Rothblatt's slogan, "Death is Optional, Love is Essential, God is Technology" states their view boldly. Human technology is all powerful, in their view, and they are fully utopian on the possibilities. But what if the Singularity erases everything about our individual humanity that we value, as is threatened in the 2014 film *Transcendence*, in which another grieving widow's desire to resurrect her husband leads to a supercomputer that seeks to absorb everything? That prospect is not presented with hope there. As a science fiction fan, I found it especially odd that no dystopian visions about AI were even referenced. Does humanity have the ability to make moral decisions with all this technology? Martine says that the earth is fragile, and we have responsibilities towards it—but will we exercise that responsibility wisely? They suggest that we must evolve in compassion and social organization to match our technological ability—but that's the real trick. There isn't so much evidence in the world today that that is very likely to happen.

From the perspective of many religions, there has always been a danger in trusting too much in human ability. We refuse to admit our limits, especially our moral limits, and the idea that

we can be God has a tendency to go wrong—whether in fictional Doctor Frankensteins or real-life contributors to global warming, weapons of mass destruction, or toxic social media. One need not be a Luddite who fears all technology, but we are not all powerful, and perhaps we should not be. The Rothblatts, however, do not share that concern, as they "boldly go where no one has gone before." That sounded nice in the 1960s, but maybe they should watch a few more *Black Mirror* episodes in between those old *Star Trek* reruns.