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REAL HUMANS?
Affective imaginaries of the human and its Others in the Swedish TV series Äkta människor

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Abstract

According to the Swedish science fiction TV series *Äkta människor (Real Humans*, SVT and Matador film 2012-2014), humanoid robots called "hubots" are replacing the human workforce in care work and assembly line industries. Against the backdrop of current debates about immigration and citizenship in the Nordic countries, this article does a close, contextual reading of the series, exploring how the hubots influence work and family life. We are particularly interested in how hubots tie in with the cultural circulation of affect in relation to Otherness and how responses towards the "not-quite" human or dehumanized Other are negotiated in present-day Nordic cultural imaginaries. What kinds of affects are at stake in how *Äkta människor* takes up and interacts with debates about immigrant workers and the "not-quite" human? To answer these questions, the article develops the notion of "affective imaginaries" as an analytical tool for understanding the exchange between popular culture and political debate.

Keywords

Affective imaginaries • Humanoid robots • Care work • Not-quite-ness • Immigration

Introduction

According to the Swedish science fiction TV series *Äkta människor* (*Real Humans*, SVT and Matador film 2012-2014), humanoid robots called "hubots" are replacing the human workforce in many lines of work, including assembly line industries and care work. The series is set in a recognizable Nordic society, where the use of hubots has entered the daily lives of ordinary people, mostly as housekeepers, nannies, companions for the elderly, or personal trainers. The hubots are both welcomed as useful commodities and criticized for taking over human tasks and depersonalizing care work, pointing to often contradictory

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affects and attitudes in the face of change and what is perceived as different. In this article, we explore how the hubots in *Äkta människor* serve as *affective imaginaries* about "proper" care and "proper" humanness that tie in with ongoing debates about immigration, employment, technologies of care and citizenship in the Nordic countries.

We use affect as an umbrella term encompassing the interrelational workings of emotions, feelings and sentiments. Our approach therefore differs from theories that consider affect as purely precognitive bodily sensations and situate emotions or feelings as conscious experiences (see also Ahmed 2004; Wetherell 2012). Indeed, the definitions of "affects", "emotions" and "feelings" vary across disciplines, as do understandings of their differences or interconnectedness. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2004: 6-8), for instance, deems emotions and sensations as deeply intertwined, since cognitive experiences, estimations and prejudices have an effect on the way we are affected by the objects we encounter. Following Ahmed, we find it useful to use affect in reference to the complex interplay between the sensory responses and cognitive interpretations set into motion when one is affected by something – such as moving images on a television screen.

Inspired in particular by Ahmed's work (2000, 2004), we see affect as arising in relations and situations between bodies and entities, "sticking" to some more than others and giving rise to larger social, affectively informed imaginaries. As a case in point, it is difficult to watch *Äkta människor* without connecting it to the contemporary political situation in the Nordic countries (Yang 2018). Currently, debates about difference and immigration are arguably highly affective by way of invoking discourses of nationalism, paranoia and fear of the Other, particularly in relation to the organization of work and family. This, in turn, is leading to new breeding grounds for extremist viewpoints and a surge of neo-Nazi marches in several Nordic cities in recent years.

We argue that *Äkta människor*, as a Swedish science fiction series, does not simply mirror the radical surge of affects towards the figure of the Other in a Nordic context but rather addresses and questions how such imaginaries are produced and how we come to think of some lives, bodies and functions as Other. Following Ahmed's work on how affects circulate and travel, we suggest that *Äkta människor* invokes and makes use of specific affective structures and experiences, such as fear, sexualization, racism and disregard for certain types of lives. Our aim is to explore how imaginaries and narratives in *Äkta människor* simultaneously produce and rely on affective scenarios that unsettle and potentially challenge ongoing debates and discourses about difference and sameness in a contemporary Nordic context. Through a close reading of the hubots Odi (Alexander Stocks) and Anita/Mimi (Lisette Pagler), who both serve as household/care hubots in the series, we analyze how they function as *affective imaginaries* in connection to the world outside the text. In doing so, we are inspired by Lauren Berlant's work on cinema and sociocultural context: "The key here is not to see what happens to aesthetically mediated *characters* as equivalent to what happens to people but to see that in the affective *scenarios* of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life" (Berlant 2011: 9, emphasis in original). This relationality between imaginaries in popular culture and its broader social and cultural context informs our notion of affective imaginaries.

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Importantly, both Odi and Anita/Mimi are ambivalent characters that serve to highlight the social and political context in which they are mediated. Being hubots marks them as Other, as not-quite human. On the one hand, they invoke possible scenarios and broader imaginaries of posthuman care (deFalco 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), addressing ethical and political issues such as capacities for care and replacement of the traditional carer. On the other hand, Odi and Anita/Mimi are gendered and racialized in ways that allude to issues of structural inequality in the global care regime (Spanger 2018; Stubberud 2015), as well as to questions of racism and colonial power structures that construct the Other as someone "almost the same, but not quite" in relation to a universalized, Western subject (Bhabha 1984: 126). For our analysis, this universalized subject is also a human subject (Hellstrand 2016; Koistinen 2015a). Furthermore, Odi and Anita/Mimi arguably fail to represent a standard hubot, thereby challenging us to think differently about clear-cut boundaries between human and robot, women and men and "proper" citizens and immigrants. As affective imaginaries, then, these characters also bring out discourses of vulnerability, violence and exploitation as a matter of humanness, in light of being portrayed as non-human, yet humanoid, servants. Yet our close reading of *Äkta människor* shows that the series not only problematizes such boundaries, categories and discourses but also demonstrates *how* and in what way situations of vulnerability, violence and exploitation are produced. This marked ambivalence in these affective imaginaries is central to our analysis. Before turning to the analysis itself, we elaborate on the concept of affective imaginaries.

Science fiction, imaginaries and affects: theories and methodologies

The narrative of *Äkta människor* is set in an alternative Sweden that closely resembles the current Nordic societies, yet – with its humanoid robots – is not quite the same. Speculative fiction, particularly science fiction, has long histories of imagining our current society otherwise, either by offering utopias and dystopias or by creating alternative contemporary or near-contemporary parallel societies to the ones we live in. In doing this, speculative fictions create a particularly potent and multivalent space for addressing and thinking about particular debates, challenges and prevalent discourses in the current society, such as migration and structural differences (Hellstrand 2017; Koistinen 2017; Roberts 2006; Suvin 1980). This space is also an affective space (Vint 2013; also Koistinen 2015a: 48) as it allows for readers and viewers of speculative fiction to negotiate both personal emotions and contemporary, societal sentiments and attitudes in relation to imaginaries and discourses represented in a setting that is seemingly far from our lived realities. In line with this, our point of departure is that *Äkta människor*, as a science fiction series, is both product and producer of such affective imaginaries.

The notion of affective imaginaries allows for a conceptualization of how imaginaries in speculative fiction are intertwined not only with sociocultural narratives and imaginaries (Dawson 1994), but also with imagination (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002). This is in line

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with Ahmed's (2004: 14) suggestion that affects "move, stick and slide" between words, objects and people. For our purposes, we stress that affects move between and within imaginaries, ideologies and normative standards too. Through our reading of *Äkta människor*, we draw attention to the ways in which imaginaries in contemporary Nordic science fiction television are already situated in specific political, social, cultural, affective and bodily contexts. As such, the science fiction scenarios at stake here enable a discussion on what counts as human or as "proper" workers and carers, which in turn are issues subject to contemporary political debate. As we will see, affects play a central role here, since they let us examine ambivalent and not quite formulated sentiments and attitudes that nevertheless have real political, cultural and social consequences for specific bodies (Berlant 1997).

According to Ahmed (2004: 46-48), the way affects circulate culturally can also be used to create differences between what is considered "us" and "them". Thus, although affects are always elusive and ambivalent, and a direct causality between a specific image or narrative and a specific affect cannot be predicted (e.g. Tomkins 2008: 74), they are nevertheless evoked and experienced within a contextual and representational framework (Koistinen 2017; Rossi 2010). In *Äkta människor,* the hubots are doll-like in their appearance: their eye colour is more intense and vibrant than in humans, their hair is shiny and wig-like and their skin is flawless and smooth. They move just slightly slower than humans in a friendly, almost somnambulant manner. As such, *Äkta människor* draws on science fiction traditions for portraying humanoid robots to signal their difference from humans (Hellstrand 2016; cf. Koistinen 2015a). However, the hubots are positioned as a threat in the job market and as someone disturbing established family arrangements. Hence, their not-quite humanness marks them as narratively and affectively aligned with immigrants or foreign workers: someone who does not quite belong, someone in between and someone who could be threatening.

We are particularly concerned with how the hubots, as affective imaginaries, invoke the sensation of someone "almost the same, but not quite". In the series, the hubots are contrasted to traditional imaginaries of Swedish citizens both in terms of their doll-likeness and in their function as household servants. The human Swedish families portrayed in the series are predominantly white, and in spite of being middle- or working class, they can all afford a hubot. Thus, both hubots and Swedish citizens are stereotypes relying on established structures of domination, pointing to what is considered normal, and in this case, "properly" human, in contrast to what is not. According to postcolonial theorist Bhabha (1984), stereotypes concern both lived bodies and symbolic structures of differentiation, and their circulation evoke specific kinds of affects related to sentiments of difference and sameness. For Berlant (1997: 2), stereotypes and caricature, both in terms of political rhetoric and as imaginaries, "can have profound effects [...] on the ways people perceive their own social value and the social value of 'Others'". In the following, we explore not only how the ambivalent characters of *Äkta människor* make use of and produce stereotypes, but also how the affective imaginaries that are at stake can serve as a kind of resistance in that they make structural differences visible. Stereotypes, then, are imaginaries of difference,

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but, as we will argue, they also potentially challenge us and our relation to conventional Others affectively.

Affective imaginaries of difference and sameness

The two hubots in focus for this analysis, Odi and Anita/Mimi, simultaneously confirm and complicate affective imaginaries that co-construct Otherness in line with excessive technological advances, gender and race. Odi is embodied as a young man with intense artificial-looking blue eyes, fair skin and brown hair. At the beginning of the series, Odi works, or serves, as a carer and personal assistant for an elderly man, Lennart Engman (Sten Elfström). In spite of his somewhat boyish looks and open, naïve attitude, Odi is an old hubot model, evident in the opening scenes of the *Äkta människor* series when he starts malfunctioning in a supermarket. On the one hand, Odi's breakdown makes visible how much of an object, a commodity, hubots are and how they are treated as things that can be disposed of and replaced. On the other hand, Lennart's refusal to throw the faulty hubot away reveals a profound care, maybe even love, for his hubot companion. The relational affects between Lennart and Odi serve to humanize Odi and are, ultimately, what save him from being recycled. Lennart refuses to see his friend be dismantled, and throughout the series, Odi stays on as a somewhat unpredictable and emotive character.

The hubot Anita is a so-called standard household hubot given to the Engman family as a bonus when they are looking for a replacement for Odi. Anita is beautiful, young, female and East Asian in appearance, and the whole family quickly warms to her friendly and serviceable attitude. Her affect is calm, steady and warm, and in her "factory setting", she is wearing a shirt dress and hair band that make her look like a blend of a maid and a nurse from a bygone era. Her appearance is feminized and attentive, embodying a cuteness that both inspires protection and challenges ideas about maternal care as human (Leyda 2017). She becomes a welcomed member of the household where she acts as a housekeeper, homework helper and in-house babysitter. In the course of the series, however, it is revealed that Anita is a stolen hubot that has been reprogrammed and that there is another program with a different identity running underneath: that of the rogue Mimi who is capable of individual thought and even emotions.

Odi and Anita/Mimi are particularly interesting characters because they, in spite of their obvious "not-quite-ness," disturb a clear-cut imaginary of what Otherness might entail, what a hubot is and can be and how they differ from and relate to human beings. Where Anita/Mimi is aligned with established imaginaries of immigrant women, perhaps especially East Asian au pairs, sex workers and marriage migrants, Odi's failure to care "properly" alludes more to the gendered organization of care work, even in terms of posthuman care.

Although the hubots come in different models of varying colouring of hair, eyes and skin, they are bodily and socially marked as Other, as someone "almost the same, but not quite". For Bhabha, the problem inherent in such practices of differentiation is not distance

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Figure 1. The hubot Anita/Mimi. Photo: Johan Paulin. Photo credit: SVT.

but proximity (Bhabha, quoted in Hall and Wortham 1997: 63). Here, the proximity to a "real human" that the hubots in *Äkta människor* represent is precisely what produces and maintains their "not-quite-ness" or foreignness, as it were. This point is further illustrated in the series through a small group of rogue hubots, who have hacked themselves and broken free of their programmed servitude. These hubots attempt to pass as human by not revealing their hubot origins, and they seem to gradually shed the almost drugged quality of relating to the world that the non-revolutionary robots embody. This corresponds with their increasing awakening to making independent decisions, forming wishes and desires and deciding their own destinies independently of their programming. The double character of Anita/Mimi illustrates this: she becomes more animated and lively – and humanlike – when she is Mimi rather than the subservient Anita. In this respect, the rogue hubots, as well as Odi's relationship with Lennart, pose a disturbance to the orderly system of human/hubot relations or hierarchies. As Ahmed (2004: 65-66, 79) notes, the potential threat of the Other is connected to proximity or similarity: the possibility that the object of fear, the Other, may "pass by", unrecognized and unnoticed. As such, both Anita/Mimi and Odi can be said to also negotiate questions of sameness and difference, and challenge the idea of not-quite-ness by way of (re)claiming their identities and capacities as something in their own right.

Further, the hubots are portrayed as quietly replacing Swedish workers in care work and household management, as well as in manual industries and factory work. On the one hand, this can be seen as a take on immigrant workers being cheaper labour than Nordic citizens. On the other hand, the hubots relate to ongoing debates about robotic labour and social robotics, primarily in health and elderly care. According to Telotte (1999), the portrayal of advanced technology in science fiction draws on human fears of being replaced, or even surpassed, by robots and artificial intelligence. In *Äkta människor*, this

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fear of technological replacement is connected to contemporary imaginaries of foreign workers, particularly negotiated through the character Roger (Leif Andrée), a working-class Swede who experiences being pushed aside by hubots both at work and at home. As Koistinen (2015b: 417) notes, "the Hubots seem to infiltrate every field in Roger's life: his work and his family. They even disturb his relationship with his wife, who spends more time with her handsome personal trainer Hubot than her husband". In this sense, the affective imaginaries of the hubots also resonate with the fear of immigrants "taking" Nordic women away from the "proper" Nordic men.

Notably, the series' title is also the name of a political party in the series, established by humans who are scared of what the hubots represent. The fictional "Real Humans" party has an extremist wing that conducts violent attacks on hubots. This relates to the rise of nationalist parties in the Nordic countries such as the populist Finns Party (previously called "True Finns" with a clear semantic resonance with "Real Humans"), the Sweden Democrats and the newly established Danish party Hard Line, as well as more informal groupings, for example, Soldiers of Odin and the Nordic Resistance Movement. Similar to the Nordic nationalist movements, with their anti-immigrant rhetoric and occasional attacks on refugee centres, the fictional Real Humans party expresses comparable standpoints and actions, only directed at hubots. Although the general attitudes towards hubots vary from scepticism and reliance to curiosity, fear and even friendship and love, the hostile and undecided affects nevertheless "evoke allusions to social phenomena such as racism" (Koistinen 2015b: 417).

Here, Odi and Anita/Mimi serve as affective imaginaries that not only bring into play but also potentially challenge stereotypical imaginaries and embodiments of the foreign care- and household worker. Importantly, it is such workers taking over or replacing the "real" humans in the series that we read as relevant in relation to emerging discourses and affects concerning nationalism and "cultural conservation" in the Nordic countries. This is particularly interesting in light of ongoing changes in the health, care and welfare sector, where increased use of welfare technologies as well as increasing diversity among employees are put forth as solutions to projected staffing shortages and demographic changes (Danish White Paper 2018; NOU 2011: 11; Norwegian White Paper no. 29 2012-2013, SOU 2017: 21). In addition to advocating for technological solutions to ensure more home care and individualized care, all these governmental documents mention the recruitment of immigrants, men and partially trained workers in order to alleviate the projected staff shortages and to meet individual needs for care.

Narratives of care, violence and (not-quite) humanness

Invoking histories of the unpaid and often unappreciated labour of women and slaves, as well as (feminized) discourses of care and taking care of others – those others often being in more privileged positions than the care workers (hooks 2000: 81, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 8-9) – Odi and Anita/Mimi both fit with stereotypes of the not-quite-human care worker.

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However, care and caring is also closely connected to affect and empathy, something that is usually reserved for the "properly" human (Bhabha 1984; Braidotti 2013), making them particularly interesting as affective imaginaries in a contemporary Nordic context. However, the differences between Odi and Anita/Mimi in embodiment and level of functionality evoke affects and histories not only of care and caring capacities, but also of violence and exploitation that are important to our analysis.

When first introduced, Odi is represented through his relationship with the character Lennart, an elderly human man in need of a certain level of care and assistance. The relationship between Odi and Lennart is amicable and, albeit not mutual by conventional means, an example of relationships that Haraway (2003) has called companion species relations: a human/non-human relation that entails co-dependence and emotional ties. In this respect, Odi does not represent the traditional care worker but *care as companionship*. After Odi's breakdown in the supermarket, for example, Lennart tries to hide the fact that he did not throw Odi out but kept him in the basement with the hope that he would start working again. However, the rest of his family is more concerned with Odi's "proper" functionality than his companionability, and proceeds to buy Lennart a new hubot. The new care hubot is designed especially for geriatric care and is, in contrast to Odi, embodied as a mature, matronly woman, wearing a dress and apron indicating the occupation of a nurse or a housekeeper. Although the new hubot, Vera (Anki Larsson), is supposed to be a better, more efficient model than Odi, Lennart is not satisfied with her care and misses his old companion.

Odi's failure to function properly is at the heart of this character. However, his relationship with Lennart points to the fact that his level of functionality and his capacities for care are not necessarily restricted to conventional understanding of either functionality or care, and his role as care worker remains "ambivalent in significance and ontology", to paraphrase Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 1). This ambivalence is also visible in the many roles and functions he takes on after being separated from Lennart on a fishing trip, and then picked up and resold on the black market. Odi ends up working as a sex hubot and as an assistant at the amusement park Hub Battle Land, where humans can hunt and kill hubots for fun.[1] The multiple functions of Odi serve to underscore the ambivalence of this character, but also to make an interesting point about the ways in which he negotiates his not-quiteness: Odi fails to be finally defined or categorized. He fails or malfunctions in almost every role, indicating that his programming is less than adequate. It is in these failures to perform the role of a competent male care worker that his character adds comedy to the series. However, this also represents a kind of resistance, an opposition to mere programmability for hubots as well as a defiance of being categorized as "merely" a hubot. In this sense, Odi has a lot in common with Anita/Mimi.

Anita's character draws not only on stereotypical representations on gender and care work but specifically on those of East Asian women as both docile and sexually available (Haley 1998; Wang 2012; Zinzius 2005). In a Nordic context, this figure of the East Asian female is assembled through interlocking narratives about the domestic worker, the sex worker and the women who migrate through marriage (Andersen 2017; Spanger 2018;

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Figure 2. The hubot Odi. Photo: Johan Paulin. Photo credit: SVT.

Stubberud 2015). All of these positions are defined by their (intimate) labour for the white subject/family. As such, Anita/Mimi arguably represents a different form of care narrative from Odi: *care as servitude*.

The series' portrayal of Anita as both servile and sexual thus taps into well-known imaginaries as well as long histories of exploitation. As Stubberud notes in her work on Asian au pairs, "the au pair scheme is located in a broader history of servitude, colonialism, and slavery" (Stubberud 2015: 129). The figure of the Asian au pair is constructed as both exploitable and sexual. Stubberud analyses how "sexualized stereotypes of au pairs circulate culturally" (ibid.) through classifying Asian women as "the exotic" and vulnerable in a power relation with a white host family and the larger white community. Anita literally embodies this by having her settings customized to serve in both a household

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capacity and a sex work capacity. Although Anita's sex worker programming is never used, it is made clear that the men of the Engman family consider Anita sexually attractive. This combination also becomes acute in how she is represented in the series: as an East Asian body that stands out in a world of mostly white bodies, she is praised as a good care worker and continually sexualized by her environment. As such, her difference is doubly visible, both as a robot (non-human) and as a woman of colour (non-male, non-white). Through the figure of Anita/Mimi, the series thus deftly gives us a prime example of how the globalized care industry is racialized and how, as a consequence of this racialization, it posits certain versions of carers as more or less human (Yang 2017).

The alignment between gender, race and sexuality, and the "not-quite-ness" of specific bodies becomes visible most starkly and affectively in the portrayal of sexualized violence towards Anita/Mimi. In addition to being gendered and racialized in terms of care and servitude, her character also embodies histories of sexual violence. As a case in point, one scene portrays an attempted rape of Anita when some teenage boys follow her, push her into the shrubbery and begin to take off her clothes. Even though Anita/Mimi does not seem overtly shocked by the event, as her programming as Anita does not allow her to portray emotion, she does protest by asking the boys to stop. The rape attempt is stopped by Tobias Engman (Kåre Hedebrant), the son in the family who owns/employs Anita. The scene is focalized through the viewpoint of Tobias, who is in love with Anita. Thus, it is the gaze of a human, a white male gaze, that humanizes Anita, inviting the viewer to read her rape as rape. Arguably, the scene follows a racist and anthropocentric logic, where Anita is represented as a human not as an effect of her own emotion but as an effect of the white, human, male emotions invested in her.

Evoking Stubberud's work on the persistence of "the exotic" in representations of Asian au pairs, we therefore argue that the rape attempt is not just carried out (and read as such) because Anita is not a human being. Specifically, it reads as a rape attempt also because she looks like a particularly gendered and racialized human being, one who historically and culturally has occupied a position of availability and vulnerability in relation to white, Western men: a position of not-quite-ness (Bhabha 1984; see also Crenshaw 1991). Moreover, Koistinen (2017: 89-90) maintains that since the viewer knows that Anita also harbours an emotional, free-willed Mimi, this invites feeling uncomfortable about the rape because of Anita/Mimi's own feelings. This complicates the stereotypical representation of Anita/Mimi as a fetishized, not-quite human Other only seen through the eyes and affective imaginaries of a white male subject.

The violation of Anita/Mimi echoes a long tradition of objectification and dehumanizing of women. In her book *Are Women Human?*, Catharine McKinnon asks (2007) whether the global mistreatment of women could be possible were they considered fully human instead of things. In the history of science fiction, rendering robots violable also depends particularly on their embodiment as women (Hellstrand 2016; Koistinen 2017; Melzer 2006; Springer 1996). Moreover, by embodying a figure very similar to an East Asian immigrant worker, Anita is rendered vulnerable to being sexually exploited by people in powerful host positions. As Ahmed (2000: 8) argued, encounters in the present reopen encounters

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in the past, meaning that some bodies are recognized as Others in reference to the histories of encounters with similar kinds of bodies. Interestingly, Odi is also subjected to sexual violence while serving as a male sex worker for a time. However, in contrast to Anita/Mimi and her vulnerability in the face of sexualization and violence, Odi is portrayed as a caricature in bondage gear with a cheerful grin. The sense of carnival is so striking that the connection between vulnerability and masculinity disappears, underplaying the violence that might have befallen him and giving him over to the affective imaginary of comic relief yet again.

The multiplicity of care

In *Äkta människor*, jobs that conventionally fall to human women and immigrants tend to fall to robots. As such, the perceived threat of "them" taking over is embodied in a parallel manner by the hubots supplanting human workers and by making care work, specifically gendered care as servitude, the business of the "exotic Other" outside of the screen, such as au pairs of colour and immigrants. This resonates with the political calls for considering diversity in terms of recruiting future healthcare personnel in the Nordic countries. The field of health care has embraced the development and use of new technologies, leading care robots to be seen as a possible solution to a growing elderly population combined with fewer care workers and as a threat to human jobs (Ford 2015; Stafford et al. 2010). Both of these positions are present in *Äkta människor*: technology as solution underlies the creation and marketing of hubots *tout court*, and technology as threat is explored particularly through the storyline of Roger, who loses his job at the factory after the hubots take over all jobs but the management.

The issue of care work and caring in particular runs through *Äkta människor* as questions about the affective ability to care for someone, and about the affects surrounding care receivers. With the hubots portrayed as the newest and best technology within elderly care and housekeeping, they readily invoke imaginaries of the care robot. In this respect, the series discusses the gendering of care and the ethics of care technologies, particularly in terms of "who decides what kinds of care an elderly person needs, and who defines what is considered 'the right kind of' care" (Koistinen 2016: 103-104). The collision of multiple types of care is striking through the storyline of Lennart and his two care hubots. What is the right kind of care for Lennart, and who gets to decide? Lennart and his family have different answers to that question, and we are presented with quite different kinds of care through the affective imaginaries of Odi and Vera.

Vera is constructed as a white, middle-aged woman who embodies a stereotypical representation of feminine care, whereas Odi represents a young, playful and more irresponsible masculine counterpart. The fact that Vera is marketed as a "geriatric hubot" is indicative of a gendered care discourse promoted by hubot manufacturers. Here, traditional, feminine care is reasserted as the ultimate care in stark contrast to Odi's unreliable and flawed capacities. Where Vera is created for the very purpose of caring, Odi's origins are

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Figure 3. The hubots Vera and Lennart Engman. Photo: Johan Paulin. Photo credit: SVT.

more uncertain. Importantly, while Vera represents the prototype carer, Odi's male and young embodiment, combined with his not-quite functioning programming, links questions of unconventional care to masculinity, as well as to flawed training or unskilled work and young age. In light of this, Odi's capacities for care align with unskilled and temporary care work rather than sanctioned care. As such, *Äkta människor* challenges our existing affective imaginaries about "the carer" by questioning what kind of work "we" can trust to persons with low socioeconomic, class, gender and racial status. It also points to ongoing political debates about providing individualized care to people with minority backgrounds.

However, despite Vera being the allegedly ideal carer, it is in the homosocial bond with Odi that Lennart finds the more comfortable care (Orning and Hellstrand, forthcoming). Thus, Vera ultimately fails as the "perfect" carer and challenges the stereotype of care

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work as feminine. For Lennart, Odi's embodiment matters and is part of what makes the companionship ties strong. Because Odi does not fit with bodily features or programmed capacities for conventional care, his failure to meet with established standards arguably works to underscore the importance of individual needs and personalized, relational care. The relationship between Lennart and Odi, then, addresses contemporary debates on the ethics of care technologies and tailored care practices, while also illustrating that the notion of "'good care' [..] is never neutral" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 6).

Although Odi's role as (flawed) carer is the main focus in this section, we want to note how this serves to underscore how Anita/Mimi's care practices become invisible and taken for granted, like much care and domestic work traditionally has been (hooks 2000; Pettersen 2011). It is striking how Anita/Mimi, as a specifically gendered and racialized body, seems to be more "stuck" in conventional representations and narratives of care. Whereas Odi functions not only as caregiver but also as someone who receives care through his relationship with Lennart, Anita/Mimi receives far less than she gives. As Mimi, she is disconnected from the rogue hubots, who she considers to be family. As Anita, she is programmed to be docile and serviceable. Although the Engman family does provide some kind of care for her, when, for example, Tobias manages to stop the attempted rape, this care is fragile and erratic, and not foundational and companion-like as in the case of Odi. This contributes to the depiction of her character as solitary and conflicted (or double), without anyone to care for her. Importantly, Anita/Mimi's main function as gendered and racialized caregiver reinforces traditional narratives of altruistic and self-erasing care work in the affective imaginaries of the Other in the series.

Ambivalence: challenging stereotypes and established affective imaginaries

As we have seen in the analysis of the characters of Odi and Anita/Mimi, the use of stereotypes in *Äkta människor* works to invoke certain well-known affective imaginaries around human and non-human labour: Odi is the malfunctioning robot and male, untypical carer; Anita is the perfected, non-human version of the domestic worker. Both of them have the superhuman vibrancy of skin, eyes and hair and lack direct, quick contact with their surroundings. According to Bhabha, such markers of Otherness take part in maintaining colonial structures and hierarchies. Bhabha (1994: 94) argued that "the 'concept of fixity' [is key] in the ideological construction of otherness", as a way of making certain characteristics and functions stick rather than slide. As such, it is their looks and manners that deliberately set the hubots apart as almost the same but not quite, bodily marking them as Other. These visual markers of difference make them easy to spot and, for some, to dismiss, threaten, fear or persecute.

However, we want to highlight how Odi and Anita/Mimi on one level seem to embody a simple, easily categorizable Otherness, yet their relationships and capacities defies categorization on another level: Odi may be recognizable as "the malfunctioning robot",

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but even in his malfunction, he is a valued and affectionate companion to Lennart. The affective companionship between Lennart and Odi makes it impossible for both Lennart and us as viewers to accept handing Odi over to the recycling crew to be pulled apart. His social, lived role thus exceeds the pigeonhole he was made for and makes it difficult to pinpoint him in a final categorization. Here, the stereotypes in *Äkta människor* give way to a more complicated reading of the hubots as mere machines, by showing them in affective and affectionate relations with humans around them, humans who refuse to see them as not-quite human, as somehow less valuable on account of their status as hubots. Doing so, the series also utilizes the stereotype of humanizing machines through loving encounters in science fiction (see Koistinen 2015a). The result is that the affective imaginaries that surround gender, racialization and care work are challenged and encourage rethinking of how and between whom affective ties can be built. Failure, for example, is not a trait usually associated with care; yet, Odi's failure to be a "perfect" carer (in contrast to Vera) is precisely what makes him a good companion, and, potentially, more humanlike.

However, although Vera seems more readily categorizable than Odi, she too is resold to Hub Battle Land when the Engman family decides to dispose of her after Lennart's death. In this way, both Odi and Vera embody and enact particular stereotypes, yet at the same time defy them. As such, they make visible the tension between individual and multiple in which rests the ambivalence and affective discomfort employed by many narratives about humanoid robots. The character of Anita/Mimi is the clearest example of this particular ambivalence: she is not only one exemplar of many of the same hubot version, but also two characters in the same body: the docile, au pair-like Anita and the rogue, revolutionary Mimi. Similar to the character of Maeve in *Westworld* (see Orning and Hellstrand, forthcoming), Mimi has been overwritten to make her into a submissive, domestic worker. Anita/Mimi is thus an intriguing example of how multiplicity, not fixity, messes with established boundaries between others and other Others (Ahmed 2000). Which one is the more Other? Is it the machine-like Anita or the uncannily humanlike Mimi? The hubots, even the ones who seem straightforwardly "only a machine", therefore exist in the tension between stereotype and the unknowable or multiple.

In this tension between the multiple and the individual, and in the construction of certain lives as more or less human and consequently valuable, the similarities between the positioning of hubots in *Äkta människor* and immigrant workers in contemporary imaginaries are straightforward. By conceptualizing a group as a group only, individual identity and value are easily elided, making it possible to descend into stereotyping and assumptions based on superficial characteristics. The way the hubots are visually, narratively and affectively represented in the series clearly shows us the stereotypes but they simultaneously challenge us to see what Berlant (1997: 176) calls "incipient citizens". Berlant uses this term to point to how imaginaries of the future citizen, be it foetuses, cyborgs or new computer-generated imagery, serve to simultaneously represent and challenge "the nation", core national values and citizenship. In the very notion of incipient citizenship, there is both potential threat and potential promises for the future.

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In relation to the affective imaginaries at stake in the series and in contemporary Nordic debates, the hubots raise questions of normative citizenship and citizenship rights, in relation to questions of servitude, care and companionship. As representations of potential future care robots, they also draw out the inherent connections between gender, race, class and technology, as pointed out by Chasin (1995: 83) in her work on service machines: "the performance of humanness entails the activation of such identity markers as race, class, gender, and nationality, at least". Most notably, Odi and Anita/Mimi bring out the affective imaginaries surrounding the unconventional, gendered and sexualized, racialized Others. However, their ambivalent and at times indeterminate origins, roles and functions also challenge stereotypical conventions surrounding the fixity of the Other and what counts as not-quite humanness. Further, the ambivalence in/of these particular characters also complicates the very notion of stereotype as a generalizing of categorization and "fixing".

Conclusions

In this article, we argue that *Äkta människor* taps into relevant and timely discussions on Otherness and affective imaginaries of difference and sameness. More specifically, the ambivalence negotiated through the hubots actively addresses and questions how debates, discourses and imaginaries of the Other in the Nordic countries are produced, and the ways in which some lives, bodies and functions are affectively aligned as not-quite human. Following Ahmed (2004: 46), we have shown how imaginaries of difference, particularly around gender, race and excessive technology, are saturated or sticky with affective value in a given context. In *Äkta människor*, the tension between the portrayal of the "average" Swedish family and the hubots as unpaid care workers, sexualized immigrant women and threatening immigrant workers brings this to the fore. However, the affective imaginaries at stake also invoke a kind of resistance to these stereotypes, affectively and effectively challenging them. Therefore, affective imaginaries such as Odi and Anita/Mimi highlight the ambivalent, constructed and contextual nature of stereotypes and of humanity itself.

While discussions of Otherness and the boundaries of humanity are by no means new in the science fiction genre, *Äkta människor* is one of the first – if not the first – example of a shift towards the speculative in Nordic television storytelling. Previously, we have seen series such as *Riget* (*The Kingdom*, Denmark 1994-1997) and *Blindpassasjer* (*Marco Polo*, Norway 1978) but *Äkta människor*, with its first season premiering in 2012, marks a renewed interest of speculative television in the Nordic context. The series received awards and nominations as well as critical acclaim, and was eventually broadcast globally in almost 50 countries (SVTa, SVTb, SVTc). The success of the series even led to a UK remake, *Humans* (2015-ongoing). Thus, the affective imaginaries in *Äkta människor* are highly relevant for negotiating and imagining Otherness not only in the Nordic context, but globally as well. With this article, we draw attention to *Äkta människor* as a product and producer of affective imaginaries in fiction that challenge us to see the affective economies of our everyday lives

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differently, which makes fictional narratives powerful, political tools for thinking and feeling differently with the various Others we encounter.

Note

1. In this respect, *Äkta människor* echoes the TV series *Westworld* (HBO 2012-2018), where humans can visit the eponymous park to kill, have sex with and otherwise engage with subservient humanoid robots.

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