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Negotiating privilege and social inequality in an alternative Sweden: *Real Humans/Äkta Människor* (SVT, 2012–2013)

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes representations of privilege and social inequality in the science fiction TV series *Äkta människor* (*Real Humans*) (2012–2013), produced by Sweden's national public TV broadcaster (SVT). Set in the near future or a parallel present, *Real Humans* explores an alternative version of Sweden in which more and more human workers are replaced by a type of humanoid robot called “Hubots”. Reviewers and scholars have interpreted the series in light of various contemporary social and political issues, many of which pertain to not only technology, but also social inequality amongst humans. This article connects *Real Humans* specifically to the recent increase in paid domestic labor in Scandinavia, and argues that the series deals with moral conflicts associated with being privileged and outsourcing household and care work. This is especially evident in the series' representation of Inger Engman, a Swedish mother, wife, and full-time employee, and her ambivalent relationship to her household and care work Hubot Mimi. Through Inger and Mimi, *Real Humans* explores moral and affective dimensions of privilege, and brings to mind concerns expressed by parents in Scandinavia who employ domestic workers and au pairs. Inger's conflicted relationship to Mimi also evokes the concept of maternal guilt. As I show, *Real Humans* is one of several contemporary Scandinavian narratives that use the au pair figure to comment on social and gender inequality in a globalized age, yet the series stands out in its debt to the science fiction genre. In sum, *Real Humans* is not only a rare and noteworthy example of a Scandinavian science fiction TV series—it also invites the viewer to reflect on the connections between privilege, social (in)equality, and work in contemporary Scandinavia.

KEYWORDS

Privilege; guilt; care work; domestic work; au pair; Scandinavia; Sweden; egalitarianism; science fiction; TV

Egalitarianism—whether understood as social equality in general, or gender equality in particular—is often seen as a key political ideal in Scandinavia (Bendixsen, Bringslid, and Vike 2018, 9). Norway, Sweden, and Denmark are seen as promoting policies that help citizens to reconcile work and family life and to divide care work and household chores equally between men and women. At the same time, recent decades has also seen a rise in the use of paid domestic services in Europe, including Scandinavia (Gullikstad, Kristensen, and Ringrose 2016, 3). Besides the fact that domestic labor is often underpaid, demanding labor, there is also “a tendency for those buying domestic labour to be positioned within the Global North/West, and those selling it within the Global South/East”, according to the editors of *Paid Migrant Domestic Labour in a Changing Europe: Questions of Gender Equality and Citizenship* (Gullikstad, Kristensen, and Ringrose 2016; 6; see also Anderson 2000; Cox 2006). That paying for domestic work services is becoming more common in Scandinavia thus brings into view how Scandinavian labor markets are entangled in global inequality. It also raises questions about the role of egalitarianism, and the extent to which gender

equality in Scandinavian welfare state societies rests on Scandinavian citizens being relatively economically privileged.

This article discusses a recent Swedish TV series that grapples with moral conflicts associated with being privileged and outsourcing household and care work. *Äkta människor* (*Real Humans*) (Lundström ([2012] 2013), a science fiction TV series that aired on SVT1 in 2012, is set in the future or a parallel present, and explores an alternative version of Sweden in which a type of humanoid robot (referred to as “Hubots”) is becoming an increasingly ubiquitous part of society.¹ Through its depiction of human-Hubot relationships, the series not only touches on the impact of robotics on human societies, but also raises questions about the perceived commitment to egalitarianism in contemporary Scandinavia. Hubots function as substitutes for human workers in a range of sectors and areas of life, and are mass-produced and legal, although still relatively expensive. To ordinary consumers, the machines are marketed as guilt-free solutions to everyday problems and as a means for fulfilling one's deep-seated fantasies. This can be gleaned from the series' first episode, in which we see a brief TV advert for a household work Hubot. As the tagline for the advert has it, the Hubot “takes care of the day-to-day chores—while



Figure 1. The Engmans and Mimi in *Real Humans* (from the left: Sofia, Tobias, Matilda, Hans, Mimi, Inger). © Johan Paulin/SVT/TT Nyhetsbyrå/NTB scanpix.

you can focus on what *really* matters”.² Unlike this commercial, which presents a purely idyllic scenario, the series as a whole suggests that Hubots, and the act of outsourcing work to them, comes with possibilities as well as problems. These possibilities and problems pertain not only to the fact that Hubots are machines. Indeed, while the series can be interpreted literally—as a story about the influence of robotics, artificial intelligence (A.I.), transhumanism, and biotechnology—*Real Humans* can also usefully be understood as a social critique of contemporary Scandinavia.

This article shows how *Real Humans* touches on a tension between egalitarian values, on the one hand, and the use of paid domestic work services, on the other. The series thematizes this tension through its representation of Inger Engman (Pia Halvorsen), a lawyer, wife, and mother of three, and her ambivalent relationship to the care work and household Hubot who works for her family (Figure 1). Inger’s conflicted relationship to Mimi (Lisette Pagler), as the Hubot is called, can be seen in light of cultural sociologist Rachel Sherman’s (2017) research on the moral and affective dimensions of privilege, and to psychological research on experiences of guilt among employed mothers in Sweden (Elvin-Nowak 1999; Elvin-Nowak 2001). Inger’s ambivalence also brings to mind concerns expressed by real parents in Scandinavia who employ domestic workers and struggle with how to reconcile a belief in egalitarian values, on the one hand, with their decision to pay for domestic work, on the other (Gavanas 2010; Sollund 2010). By connecting *Real Humans* to these studies on privilege, guilt, and care work, the article illuminates how popular culture in contemporary Scandinavia grapples with the meaning of egalitarianism and illuminates moral conflicts associated with being privileged. It also argues that *Real Humans* is one of several recent Scandinavian

narratives that use the figure of the au pair to comment on social and gender inequalities in an age of globalization (see Oxfeldt *Forthcoming*). Finally, given the dearth of science fiction TV series produced in Scandinavia (not least when compared to crime TV series), this article also sheds light on how *Real Humans* draws on conventions in the science fiction genre in order to comment on topical socio-political issues in contemporary Scandinavia.

Real humans

Written and created by Lars Lundström and co-directed by Harald Hamrell and Levan Akin, the first season of *Real Humans* consists of ten one-hour-long episodes, and was co-produced by SVT and the Swedish production company Matador Films. Cultural studies scholar Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, one of the few academics who has written about the series, describes the first season as “both a critical and commercial success” and “a true rarity” in Scandinavia, given how few science fiction TV series are produced in the region (2015, 414).³ Indeed, while the series draws on a range of genres, such as crime, comedy, and drama (Majsa 2014; Mountfort 2018, 67), its debt to science fiction is evident on various levels. For one, in setting its plot in an imagined future or alternative present and focusing on Hubots, the series exemplifies what film scholar Annette Kuhn calls “surface conventions of plot and iconography” in science fiction (1999, 3), specifically the use of “temporal displacement” and the robot as a symbolic figure (Kuhn 1990, 4–5). Thematically, the series explores long-standing issues in sci-fi literature, film, and TV, including what constitutes humanity and human consciousness, and the impact of technology on human self-understanding, human societies, and

personal relationships. *Real Humans* brings to mind pivotal works in the science fiction genre—ranging from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* ([1818] 2003) (deemed the world’s first science fiction novel) to films like *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang [1927] 2010) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott [1982] 2012), and TV series such as *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009), *Westworld* (HBO, 2016–), and the ever-expanding *Star Trek* media franchise.⁴

Since the primary function of Hubots is to work for humans, *Real Humans* foregrounds the topic of work and, like many sci-fi narratives before it, invites the viewer to consider the questions: For what purposes, to whose benefits, and at what cost, is robot technology introduced and used? As current research and public debates on robotics and A.I. suggest, the impact of robotics on human employment is one of the most pressing questions with which the world is faced today (Stone et al. 2016, 8, 38; see also Markoff 2016; Boffey 2017). Creator of *Real Humans* Lars Lundström states in an interview with the Swedish newspaper *Dagen* that he does not have a political agenda, and that *Real Humans* is “just a reflection of our society” (Mattebo 2012).⁵ Yet, he notably goes on to say: “But when one thinks about how society may be transformed by Hubots, it does have political implications for us. Like when it comes to the labor market. After all, people lose their jobs . . .” (Mattebo 2012). *Real Humans* most evidently touches on the issue of unemployment through the characters Roger (Leif André) and Malte (Jimmy Lindström), two white, Swedish, middle-aged men who embody the fear that robots will put humans out of work. Yet, as I show later in this article, Inger’s life is also dramatically altered by the arrival of Mimi and the fact that Mimi takes over much of the (unpaid) care work Inger previously did.

Narratively speaking, the series deals with a wide gallery of protagonists (both human and Hubot), but generally follows three, central narrative threads. The first storyline revolves around a group of unusually advanced Hubots—or “liberated Hubots”, as they call themselves—who have escaped the laboratory in which they were designed. Their escape follows the death of David Eischer, a lone scientist who symbolizes the “Frankenstein figure” in the series (Mountfort 2018, 69).⁶ Unlike ordinary mass-produced Hubots, the liberated Hubots may have the capacity to think, feel, dream, and revolt, thus making them a fascinating, yet monstrous mix between human and robot (the word “Hubot” is itself a portmanteau of “human” and “robot”). That Mimi belongs to the liberated Hubots is established in the opening of the first episode, when she is kidnapped and dramatically split off from the rest of the group. Later, Mimi is illegally sold to the owner of Hubot Market, a retail store selling Hubots, and consequently ends up becoming the Engman family’s housework and

care work Hubot.⁷ The other two narrative threads each revolves around a white Swedish family, one of whom is Inger Engman’s family, while the other is the family of Roger, whom I mentioned earlier (see Koistinen 2015 for more on Roger’s function in the series). Through these two families, *Real Humans* explores how ordinary people’s lives are altered by the use of care robots and home robots (home robots refer to robots that do housework, but also various kinds of entertainment robots, e.g. robots that provide social interaction and/or sexual services).⁸

As mentioned, *Real Humans* encourages the viewer to see human-Hubot relationships in light of power relations between humans. The political context in which *Real Humans* was made partly explains why the series has been regarded as not only dealing with humans and robots, but also with the ways in which humans have exerted—and continue to exert—power over certain individuals and groups by categorizing some humans as “real humans” and others as less-than-human. *Real Humans* was released not long after the 2010 Swedish parliamentary election, in which Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) made historically huge gains and won representation in the Swedish *Riksdag* (i.e. the national legislature and supreme decision-making body) for the first time in history. According to Koistinen, the animosity that certain human characters have towards Hubots can be connected to “the hostile attitudes towards immigrants and the surge of neo-nationalist or patriotic political parties in the Nordic area and other European countries” (2015, 417). More generally, she argues, *Real Humans* is a good example of science fiction’s “potential to address cultural anxieties” (2015, 416). As she suggests, the series evokes associations to, among other social phenomena: racism, unemployment and alienation, the social construction of normative sexuality, human rights, and human trafficking and prostitution (2015, 417–418; see also Mountfort 2018, 66–67). To compare, reviewers in the Swedish press have interpreted the Hubots as underpaid and abused workers in the contemporary era and/or as human slaves in the past. Lina Mattebo of *Dagen* writes that Hubots recall the history of slavery and racism, as well as global inequalities and racism in the present (2012), while Eva Åström of *Norrbottens-Kuriren* states that the treatment of Hubots makes one think of apartheid and slavery in the past (2012; see also Lundin 2012; Platenik 2014; Bergesen 2015).

That the Hubots have been interpreted symbolically is also a product of audience expectations towards science fiction as a genre. As Kuhn notes, “among popular fictional genres,” “science fiction above all appears to solicit critical commentary of a sociological kind” (1999, 3). Moreover, the series casts human actors in the roles of the Hubots and makes the latter appear distinctly anthropomorphic. In short, while Hubots

may move and talk in a stilted manner, and have certain “robotic” behavioral tics and eye colors that look unnatural (by human standards), they nevertheless look noticeably human-like. As suggested earlier, the series also uses the liberated Hubots, in particular, to blur the boundary between human and Hubot by suggesting that they may (like humans) be sentient and conscious. Finally, *Real Humans* also contains several dialogues that deal with the treatment of Hubots but refer to racism, discrimination, or slavery in human history. This further connects the fictional Hubots to victimized and exploited humans. To illustrate, in the sixth episode, Åsa, a (human) priest, gives a sermon in which she tries to stir compassion for Hubots amongst the congregation by explicitly comparing Hubots to enslaved Africans in the past. She also talks of Hubots as if they were workers who do the dirty and dangerous jobs that privileged people can afford to outsource, thus bringing to mind the numerous workers in the contemporary world who do jobs describes as “the 3Ds”: dirty, difficult, and dangerous work. Dialogues such as these appear throughout the series, and encourage the viewer to perceive the Hubots as allegorical stand-ins for vulnerable humans, including exploited workers.

Negotiating privilege in a Swedish family

When introduced at the start of the series, Inger Engman and her family are positioned as relatively privileged due to Inger’s job as a lawyer, their comfortable, middle-class home, and the fact that Inger’s father Lennart (Sten Elfström) has a Hubot that takes care of him. A dialogue between Inger and her husband Hans (Johan Paulsen) in the first episode revolves around Lennart and his need for a new care work Hubot. For the last few years, a Hubot has taken care of Lennart, even becoming his friend, but the Hubot has now begun to malfunction. The conversation between Inger and Hans suggests that Hubots are relatively expensive (and thus, that the Engmans must be economically privileged if they can discuss whether to buy a new Hubot).⁹ The dialogue is also important because it shows how Inger feels conflicted about mixing Hubot technology with intimate, familial relationships. Working full time as a lawyer, she does not have time to care for her father herself, yet the thought of delegating the care to someone else—or, in this case, to *something* else—appears to give Inger a bad conscience, to use Hans’s words.

While Inger ultimately decides to get a new Hubot, the choice clearly makes her feel uneasy and foreshadows her discomfort when faced with a second, larger dilemma—namely, whether to accept that a Hubot, i.e. Mimi, should become part of her own home. Hans acquires Mimi when he visits the retail store Hubot Market to buy a Hubot for Lennart and is offered Mimi as a freebie. Oblivious to the fact that Mimi’s is stolen goods, Hans and his children unbox the Hubot and follow the instructions from the

retail store, giving their new Hubot a name (“Anita”).¹⁰ When Inger comes home from work to discover that the family has a Hubot, she is shocked and objects to having a machine raise her children. However, due to pressure from her family, who seem more excited than worried about having Mimi around, Inger gradually approves that they at least try out the Hubot. Meanwhile, Mimi immediately takes up the role as a domestic worker, maid, and/or servant in the household, unaware that she has a second identity as a liberated Hubot.

Mimi’s arrival affects the lives of everyone in the Engman family: Depending on whether it is Hans or Inger, the two teenagers Tobias and Matilda (Natalie Minnevik), or young Sofia (Aline Palmstierna) who interacts with the Hubot, Mimi is variously perceived as a commodity or piece of property, a servant, friend, or family member, and an (unattainable) love interest, or an object of sexual desire.¹¹ While each of the five family members projects his or her own needs and fears onto Mimi, Inger’s ambivalent relationship to Mimi most explicitly addresses the moral dilemmas associated with being privileged and outsourcing household and care work. On the one hand, Mimi relieves Inger and Hans of household chores and thus, at least in theory, makes their lives (and that of their children) easier. On the other hand, Mimi also triggers concerns on Inger’s part that her children might become spoiled or entitled from having a servant-like Hubot around. Thus, being able to delegate everyday tasks to Mimi is convenient, but there is also something disconcerting about having someone (or something) else clean the house, do the laundry, care for the children, and more. Through Inger’s relationship to Mimi, then, *Real Humans* explores how privileged people, especially parents in privileged families, grapple with their own advantaged positions and that of their children.

Inger’s fear of raising entitled children is conveyed in a light-hearted and slightly comical scene near the end of the first episode. It is morning, we are at the Engman family’s house, and Inger has just walked into the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee only to discover that the kitchen table is set with a full breakfast, thanks to Mimi. Alone in the kitchen with Mimi, Inger is about to sit down at the table when Mimi comes and gently pulls out the chair for her (which makes Inger somewhat uncomfortable). Soon after, Sofia (who is of primary-school age), arrives and starts to ask Mimi for favors. Looking at Mimi, Sofia asks: “Can I have the blue spoon?” Next, a medium close-up shows Mimi smiling calmly, nodding, and walking towards the kitchen drawers to get the spoon. The camera then tilts down to Sofia, who adds: “Then can you scratch my back?”. Cut to a medium close-up of Inger, who looks shocked. “Sofia!” she says, so as to shush her daughter. “They do that. Alice and her family have a Hubot”, Sofia replies in her defense. The problem is, of course, that Sofia is right: Hubots do take orders from humans—that is what they are designed to do.

The scene in the kitchen, then, touches on the difficult question: How do you teach children to not take their privileges for granted? Feeling uncomfortable with the fact that Sofia is treating Mimi like a servant, Inger tries to set boundaries for how Sofia should behave despite—or because of—Mimi’s presence in their home. Similarly, in the third episode, Inger says to her family that while they can keep Mimi, everyone still has to do their usual chores, and adds that Mimi also needs to have time off. The latter is presented as a puzzling statement: After all, Mimi is incapable of feeling tired and has been reprogrammed to have no real desires of her own. Inger’s behavior also comes across as paradoxical in another sense: On the one hand, she tries to ensure that they do not become entitled but on the other hand, she also allows important material entitlements (i.e. Mimi) to become a part of their everyday lives. Inger’s behavior can be usefully understood in light of Sherman’s (2017) sociological research on privilege and the ways in which being privileged is, for some, shaped by moral conflict. As Sherman finds in her sociological study on elite families in New York, parents she interviewed showed a concern “with inhabiting their privilege in a morally worthy way” (10). She also notes that “[c]oncerns over how to be a morally worthy privileged person surfaced especially strongly in the case of children”, as parents exhibited a fear that “their kids would take [their] *class advantages* for granted” (2). To grapple with this fear, parents use various strategies in order to create “an *appropriate habitus of privilege*”, as Sherman calls it—that is, a habitus “in which children are moderate in their consumption, hardworking, and ‘aware’ of their advantages” (10).¹²

While Sherman’s respondents are real parents in New York (and, moreover, far wealthier than Inger in *Real Humans*), it is noteworthy that Inger, like Sherman’s respondents, grapples with how to be both privileged and a morally good person, and that she struggles to ensure that her children will not become entitled. As importantly, Inger’s behavior visualizes one of the conclusions that Sherman draws in her study: that when parents want to prevent their children from behaving like entitled brats, they often attempt to manage “behavioral and affective ‘entitlement,’” but do not necessarily change the “material entitlement” of their children (2017, 29). The tendency Sherman describes here is visualized in *Real Humans* through Inger’s attempt at teaching her children how to treat Mimi well, without actually limiting her children’s entitlements.

So far, I have described the fear of raising entitled children as if it were Inger’s responsibility, not that of Hans. I have done this deliberately in order to reflect how *Real Humans*, at least initially, represents precisely Inger as the one who worries about the children’s upbringing. (At the start of the series, Hans appears

excited rather than worried about the prospect of having a household Hubot. Only later in the series, when Tobias falls in love with Mimi, and consequently becomes a sexual minority in society, does Hans become skeptical of Mimi and start to see her as a problem.) The fear of raising entitled children never explicitly becomes a worry on Hans’s part. In this sense, *Real Humans* exemplifies a more general tendency to assume that the raising of children, also in Scandinavia, is a mother’s responsibility (see Cox 2006, 132). Research on domestic services in Sweden suggests that discourses in Sweden often frame issues surrounding private domestic services as “women’s issues” (Cousins and Tang 2004; Björnberg 2002; cited in Gavanoas 2010, 117).

Moral discourses on domestic work in contemporary Scandinavia

More generally, the representation of Inger and Mimi’s relationship can also be discussed in light of broader tendencies in contemporary Sweden and Scandinavia, specifically the recent rise in the use of paid domestic services. Inger’s reluctance to admit that a new hierarchy has become part of her home—where humans are at the top, and the Hubot at the bottom—connects *Real Humans* to contradictions between a perceived commitment to gender equality in Scandinavia and the implications of purchasing domestic work services. According to Anna Gavanoas, who has researched migrant domestic work in Sweden, “[t]he mere idea of private domestic workers [in Sweden] goes against the grain of social democratic and feminist traditions, as well as cultural preferences for public care” (2010, 117).¹³ In Sweden, tensions between “egalitarian ideals on the one hand and the needs of working parents on the other” became especially evident the 1990s, during a debate that has since been called *pigdebatten* (the “maid debate”), according to Gavanoas (2010, 118). Described as a “morally and ideological[ly] charged” debate (Kvist and Peterson 2010, 192), the maid debate revolved around a proposal that suggested private households be allowed to claim tax credits on domestic work (Kvist and Peterson 2010, 191–912; see also Gavanoas 2006). In 2007, the questions raised in the maid debate took center stage again, when a new law on tax deductions on domestic services was officially implemented. As sociologist Ellinor Platzer notes, the 2007 law was preceded by “years of ideological debates about whether it should be acceptable to employ domestic workers at all, and if so, who was going to pay for it” (2010, 167). While *Real Humans* does not refer explicitly to the maid debate, the series was made in the wake of these discussions, and touches on the moral conflicts associated with domestic work services in Sweden (and in Scandinavia in general).

Inger's ambivalent response to having a servant figure in her home is strikingly similar to concerns expressed by real parents in Scandinavia who hire domestic workers or au pairs. According to recent sociological studies conducted in Norway (Kristensen 2015; Sollund 2010) and Sweden (Gavanas 2006; Gavanas 2010), parents who hire domestic workers or au pairs have an ambivalent relationship to their employees, and grapple with how to reconcile, on the one hand, their own decisions to pay for domestic work and, on the other, Scandinavian cultural ideas of social equality and sameness. In her study of employers of au pairs in Norway, criminologist Ragnhild Sollund notes that several informants "[explain] their au pair's role to their children so that they would *not* regard the au pair as a *servant*" (2010, 153). To cite one of Sollund's informants:

... my children started to say, 'We have a maid.' And I felt hot and cold with embarrassment and I made it very clear that it is called 'au pair' ... so there is nothing for the children to feel ashamed of, but I notice that I am very afraid of being perceived as a cold, cynical, exploitative person, because I am not! But I know many people think that about those who have au pairs from the Philippines. (2010, 153)

Sollund's informant explicitly mentions embarrassment, shame, and a fear of being perceived as exploitative. In *Real Humans*, these emotions are not mentioned by name, but appear in the form of ambivalent interactions between Inger and Mimi. Through exploring this relationship, the series touches on how attempts at negotiating privilege may, in the Scandinavian context, be especially shaped by the awareness of egalitarian ideals.

In the company of guilt

The representation of Mimi in *Real Humans* can be understood within a larger body of contemporary Scandinavian narratives that use an au pair (or, in the case of Mimi, an au pair-like figure) to thematize global inequality. As scholar of Nordic literature Elisabeth Oxfeldt notes in her article "I Come from Crap Country and You Come from Luxury Country: Ugly Encounters in Scandinavian Au-Pair Novels", several recent novels from Norway, Sweden and Denmark revolve around au pairs and their hosts or host families, and represent the au pair as a "guilt-triggering" figure that "rais[es] questions of femininity, feminism and global sisterhood" (forthcoming, 2). Drawing on Sianne Ngai's (2005) concept of "ugly feelings", Oxfeldt examines how these novels depict what she calls the "ugly encounters" between "the Scandinavian woman" and "the suffering Other". As she suggests, the au pair figure can be connected to Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russel Hochschild's discussion of the "global woman" in the 21st century, specifically the fact that "[t]he lifestyles of

the First World are made possible by a global transfer of the services associated with a wife's traditional role—child care, homemaking, and sex—from poor countries to rich ones" (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002, 4, cited in Oxfeldt *Forthcoming*).¹⁴ While Oxfeldt's examples are novels, her discussion of the au pair as a "guilt-triggering figure" also fits well with Mimi. In casting Lisette Pagler, a Swedish actress and Korean adoptee, in the role as Mimi, *Real Humans* touches on what geographer Rosie Cox calls a "new global domestic labour market" (2006, 13). More specifically, the series hints at the fact that many domestic workers in contemporary Scandinavia are precisely women from Asian countries (including the Philippines).¹⁵

The guilt feelings Mimi seems to trigger in Inger have specifically to do with the latter's own role as an employed mother trying to balance work and family life. To illustrate, in the second episode, a dialogue between Inger and her youngest daughter draws attention to how Inger (i.e. the biological human mother) seems to feel inferior when she compares herself with Mimi, the surrogate Hubot mother. Set in Sofia's bedroom, the dialogue opens with Sofia and Inger sitting in Sofia's bed. They are getting ready to read a bedtime story, and the scene by and large cuts between close-ups of mother and daughter as they discuss whether Inger or Mimi should read the story. While moving between close-ups of Inger and Sofia, the viewer's attention is drawn to Inger (and her discomfort) in particular. During the dialogue, Sofia asks her mother if Mimi—or "Anita," as she calls her—can read the bedtime story instead. When Inger eventually gets up to get the Hubot, Sofia looks up at her mother and says: "She's never in a rush like you are." Inger pauses, looks at her daughter, sits down again, and tries to explain: "I'm just a little tired, darling." "You're always tired," Sofia replies. Inger smiles, and says that she is not always tired. Sofia, who embodies the idea of the child who has to tell the truth: "A lot of times you are." Inger then calmly asks Sofia once more whether she or the Hubot should read the story. Again, Sofia picks the Hubot.

This dialogue between Inger and Sofia uses the contrast between Inger and Mimi to highlight Inger's struggle to balance work and family life. As the series repeatedly shows, Mimi is able to work more or less incessantly (as long as her batteries are recharged every evening), and also appears to be endlessly patient, given that she does not have the (human) capacity to get annoyed and feel undervalued as a caretaker. Meanwhile, Inger is often depicted as having to work over-time in her job as a lawyer, and as not always being able to keep track of what is going on with her children. To viewers in Scandinavia, the scene may bring to mind discussions on the "time bind" or "time squeeze"—a term that is, especially in Norway, closely associated with the dual earner model for gender equality (Kristensen 2015, 209) and public debates

on the everyday, practical challenges of reconciling work and family (see also Ellingsæter 2005). Inger's situation is compounded by a fear that Mimi will replace her in her role as a mother. While guilt is never explicitly mentioned in the scene, Inger's dialogue with her daughter evokes associations to guilt feelings on the part of employed mothers, or what psychologists such as Jean-Anne Sutherland refer to as "maternal guilt" (2010). Within the Swedish context, psychologist Ylva Elvin-Nowak's 2001 study *I sällskap med skulden: om den moderna mammans vardag* finds that guilt feelings among employed mothers in Sweden is a common phenomenon (see also Elvin-Nowak 1999).

That Mimi is a Hubot (as opposed to an actual human au pair or domestic worker) makes an important difference in this scene, and evidently sets *Real Humans* apart from the novels examined by Oxfeldt. While Inger (and her limitations as a human mother) is contrasted with Mimi, the latter is not represented as an idealized mother but rather, as an embodiment of an artificial and unrealistic mothering ideal. By virtue of being an always-present, always-attentive, but ultimately manufactured maternal figure, Mimi functions as a social critique—a reminder of what real, human mothers cannot achieve. Moreover, besides being a machine, Mimi has also had her memory wiped, been programmed to be a housework and care work Hubot, and thus essentially forgotten who she is and what she wants. In short, the constructedness of Mimi's maternal role contrasts with the flesh-and-blood Inger, who can feel fatigued, has needs of her own, and is far more fallible. That fallibility is, however, what makes her human: a "real human", to invoke the title of the series. (That Inger can feel guilty about her own limitations only further underscores her humanity.) In sum, Inger's struggle to be there for Sofia and her fear that Mimi may replace her in her role as a mother thus not only draws attention to Inger's predicament as an employed mother. It also uses Mimi the Hubot to highlight the fact that a maternal figure that is always present and never tired is an unattainable goal—that is, lest human mothers become more like machines and, in the process, arguably less like humans.

Conclusion

By exploring a future or alternative version of Sweden, *Real Humans* is able to temporally displace contemporary issues that pertain to technology, social inequality, gender roles, and many other issues. Indeed, while evidently speculating on the potential impact of robotics, *Real Humans* can and has been discussed in relation to various social issues in contemporary Scandinavia. In this article, I have focused on the ways that Inger and

Mimi's relationship functions as a social commentary on the connections between privilege, the outsourcing of work, egalitarianism, and feelings of ambivalence and guilt. As discussed above, this relationship can be understood in light of sociological research on parents who employ domestic workers in Scandinavia and in other contexts in the Global North—specifically, in light of concerns expressed by parents who pay for someone to clean their home or watch their children, on the one hand, and worry that such transactions challenge their self-understanding as egalitarian, morally good people. By connecting research on privilege and domestic work to the representation of Inger and Mimi in *Real Humans*, this article shows that contemporary popular culture in Scandinavia grapples with moral conflicts related to being privileged and outsourcing household and care work. As importantly, it sheds light on the ways that science fiction—when adapted to Scandinavian

TV—can raise questions about not only the future impact of technology. The series also illustrates a key characteristic of science fiction in general, as literary scholar Fredric Jameson describes it: "Science Fiction is generally understood as the attempt to imagine unimaginable futures. But its deepest subject may in fact be our own historical present" (2007, 345). Likewise, in *Real Humans*, what is at issue is not only the future, but the important tensions in Scandinavian societies in the present.

Notes

1. There are altogether two seasons of *Real Humans* (the second of which was released in 2013). This article focuses only on the first season, and any mention of *Real Humans* thus refers to the first season unless otherwise stated.
2. The voice in the TV advert speaks in British English, while the dialogue in the rest of *Real Humans* is primarily in Swedish. When I cite dialogue from the series in this article in English, I use the English subtitles from the official DVD.
3. *Real Humans* has won several awards at international festivals, been sold to almost 50 countries, and led to an English-language, British-American remake called *Humans* (Channel 4 [2015] 2016) (Koistinen 2015, 414–415).
4. In *Real Humans*, several humans develop romantic or sexual relationships with Hubots. The theme of human-robot relationships harks back to *Blade Runner* and to the short novel which inspired the film, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). The same theme has also been the subject of several popular sci-fi films from recent years, such as *Her* (Spike Jonze [2013] 2014) and *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland [2014] 2015). Besides these thematic links to the science fiction genre, *Real Humans* also

- includes various intertextual references to earlier science fiction films and TV series (see Koistinen 2015, 416).
5. My translation. All translations from the Scandinavian languages into English are my own.
 6. Accompanying these Hubots is Leo Eischer, a young white male who is part human and part machine (i.e. a cyborg) and the son of David Eischer. Taken together, the liberated Hubots and Leo constitute a family of sorts, as we learn through the various flashbacks that are scattered throughout the season, but Leo's status as a cyborg clearly sets him apart. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss Leo's character, and *Real Humans* in general, in light of Donna J. Haraway's famous "Cyborg Manifesto" essay (Haraway [1985] 2016a), Haraway's provocative analysis of the cyborg and its relationship to feminism (see also Haraway [2003] 2016b) are fruitful avenues for further discussion.
 7. See Koistinen (2016) for a discussion of care work robots in *Real Humans*, specifically the representation of elderly care. As she notes, the series touches on key issues in debates on elderly care in contemporary Finland, including the question of whether "the person receiving care has the right to choose what sort of care they want" (2016, 102–3). For more on the topic of elderly care in Scandinavia, see Marklund's article in this volume.
 8. I borrow the terms *care robot*, *home robot* and *entertainment robot* from the article "A Literature Review of New Robotics: Automation from Love to War" (Royakkers and van Est 2015), which traces robotics developments in five areas—the home, health care, traffic, the police force, and the army—and explores societal issues raised by the new robotics. Because some of the liberated Hubots, e.g. Niska (Eva Röse), the self-proclaimed leader of the group, have a propensity for violence, *Real Humans* also touches on the topic of "killer robots", or armed military robots and autonomous robots.
 9. The same theme also crops up later in the series, as seen in the eighth episode when the teenage son in the Engman family, Tobias (Kåre Hedebrant), hangs out with a girl from school who is classed as middle-class or working class (in contrast to the somewhat more privileged Tobias). Walking down the street in Tobias's neighborhood in the evening, Tobias's classmate asks him whether everyone in his neighborhood has a Hubot, and says: "Mom says she's gonna buy one. She says it all the time, as if she could afford one".
 10. To avoid confusion, I will continue to refer to the Hubot as Mimi rather than using her second name, Anita.
 11. Media studies scholar Julia Leyda problematizes the representation of Mimi in *Real Humans* in her chapter on contemporary narratives about "fembots" (i.e. feminized robots), arguing that *Real Humans* echoes "familiar narratives about male employers and female domestics, as well as the 'Western' male fetishization of allegedly hyperfeminine, submissive Asian women" (2016, 167). Leyda's critique can be situated within the emerging research on race and race relations in science fiction (e.g. Nama 2008; Lavender 2011). Leyda's analysis of Mimi can also be connected to gender studies scholar Elisabeth Stubberud's (2015) analysis of Norwegian media representations of au pairs, and what she considers a tendency to frame au pairs as feminized, victimized, and sexualized figures.
 12. The strategies Sherman observes include *creating limits* for their children (e.g. "regulating their consumption and behavior"), and *exposing* them to "their advantages relative to others, in the hope of inculcating appreciation for what they have and a sense of obligation to those with less" (2017, 10).
 13. As Gavanas notes, "[f]or many decades, Sweden has been considered an international role model in terms of its work versus family reconciliation policies, encouraging women's labour force participation as well as providing relatively high levels of benefits for parental leave and (...) public day care services" (2010, 117).
 14. Oxfeldt examines the three novels *Fågelbovägen 32* (Sara Kadefors 2006), *Jeg kommer snart* (Selma Lønning Aarø 2013) and *Tilfeldets gud* (Kirsten Thorup 2011), and connects them to the contemporary Scandinavian context and to the happiness discourse of the *World Happiness Reports*. Her key question is the extent to which these "au-pair novels", as she calls them, "respond to a sense of guilt at being privileged (i.e. 'ScanGuilt')" in contemporary Scandinavia (Oxfeldt *Forthcoming*).
 15. Since 2004, most au pairs working in Norway come from the Philippines (followed by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, albeit with significantly lower numbers) (Gullikstad and Annfelt 2016, 66). Similarly, statistics from Denmark in 2008 suggest that most au pairs working in Denmark came from the Philippines (followed by Ukraine, Russia, Brazil, and Thailand) (Stenum 2010, 24).

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Notes on contributor



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