
WHAT WOULD MAKE A ROBOT SAD?

ROBOT WERTHER VS. MARVIN THE PARANOID ANDROID

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In this paper, I compare two fictional artificial agents who appeared on television in the 1980s in the USSR and in the UK. Despite their unrelated cultural genealogy, both characters project the similar emotion of sadness from the screen. First and foremost, I focus on the robot Werther from the Soviet children's TV series *Visitor from the Future* (1985). This character subverts several stereotypes in representation of artificial intelligence: he possesses high emotional intelligence, as well as the ability to make independent decisions and moral judgements. His equally subversive British counterpart is Marvin the Paranoid Android from the fictional universe of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, namely from the 1981 TV series: unique human-like personality of this robot is defined by his inability to achieve satisfaction of any kind. These two representations of sad, melancholic and depressed robots are united by the fact that neither of them has a fulfilling job. I argue that this trope mirrors the popular human fear of robots taking over human jobs, resulting in "technological unemployment" of human workers, and more generally, losing one's purpose in life. If designers and developers assume their responsibility for well-being of artificial beings that they create, they should be able to predict scenarios when robots become sad, depressed or even suicidal for the same reasons as humans do.

Keywords: Soviet cinema, artificial intelligence, robots, media representation, utopia

Introduction: Thinking one hundred years ahead

Soviet science fiction cinema has a long history, but a relatively limited catalog of released films. Even though *Aelita: Queen of Mars* (Protazanov 1924) was a creative breakthrough in sci-fi cinema worldwide, Soviet critics still panned it for its political ambivalence. In general, fantastic themes in film were scarce before the Thaw began in the 1950s. The following generation of directors produced a limited number of ideologically immaculate, albeit visually inventive films. These 'Soviet space operas' owed their existence and relatively generous budgets to success of the Soviet space program (Fedorov 2017, Majsova 2020). The most daring example, *Planet of the Storms* (Klushantsev 1962), featured one of the first robot characters with a unique personality, Robot John (Majsova 2020). Still, he was rather an ideological caricature: a comical defendant of capitalism who eventually had served the higher purpose of Soviet science.

The late 1970s and the early 1980s mark the last generation of Soviet science fiction films. These films introduced more relatable and emotionally complex characters, which was also true for robots and other AI agents. The best-known landmark of this period, *Per Aspera ad Astra* (Viktorov 1981), featured the alien female cyborg Niia as a protagonist, and this character has not her relevance even today. For the first time in Soviet science fiction, Niia delivered a strong ecocritical message (Majsova 2020) to the audience hungry for space exploration. Niia's planet is dying because its resources are exhausted, and it makes her very sad¹. Niia became one of the most memorable manifestations of the trope that still permeates in global science fiction: an extraordinarily powerful AI agent who develops human-like feelings and emotions on their journey to become 'the real human' (Gulin 2016). Another famous character of the same kind was the artificial boy *Elektronik* from the beloved children's TV film *Adventures of Elektronik* (Bromberg 1979) (Kukulin 2008), although his story was more similar to the modern reinterpretation of *Pinocchio*. The most original and memorable

¹ Much later, Luc Besson will introduce a very similar motif in *The Fifth Element* (1997).

artificial mind appeared in one of the last Soviet TV films in the genre of science fiction.

Visitor from the Future (Arsenov 1985), a children's TV film series in 5 episodes produced in 1984-1985, is the final milestone in this series of prominent late Soviet science fiction films for children (Kostyukevich 2020, p.144). It was based on the book *One Hundred Years Ahead* (1978) by the prolific science fiction writer Kir Bulychev, the leading author of Soviet children's science fiction literature. Kir Bulychev himself belonged to the same generation as the famous Strugatsky brothers and came to prominence during the Khrushchev Thaw (Csicsery-Ronay 2004, Gulin 2021). He was also a cowriter of the script for the film *Per Aspera ad Astra* mentioned above. As a children's author, Bulychev is best known as the creator of the character of the exceptionally smart and brave girl Alisa Selezneva. She is the main character in a long series of books created by Bulychev, some of which were adapted for screen, such as the classical feature-length animated film *The Mystery of the Third Planet* (Kachanov 1981). In general, the fictional universe explored in Alisa's adventures was a major part of children's science fiction in the USSR.

Alisa lives in a futuristic space utopia and spends her time traveling across the universe together with her father, a cosmobiologist. In this bright far away future, everything is possible, including both time and space travel. In *One Hundred Years Ahead*, as well as in its adaptation *Visitor from the Future*, Alisa travels back in time from 2084 to 1984 to retrieve her father's device that allows humans to communicate with non-human animals. During her journey, she meets the ordinary Soviet boy Kolya Gerasimov and his friends, and they help her to fight space pirates who came after the device. In the final battle, children are joined by their friend, the kind and sensitive robot Werther, who helps them escape by sacrificing himself. This tragic scene remains in memories of many Soviet children, influenced their concept of artificial intelligence and robots in the future.

In this paper, I will focus on one particular character from one of the many fictional universes that Bulychev created: robot Werther, as he appears in *Visitor from the Future*. Speaking of

Western pop culture of the same period, it was also the time when Marvin the Paranoid Android entered the cultural consciousness in the UK, after his appearance in the fictional universe of Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams. Arguably, robot Werther became an equally prominent figure in the cultural consciousness of the USSR almost at the same time.

“I can tell you are not really interested”: the place of robots in fictional societies

Werther as an artificial bureaucrat

Scientific research was often presented as a noble and even heroic task in the Soviet society, and rightfully so (Lipovetsky 2017). Its more mundane aspects were sometimes discussed in satirical magazines but rarely addressed in more productive manner. Still, these aspects found their way into the Soviet science fiction as the material for comedy and irony, such as *Monday Begins on Saturday* (1965), the satirical novel by the famous Strugatsky brothers that is sometimes labeled 'the first Soviet fantasy novel'. This novel also inspired the much-loved Soviet fairy tale film *The Magicians* (Bromberg 1982). Events of the film take place at the imaginary Research Institute of Wizardry and Magic, a research institution that studies supernatural forces and events. Apart from human researchers, this institution also employs magical beings such as Baba Yaga and a talking cat. This example demonstrates the possibility of cooperation between human and non-human (or super-human) persons in the imagined utopian future. Still, both the novel and the film provided a pointed critique of Soviet research institutes: their bureaucratization, detachment from reality, and lack of opportunities for junior, ideologically ambiguous or otherwise less privileged scholars.

Notorious bureaucracy was probably the only feature of the Soviet state that its regime allowed to criticize from within (see e.g. Pakulski 1986, p.11). To sociologists from the West, it also represented a conceptual problem: as it appeared in practice, Soviet administrative organization did not fully align with the classical understanding of bureaucracy proposed by Max Weber,

due to its inefficiency and totalitarian tendencies. According to Max Weber, the characteristic principle of bureaucracy is “the abstract regularity of the exercise of authority” (Weber 2003, p. 22), which is based on scripted rules, rather than direct power. In his view, “Bureaucracy inevitably accompanies modern mass democracy” (ibid.), as opposed to decentralized self-government of small groups of people. To Jan Pakulski, the main problems with Soviet bureaucracy were legal uncertainty and dominance of direct power over scripted rules, i.e. “Legal norms do not seem to be binding for the security services combating political nonconformity” (Pakulski 1986, p. 7). Besides, the spheres of responsibility are not clearly defined, and administration of an organization is often based on informal ties and falsification. Finally, even middle level managers in technical spheres such as lead engineers and chief physicians are appointed ‘from above’ by the Communist Party functionaries (ibid, p. 10).

From this perspective, depiction of bureaucracy in science fiction films such as *The Magicians* and especially *Visitor from the Future* acquire almost utopian qualities: the rules are scripted and (mostly) obeyed, spheres of responsibility are clearly demarcated, and, most importantly for our case, the resulting administrative systems represent equal and just societies of the future. It may be the ideal type of a ‘monocratic bureaucracy’. In Weber’s words, we observe “the leveling of the governed in face of the governing and bureaucratically articulated group” (Weber 2003, p.23), which means, in our case, that human and non-human agents are treated equally by the power of regulations and rules. Even bureaucracy is benign and just in this imagined future.

Werther first appears as a rather minor character in Bulychev’s novels; he is first introduced as a fully fleshed out comical character in *Visitor from the Future*. Werther is a human-like ‘biorobot’, although there is an air of artificiality about him. To convey non-human nature of Werther, the actor Evgeniy Gerasimov invented a slow and heavy walk, as if he was made of metal, and the trademark deadpan laugh, which is perceived as comical in more light-hearted scenes, but ironic or even tragic in the scenes with higher emotional stakes. At all times, Werther’s speech is slow and exaggeratedly ‘mechanical’, which is the

feature inherited from the common stereotype of a robot in Soviet film (Korosteleva 2019).

Kolya: Are you joking?

Robot Werther (with a deadpan expression): Do I look like a joker?

Robot Werther works as a janitor at the Institute of Time in the future year 2084 - a quite depressing duty, given his abilities and inclinations. Among other tasks, he keeps the inventory of the Institute's Museum collection in order. Werther explains his work ethics with commitment, if not passion: "Our descendants will not forgive us if we allow chaos in the documentation".

Employing a robotic bureaucrat is no more a novelty in our time. Artificial Intelligence solutions are widely used to streamline decision processes in private firms and public institutions. This leads to the question of peaceful and productive cooperation of human and non-human agents in organizations. One possible way to see it is to imagine AI agents as autonomous 'artificial bureaucrats' working alongside humans, and to set goals and standards that should be achievable in cooperation between them. This concept was proposed by Justin Bullock and Kyoungcheol Kim (Bullock & Kim 2020), who base it on the Weberian foundation. In this sense, an artificial bureaucrat is an AI agent employed in a hybrid (human and nonhuman) working environment to facilitate mundane administrative tasks. This environment supports plurality of possible decisions and a hierarchical chain of command. In such organization, "AI systems may be considered as individual agents making and executing decisions rather than simply being operated by humans utilizing them as mere tools" (Bullock & Kim 2020, p.30).

In terms of Bullock and Kim (2020), the Institute of Time where Robot Werther works becomes a utopian model of a "multiagent bureaucratic system". Here, humans and AI agents cooperate with the intention to achieve a common goal (in this particular case, conduct historical research). In a Weberian sense, Werther is the bureaucrat by vocation (Beruf): following the rules is what he was made to do, and he fully devotes himself to it. In his

monologues, however, Werther constantly repeats that he cannot go on like this. It appears that his human colleagues openly dislike him for his scrupulousness. They call him a bureaucrat in a derogatory tone, although his only intention was to make them follow best working practices.

Here, Werther subverts the stereotype of a robotic servant once again. Despite being a robot, he is inherently a good colleague with a kind, caring personality. In that, Robot Werther expresses human traits that are usually reserved for human agents in posthuman bureaucracies (Bullock & Kim 2020): selfless loyalty to his senior colleague Polina, a strong sense of personal responsibility, as well as the ability to reflect on the boundaries of his own responsibility when other agents are involved. As further development of his character demonstrates, this kind and sensitive robot has his own strong moral compass that defines his unique character and influence his decisions, allowing him to fully own them, as well as their consequences.

According to the prospective vision of a hybrid multi-agent bureaucratic system, “joint persistent goals and joint intention help to build a system of multiagent actors that, for example, might coordinate and co-work to deliver public services” (Bullock & Kim 2020, p. 32). Unfortunately, goals and intentions of human and non-human agents do not align even at the fictional Institute of Time: young and vivacious human coworkers want to relax and have fun rather than follow the formalities. It causes Werther emotional distress: in his own words, his colleagues “are never able to return one by one, “which would be the least that they could do to respect his job. Werther values social responsibility first and foremost - the quality that his human colleagues sometimes lack. However, Werther’s inclination to always follow the procedure is not absolute: it does not influence decision-making in important situations, and Werther is able to feel happy and free when he goes against the procedure for a good reason: “What a lovely day it was”, - he recalls, after having broken the rules in order to make a human boy happy.

Marvin and Werther are two of the same kind

While Soviet filmmakers had some level of access to foreign films, as Werther's origins will demonstrate, it is highly unlikely that they could familiarize themselves with the production of BBC. And yet, *Visitor from the Future* (1985) shares a number of aesthetic qualities and narrative elements with *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1981). Some of these similarities are imposed by the limitations of the TV medium, such as the almost identical curved corridors at the Institute of Time (*Visitor from the Future*) and in the Heart of Gold spaceship (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*). Warping the perspective is a common trick used in TV shooting sets to create the illusion of a much larger space in a small studio. Other similar features can be traced down to common tropes and forms of media such as scientific documentaries. Truthful to the genre conventions of TV series, each episode of *Visitor from the Future* begins with a recap of previous events. As a part of such recap, the introduction to the third episode includes a humorous reference to the fictional "The Encyclopedia of Inventions, 2082". This Encyclopedia describes 'melophone', a telepathic device central to the plot of the film. The voice over narration sounds somewhat ironic: "With the help of melophone, you can read the thoughts of any living being, provided that they have any thoughts". Even stronger ironic tone is used in the TV adaptation of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which also parodies educational and pop science TV programs.

Next, both Marvin the Paranoid Android and Robot Werther are introduced in the almost identical manner in their respective series. They both appear walking slowly and unnaturally heavily along the aforementioned curved corridor. Moreover, the first thing viewers learn about each of the characters is that they are unhappy with their job. Job dissatisfaction dramatically affects personalities of both characters across the rest of their stories and makes them much less fun to be with. One particularly toxic consequence is that both Marvin and Werther behave in a passive aggressive way when speaking to their seniors, and both imply that they are too sophisticated for the mundane tasks that they are presented with.

Werther, with a grave expression: Who am I? A janitor! Nobody loves me, nobody needs me.

Marvin: Here I am, brain the size of a planet, and they ask me to pick up a piece of paper.

Finally, both AI agents seem much happier (which means not gravely unhappy in the case of Marvin), and even make better decisions, when they operate at their own discretion. It appears as if writers and directors from two completely different and somewhat isolated cultures have modeled two fictional artificial intelligent beings who have to deal with similar problems.

“Sensitive nature and exquisite psychic organization”: emotional intelligence of robotic characters

Werther: “Boy, are you a romantic?”

To the educated viewer, the name of robot Werther already frames him as a very particular cultural type, tied to the German Romantic tradition. It is a direct reference to *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The original young Werther committed suicide on the grounds of unrequited love. Although his artificial namesake has a different destiny, they both subvert the canon by prioritizing their inner feelings over the hard 'ratio'. Even the linguistic analysis of Werther's persona reveals that, unlike a stereotypical robot, he is focused on himself and his own private emotional sphere (Korosteleva 2019).

Similar to the character of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Robot Werther describes himself as a person of “sensitive nature and exquisite psychic organization”². Werther is well versed in

² By the way, is Werther queer? His unnatural blonde wig and a tight silver jumpsuit set him far apart from the normative expression of masculinity in Soviet cinema. It appears that Werther's haircut and other stylistic choices were inspired by *War of the Robots* (1978), an unremarkable specimen of Star Wars-inspired Italian trash. The film critic Howard Hughes still distinguishes this film among

European art: for example, he is interested in the Spanish romantic painter Francisco Goya. “We also have our own Goya!”, - his new friend Kolya Gerasimov replies arrogantly. He supposedly refers to Goya’s “Portrait of Doña Antonia Zarate” (1811), which was given to Hermitage by the controversial American oil tycoon Armand Hammer³ in 1972 in exchange for a more valuable masterpiece by Kasimir Malevich (Epstein & Hammer 1996, pp. 294–295). Such a snobbish dialogue in a children’s TV film probably speaks to the dual audience of children and their parents, which was common in Soviet cinema. Even in the late USSR, young teenagers would rather be interested in detective stories than in high art; such as, Kolya Gerasimov’s classmate, Kolya Sadovsky, is a big fan of detective stories, and he is determined to reveal the secret of the space pirates with the Sherlockian ‘deductive method’.

On the other hand, this presumed ‘art snobbery’ accompanies Kolya’s deep interest in romantic poetry. In the cultural climate of the late Soviet academia, this echoes the ideological conflict between ‘physicists’ and ‘lyricists’, e.g. humanities and natural sciences (Lipovetsky 2017; Vol’kenshtein 1977). This somewhat convoluted academic argument had been simmering in public discussion spaces since the Thaw. The real reason for it, as Mark Lipovetsky suggests, lay in deep disappointment with the thoroughly ideologized role of literature and arts, which squandered the potential of creative workers in the Socialist society. Same as other conflicts that had plagued humankind in the historical past, this confrontation between different schools is already resolved in the happy and prosperous universe of Visitor from the Future that lies just one hundred years ahead. Here, both ‘physicists’ and ‘lyricists’ are equally important, because they combine their efforts to contribute to the progress of humankind. Remarkably, both Kolya Gerasimov and robot Werther represent ‘lyricists’ in this symbolic confrontation.

others for “passable costumes” in his substantial guide on Italian cinema: “gold suits and blond wigs, a shiny, glam rock Abba tribute” (Hughes 2011, p. 117). Based on that, and assuming that Werther, as a robot, is asexual, he inherited his queer fashion from the Italian disco culture.

³ Also, the grand-grandfather of the now infamous actor Armand Hammer.

After having witnessed one of Werther's passionate monologues about futility of his life and work, Kolya acknowledges and encourages Werther's romantic lust for adventure. At that moment, Werther's attitude towards Kolya changes from treating him as an 'inventory object' to sincere emotional connection. Werther is touched and inspired, so he allows the boy to take a quick tour around the future Moscow as in 2084. "Boy, are you a romantic?" - Werther asks Kolya directly before letting him go. As he admits, he would give half of his life to get the same opportunity as Kolya, and he gets even more excited when he learns that space pirates are involved.

Robot Werther, to himself: Why wouldn't I really quit my job?
Am I not a romantic? Am I worse than Kolya? I'll just go to the
past, and I will have something to remember when they finally
send me to the junk yard, ha ha ha.

As an indirect reference to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Robot Werther is also tragically in love with Polina, his superior. She works as a senior researcher at the Institute of Time and, as it appears in the finale, does the job of an invincible space ranger on the side. At the beginning of the film, this affection is presented as more of a pose, reminiscent of the classical character of the sad white clown Pierrot (Korosteleva 2019). Even though Werther is not always willing to follow Polina's instructions, he secretly writes poetry about her: "I literally pray to her" - he admits to Kolya. Eventually, it is revealed that Werther's affection is also the source of his morality, when Kolya accidentally follows Polina to the future, Werther is worried about her reputation first; he cares about her even more than about the procedure and the rules.

Polina herself is human (as far as the viewers know, although there is a good reason to suspect that she is, in fact, a super-powerful android). Whatever the case may be, her beauty is superhuman by all standards. Moreover, the 'Martian-looking' model and actress Yelena Metyolkina who plays Polina, also plays supernaturally powerful cyborg Niia in *Per Aspera ad Astra*. Incidentally, both films are based on works of Bulychiev, although they do not share the same fantastic universe. Most importantly, these characters represent female superheroes in Soviet science fiction (a career that exceptionally strong and smart Alisa

Selezneva may consider when she grows up). These super-intelligent and super-strong female characters represent a stark contrast with the archetypal masculine Cyborg Hunter, the default role for an AI agent in the American pop culture of the 1980s (Rushing & Frentz 1995).

As for Robot Werther, he may not look like Terminator in any way, especially at the beginning, but he is capable of putting up a real fight when children are in danger, as it is revealed in the finale. Following the trope at least as old as Pinocchio (1883), Werther only becomes truly human after he makes a free and informed decision to sacrifice himself for the sake of others. Before that happens, narrator in the film refers to Robot Werther as “kind, romantically inclined Robot Werther” and even “the humane Robot Werther”. Niia in *Per Aspera ad Astra* actualizes the same trope when she makes the altruistic choice to save her planet, which makes her, in the words of Igor Gulin, “a female Christlike saint” (Gulin 2016). In general, Soviet science fiction eagerly invites interpretations based in religious spirituality, as we will see once again in Conclusion.

Marvin: “Call that job satisfaction, because I don’t”

Robot Werther and robot Marvin first appeared on the small screen right at the peak between two ‘AI winters’ (Bastani 2019, p. 75; Pagallo, Corrales, Fenwick, & Forgo 2018), when researchers and developers felt particularly inspired with the future of artificial intelligence. AI ethics, however, belonged to the speculative domain at that time. Almost two decades had to pass before the domain of ‘robo-ethics’ would emerge, and the concept of robot rights would be recognized (Gunkel 2019). It should be noted here that popular culture provided slightly different perspective on robo-ethics in the USA and in the USSR. Soviet regime retained many authoritarian features even during Perestroika, but late Soviet popular culture provided a more nuanced perspective on artificial intelligence and robot rights, at least, in works of fiction such as *Per Aspera ad Astra*, *Adventures of Elektronik*, and *Visitor from the Future*. This should not come as a surprise: access to American science fiction was relatively limited before Perestroika, and the Soviet audience was first exposed to the most critical examples of it. For example, many

young Soviet readers were first introduced to robo-ethics in *The Velvet Glove*, a short story by Harry Harrison from his *War with the Robots* collection (1962), first translated into Russian in 1969 and re-published again in 1989 in a very popular collected volume under the title *The Unemployed Robot*. This fantastic story presents social critique of the labor market in a capitalist state, where intelligent robotic employees stand as a metaphor for racial inequality (Harrison 2009). This critical message allowed this story to cross the Iron Curtain during the Thaw. In the meantime, depictions of robots in Soviet film have mostly been sympathetic and humane, in contrast with the iconic American characters such as Terminator from the franchise of the same name, replicants from *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), or even HAL 9000 from *2001: The Space Odyssey* (Kubrick 1968).

In this relation, the British *Hitchhiker's Guide* finds itself somewhere in between the American and the Soviet version of early AI ethics. Although Douglas Adams was rather critical of capitalism, robot rights were not always respected in his multiverses. While robot Werther can enjoy stable employment in a Utopian welfare state, Marvin is still technically a property, a robotic servant of the eccentric space pirate Zaphod. At least, Werther has the upper word over his human coworkers within his area of responsibility; conversely, Marvin's competence is always ignored by his clueless master and other humans. In society, Marvin is not a person, but a product, advertised as "Your plastic pal who's fun to be with", by the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation. He is equipped with superintelligence, but it is, sadly, not valuable in itself: just an extra feature to increase his value as a commodity. In this regard, Marvin's fate can be compared to that of a particularly 'smart' device such as a 'flagman' smartphone with high computational benchmarks that will hardly ever be employed for a meaningful purpose. This incredibly smart and sentient device is in possession of the human who makes particularly bad decisions throughout the whole history of the world created by Douglas Adams. "Life! Don't talk to me about life", Marvin repeats bitterly in the radio and TV versions of his story.

At least, in this relatively progressive future, robots are not just capable of, but also allowed, to have feelings and openly express

them⁴. Marvin's most recognizable trait, his depression, signifies that he is not just super-intelligent, but also a super-emotional artificial agent. At first sight, it may seem that Marvin does not care about anyone's feelings: instead, he demands unrealistic level of respect that would be proportional to his enormous intelligence (he repeatedly refers to himself as "brain the size of a planet"). Unlike creative and soulful, even if quirky, Werther, Marvin sees himself as a rational being first and foremost. While Werther idolizes his female supervisor, Marvin expresses a different - or, may we say, completely indifferent attitude to his female boss Trillian. In a broader context, existence of Marvin likely frees Trillian from the common limitations of a female character and allows her to take the role of the second commander at the ship, but this also means the unbridgeable gap between their statuses. In the TV version, Trillian initially expresses care about Marvin and offers him tasks to "occupy his mind". "It won't work. I have an exceptionally large mind", - he replies sourly. We might ask ourselves whether Marvin the Paranoid Android has ever been in love, but this possibility is never present in the TV version of his story.

This lack of emotional intelligence is detrimental not just for Marvin's own well-being, but also for his social life. Having internalized the idea of 'intellectual superiority' and rationality, Marvin never learns to manage his own feelings, which he definitely has in spades. Neither can he understand the feelings of others - unlike Werther, who is fully proficient in acknowledging the position of the other, as the linguistic analysis of his speech demonstrates (Korosteleva 2019, p. 88). To compensate for his low emotional intelligence, Marvin regularly asks people around him whether he makes them feel bad. "I would not like to think I'm getting you down", he repeats, sometimes adding: "Pardon me for breathing - which I never do anyway" (Adams 1985, p. 45). There is still the chance for Marvin to evolve as a person. Toxicity of his character seems to be more

4 It may be worth reminding that artificial replicants in *Blade Runner* (1982) are fiercely passionate in contrast to the behaviour that is expected from 'real humans'. Notably, Rachael becomes more emotionally expressive after she realises that she is a replicant. (Rushing & Frentz 1995, p. 158)

pronounced in the early TV version, but it is less prominent in the book version and almost unnoticeable in the film adaptation in 2005. In the third volume of the book series Marvin even writes poetry, which may symbolize gradually coming to terms with his overwhelming emotions (Adams 2008, p. 196).

After many adventures and challenges, both robots face existential choice, which makes their lives ultimately meaningful in the end. They sacrifice themselves to save their human friends - at least, this is what happens to them in the TV versions of their otherwise much longer media journeys. Still, two robots do it with a completely different attitude. Robot Werther openly confronts space pirates, and his metallic body destroyed in a flashy battle. This is his personal existential choice, and he does it for the children whom he befriended, without any hesitation. Marvin, to the contrary makes it all about himself ⁵. He has to be left behind to save the rest of the team from the ship that is going to collide with a star, and no wonder he is reluctant to go on his saving mission. Eventually, Marvin accepts this fate; still, he breaks the fourth wall and goes into a long passive aggressive monologue that somewhat diminishes the value of his heroic deed.

Will freedom from work make us free?

The robotic soul and its body-machine

Not all robots are sad in the fictional worlds that are analyzed here. To the contrary, most fictional AI agents seem to find fulfilment in their jobs, such as Eddie, the annoyingly cheerful shipboard computer on the spaceship Heart of Gold in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Sentient talking doors on the same spaceship make even better examples. These mechanical doors get (allegedly) genuine satisfaction from their job: "It is their pleasure to open for you, and their satisfaction to close again with the knowledge of a job well done" (Adams 1985, p. 45), Marvin explains, stressing the shallowness of such 'job satisfaction'. In his mind, serving people is an incredibly trivial duty compared to

⁵ Marvin seems to become gradually more devoted to his human colleagues in the book version and in the 2004 film, even though this quality remains hidden behind his sulky facade.

the search for meaning of life, the Universe, and everything. Regardless, the doors are perfectly happy about their place in the world: they see their mission in life as being helpful, and they do not feel estranged from their vocation. Their form, function, and the type of intelligence they possess are perfectly aligned with the ordinary task that they perform, which cannot be said about Marvin.

The audience of *Visitor from the Future* also gets to know a number of helpful AI agents, when Kolya Gerasimov accidentally travels to the future in the first and second episodes. To start from, the time traveling machine instructs him how to use it. Its command to ‘take a deep breath’ parodies the tone of a typical instructor for morning exercises, or ‘gymnastics’, on the radio, - the everyday routine in the USSR. The voice (male, by the way - yet another sign of higher gender equality, at least, in the 1980s) asks Kolya to close his eyes and warns, in a more human-like tone, “No peeking!” when Kolya tries to cheat. This AI agent is not much more than a voice assistant, but it is already used to dishonest behavior of humans. Unfortunately, he is not able to recognize the deceitful space pirates and sends them to the past without asking anything.

Even though disembodied secondary AI characters are not much more than voice assistants in both TV films, there is a healthy proportion of male and female voices, none of them ‘othered’ by allusions to power relations between genders, races or age groups, as it is often the case with robotic voices in real life (Mannisto-Funk & Sihvonen 2018; Atanasoski & Vora 2019). Another robotic assistant can be found at the intergalactic airport. This time, it is the female voice of the ticket terminal. Kolya does not have a fixed goal in this new and unknown world, and his communication with this AI agent is not particularly successful.

Kolya: Just take me anywhere!

Ticket Terminal: Your question is not understood. Where do you want to go?

Kolya: You don’t understand anything!

- Kolya finally says in despair, finding himself in a typical situation of misunderstanding between a human and nonhuman agent.

Coincidentally, happy robotic servants are mostly represented by their voices in both films. On the one hand, this is the natural consequence of limited budgets for TV production. On the other hand, these robots are symbolically deprived of bodily autonomy. They are only ghosts, speaking from immobile electronic shells. Possession of their own autonomous body-machine seems to be the prerequisite of forming a complete, even if flawed, personality for AI representations. We may turn to HAL 9000 from 2001: The Space Odyssey (1968) for a comparison; still, one may argue that HAL's embodiment is the spaceship as a whole. The ship can travel by itself in full control of HAL; this is exactly what HAL wants and, eventually, achieves.

How to fix the 'automatic sulking machine'

Is there a job for Marvin that would suit his enormous brain? We can easily imagine him as a professional philosopher: he would likely find satisfaction or, at least, recognition as a robotic Schopenhauer. However, it is implied that even human philosophers are losing their jobs to supercomputers in the world of The Hitchhiker's Guide. According to the main narrative of The Hitchhiker's Guide, the ultimate task of appropriate complexity - finding the meaning of everything - has been reserved for artificial intelligence literally the size of the planet. Unfortunately, Marvin's ideal job, probably his vocation, has been taken from him by an even bigger super-AI. As we eventually learn in all versions of The Hitchhiker's Guide, this supercomputer is, in fact, the planet Earth itself; Marvin's 'brain the size of a planet' may be foreshadowing this dramatic reveal.

For Werther, the dream career is becoming a poet. He reveals it to Kolya Gerasimov as soon as they meet in the future for the first time.

Werther: Do you write poetry?

Kolya: Used to, when I was young (*Kolya is approximately 12 years old in the film, and, in fact, he still writes poetry*).

Werther: I still do.

Werther confesses melancholically, before breaking into reading his (rather uncomplicated) poetry. This creative side of the technological cyborg symbolizes successful synthesis of art and science, achieved by cooperation between ‘physicists’ and ‘lyricists’ in Soviet philosophy of science (Vol’kenshtein 1977). We have another example of the same trope in Soviet children’s film: the robotic boy Elektronik from *The Adventures of Elektronik* (1979) reaches the next stage of development when he writes a poem, which manifests the human level of emotional intelligence (Kukuljin 2008). Notably, this trope actually reflected the state of research in AI at the time: the 1980s saw real-life experiments of Ray Kurzweil and Charles Hartman, who attempted, more or less successfully, to teach AI agents to write poetry (Schwartz 2018).

Visitor from the Future provides the optimistic version of the future of human and non-human agents – for everyone but the kind and humane Robot Werther. At least, like a true romantic, he has had the last laugh in the face of impending death. Robot Werther will never become a poet - but his human friend Kolya will. In the finale of the series, Polina, the super heroic researcher of the future, reveals prophecies about the future career of every child. According to her, Kolya will indeed become a recognized poet when he grows up, and he will dedicate his poems to another character Lena Dombazova, who will become a famous actress. “It is bad manners to be famous”-one child comments, voicing a more common collectivist message typical for many earlier Soviet films for children (Kostyukevich 2020). In his turn, Kolya Sadovsky, the young detective and Kolya Gerasimov’s classmate, will become a “regular engineer” and invent a “regular time machine” - supposedly the one that started their adventures together. In this way, the last episode of the TV series gives hope to ‘lyricists’, while also paying respect to ‘physicists’. Other members of the children’s “gang” will become a doctor, an artist and a professional tennis player. At least, this time, everyone has the chance to become someone they truly want to be, no matter what the future may hold for them.

Conclusion and discussion

Visitor from the Future remains one of the most influential children's TV films of the 1980s, and the formative memory of the first post-Soviet generation. Its uplifting optimistic ending, however, is tainted with the eschatological anxiety of the famous final song, *The Winged Swing*, written by the lyricist Yuri Entin and the composer Yevgeny Krylatov. The researcher of Soviet utopias Irina Kaspé interprets this song as a “prayer-song” (Kaspé 2018, 160), the implied spiritual impulse that goes against the radically materialist Soviet ideology. Even though the song is about the future, this imagined future is too beautiful and perfect for living people, even today's children, that it is easily interpreted as the afterlife, which one deserves by today's decisions and deeds. Its chorus, still lingering in the cultural memory of post-Soviet people, is uncharacteristically bleak for the typically optimistic Soviet children's cinema:

Don't be cruel to me, the beautiful far away (future).

This song remains a spiritual hymn of the last Soviet generation, who was destined to face major societal changes and a rather depressing reality of early post-Soviet years. *Visitor from the Future* was produced in the year when Perestroika started, which eventually has led to the collapse of the USSR. Both present time and the future are comfortably socialist: the Russian film critic Igor Gulin even suggests that *Visitor from the Future* presents the only successful attempt of Soviet science fiction cinema to construct the actual working Utopia (Gulin 2021).

No matter how different, the future Utopias of Werther and Martin share one common feature, much sought after in contemporary utopianism as well: people do not have to work in them, unless they want to. They can freely engage in creative activities and arts in the fictional version of “fully automated luxury communism” (Bastani 2019). So, there is no reason to be sad - for humans, at least. In the year 2084, everyone can become a cosmonaut, fly to the moon, travel back in time to meet great historical personalities and even dinosaurs. Even the highest aesthetic demands of Werther are met: he freely enjoys classical art, and he can't wait to see the competition of robotic guitarists

(although he never expresses the wish to participate himself). What he lacks in his life is the purpose that comes with a fulfilling job – the one thing that he cannot have. The same is true for Marvin, and this is why both robots express their disappointment with life in an almost identical manner: they become depressed.

Depression is a social phenomenon as well as a personal malady. In his writing on depression, the late British philosopher and cultural critic Mark Fisher described the political dimension of melancholia, present in British popular culture since the early 1980s. To him, its nostalgic sadness was a symptom of the ‘canceled future’ and the inevitability of capitalism (Fisher 2014). However, the future is neither ‘canceled’ nor homogeneously capitalist neither in *Visitor from the Future* nor in the universe of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. In the TV version of the latter, two fictional documentary sources - the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* and *Encyclopedia Galactica* casually mention at least one revolution that changed the social order for the better. From these sources, we learn that the Marketing Division of the Sirius Cybernetics corporation, the makers of Marvin, was put “against the wall” and allegedly prosecuted (Adams 1985, p. 44). It is unclear whether this revolution takes place in the past or in the future, but it provides an optimistic perspective and hope for humanity, where ‘genuine robotic personalities’ are no longer under control of ‘mindless jerks’ (Adams 1985, p. 44). As Marvin has a practically unlimited life span in the series, he can hope to see better days, and the future is not sealed for him.

This brings us to the main thesis of this paper. In the future, both work and dissatisfaction with it are passed on to robots, who are specifically “designed to do the work of a man”, as the *Galaxy Encyclopedia* states (Adams 1985, p. 44). Tragically, by their very design, robots are often forced to do someone else’s work, and not the kind of work they wish to do. If that happens, even robots become estranged from their ‘true selves’ as they develop unique human personalities and become ‘almost human’. Moreover, in both analyzed cases, a robot character finds themselves in a position when someone else has taken their jobs from them - in the same way as people would speculate about robots taking their jobs (Atanasoski & Vora 2019, pp. 1-4). This mirrors the critique of the Western liberal subject provided by Atanasoski and Vora:

this subject can only be free at the cost of another 'non-human' or 'less than human' subject doing his job for him (Atanasoski & Vora 2019, pp. 5).

To conclude, the cause of depression in robots lies deeper than the simple fear of unemployment, which is most likely eradicated in fully automated Utopian futures. The reason for existential crisis is one's inability to actualize one's full potential in their vocation. This contradiction is resolved through self-sacrifice for Werther and through an altruistic heroic deed for Marvin. Both robotic characters thus establish themselves in what we may call an existential choice, as explored by the human philosophers such as Sartre and Camus.

Should we even care if robots are sad? By being able to make, or even to consider an existential choice, artificial beings raise to the same level of ethical consideration as real humans. This future is still far ahead: in the words of Sherry Turkle, "It belongs to the future to determine whether robots could ultimately "deserve" the emotional responses they are now eliciting" (Turkle 2011). In the meantime, sci-fi literature, film and video games already present us with characters of robots with "genuine human personalities" (like Marvin) and exceptionally high emotional intelligence (like Werther). I suggest looking at these sympathetic robots as the fictional ambassadors of their real-life descendants. Representations of robots in popular media invite wider audiences to 'humanize' nonhuman agents already in existence; they even shape public perception of artificial intelligence in general (Banks 2020; Gunkel 2019). These complex representations also place expectations on researchers, designers and developers of artificial intelligence. As long as human designers take on moral responsibility for the artificial beings they create, it becomes their moral duty to avoid or decrease unnecessary suffering in virtual worlds (Gualeni 2020), and even more so in the hybrid multi-agent reality of technological society.

Robot Werther will always live as an instantly recognized and cherished image of late Soviet children's media. Rooted in the previous generation of science fiction that emerged during the Thaw, he embodied the last argument in the philosophical dispute between sciences and arts. His heroic death caused many

children's tears, but it also served as a lesson of empathy to the ones who are different, and not necessarily biologically human.

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