

The Man is Made Machine: The Human (and Humanoid) Subject in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

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*The cyborg has been defined in a number of ways by many people, with definitions ranging from the mundane attachment of people to their cell-phones, to fantastic forms of artificial life in science fiction. In general terms, however, the cyborg is usually taken to be a melding of human and machine, blended or forced together in such a way as to challenge both categories. Many authors and critics portray the cyborg and its relations as utopian constructs that will finally allow a true transcendence beyond physical and social impediments. Important to remember, though, is that the cyborg is a complex figure, not only liberatory, but also threatening—and it is this figure that Philip K. Dick explores in his foundational novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Brittany Kraus's essay argues that Dick's novel situates the central conflict of the novel between humans and androids as one that is "fully entangled and encased within a perpetual economic structure based on consumption and consumerism." Kraus allows us, then, to see the ways in which Dick alters our concept of the human even as he critiques the alienating social forces that turn people into cogs in the machine.*

- Dr. Jason Haslam

In Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, humans and machines (or android) are set in diametric opposition: the humans must destroy the androids and vice-versa in order to preserve their very being. Yet the distinctions between human and android, as well as reality and non-reality, are consistently disrupted and distorted throughout the novel. The notion of human subjectivity is destabilized by a counter-notion of potential humanoid subjectivity. Human existence in Dick's mechanized, post-apocalyptic world is an "existence progressively altered by innovations of technology" (Galvan 413), a construct simultaneously shaped and undone by its own construction. Technology is dichotomously portrayed as both unifying and estranging for humans and androids alike; it threatens and comforts, distances and connects, and, concomitantly, is as natural as it is alien. But technology is not outside of the subjective; rather it "co-exists and co-originate" (Galvan 425) from it—the human is the machine and the machine, human.

Humans in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* are entirely dependent on technology. The Penfield mood organ, for example, not only stimulates but simulates their emotions, and the television set, personified by Buster Friendly, provides "a surrogate for human interaction" (Garland 417) in an otherwise bleak and desolate world. Technology, then, is not only a functional or convenient utility for humans: it actually infuses their lives with meaning and, in direct relation, plays a part in formulating their concepts of identity and selfhood. From the onset of the novel, however, human relationship with technology is fraught with problems and contradictions. Iran, for example, Rick Deckard's wife, describes a particular instance in which she does not experience the "appropriate affect" (Dick 5) of her dialed-in mood but rather the absence of that affect. Yet, in spite of having sensed the "absence of life" (Dick 5) and the inherent emptiness of artificial feeling, Iran is unable to separate her human self from her mechanical self. Instead she finds a setting on the mood organ that allows her to feel utter, hopeless despair for three hours a day before she is automatically reset to feel an "awareness of

the manifold possibilities open to [her] in the future [and] new hope” (Dick 6). Her humanness, if defined by her ability to emote, is no more than a technological construct.

Iran’s apathy, which is paradoxically her only ‘genuine’ emotion, undercuts the divisive line drawn between humans and androids. A human is categorized by his/her ability to feel empathy while an android is categorized by ‘its’ inability to feel empathy. A hierarchy of being emerges, then, wherein the Nexus-6 androids, though “equipped with an intelligence greater than that of many human beings” (Dick 32), are subjugated to a life of servitude (i.e. enslavement) by their so-called emotional superiors.

Jill Galvan argues, however, that “what passes for ‘empathy’ among humans derives far more from a cultural construction than from any categorical essence” (415). Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter, is charged with the task of “retiring” a group of fugitive androids who, after murdering their human masters, escape from the colonies on Mars and illegally emigrate to Earth: a nuclear-ravaged, entropic wasteland. In this “kippleized” hinterland, the androids attempt to assert themselves as autonomous subjects both in and outside the frameworks of human society. Some of the androids, including LubaLuft and Polokov, pose as humans, adopting positions of public prominence and fame. Others simply hide. In order to demarcate the “andys” from the humans, Deckard relies on the Voigt-Kampff scale, a technological device that systematically measures empathy by monitoring and calculating a subject’s reaction/response time to a series of questions. These questions all pertain to the mistreatment or exploitation of animals because, “in a post-nuclear era which finds them scarce, [animals] have been fetishized as the repositories of human empathy” (Galvan 415). Because androids are purported to have “no regard for animals” (Dick 32), they are thus judged as being wholly un-empathic and thus, wholly inhuman.

But while animals are highly valued in the Terran society, their value is commodified. The acquisition of a ‘real live animal’ immediately propels an individual to a higher social status. Purchasing an animal is therefore a large monetary investment. Deckard is only able to put a down payment on a black Nubian goat after retiring the first three rogue androids: Polokov, Garland and LubaLuft. At a thousand dollars per head, killing andys is a lucrative endeavour (Dick 14). Technology, then, functions within a consumerist system, and the androids become its currency. Androids cannot possess anything, but can be possessed. They are even used, at first, as incentive for the humans to immigrate to the colonies on Mars: “Under U.N. law each emigrant automatically received possession of an android subtype of his choice” (Dick 16). Furthermore, Deckard initially justifies his mercenary killings by buying into the human-centric ideologies of the consumerist Terran society. Deckard purchases the goat not only for the prestige it will bring, but because after watching Phil Resch murder LubaLuft, Deckard’s morale, and his moral certitude begins to wane. He rationalizes his purchase (and position) stating, “Something went wrong today; something about retiring them. It wouldn’t have been possible...to go on without getting an animal” (Dick 171). Deckard, of course, already owns an animal, albeit an electric one: a sheep that, despite putting in “as much time and attention into caring for it” (Dick 12) as a real animal, Deckard finds “gradually demoralizing” (Dick 9). Even when he begins to feel empathy towards the androids he hunts and subsequently kills, Deckard is fully entangled within a perpetual economic structure based on consumption and consumerism. He must complete his murderous task in order to pay off his goat-debt, and subsequently restore

his faith in the system, a system whose “business is based on the exploitation of machines” (Garland 423).

Mercerism, a pseudo-religion based on the dogmatic principles of humanity’s collective consciousness and its empathic community, provides the ontological basis for Deckard’s bounty-hunting. Wilbur Mercer, a Sisyphus-like messiah, is condemned to a perpetual cycle of death and rebirth. Day after day, he climbs towards the top of a hill, but when he reaches the top, “the sudden leveling of the hill” (Dick 23), he realizes he has to restart again. The followers of Mercerism, exclusively human, fuse with Mercer and each other by grasping onto the handles of a device called the “empathy box.” In their fusion, they join Mercer in his futile ascent while mutually experiencing one another’s joy and suffering. This merger is conducted “in the controlled space(s) of [their] living room(s)” (Garland 417). We discover, however, that Mercer is a fraud: he is a bit-player and alcoholic named Al Jarry who lives in a “smelling, moldering, kipple-filled” (Dick 208) home in Indiana. Mercerism, by extension then, is an artificial construct designed to keep the humans indoctrinated by believing in their own ‘humanness.’ It sustains the illusive divide between human and android by propagating the value of “human companionship through empathic fusion” (Garland 417), of which “andys” cannot partake.

Interestingly, Mercer is, as Jill Garland terms, a “commodified illusion” (417). Drawing upon the principles of Mercerism, for instance, Deckard’s neighbor states in the first chapter that not having an animal is considered “immoral and anti-empathic” (Dick 13). Humans, then, are programmed to desire not only the product Mercer is imperceptibly selling exorbitantly priced livestock—but also an image of ‘Self,’ an ideal of humanness, which is propagated through the image of Mercer (Garland 418) and both products are bought into through the practice of Mercerism. In that sense, androids are not only ‘othered’ by Mercerism, but thrust into a quasi-spiritual battle between good and evil:

In Mercerism, an absolute evil plucked at the threadbare cloak of the tottering, ascending old man. It was never clear who or what that evil was. A Mercerite *sensed* evil...A Mercerite was free to locate the nebulous presence of The Killers wherever he saw fit. For Rick Deckard an escaped humanoid robot [...] epitomized The Killers. (Dick 32)

Deckard’s rationale is based on this belief structure: armed with a laser gun and imbued with Mercerist propaganda, Deckard sets out to exterminate humanoids without any ethical or moral objections. He is, after all, only killing the killers (Dick 31) and, in his mind, righteously so.

Deckard’s point of view begins to blur, however, when his ability to distinguish human from android becomes increasingly muddled. Fellow bounty-hunter Phil Resch is identified by the android LubaLuft as an android but as it turns out, Resch is technically human. The cold, unfeeling nature of Resch, who derives sadistic pleasure from killing andys, subverts Deckard’s initial position of ‘Us versus Them’; he doesn’t recognize Resch as human because Resch lacks the empathic abilities that are purported to simultaneously connect and differentiate humankind from humanoid-kind. Conversely, Nexus-6 prototype Rachel Rosen displays empathic qualities towards LubaLuft, describing her as being, a “very close” (Dick 199) friend. In her own way,

Rachel mourns the death of LubaLuft, which undermines the common percept that “an android doesn’t care what happens to another android” (Dick 101). Yet, the androids are different from the humans. They are human-made, technological Frankensteins who have escaped their creators. They desire to live as free subjects, not by assimilating with the humans but by co-existing with them. Deckard realizes, by the end of the novel, that “the electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are” (Dick 241). Deckard both recognizes the androids’ right to subjectivity and his own inability to understand or fully identify with the humanoid-self. Yet, Deckard senses an inherent ‘aliveness’ in the android, one that is, “in ways...fundamentally analogous” to himself (Dick qtd. in Galvan 413). Deckard’s former unilateral perspective shifts to a perspective that is at least marginally more inclusive and accepting of the ‘other.’ But it is too little, too late: the androids are dead, and Deckard has killed them.

The conclusion of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is wrought with gloomy irony. Both humans and humanoids, it seems, face the same immanent fate. After a time, androids will simply cease to function, a victim of his/her own built-in mechanical destruction; likewise, humans will cease to be, vanquished from existence by the encroaching, overwhelming ‘kipple’ and dust. Both androids and humans will eventually be undone by their own technological constructions: the android’s body and the human’s nuclear-destroyed environment. In the end, the ideological distinction between android and human seems largely arbitrary, but perhaps that is precisely the point.

Works Cited

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