

Images of Absence in P.K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

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Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* inspired the cult-classic cyberpunk film-noire by director Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*, yet the novel differs in many respects from this Hollywood production. This essay will explore the novel's images of absence, and will provide key contrasts with the movie. Dick's science fiction corpus explores a plethora of psychological and philosophical issues, yet "two questions obsessed Dick: What is real? and What is human?"¹ Certain identifiable trends remain prominent in his stories: he constantly explored and scrutinised the tensions between the artificial and the natural, appearance and reality, and superficiality and authenticity. Dick "was one of the first SF writers to explore a new virtual technoculture, in which the distinction between reality and illusion, the real and the virtual implodes"². This essay employs *Androids* and *Blade Runner* to explore questions about the iconic nature of sociality and human being. "According to Peirce, an icon is a non-arbitrary intentional sign – that is, a designation which bears an intrinsic resemblance to the thing it designates"³. Seemingly, under Peirce's vision, a text can only serve as a context or symbol for the iconicity of any given sign; this paper does not work under this assumption, but rather treats the images described in the novel and movie from a broader conception of

¹ Corliss, Richard, (2002: 56) "His Dark Vision of the Future is Now". *Time Europe*. Vol. 160, Issue 1.

² Best, Steven, and Kellner, Douglas, (2003: 190). "The Apocalyptic Vision of Philip K. Dick". *Cultural Studies* □ *Critical Methodologies*, Vol. 3, No. 2: 186-204.

³ Wescott, Roger W., (1971: 417) "Linguistic Iconism". *Language*, Vol. 47, No. 2: 416-428.

iconicity.⁴ "It is certainly true that the analysis of iconic elements in literature must proceed with the utmost care and discrimination, but there is no doubt that iconicity belongs to the aesthetic potential of the verbal artefact, since the *interdependence of form and meaning* is an essential characteristic of the aesthetic use of language".⁵ Dick's language plays with the iconicity of technology wherein we find "form miming meaning and/or form miming form." Dick shifts the problematic by having that which is the object of the designation, technology itself, asking self-referential questions. As with (almost?) all works of science fiction, technology shapes these questions (and their answers), but in *Androids* and *Blade Runner*, the questions are asked by the artificially created life forms, and thus we find Dick toying with the idea of "meaning miming form".⁶ *Androids* may then be pointing us towards what Merleau-Ponty would call that form "between the pure subject and the object, a third genus of being".⁷ As we see in the novel and film, "the boundaries between species and things become more porous and permeable"⁸; this paper intends to situate human being in this *chiasm*⁹.

Technology permeates the post World War Terminus/III stage of *Androids*; however, unlike the dark, rainy movie, the novel's story winds its way through a dusty, dry, and irradiated environment of a dying biosphere. Life itself becomes artificial, which is masked by the seeming authenticity of android behaviour. The surviving and

⁴ Galen Johnson (1993: 32) explains that "an iconic sign is one in which there is a relationship of resemblance between the sign and its referent," and includes "not only paintings and photographs, but also fiction, poetry and drama". Johnson, G., (1993) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

⁵ Nanny, Max, and Fischer, Olga, (eds) (1999: 393) *Form Miming Meaning, Iconicity in Language and Literature*. U.S.A.: John Benjamins North America, italics added. See also Merleau-Ponty (2004: 97) *The World of Perception*. U.S.A.: Routledge.

⁶ "To the degree that there is isomorphism between form and content at the various levels of language structure, language is diagrammatically iconic" (Nöth, Winfried, (1999: 615) "Peircean Semiotics in the Study of the Iconicity of Language". *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*. Vol. XXXV, No. 3: 613-619.); cited so as to indicate the bi-directional relation between form and content.

⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1966: 350) *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

⁸ *Best op. cit.* 2003: 192.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*. U.S.A.: Northwestern University Press.

remaining humans produce these androids, these *forms of life* in an attempt to refill their new worlds with meaning, after having come close to realising apocalyptic meaninglessness on Earth.

Mass manufactured life serves for various social functions lost in the war: real empathic contact and aspirations of hope. Yet, the artifice of android life is only a mimicry employed as a tool for human authenticity. We are forced to ask, what does it mean to be human? Are there defining properties for humanity? Or are we our own creations, just as Dick would confront us with creations that are human? *Androids* and *Blade Runner* engage us not merely in the superficiality of observed behaviour, such as the physical, social and linguistic, in which artificial forms of life camouflage themselves, but also in the impersonal impersonating of the personal. Dick has, in numerous works, "written about androids or robots or simulacra - the name doesn't matter; what is meant is artificial constructs *masquerading* as humans".¹⁰ In this vein, Dick dramatises, not so much the language he uses, but its very iconicity to not only concretise what has become conventional, using form to add to meaning, but calling these forms and meanings into question, destabilising and deconstructing the semantic relations that are taken for granted.¹¹

***Androids*, A Synopsis**

Androids is nominally a story about a paid bounty hunter/policeman, Rick Deckard, who tracks down and "retires" rogue androids in a post-world war San Francisco; the film likewise has Deckard follow this occupation, but the imagery suggests the apocalypse is ecological, driven by corporate greed and over-industrialisation. The novel's nuclear conflict between the former super-powers devastated the planet's environment, making it nearly uninhabitable. Humanity, for the most part, has fled to colonies in outer space, enticed by new frontiers and economic incentives that include the granting of android workers, servants, and companions,

¹⁰ Sutin (1995: 185) *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick*. New York: Vintage Books, italics added.

¹¹ Nanny *op. cit.* 1999: xxi - xxii.

that is, synthetic slaves designed in humanity's own image(s), to each émigré¹². The companies that produce these beings face highly competitive and lucrative global and interplanetary markets; thus, they are driven to constantly improve their android technology¹³. Economics impels this development to the point that only those models that are most human-like in appearance *and* behaviour can "survive" humanity's colonial expansion into the galaxy. However, the sophistication of the androids has some unexpected results: some wish to be *free*.

The androids that seek to free themselves from human ownership, and wish to lead their own "lives", go rogue (sometimes killing their owners) - escaping back to Earth. This is where Deckard's profession arises; he is paid to track down such androids and "retire" them from service, i.e., kill them¹⁴. Essentially, he is supposed to turn them off, after all they are simply units of technology that have run rampant, pieces of property that have gone astray. Such rationalisations ground Deckard's self-understanding; however, this runs headlong into the paradoxes produced by this android technology. Its sophistication and apparent reality violates Deckard's most human traits, used as pseudo-scientific and social standards in the novel: the feelings of *compassion* and *empathy*¹⁵. Deckard's job is to *make absent* beings in a world that is already deprived of beings; this provides our first image whose ironic nature will significantly impact upon the protagonist. Progressively, Deckard's fiduciary rewards from his retirements begin to take on the affective consequences of guilt for being a (self-accused) *murderer* of "living beings". In describing their status to the android Rachel Rosen, Deckard states, "Legally you're not [alive]. But really you are. Biologically. You're not made out of transistorised circuits like a false [robot] animal; you're an organic entity"¹⁶. But this biological status is viewed paradoxically,

¹² Dick, Philip K., (1982:26) *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. U.S.A.: Ballantine Books. See also Shelley, Mary, (1991: 137) *Frankenstein*. U.S.A.: Bantam Classics.

¹³ Dick *ibid.* 1982: 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 1982: 11.

¹⁵ Best *op. cit.* 2003: 194.

¹⁶ Dick *op. cit.* 1982: 173.

as if life has two indices: authentic/natural and inauthentic/artificial. Differentiating the two, in terms of real humans and humanoid androids, is a central epistemic issue in the novel and movie; the stories' standard scientific psychological tests are continually called into question by the constant improvements in technology, as well as the behavioural range exhibited by the androids. "For Dick, the threat comes ... when technology obtains the ability to disguise itself as human, and our ability as observers to differentiate one from the other is lost".¹⁷ This indexical dichotomy is blurred in Dick's story, and thus the distinguishing characteristics that separate android and human existence are marked by mimicry: but as to who is mimicking which behaviour, this becomes progressively unclear as the stories unfold.

Living beings in the novel's post-nuclear holocaust are accorded the highest value. Since the war and the nuclear fallout have decimated most of the planet's animal life, technology has stepped in to fill the gaps; life-like artificial pet animals serve as manufactured *love-objects* for the remaining population; this is illustrated in the movie when Deckard tracks down a clue, the scales of a genetically engineered pet snake. These love-objects iconically serve as metaphors for uniquely human affects, as well as symbols of socio-economic status in a depopulated and dying world. Such affective behaviour though, is either indirectly elicited by artificial life forms, animal-like reproductions of extinct species, or directly induced by the use of the technological devices, such as *mood organs* or the *empathy boxes* for the Mercer religion (both of which are missing in the film). The latter fabricated artefact unites human individuals, via an electronically created virtual world, into a universal community of authentically empathic persons as social beings. Such sociality is intrinsic to human being and differentiates

¹⁷ Gillis, Ryan, (1998: 266) "Dick on the Human: From Wubs to Bounty Hunters to Bishops". *Extrapolation*, Vol 39, No. 3: 264-271. Dick claims of (fictional?) androids that "Their behavior frightens me, especially when it imitates human behavior so well that I get the uncomfortable sense that these things are trying to pass themselves off as humans but are not. I call them 'androids,' which is my own way of using that word" (Sutin *op. cit.* 1995: 211; Palmer, Christopher, (2003: 225) *Philip K. Dick, Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.).

humans from androids, for only humans can have these experiences: "The concept of empathy ... becomes for Dick the critical characteristic that identifies a human".¹⁸ This property is missing from android technology. Yet the use of such experiential demarcation distorts in Dick's characters, wherein we find form and meaning sliding into one another, settling in a valley of *ambiguity*.¹⁹ The chiasmatic themes of sociality and human being are marked by images of absence that haunt *Androids* and *Blade Runner*.

Social Existence

Androids opens with Deckard and his wife, Iran, waking to the workday with a not so congenial exchange. Iran, in setting the dark mood of the novel, is currently preoccupied with depressive psychological states, which she can artificially induce with her mood organ, yet authentically emote: with the TV sound off, she says, "I heard the emptiness intellectually, I didn't feel it ... But then I realised how unhealthy it was, sensing the absence of life, not just in this building, but everywhere, and not reacting ... that used to be considered a sign of mental illness; they called it 'absence of appropriate affect'"²⁰. The absence of living others is thereby iconically identified with the absent affect, the meaning of such absence. Yet this meaning is *wrong*. The wrongness is grounded in the intellectual or cognitive similarity itself, for the meaning *ought* to be real (direct and connected) affect. The empathic response, not the cognitive is appropriate. This is again echoed in the next chapter's more extended treatment.

In the second chapter, John Isidore, a radiologically and mentally damaged truck driver, lives alone in an apartment building. The lack of occupancy marks the building by a perceptual absence, both felt and startling:

Silence. It flashed from the woodwork and the walls;
it smote him with an awful, total power, as if

¹⁸ Gillis *ibid.*

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty *op. cit.* 1968.

²⁰ Dick *op. cit.* 1982: 3.

generated by a vast mill. It rose from the floor, up out of the tattered gray wall-to-wall carpeting. It unleashed itself from the broken and semi-broken appliances in the kitchen, the dead machines which hadn't worked in all the time Isidore had lived here. From the useless pole lamp in the living room it oozed out, meshing with the empty and wordless descent of itself from the fly specked ceiling. It managed in fact to emerge from every object within his range of vision, as if it – the silence – meant to supplant all things tangible. Hence it assailed not only his ears but his eyes; as he stood by the inert TV set he experienced the silence as visible and, in its own way, alive. Alive! He had often felt its austere approach before; when it came it burst in without subtlety, evidently unable to wait. The silence of the world could not rein back its greed. Not any longer. Not when it had virtually won ... He wondered, then, if the others who had remained on Earth *experienced the void in this way*.²¹

The film's version of this character also lives in a hollow, cavernous building, seemingly alone, except for his robot prototypes. The living silence of a decimated human civilisation and world has nearly, if not completely claimed victory. The void in both stories emanates from the environment, actively attempting to re-impose itself on everything and everyone.²²

The android embodies and symbolises this behaviour of the void, the action of absence. When John first meets the android Pris Stratton (who happens to be of the same model as Rachel in the novel, but is presented in the movie as a different android), her awkwardness and alarm eventually evaporate in the face of his *compassion*: "Now that her initial fear had diminished, something else had begun to emerge from her. Something more strange. And,

²¹ *Ibid.* 1982: 16.

²² See the discussion of "proliferating entropy" (Best *op. cit.* 2000: 196-197), and "the notion of entropy as a dynamic force" (Palmer *op. cit.* 2003: 62).

he thought, deplorable. A coldness. Like, he thought, a breath from the vacuum between inhabited worlds, in fact from nowhere: it was not what she did or said but what she did *not* do and say"²³. Dick's analysis of another story about a menacing machine can be extended to his treatment of the android: it is as if "there is a vacuum. A place unfilled. The *absence* of something vital – that is the horrific part, the apocalyptic vision of a nightmare future" (Sutin 1995: 190) embodied in such creatures.

Later in the novel, John meets Pris' "friends", fellow rogue androids. To him, "They're all strange. He sensed it without being able to finger it. As if a peculiar and malign *abstractness* pervaded their mental processes. Except, perhaps, for Pris; certainly she was radically frightened. Pris seemed almost right, almost natural. But -"²⁴ The malignancy to which John cannot point, aligned with the objectivity and dispassionate behaviour of the androids secures their alienation from all others; even Pris, despite John's befuddled wishes, is marked by some absence, the unstated description indicated by the dangling conjunctive, "But - ". She explicitly demonstrates this in her icily objective torturing of the spider that John miraculously finds.²⁵ For Dick, androids are "cruel and cheap" mockeries of human beings (Sutin 1995: 213). All of the deeds of the androids are motivated by this absence in their characters. This meeting in the movie has a different quality because John quickly recognises the androids for what they are, since he had a hand in their design. His reactions to them are marked by gloomy resignation, rather than puzzlement.

The android is always alone – even when in the company of other androids. "Evidently the humanoid robot constituted a solitary predator," a *killer*.²⁶ For Deckard, and by extension the remaining Earth-bound population, "an escaped humanoid robot, which had killed its master, which had been equipped with an intelligence greater than that of many human beings, which had no regard for

²³ Dick *op. cit.* 1982: 59.

²⁴ Dick *op. cit.* 1982: 136.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 1982: 181.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 1982: 27.

animals, which possessed no ability to feel empathic joy for another life form's success or grief at its defeat – that, for him, epitomized *The Killers*".²⁷ This attitude will however, create the most dynamic paradox for Deckard himself. As a human, with his innate empathic abilities and tendencies, he will develop empathy for (some of) these artificial life forms who are cursed with this pitiable state of isolation and insurmountably flattened affect: "Androids are unempathetic".²⁸ Among themselves, androids cannot empathically connect with one another. At best, they can cognitively identify with each other, but only as identical replacements: Rachel states, "We *are* machines, stamped out like bottle caps. It's an illusion that I – I personally – really exist; I'm just representative of a type".²⁹ Such "identification" superficially at a behavioural level *mimics* human empathy, but is meaningfully different for it is purely cognitive and artificial in structure, constituted by mere propositional equivalences: android models are essentially and indifferently substitutable for each other given the appropriate construction.

Yet, Dick again twists this for the androids: in the novel, when Rachel, after having "seduced" Deckard, seems to dispassionately anguish over her own final fate, whether it is to be "born again" (i.e., reincarnated in the product's next model-line) or experience "spiritual oblivion", there is "no emotional awareness, *no feeling-sense* of the actual *meaning* of what she said. Only the hollow, formal, intellectual definitions of the separate terms".³⁰ Dick, in a literary self-analysis describes Rachel as such: "They can be pretty but somehow lack something"; furthermore, Dick explores the possibilities for this relationship as it is to be portrayed in the movie he envisioned in "Notes on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*", writing, "They are both *pretending* ... but a good deal of ordinary, today and now sex is handled in this way; during sex the faculty of

²⁷ *Ibid.* Dick (1982: 37); he also writes, "A human being without proper empathy or feeling is the same as an android built so as to lack it, either by design or mistake ... We mean, basically, someone who does not care about the fate that his fellow living creatures fall victim to" (Gillis 1998: 267; Sutin *op. cit.* 1995: 211).

²⁸ Gillis *op. cit.* 1998: 267.

²⁹ Dick *op. cit.* 1982: 165.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 1982: 167, italics added.

judgment in many ways is suspended, by both participants" (Sutin 1995: 211 and 160, italics added). Thus their intimacy is marred by inauthenticity, and the relationship is left hollow and unfulfilling for both Rachel (necessarily) and Deckard. Rachel's cogitation about the relationship is performed with data understood as atomic units, as though the meaning *qua* actual referent of the (formal) signs somehow stands outside of or between the so-called signifiers. There is herein an inadequacy of positive signification to point to what is meant, where we find the inverse is the case: the "inference", not reference, of meaning is absence *per se* – an unrepresentable "hiccup", not so much in thought, but in the being of the android. The characters' relationships in the film are not complicated by the absent presence of Deckard's wife, yet despite Rachel's emotional behaviour and seeming affective attachment to Deckard, there is a persistent hollowness that characterises their interaction. One could contend that Deckard's attraction to Rachel's demureness is an empathetic misreading of her essential emotional detachment and distance.

The failures of the androids in terms of social affect and the establishing of "authentic" relationships are due to their lack of empathy, purely cognitive behaviour, and complete reliance on mere instrumental and propositional intelligence. Generally, Dick portrays androids as artificial sociopaths: "androids have no loyalty to one another",³¹ though this is seemingly offset in the film's depiction of Pris' relationship to other androids. Still, all of their relationships are merely constituted at the level of representation, just as Descartes' understandings of all known perceptions are reduced to forms of the (solipsistic) *cogito's* conceptual judgments. Reality then is nothing other than cogitation for the androids; cognitively perceived reality is structurally artificial, prefabricated

³¹ *Ibid.* If my line of argument here is correct, then Best and Kellner's explanatory discussion (Best 2000: 193-194) is wrong: they claim that in the context of gaining freedom to extend their preprogrammed lives, the former slave androids "are seemingly identical with humans, sharing capacities such as memory, love, empathy, desire, and fear of death," with their high-level of "self-reflexivity". This directly misconstrues Dick's explicit statements in the novel and misses Dick's point about the nature of artificial intelligence: intellect without "soul" or empathy is less than or not at all human.

by the programming supplied by their manufacturers. This less than human quality is deliberately designed into their biological systems³², whereas the film's version of this is to design the androids with limited life spans. Yet these androids can behave in nearly complete human fashions. Thus we see Dick's characters sliding back and forth between artificiality and authenticity, a grey area whose limits slide into ambiguity through the use of technology to intentionally modify and mimic human experience: that which merely imitates human affect is supposed to stand in sharp contrast to that which has manufactured human emotions. But, we can ask, is this the case for human being?

Human Being

"And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth'" (*Genesis 1:27-28*³³). Humanity was thus fashioned in the divine image; human beings may perhaps serve as symbols of the divine, that which is purely iconic in and of itself. The symbolic function of human beings receives a divine blessing, but also some *commands*: to reproduce, conquer and control. Mary Shelley took up this creation story in *Frankenstein*. Shelley's tale imaginatively answers these biblical aspirations in a dark and haunting manner. Dr. Frankenstein relates:

One of the phenomena which had peculiarly attracted my attention was the structure of the human frame, and, indeed, any animal endued with life. Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered a mystery ... After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay,

³² *Ibid.* 1982: 162.

³³ *The Torah*, (1962) U.S.A.: The Jewish Publication Society of America.

more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter. (Shelley 1991: 36-37)

This fictional achievement stands as a given in the novel and movie. Corporations driven by economic greed and scientific achievement, not only mimic Frankenstein's action, but also institutionalise and mass-produce it. Dick provides us with a world that has thus fulfilled, though imperfectly, the divine imperatives. Human creativity becomes an expression and instantiation of godly genesis.³⁴ However, just as humanity finds itself driven from that initial pure creation (the Garden of Eden), so too do we find the fulfilment of mortal ingenuity falling short of perfection. Why are the characters driven to create such beings? The mimetic creation of such similar beings is rationalised: for Frankenstein, driven by the loss of his mother, the alleviation of pain and death motivate his quest for this God-like ability; likewise the institutions of Dick's fictions are attempting to alleviate human suffering (and to make a profit). "Mimesis is the outcome of the human's creative activity and cannot occur without the recognition by the creative subject that it is possible and worth to express the perceived object mimetically".³⁵ In these cases, the "blessed" human form is seen as valuable in and of itself, worthy of (re-) production. Frankenstein created a destructive monster; Dick's corporations create horrors whose monstrosity is masked by their near perfect human visages and behaviours. That which is missing, though "positively signified" by coldness, vacuum, void, and silence supposedly demarcates the artificial from the natural (human being). These creative projects fail to live up to their models, for the human is only a *mere* image of the divine, and can never fulfil the latter's meaning. The iconic has a relation to its object in mimicking one or more of its qualities, thus generating meaning (the Peircean interpretant), but this, as Dick

³⁴ Dick says, "Reality, to me, is not so much something that you perceive, but something you make. You create it more rapidly than it creates you. Man is the Reality God created out of dust; God is the reality man creates continually out of his own passions, his own determination" (Sutin *op. cit.* 1995: 205).

³⁵ Maran, Timo, (2003: 201) "Mimesis as a phenomena of semiotic communication". *Sign Systems Studies*. 31.1: 191-215.

insists, is not the sole province of language or technology. Meaning cannot be created through factory manufacturing (or cultural production). A more historical process is needed.

Dick evokes evolutionary theory to support the authenticity of natural human beings. Evolution has provided humans with instincts for survival. These too are missing in the android. When Deckard captures one of his assigned "retirements", she "did not come willingly, but on the other hand, she did not actively resist; seemingly she had become resigned. Rick had seen that before in androids, in crucial situations. The artificial life force animating them seemed to fail if pressed too far ... at least in some of them. But not all ... And it could flare up again furiously".³⁶ This scene is radically altered in the film where it blazes alight: the targeted android flees Deckard in seeming abject terror, dramatically crashing through plate glass windows as she is shot. But such desperate actions are only the end products of cognitive calculations by the androids, a consequence of a risk-benefit analysis, for the benefit, life or continued existence, has no intrinsic meaning or valence for the androids, according to Dick. They do not even have compassion for themselves in the novel, which stands in stark contrast to living organisms: "Yet, the dark fire waned; the life force oozed out of her, as he had so often witnessed before with other androids. The classic resignation. Mechanical, intellectual acceptance of that which a genuine organism - with two billion years of the pressure to live and evolve hagridding it - could never have reconciled itself to".³⁷ Evolutionary pressures have driven natural living beings to act for survival no matter the cost, even if survival is impossible. The same cannot be said of the android for it does not have this essential component to life, "the will to live". What does seem innate to them, according to Deckard, is their "desire to remain inconspicuous".³⁸

³⁶ Dick *op. cit.* 1982: 116.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 1982: 176. One of the characteristics that marks android existence is predictability (Sutin *op. cit.* 1995: 191).

³⁸ *Ibid.* 1982: 116.

By being inconspicuous, rogue androids hope to go unnoticed. This way they can lead their lives like any human being. Dick's novel paints a possibility for meaning to mime form here: to be human is to behave as such; thus the androids hope to remain "alive" by blending into human society. The void in their characters, the cold core of their emotional behaviour belies these attempts. No matter how much the androids fool themselves into performing their occupations and believing their "personal histories" (in the movie, androids collect "family photographs"), they cannot connect, in any authentic fashion, to those around them. All that they can do is behave according to social forms, but the result is only ever an impersonal impersonating of the personal. Dick says,

... [The] difference between what I call "android" mentality and the human is that the latter passed through something the former did not, or at least passed through it and responded differently – *changed*, altered, what it did and hence what it was; it *became*. I sense the android repeating over and over again some limited reflex gesture, like an insect raising its wings threateningly over and over again, or emitting a bad smell (Sutin 1995: 203).

Herein meaning mimes form, for meaning is a shared social construct, just as the android is itself produced by the corporation, and is thus an impersonal artefact; their imitations of social behaviour are acts of impersonation, and each one's outward personhood is merely a form that masks an essential absence, iconically represented by every android. These continuous failed strivings at establishing a life by these androids have far ranging impacts on Deckard.

Deckard develops empathy for (certain kinds of) androids. In the novel, human beings use technology to elicit empathic responses and behaviours from themselves. Mood organs provide individuals with any kind of emotion they desire (even the desire to have emotions). Empathy boxes are used for the simulated, though authentically meaningful, religious experiences. Electronic pets are

standard possessions, indicative of socio-economic status, and provide love-objects for human empathy and care; in addition, the possession of a real, live pet animal authentically contributes to the owner's genuine self-worth. Thus the technology of this future society serves to condition and expand human compassion. Is it then any wonder that Deckard begins to see his android "retirement" assignments through these lenses? As he interacts with other humans and androids, he begins to question his own feelings about his targets: at first, he "had never felt any empathy on his own part toward the androids he killed ... And yet ... Empathy toward an artificial construct? He asked himself. Something that only pretends to be alive? But [at least one android] ... had seemed genuinely alive; it had not worn the aspect of a simulation"³⁹: this, of course, was Rachel. He slowly becomes aware that he is "capable of feeling empathy for at least specific, certain androids. Not for all of them but - one or two"⁴⁰, who happen to be the ones to whom he is physically attracted⁴¹. This leads him to an ambivalent conclusion: "So much for the distinction between authentic living humans and humanoid constructs".⁴² The line that separates the artificial from the authentic is lost (goes missing), at least for a while, from Deckard's psychological profile; he finds that he can physically and emotionally intertwine himself with androids - yet such reciprocity is merely behavioural on their part, for all of their actions lack compassion and empathy. An android caress, touch, embrace or kiss, is nothing more than a reflex arc artificially inscribed by the designs of others, is never felt within, is merely reaction to stimuli. The essential human property of empathy becomes an obstacle to Deckard's duty to protect both human society and priceless human compassion from the affectless android. This is also the internal conflict that Deckard struggles with as the movie progresses, thus making his job all the more difficult.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 1982: 123.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 1982: 124.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 1982: 84.

⁴² *Ibid.* 1982: 125.

This description of Deckard points to another feature of human being, one that Dick's characters seem to possess, though it only remains implicit. The androids go rogue in their escape from exploitation and search for freedom. Their attempts at these goals are indicative of a peculiar human *style of being*⁴³ or "way of being in the world" (Sutin 1995: 212). For humans, Merleau-Ponty claims, "The psycho-physiological equipment leaves a great variety of possibilities open, and there is no more here than in the realm of instinct a human nature finally and immutably given. The use a man is to make of his body is transcendent in relation to that body as a mere biological entity".⁴⁴ The rogue androids are aiming at such transcendence of their mere biological equipment, but not in some metaphysical manner. They are searching for more, to explore the possible meanings that life/existence has for them, which entails extending their life spans in the movie. In other words, they are doing something distinctly human: attempting to create meaning in their lives. Dick though would have us believe that such meanings must have a component "feeling sense". Yet, "behaviour creates meanings which are transcendent in relation to the anatomical apparatus, and yet immanent to the behaviour as such, since it communicates itself and is understood".⁴⁵ Are not then the meanings created by these androids understandable by both themselves and humans? Is not such striving toward meaning intrinsic to the challenges and quests that all humans must face? However, the way these meanings are understood determines the fate of these androids.

The law enforcement agencies that use bounty hunters like Deckard, hunt down the androids because they understand them as a threat. Certainly their sociopathic behaviour is a danger to the remaining humans on Earth; in the novel, Rachel in a "fit of jealous rage," publicly and unabashedly kills Deckard's pet, a real living goat.⁴⁶ She could have, without any compunction, just as easily done

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty *op. cit.* 1968: 139.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 1966: 189.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Dick *op. cit.* 1982: 200.

the same to his wife, Iran, or any other living being. The android, Roy Batty, in *Blade Runner*, displays a comparable disposition towards his human creators. This behaviour is an anathema to the novel's human community. This context shapes the human characters' understanding of their situations. The context, according to Merleau-Ponty, is a phenomenological *Gestalt* wherein experiential meaningfulness oscillates in the dynamic between figure and ground. Meanings are always revealed perspectivally, and are subject to conditionality and contingency. These perspectives are as much socio-historical in terms of culture, as they are sensorimotor for the embodied subject. Meaning, if it is to have any meaning, must mean something to someone.

As Berkeley says, even an unexplored desert has at least one person to observe it, namely myself when I think of it, that is, when I perceive it in purely mental experience. The thing [or object] is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually *in itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity. To this extent, every perception is a communication or communion ...⁴⁷

Meanings without real living interpreters would be meaningless. Dick's *Androids* speaks to this existential claim – “a large number of narrative techniques may be fruitfully interpreted in terms of their iconic function with the all-important proviso, however that the *act of interpretation* must always proceed from meaning to form”.⁴⁸ The forms Dick presents us with are superficially human, i.e., the androids. However, these artificial life forms *do not experience meanings*. They lack that “feeling sense”⁴⁹, the empathic connections with others and the ability to experience compassion or communion.

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty *op. cit.* 1966: 320.

⁴⁸ Nanny *op. cit.* 1999: xxv; italics added.

⁴⁹ Olkowski, D., and Hass, L., (eds) (2000: 90) *Rereading Merleau-Ponty, Crossing the Continental-Analytic Divide*. U.S.A.: Humanities Press.

Just as they search to create meaningful lives, this escapes them, because they can never even feel for themselves. Thus, if Dick is correct, then Merleau-Ponty's notion of the embodied subject being able to transcend the mere confines of physiology cannot alone provide an adequate explanation of meaning generation because embodied empathy is a necessary condition for meaning. To make sense of this for Merleau-Ponty, we will need to briefly explore the nature of the psyche *qua* subjectivity that is bound to the lived-body.

For Merleau-Ponty, the embodied subject is a product of personal and pre-personal history: each individual undergoes psychological experiences that are sedimented (or layered) over a developing core of psychophysiology. This begins at birth (and perhaps in the womb) with the awakening and deployment of the body's sensorimotor abilities. Living creatures come to learn their own bodies, just as they learn of the world. This simply takes time. These developments are absent from the experiences of the androids. Given their limited life spans, they are programmed with systematic memories - at the barest minimum an operating system that allows basic physiological activity, and in more expensive models, pseudo-psychological histories of seeming first-person recollections. These too are artificial; for example, Rachel is supplied with such memories⁵⁰, which in the movie are based on a company executive's niece. In this way, since meanings are always meaningful to someone (an interpreter), the someone, when it is an android, is an artificial person that cannot truly understand the meaning; the "feeling-sense" is absent, according to Dick. Thus the experience of the android is ultimately meaningless, which is exactly how Deckard describes them; the android can only understand at an intellectual level, which is akin to the processing of data/signs according to pre-programmed structures and functions. They can only read the world as a text, but its meaningfulness always escapes them. The inverse of this is that human beings can authentically experience meaning, as illustrated by their empathic bonds with one another, and they do so socially: "Popular culture is always in process; its meanings can never be identified in a text, for texts are activated, or made meaningful, only in social relations and in intertextual relations. This activation of the meaning potential of a

⁵⁰ Dick *op. cit.* 1982: 52.

text can occur only in the social and cultural relationship into which it enters".⁵¹ Therefore, meanings are experienced in the dynamic inter-human relations that activate, or better yet, create these meanings that are meaningful to individuals who are part and parcel of communities of embodied subjectivities capable of empathy and compassion.

Conclusion

Human beings and androids are characteristically individuated and exist as beings-in-the-world. Both forms of life are mortal, and must face their own existential crises: humans live for decades, whereas the androids only live for a handful of years. Both can take on worldly projects, learn new skills, and transcend their mere biological or anatomical apparatus. However, Dick's fictional androids will always remain in isolated states of solipsism. Their connections to the world can only be cognitive and empirical, whereas the human experience includes the empathic and affective over and above these artificial limitations. This provides them with authentic social relations and community.

The androids are always marked by absences, which stand in contradistinction to the human characters. Yet the human characters constantly crisscross this line: Deckard's compassion, due in part to all of the paradoxical social pressures, begins to extend to androids, who are both alive and artificial, i.e., authentic and inauthentic, real and unreal. Deckard, at the end of the novel, having a mystical experience, is challenged:

You will be required to do wrong no matter where you go. It is the basic condition of life, to be required to violate your own identity. At some time, every creature which lives must do so. It is the ultimate shadow, the defeat of creation; this is the curse at work, the curse that feeds on all life. Everywhere in the universe.⁵²

Thus to be a living creature, to have real authenticity, to fulfil the demands of empathy, and understand his humanity, Deckard must

⁵¹ Nanny *op. cit.* 1999: 285.

⁵² Dick *op. cit.* 1982: 156.

absent himself from his own being. In regard to his actions and behaviour as a bounty hunter, he comes to the following realisation: "But what I've done, he thought; that's become alien to me. In fact, everything about me has become unnatural; I've become an unnatural self".⁵³ The necessity of his duty has demanded the violation of his compassionate feelings, all in the greater endeavour to protect those he (supposedly) loves – other living humans and creatures.

The absences in *Androids* and *Blade Runner* challenge us to look at the nature of meaning. These fictional settings speak to that which is most human in us, while presenting us with icons of ourselves that masquerade as authentic persons. These images show us what is not there, that cold vacuum *qua* the lack of empathy. But just as these images are superficially meant to be other than human, they nonetheless point to that which is endemic to human being. The images of absence that the androids iconically represent are images that are all too human. Dick believed that "the android is not simply a science fiction prop. The android lives among us; it is us, as long as we continue to separate ourselves from that part of our character that is human".⁵⁴ As C. S. Friedman so succinctly states, "Each human, is within himself, an alien landscape to all others."⁵⁵ By extension, each android stands as in individual icon for that dark silence of everyone and no one. They are the outward expressions for what is within; after all, they, like us, are products of human creativity.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 1982: 204.

⁵⁴ Gillis *op. cit.* 1998: 270.

⁵⁵ Friedman, C. S., (1999: 90) *This Alien Shore*. U.S.A.: DAW Publications.