Philippi K. Dick's Human Vision

by Kyla Bremner

Philip K. Dick "was constantly asking the questions of "What is reality?" and "What is human?" in his writing. These themes are found throughout his books. Both of these questions he could never fully answer. But, in his hundred or so short stories and around fifty novels he contains these questions and tries to answer them in some form. In all of Dick's attempts to answer these questions he seems to have become the world." (Future Boy, 1999).

In Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, part of Dick's exploration of humanity and what it is to be human is through an examination of the androids as a group or society create and subsequently reinforce their own realities. Dick's critical satire of the humanity of Western through the transposition of 'real' cultural phenomena into the science fictional world of Androids. This displacement of certain ideas of human values of science and technology exposes their fundamental 'inhumanity' through their facilitation of their own realities. The essential hypocrisy and inclination for 'evil' in human society through the construction of a false reality is therefore one of the primary issues in this incredibly multi-layered yet concise piece of sci-fi.

Dick's fascination with the idea of reality stemmed from his own mystic experiences and psychiatric problems (Future Boy, 1999). Du struggled with his own perceptions of what was real, and because of this had many encounters with psychiatrists and psychoanalyst of 'rehabilitation centres'. References to schizophrenia recur throughout the novel, and although Dick himself did not seem to suffer as a prime example of the instability of reality. "What about the world of a schizophrenic? Maybe it's as real as our world" (Dick, quot 1999). Dick believed that it is more correct to talk about realities in the plural rather than the singular (Future Boy, 1999). The psych scientific medical fields and their discourses that influence the defining of the normal, the sane, and the singular 'real' are discussed and his use of the Voight-Kampff empathy test on android subjects. I will discuss how Deckard uses this test to reinforce the 'reality' which he lives, and how this is akin to the way scientists such as eugenicists and psychiatrists have used their own tests on patients social reality that they have defined and thus created.

As we read the novel, we are, at first, inclined to believe what Deckard's thoughts tell us in terms of what is right and wrong in his society. That he is a bounty hunter who gets paid to 'retire' andys, man-made replicas of humans. Rick Deckard is employed by some sort of corporation and what he does is legal, even essential to keeping the world 'safe', it is easy for the reader to assume it is ethical as well. The problem with what he does so neither does the reader. It is not until we read between the lines of Deckard's prejudices that we begin to understand the true inhumanity of his actions and the society in which they are enacted. In the opening scene of the book, Deckard's own wife c murderer hired by the cops" (p. 7). The truth of this accusation is slowly exposed as we learn more about the andys and why they are non-human.

The classification of the androids as non-human holds many echoes of the Nazi decrees against the human rights of Jews in the era of the Third Reich, and the historical American disregard for the rights of black slaves before the American Civil War. The basis for the determination of the androids as non-human is the Voight-Kampff scale that Deckard uses, or the Boneli Reflex-Arc Test used by Phil Resch. The German and Italian names of these tests are Ander's and Resch's version, respectively. Perhaps allude to the fascist regimes of Hitler (Mein Kampf perhaps?) and Mussolini, and the crimes against humanity which both these dictators perpetrated less than thirty years before Dick was writing this novel. The enslavement and murder of androids is justified on an arbitary basis of society that constitutes human, just as American slaves and European Jews were classified as subhuman because of the emphasis of different social realities as they are constructed through the lens of power and the way in which they are enacted.

The idea that the androids are not human because they are artificially created through feats of genetic engineering, and because they are biologically and empathically distinguishable from 'real' people seems reasonable at first. It is only when the specifics of the Voight-Kampff tests are discussed do we realise the essential irrelevance of their results to determining 'humanness'. In fact, the test is a startling little difference between the two, and what the androids are doing is illegal, even essential to keeping the world 'safe', it is easy for the reader to assume it is ethical as well. De Velikovsky's explanation of the test is "In order to succeed, the testee must be able to show a certain degree of alienation from the human norm, which is not always easy to do." (p. 48). This delayed reaction time is what is tested by the Boneli Reflex-Arc Test. As Resch explains, "The reflex-arcs are taking place in the upper ganglia of the spinal cord which requires several milliseconds more than the humanoid robot than in the human nervous system...We try it a number of times, of course, varies in both the andy and the human. But by the time ten reactions have been measured, we believe we have a reliable clue." (p. 48). Getting the correct reaction time gives them a clue as to how to interpret their test results. On top of this uncertainty is the irrelevance of the test results, which means that there is a microsecond of difference between the nerve response of a human and an android, whether or not they are classified as android or inhuman? It seems that the test results really reinforce the essential sameness of the androids while desperately searching for some slight difference in physiology and direction of empathy on which they can base their discrimination.

The second flaw of the Voight-Kampff test is its reliance on the idea of a concrete moral standard. "What is the basis of your Voight-Kampff?" asked Resch. "Empathic response. In a variety of social situations. Mostly having to do with animals." (p. 92). Since this has not been a dramatic loss of animal life from the planet, these questions regarding animals pose no ethical dilemma for the reader "you are given a calf skin wallet on your birthday" (p. 40-41) would elicit a 'normal' response of 'I'd thank them and put it in my pocket'. The basis of the Voight-Kampff scale is that the response is instant and that the reader would not accept it. Also, I'd report the person who gave it to me to the police." (p. 41). It is not surprising that they do not! Andays are not always as socially acceptable as the humans in their defined roles and places. It is not surprising that they do not!
the androids are thus kept socially separate from the humans in their defined roles as slaves. It is interesting to note that they do not share the same values as humans. This is because, in fact, in relation to the social values of the reader, the androids who have empathy for each other, compare with humans who have more empathy for animals (or at least they seem to value them more) than for the androids, seem more human and rather unempathic characters such as Deckard and Resch. This exposure of Deckard and his psychological testing as a rigid determination of ‘humaness’ is pretty much a satirical parody of psychoanalysts and their techniques for determining the ‘abnormals’ in their readers’ minds.

This link with the psychiatric medicalisation of the normal is further emphasised by Deckard’s conversation with Bryant regarding the Voight-Kampff scale, and by many of Rachel’s responses while taking the test. Deckard and Bryant’s discussion of Lurie’s essay, while Voight’s scale to make the Voight-Kampff Altered Scale, and who wrote an article entitled “Role-taking Blockage in the Undeteriorated (p. 33) is deliberately portrayed as a psychiatrist in the mould of the likes of late nineteenth-century sexual psychologists such as H. L. von Krafft-Ebing, both of whom were instrumental in laying down the foundation from which Sigmund Freud developed his theories. Wilhelm Reich, a Marxist sexologist who worked with Freud before disagreeing with him and branching off on his own (Weeks, p. 2-3) surprisingly, the “Leningrad psychiatrists” (p. 33) also disagreed with Kampff in his certainty regarding his altered scale. The similar methods of building psychiatric models from earlier ones, as well as conflicting ideas of the ‘professionals’, are distinct reminders of the twentieth-century sexual psychoanalysts. The curious similarity between the name of the Voight-Kampff test, Krafft-Ebing’s name, and Mein Kampf, seems to link the three in a manner that suggest they are all interrelated; that it was the psychologists who are the dangerous creation of identities classified as socially undesirable, which the Nazi regime then used to justify their extermination of homosexuals, and other ‘undesirables’, just as Deckard and his contemporaries use the ‘empathy’ test to justify the androids as being dangerous, Dick gives us a clue at the sexologists of our own society’s construction of the dangerous ‘abnormal’ when Deckard states regarding a picture of a naked woman which seems to be totally irrelevant to empathic response, “Is this testing whether I am human or whether I’m homosexual?” (p. 41). This is also perhaps Dick’s comment on the McCarthy era in the US and gay men through their psychiatric categorisation as mentally ill in the 1950s. In addition, Rachel’s response to Deckard’s psychoanalytic have a little boy and he shows you his butterfly collection, including his killing jar” (p. 41), that she would “take him to the doctor” (p. 41), that the extent to which certain behaviour in our society has been categorised as deviant and in need of medical intervention, and how much deviant is a culturally specific construction.

Dick’s portrayal of Deckard, and more so Resch, as the true sickos is explicit. When Deckard sits and appreciates Luba’s aria before murdering her, stories of Nazis who made Jews perform for them the night before they were gassed are conjured up. Resch’s recommends Deckard to go to bed with a female android and then kill her (his “grainy, hardened smile remaining” (p. 111)) is a gross reminder of atrocities which of androids and humanity are capable. Dick seems to believe that the atrocities in the real world, to which he alludes, misogyny, nuclear war, and Nazism, are justified through an enforced alteration of reality by the means of false definitions and a lack of human beings. The fact that Deckard cannot know Rachel after he sleeps with her shows some sort of empathy for her that he cannot overcome (his true humanness), yet he is unable to see out of the ‘reality’ in which he has existed for so long in which androids are a dangerous ‘true humans’. It is Deckard and Resch, the supposed defenders of humanity who are in fact the ones who are destroying it, and this with the help of the false psychiatric tools that they use to confirm their version of reality.

The behaviour of the bounty hunters is contrasted by that of the androids. The androids’ appreciation for the fine music of Mozart, of a schizophrenic in the art of Munsch, and literature of the pre-apocalyptic world are indicators of their true humanity. Dick himself about music and he was very knowledgeable about classical recordings (Löfgren, 1998). As well, the androids display an sense of co appreciation for the well being of others that is seen no where else in the book.

This ability for empathy may be overlooked by readers as they get caught up in Dick’s fantasy world. The horror that the read with islorde when the androids cut the legs off the spider is a quite an amazing indication of how well Dick has created his world, and reader gets sucked into it. Considering how easily most of us kill insects in our world, the horror of the reader to the spider scene be amusing as a certain level of hypocrisy and willingness to judge is revealed in the reader herself. Perhaps Dick was playing with his readers, getting them to believe what Deckard did regarding the androids without realising that it is foolish to believe what you are told with out examining its fundamental truth. The point is that the name you call something doesn’t change the reality of what it is. “The basis manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use them” (Dick, as quoted by Future Boy, 1999). Calling an android a machine can still not remove its humanness, only others’ perception of it as just as labelling someone a psychopath or schizophrenic can serve to remove their essential humanity in the eyes of society.

This reading of Dick’s Androids does not interpret his ideas regarding the psychiatric discourse that has arisen since end of the last all favourable. The creation of the ‘other’, or in this novel, the android, has led to unprecedented human atrocities as seen in the slaughters of the Second World War. Dick’s implication of the psycho-medical field in the social facilitation of the dehumanisation of the ‘other’ through ‘proving’ essential inhuman differences in them is damning in the least. From his own experiences with psychiatrists, and his own strict concept of reality, Dick is perhaps making an argument that sometimes the doctors are perhaps more sick than the patients. Throught deconstruction of the bounty hunters as inhumanely prejudiced members of a fascist society, Dick is also deconstructing the society ours. What is good in Androids is perhaps what is bad in our world, such as our propensity for extreme lack of empathy for and des animals and other races and religions, or our ease at creating an ‘other’ to persecute. We must recognise the hypocrisy and inhumane society, but that recognition must then be turned upon our own to see that our is no better, and perhaps is worse in many ways.

References:


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