

Eroticism and Androids. On the Dynamic of Eroticism in Relation to Androids in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Blade Runner*

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Some female androids seemed to him pretty; he had found himself physically attracted by several, and it was an odd sensation, knowing intellectually that they were machines but emotionally reacting anyhow. Philip K. Dick – *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

“To deny our own impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human.”

Mouse – *The Matrix*

In this essay I will examine the possibility of eroticism, which I will later define more clearly, in relation to androids (human-resembling robots) in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by Philip K. Dick and the film that was based, albeit loosely, on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott. In the attempt to do so, I will consult the following texts, which mostly deal, in one way or another, with the *unheimliche* or the uncanny: “Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen” (1906) by Ernst Jentsch and “Das Unheimliche” (1919) by Sigmund Freud. Along these texts I will also draw from Georges Bataille’s *L’érotisme* (1957), as his comments on eroticism will help me analyze the possibility of eroticism related to androids in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Blade Runner*.

Das Unheimliche

Before I will read *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Blade Runner* in relation to the possibility of eroticism in androids, I will first introduce the subject of and the discussion on *das unheimliche*; a discussion which is very interesting in relation to androids because of the way in which *das unheimliche* functions in the essay “Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen” by Ernst Jentsch. In analyzing the story *Der Sandmann* by E.T.A. Hoffmann, as Jentsch refers to the episode in which there appears the character of Olympia; who is, ultimately unveiled as a ‘automat’, but is throughout most of the story believed to be alive, he states the following:

Unter allen psychischen Unsicherheiten, die zur Entstehungsursache des Gefühls des Unheimlichen werden können, ist es ganz besonders eine, die eine ziemlich regelmässige, kräftige und sehr allgemeine Wirkung zu entfalten im Stande ist, nämlich der Zweifel an der Beseelung eines anscheinend lebendigen Wesens und umgekehrt darüber, ob ein lebloser Gegenstand nicht etwa beseelt sei, und zwar auch dann, wenn dieser Zweifel sich nur undeutlich im Bewusstsein bemerklich macht. Der Gefühlston hält so lange an, bis diese Zweifel behoben sind und macht dann sehr gewöhnlich einer anderen Gefühlsqualität Platz. (Jentsch 1906, 197)

Thus, Jentsch relates the feeling of *das unheimliche*, which one might experience in reading *Der Sandmann* to the character of Olympia and the physical uncertainty surrounding this character in the attempt to answer the question if she is alive or animate. In his essay “Das Unheimliche,” Freud refers to this passage only to question whether it is really just the character of Olympia and the uncertainty surrounding this character that evoked the feeling of *das unheimliche* in reading *Der Sandmann* (Freud 1919, § II). Instead, Freud claims that it was really the fear of losing one’s eyes, which was really the latent fear of castration, which evokes the uncanny feeling in *Der Sandmann* (Freud 1919, § II). However, what Freud, I believe, overlooked in discarding the way in which the character of Olympia could possibly induce the uncanny – referring to children playing with dolls and experiencing no such feeling – and Jentsch for that reason as well, is that *das unheimliche* does not necessarily and solely stem from the intellectual impossibility of determining whether or not a being is alive or not, but, rather, what it is that such a being reveals to us about what it means to be human if we are unable to do so. If a human being is unsuccessful in determining whether or not a doll, automaton, or later, an android is alive – in the

way human beings are alive – this being, implicitly, exposes to us the *constructability* of the entity of Man. I state that Jentsch too overlooked this fact because he claims that the feeling of *das unheimliche* is present as long as “diese Zweifel behoben sind und macht dann sehr gewöhnlich einer anderen Gefühlsqualität Platz”. These doubts, however, caused by the inability to clearly designate a being as either alive or animate, *transcend* this specific being which brought about these doubts; unveiling the notion of the constructability of Man and therefore an uncanny sensation will not dissipate if that particular being is said to be alive or animate. As the animate beings in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* as well as in *Blade Runner* resemble human beings to such an extent that endowing them with the potential of confronting us with our own constructability is far from improbable.

Human or Android?

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the protagonist Rick Deckard, as a bounty hunter looking to hunt down androids, is forced to differentiate between human and androids which has, due to the technical evolution of the android, become increasingly difficult. In his attempt to do so, there are mentioned two ways in which one is still able to tell the difference: through an empathy-test and by a bone marrow test. The bone marrow test, however, is only legally administered after the death of the subject. This leaves us, and Deckard for that matter, with the empathy test:

He [Rick] had wondered as had most people at one time or another precisely why an android bounced helplessly about when confronted by an empathy-measuring test. Empathy, evidently, existed only within the human community, whereas intelligence to some degree could be found throughout every phylum and order including the arachnida. For one thing, the empathic faculty probably required an unimpaired group instinct; a solitary organism, such as a spider, would have no use for it; in fact it would tend to abort a spider's ability to survive. (Dick 1999, 27)

What further complicates the matter is that androids are able of *simulating* an empathic response; however, because of the fact that it is simulated, it is not instant, as with humans, but takes a little longer to register in response to certain situation where an empathic response is typically expected. The empathy-measuring test times the responses of the androids, which then have to be interpreted by the person who

administers the test, reducing the test-results to an interpretation, causing all kinds of questions as to the validity of these results to arise.

It is at this point that I would like to propose a third way in which one would theoretically be capable of distinguishing between an android and a human being; to attempt to answer the question whether or not the being is capable of experiencing eroticism. With eroticism I mean the anticipation of and the desire for sexual activity. In formulating the idea of differentiating between android and human being through the experience of eroticism, I have drawn on this particular passage from the introduction of Georges Bataille's *L'érotisme*, in which he states that:

L'activité sexuelle de reproduction est commune aux animaux sexués et aux hommes, mais apparemment les hommes seuls ont fait de leur activité sexuelle une activité érotique, ce qui différencie l'érotisme et l'activité sexuelle simple étant une recherche psychologique indépendante de la fin naturelle donnée dans la reproduction et dans le souci des enfants. (Bataille 1974, 15)

Only humans have succeeded in transcending the simple goals of sexual activity; to multiply and raise children, and experience an *erotic activity*, very much apart from sexual activity and its goals. As the erotic activity is typically and solely human, it might serve as a way to make a distinction between human and android.

Androids and Eroticism

In considering the possibility of eroticism in androids, I will also look at the possibility of evoking erotic desire in others, but when it comes to evoking eroticism I will make a distinction between *actively and intentionally* evoking erotic desire and *passively* evoking erotic desire. The reason for this distinction is that actively evoking erotic desire can be linked to the possibility of experiencing eroticism, as I hope will later become clear, whereas passively evoking erotic desire does not necessarily require the possibility of experiencing eroticism; as, for some people objects, which clearly are not endowed with the ability of experiencing eroticism, can fulfil such a function (a type of sexual fetishism directed towards inanimate objects, a phenomenon that was explored by the French psychologist Alfred Binet in "Du fétichisme dans l'amour" (1887)).

Let us now focus on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* What eventually turns out to be a big problem for Deckard in determining whether a being is an android or a human being is that he is able to

feel sympathy for them, or at least for some of them: female androids to which he is physically attracted. Some androids, especially the android Rachael, are capable of creating a sensation in Deckard which is normally only present in human-human interaction:

I wonder what it's like to kiss an android, he said to himself. Leaning forward an inch he kissed her dry lips. No reaction followed; Rachael remained impassive. As if unaffected. And yet he sensed otherwise. Or perhaps it was wishful thinking. (Dick 1999, 161)

The kiss, which I will here recognize as having the potential of inducing erotic desire, leaves Rachael impassive; unaffected, for reasons which I will come to explain later on. This specific passage from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* has its equivalent in the film, which was based on the novel by Dick, *Blade Runner*, in which Deckard kisses Rachael in her neck and the facial expression of Rachael is almost artificially unyielding, or indifferent (Fig. 1).

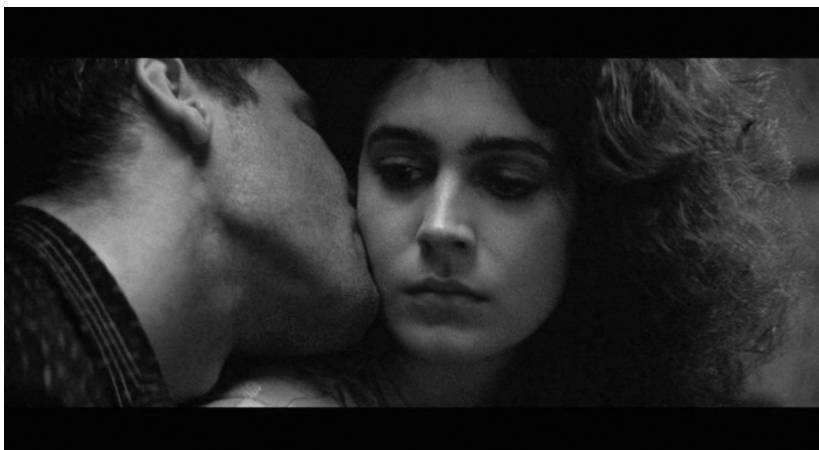


Figure 1.

In the following passage from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* there is an android, Pris, who just moved into a building which she believes was empty, but is inhabited by the human being John Isidore. He hears her moving in and decides to go down to her apartment to welcome her. As Pris is initially unwilling to open the door to John they have a lengthy conversation with John outside her door and Pris in her room. When she does open the door, John focalizes:

She seemed less timid, now; her body straightened and with her hand she smoothed her dark hair. Now he saw that she had a nice figure, although small, and nice eyes markedly established by long black lashes. Caught by surprise, the girl wore pyjama bottoms and nothing more. (Dick 1999, 54)

Yet, was she really caught by surprise? She knew that there was a man outside her door, talking to her, pleading her to let him in and when she eventually opened the door to him, she was half-naked. If we again consider *Blade Runner*, we can see something similar happening here when an android welcomes Deckard into her dressing room, half-naked. She then takes a shower with him still present and prior to covering herself up, she puts on her boots (Fig. 2).



Figure 2.

Let us consider these examples more closely. In the first two from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Blade Runner*, androids are confronted with a kiss, something humans probably view as having the potential of causing erotic desire, yet *not always* automatically resulting in erotic desire. Whether or not a kiss results in desire depends on the situation, the person from which you receive it, and many more factors which determine whether or not erotic desire stemming from a kiss is wanted making the kiss a subtle and a very complex form of human interaction. In both examples, the androids, upon receiving a kiss, remain impassive. In the two other examples female androids are dealing with men while they are half-naked. In both examples they

make no attempts to obscure their nakedness; nakedness which, of course, has the ability to evoke erotic desire.

Now, we can attempt to explain these reactions by androids to their respective situations in two ways, either (1) they are *unconscious* of the fact that they are in a position to evoke erotic desire or are already evoking erotic desire; not acknowledging the kiss and their nakedness respectively as having the potential to evoke this desire; and therefore they fail to react to a kiss – which is a failure to react altogether; a kiss is generally wanted or unwanted; the androids do not reject the gesture nor do they accept it – and fall short to conceal their nakedness, which a woman would typically do in front of an unknown man, recognizing the scene as potentially erotic, or (2) they are *conscious* of their position and their potential of evoking erotic desire, but are indifferent to it; not considering the effects it might have on the men as troubling or, in fact, of any interest to them.

I will attempt to explain why the first option seems, to me, to be the most plausible. In doing so, I will return to the distinction I made earlier between actively and passively evoking erotic desire. It seems that in all examples, as the androids are unaware that they are in the position to evoke erotic desire, they are evoking it passively; unknowingly. Therefore, it is not necessary that the androids themselves are able to experience eroticism in order to evoke such a desire; as they appear to be the passive eroticized objects of others. Let us consider then the option of actively evoking erotic desire. As a human being, I have the ability to experience eroticism; to experience erotic and sexual desire. Because of the fact that I am capable of such a feeling, I can ask myself the question: how is it that erotic desire is successfully evoked within me? As I can ask myself that question and, with a little daring honesty, in all probability answer it, I can then, with that answer in mind, ask myself the following question: now that I know how erotic desire is evoked in *me*, how can I go about evoking erotic desire in *someone else*? It is through a self-reflection on my own erotic desire and the actions or thoughts which led to this desire that I can attempt to evoke it in someone else, which I would say the whole concept of seduction – actively and intentionally evoking erotic desire in someone – relies upon. In this way experiencing erotic desire renders someone able to evoke it in someone else. So, when we once again consider the examples in which androids are confronted with possible erotic situations, we could claim that because they are androids, and thus at least theoretically, as androids are not-human, are incapable of erotic desire, they are too incapable of, through self-reflection, recognizing and acknowledging

these situations as potentially erotic. Of course, there is always the possibility of the imitation of erotic desire, and the imitation of seduction on which androids probably rely. Later on in this essay, I will attempt to answer the problem of imitation when it comes to eroticism and seduction.

As I have said, the possibility to seduce, to actively and intentionally evoke erotic desire in someone, would imply the possibility of experiencing eroticism in the being who seduces. But, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* we are confronted with an android who actively seduces, who attempts to lure Deckard into bed, into sexual activity, instead of just being a passive eroticized object. Rachael, the android who actively seduces, is in this particular passage attempting to have Deckard sleep with her. The activity itself, Deckard sleeping with Rachael, is necessarily bound to be an erotic activity, instead of sexual activity, as androids are unable to have children (Dick 1999, 165). So, their actions have no relation to the natural intent of their actions; to multiply and raise the children resulting from their intercourse. However, the act of seduction, as initiated by Rachael is solely linguistic – she refrains from more physical seduction – and rather direct, when she invites Deckard to: “go to bed,” and when he doesn’t immediately comply with her wishes, resorts to: “Goddamn it, get into bed” (Dick 1999, 161-163). The linguistic nature of the attempt of the seduction employed by Rachael and the notable absence of the attempt of physical seduction in this passage might lead one to belief that it is imitated behaviour: artificial, reminding one of the ways in which children sometimes imitate the linguistic behaviour of their parents or others, using words or phrases they picked up, without really knowing what they signify.

The possibility of sexual activity with an android along with the fact that Deckard is capable of feeling empathy for some of the androids – both interactions/feelings which would normally only occur in human-human interaction – reveal the way in which these androids resemble human beings and how close they come in realizing the notion of what it means to be human. They allow for human-human interaction, instead of machine-human interaction and perhaps even *necessitate* human-human interaction; as machine-human interaction no longer suffices.

The very idea which I departed from, that the possibility to experience eroticism would and could serve as a way to differentiate between android and human, and thus started my reading of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, is in fact substantiated in the novel itself, when we

1 When seen in this perspective, one could argue that the activity which Rachael and Rick engage in is *sexual activity* rather than the previously claimed erotic activity, because it serves the same purpose as human-human sexual activity, namely to ensure the survival of the respective species.

notice the way in which androids employ their, albeit artificial, sexuality. After Rachael has slept with Deckard – the scene in which the sexual activity supposed to have taken place is notably absent, a rather substantial gap in the narrative – she confesses to him that she has done this before, after which the ultimate goal becomes clear:

“You’re not going to be able to hunt androids any longer,” she said calmly.

“So don’t look sad. Please.”

He stared at her.

“No bounty hunter has ever gone on,” Rachel said. “After being with me.”

[..]

“I see,” Rick said. He felt numb. Completely. Throughout his entire body.

[..]

“The association,” Rachel said, “wanted to reach the bounty hunters here and in the Soviet Union. *This seemed to work. . . for reasons which we do not fully understand. Our limitation again, I guess.*” (Dick 1999, 169-70, italics added)

Rachael employs her sexuality; her ability to be sexually active – as was envisioned by the association which is responsible for the creation of androids – to deconstruct the already fragile boundaries which remain between android and human, conforming that the ability to transcend sexual activity and instead experience erotic activity is indeed a human capacity.¹ If a human is capable of experiencing such an activity with an android – a not-human – the distinction between the two entities consequently is blurred; it becomes unsustainable and is ultimately revealed as artificial.

However, their ability to be sexually active and perhaps constitute an erotic

experience always remains and never exceeds an imitation in order to resemble the original. Earlier, I promised, I would attempt to discuss the problem of imitation when it regarded eroticism and seduction, which I shall do so here. Of course, when it is acknowledged that the erotic activity and the ability to evoke erotic desire is nothing but an imitation, the question whether or not an android is capable of eroticism is answered; it is then unveiled as an impossibility. When confessing to Deckard that it was all part of a plan envisioned by the Rosen association, Rachael says that sleeping with the bounty hunters “seemed to work. . . for reasons which we do not fully understand. Our limitation again, I guess.” Because she acknowledges that she does not understand why seducing men into sexual intercourse with an android works, she implies that it is imitated or taught behaviour. It seems that she does not understand why this tactic is so successful in dissipating the boundaries between android and human, because, she, as an android, is incapable of experiencing eroticism herself, which means she is unable to grasp the significance of an erotic experience shared between two beings. This claim is further substantiated by an earlier passage, wherein Rachael warns Deckard that he is not going to make love with a woman but with an android and tells him: “I understand – they tell me – it’s convincing if you don’t think too much about it.” (Dick 1999, 165), again implying imitation, as something is only convincing in relation to its original, as a counterfeit Rolex is convincing only in relation to a genuine Rolex. In all probability, it are Rachael’s hints at imitation, which enable Deckard to continue to hunt androids, where others have failed to do so, implying that imitation only works when it is not regarded or discovered as such. Rachael reveals herself as an android imitating human behaviour which allows Deckard to continue to differentiate between the two entities and therefore his bounty hunting which is facilitated by the possibility to discern between human and android.

Although the androids come close to realizing a deconstruction of the borders, which with effort aid the differentiation between android and human, and come close to being the embodiment of the Baudrillardian simulacrum: the copy without an original (Baudrillard 1994, 6), they are ultimately revealed as simulation; as an imitation of an original, an original, however, which can barely hold its ground towards its copy.

Conclusion

Androids in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* – as non-humans – are incapable of experiencing eroticism and therefore seem unable to recognize a situation or object as potentially erotic, consequently failing to react in these situations as a human normally would, exposing them as non-human. Although they are capable of reacting, they do not necessarily *understand* erotic situations – recall Rachael stating: “This seemed to work. . . for reasons which we do not fully understand. Our limitation again, I guess.” – which sometimes results in responses which could be considered as strange or inappropriate, as they are – as machines – incapable of reflecting on their reactions to certain situations in the attempt to understand them.

Through the analysis of eroticism, I hope I have made clear that the differentiation between android and human in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, albeit difficult to maintain, *is* sustainable and desirable to maintain; hopefully facilitating Men with some more ground against their manufactured counterparts, so they will stand a little firmer.

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SUMMARY

In more and more contemporary science-fiction films and novels the difficulty experienced in attempting to distinguish human from machine has become the main problem facing humanity, endangering its survival, as the machines turn against their architects. In his article, *Androids and Eroticism* De Kam attempts such a differentiation between android and human in the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by Philip K. Dick and *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott, through an analysis of the characteristic human ability to experience erotic activity, proposing a new reading of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and supplying post-human generations with a critical distinguishing feature between the animate and the inanimate.

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