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BLADE RUNNER AND *DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?:* AN ECOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF HUMAN-CENTERED VALUE SYSTEMS

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The ecology movement, which sprang into public consciousness in the 1960s, has recently moved into a reflective stage as philosophers and activists try to state more clearly the overall meaning of ecology for human values, consciousness and modern life. The old ecology movement tended to look at such discrete issues as the disappearance of a species, cost benefit analysis for maintaining a public park, etc., but did not attempt to reevaluate the relation between humans and nature, a goal which characterizes the new ecological philosophy. One of the fundamental questions posed is how far traditinal respect for human life can be extended to other forms of life. At least a partial answer is that overly human-centered value systems cannot adequately expand empathy and respect for other beings.[1] Such questioning of human-centered value systems can be very illuminating for the study of cultural texts and works of art; at the same time art is often capable of developing this questioning much further than the philosophers and activists of the new ecology movements imagine. Furthermore, as I will argue in the case of *Blade Runner* (directed by Ridley Scott) and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Phillip K. Dick's novel which inspired *Blade Runner*), works of art can extend and illuminate the critique of human centeredness through both theme and form. Indeed

much modern art, with its sense of distortion and paradox, seems particularly oriented to expressing crisis, loss and disappearance, all themes of the new ecological philosophy. In the two works in question theme and form work together to give a new understanding of the issue of how far human empathy can be extended beyond the human, a question which is posed against the background of the potential destruction of nature, including animal nature.

In addition Dick's novel and Scott's film deal explicitly with two issues of particular concern to the new ecologists: respect for animals and genetic engineering. Tom Regan has argued that increased respect, both for animals and for marginalized humans, depends upon seeing how their specific life has value and can be better or worse for them, independent of what others say or do. (Regan 1982: 135-138) The expansion of empathy, as depicted in *Blade Runner* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,* seems to rest upon such a notion of respect.

The close connection between issues of animal liberation and genetic engineering is suggested by a recent interview with Jeremy Rifkin, who has campaigned against genetic engineering because it violates species integrity and thus runs the risk of producing monsters or slaves – such as ten-foot cows – that would simply provide milk and meat and not be allowed to lead any significant life on their own. He connects his own fight with that of the animal liberationists who are struggling to develop a "new deep ecology philosophy about the sacredness and integrity of life" (Rifkin 1987: 41).

Issues of genetic enginering and animal liberation raise with poignancy questions of how far empathy can be expanded and what the paradoxes and limits of such expansion might be. To the general question of how far traditional respect for human life can be extended to other beings we can add the question of whether such respect can or should be extended equally in all directions for all beings. Could humans, for example, ever care for all forms of life as much as they do for human life? Even if it was agreed that this was a good thing, one might still argue that it is an overly utopian notion. Preserving animal life, for example, entails recognition that animals often eat each other; thus extra efforts to preserve them may not lead to a steady expansion of life preservation.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? depicts a post nuclear war society in which bounty hunters track down genetically engineered androids who have escaped from a life of semi-slavery on colonized planets. The action of the novel concerns the effort of the protagonist Rick Deckard to execute a particularly dedicated band of rebel androids who have returned to earth. In this attempt he begins to question his own notions of empathy.

In the background of the story Dick manages to convey the sense not just of a nuclear explosion but also of the implosion that followed it, producing a mass of rubble or "kipple" as it is called in the novel. The

kipple makes the regeneration of earth seem hopeless. But what *can* be regenerated is the feeling for the things on earth. They are more valued than they were before the implosion. In particular this process of reevaluation has affected the attitudes of human beings toward animals. Because most animals were destroyed by the aftereffects of the nuclear war, and indeed many species became extinct, it is universally considered wrong to kill them (one character says that it is a crime and another says that it was only a crime immediately after the war – Dick 1982: 10, 241.) The new attitude to animals surfaces in the extremely important empathy test for identifying androids by checking whether they have normal human sympathies, including feeling for animals.

The paradoxes generated by this situation allow Dick to meditate on the issue of whether there are limits to the expansion of empathy. The novel emphasizes the dichotomy humans feel between wanting to respect androids, because of their human characteristics – and what appears to be the beginnings of feeling for humans on the part of androids – and not wanting to respect them, given their inability to feel adequately for humans and other animals. Their inability to respect animals is regarded as particularly horrendous, because at least the appearance of human respect for animals has grown vastly since so many animals became extinct as a result of nuclear war.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? is thus concerned with valuing beings produced by genetic engineering and with respect for animals. It counterbalances the theme of the expansion of empathy for such nonhuman beings with the theme of the limits of such expansion. Only at the end of the novel does the puzzling title become completely clear. It asks whether androids, as they increase their emotional range, would still be limited to empathizing with animals that are, like them, not fully organic. There is a certain irony here, since many humans own electric animals both for prestige and as substitutes, as objects of affection, for real animals, which are scarce and expensive. Throughout the novel the expansion of empathy is dealt with in both a utopian way (for example through the depiction of a religion of empathy, Mercerism) and in a more practical way, through the depiction of actions which lead some of the protagonists to a position where they can glimpse the workaday possibility of expansion of feeling in their own lives. The novel describes not only the general situation of animals but also Deckard's own quest to own a real animal, as well as his ambivalent relation to Mercerism.

Throughout, the justifiable (as opposed to prejudicial) reason that humans prove limited in their respect for androids is shown to be android inability to appreciate and respect the human and animal world. Although androids may dream of electric sheep, an electric sheep is different from a real sheep. This is not to imply that humans are always sincere in their interaction with animals, since they too are often satisfied with electric animals as status symbols. Furthermore, for humans the religion of empa-

thy is often a matter of hypocrisy. Still, the novel envisions that caring for others is something of a fixed natural element, unsubjected to cultural change and personal idiosyncracies. If this were not the case the empathy test would not work.

Dick depicts humans as capable of following the Mercerite commandments of respecting all life and killing only the killers (Dick 1982: 27). Deckard's killing of Roy Baty and Pris and his ultimately harsh rejection of Rachael (the android with whom he has a relationship) seems to be justified by Baty's torturing of a spider and Rachael's killing of Deckard's pet goat. And when the novel ends, Deckard has accepted enough of the religion to give up his bounty hunter job. However, acceptance of Mercerism leads to no utopia. The novel ends ironically when Deckard discovers that the toad that he found in "the north," and which caused him for a moment to see "through Merceer's eyes," is itself electric (Dick 1982: 210-211).

Mercerism is shown as both a fake and a reality. It is certainly real as finally incorporated into Deckard's life, but even that incorporation has a dichotomous aspect. Deckard stops killing androids and has expanded his feeling for them and for animals. Yet he continues to justify, although ruefully, his killing of Roy Baty and his group of androids, partly because Mercer himself has given a personal message to him indicating that these acts of killing are justified. At the same time, Deckard has been struck by the capacity of the androids for what appears to be genuine feeling, an example being the android Luba Luft's interest in expressionist art, specifically in Munch's *Puberty*. Because of Deckard's understanding of the unique value of Luba's way of life, the "kill-only-the-killers" slogan – to the extent that it entails killing the androids – is ultimately undercut. It is seen as a fundamentalist or right-wing interpretation of Mercerism which is inconsistent with its deeper critique of human centeredness.

Although the ecological questioning of human centeredness is done differently in *Blade Runner* than in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *Blade Runner's* use of expressionist form to convey such questioning makes it a significant translation of the novel, even though the religion of empathy does not appear, and, unfortunately, much of the explicit animal material has been banished from the film. (Although in the film animals are depicted as scarce, there is no attempt to explain this as a result of nuclear war. And while animals do play the same role in the film version of the empathy test, this device isn't used so much to reflect on the animal/human relation.)

The film concentrates on Deckard's increasing feeling for the androids (now called replicants) and particularly for Rachael, with whom he falls in love. It concentrates as well on Batty and Pris, who articulate most clearly the android philosophy of rebellion. Whereas in the novel Deckard simply kills Roy Baty (Batty in the film), in *Blade Runner* Deckard winds up being rescued from death by Batty after a climactic battle scene. After ar-

ticulating a newfound understand for the dying Batty, Deckard, along with Rachael, escapes from the imploded city to the relative refuge of "the north."

In the novel, in contrast, although Deckard is attracted to Rachael, their relationship is not treated very romantically. Whereas in the film Deckard's growing awareness of android claims for respect is depicted through the romance scenes with Rachael, in the novel this awareness is better depicted through his encounters with the other androids. Another important difference is that the film stresses the possibility of empathy simply increasing, whereas the novel is more ironic. This is not to deny that the growth of respect for other beings remains an ideal in both film and novel. Furthermore, in some ways, in spite of its irony, the novel remains truer to this ideal than the film. For in the novel, since there is not as much emphasis put on the relation between Deckard and Rachael, the issue of expanded understanding does not become as confused with romantic love as it does in the film.

In spite of this problem, I believe that the film does succeed in expressing the dilemmas of expanding empathy in a way that the book does not, by using its expressionist form to depict these dilemmas. Douglas Kellner, Flo Liebowitz and Michael Ryan have emphasized the expressionist aspect of *Blade Runner:* "In fact the formal style of *Blade Runner* borrows entire sequences from German Expressionist films. In addition to the *Metropolis* parallels, the sleazy bar where Deckard finds the android Zhora is reminiscent of Mrs. Greiffer's party in Pabst's film, *The Joyless Street.* Moreover, many stylistic elements of film noir make *Blade Runner,* even more complex. Deckard appropriates the first-person narrative role of the film noir detective, and Rachael acts as a classic femme noir-dark sensual, mysterious, and seemingly morally ambivalent" (Kellner et al.: 6).

In *Blade Runner,* I will argue, expressionism often points to a critique of human centeredness. Above all it is this which makes *Blade Runner* a genuine innovation and not simply a postmodern pastiche of past films.[2] The reason why some of the film's expressionist techniques can illuminate the critique of human centeredness that informs Dick's novel is that they can convey the border between human and nonhuman life in a way that few artistic techniques do. Thus, they are ideally suited for depicting the issue of the expansion of empathy beyond ordinary human limits. A short excursus into the theory of expressionism developed by Wilhelm Worringer aids my argument. (Worringer's theory was formulated in the early part of the century, as central European expressionism was itself developing.)

Worringer questioned and creatively incorporated into his analysis the results of two types of German aesthetics of his day. The first was the art history of Alois Riegl and others who had explored non-representational, abstract art, often of a geometric nature, and largely outside the canon of classical western painting and sculpture. Riegl, for example, had studied

late Roman crafts (Worringer 1959; 55-56). The second line of research was that of Theodore Lipps, who had suggested that the emotion of empathy *(Einfuhling)* was particularly elicited by the works of the naturalistic classical Western canon of great painting and sculpture. Starting with these two lines of research Worringer asked what the emotional correlate of the abstract, geometrical art was. In asking this question he assumed that the answer was not empathy. His answer was essentially "alienation and denial of the world." Thus, Worringer saw art as either naturalistic and empathic or abstract and life-denying (Worringer 1959: 35-60).

In the extended, tripartite (as opposed to dualistic), version of the theory, there is a third possibility: an abstract art which was neither as geometric as the art studied by Riegl, nor as naturalistic as the art studied by Lipps, but a distorted version of natural life. Such work aroused emotion between anxious denial and empathic affirmation. Worringer discovered this third possibility in analyzing some of the grotesque aspects of Gothic art, which he characterized as "a hard angular, ceaselessly interrupted line, of the most powerful vehemence of expression" (Worringer 1964: 43). Although the affinities between Gothic art and the expressionism that was then developing in Germany and northern and central Europe are fairly clear in Worringer, it was his English follower, Herbert Read, who most explicitly tied the jagged lines of Gothic art to the new expressionist art – whose artists were fond of depicting beings such as monsters or robots. These figures could be empathized with as having similarities to humanity, but they also conjured up terror and disassociation because of their distorted and nonhuman characteristics. It was a short path from this third type of emotion to classic German expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Nosferatu, The Golem,* as well – I maintain – as to *Blade Runner.*[3]

Furthermore, such figures as Nosferatu and the replicants in *Blade Runner* represent expressionistically, in terms of their physical characteristics, the border between that with which we can and cannot empathize. The expressionist form of these films is therefore particularly able to depict the theme of the border between human and non-human, the border where our sympathy with living beings can easily break down. It is also possible that the expressionist form of the film, for which there is no analogue in the novel, (other than the scene with the Munch paintaings) also represents a thematic change. In the film the replicants are in many ways more human than the androids in the novel. This change may reflect subtle differences in the understanding of genetic engineering between 1968, the date the novel was published, and 1982, the date the film was released. In some ways the genetically engineered androids of the novel are more robot-like, and the genetically engineered replicants of the film are more organic.

Above all *Blade Runner* must show the education of Deckard to the possibility of expanding his feeling for other beings and coming to understand

the relation between human, replicant, and animal empathy. Just as in the novel one of the central moments of this education is Deckard's understanding that Luba Luft can appreciate the expressionist paintings of Edward Munch, in the film the expansion and contraction of empathy is depicted through expressionist scenes. The central task in the education of Deckard is for him to give up the detachment with which he administers the empathy test. He must begin to assimilate the world of the replicants, to begin to understand that the person to whom he is giving the test has a standpoint also, a standpoint which would have to be incorporated into the test in order for it to work properly. The test's purpose is to pick out beings who do not have adequate respect for others and thus are recognizable as replicants. But this fails to acknowledge a replicant type of empathy. It also fails to recognize that the person who is giving the test in order to capture replicants is himself a good candidate for failing a better honed test, perhaps even this one. This point is underlined when Rachel asks Deckard whether he has ever taken the test.

Director Ridley Scott needed a way of visually illustrating the dichotomy in Deckard's education between the assurance that he already has the foolproof test for empathy, and his realization both that the test is inadequate and that his own feelings should expand. Scott's solution to this problem was to present in the various expressionist scenes a range of ways in which the genetically engineered replicants are disassociated from or connected with life, human or not, and thus a range of degrees to which a human can empathize with them. Sometimes they are close to human life and sometimes they are far away. Usually they are both at the same time and present a dichotomous aspect. They are living examples of how, in Rifkin's words, genetic engineering is the "violation of species integrity" (Rifkin 1987: 5). In general, however, there is a progression toward merging replicant and human.

One of the harsher dichotomies between human and replicant is introduced in the early scene in which Leon, the fierce rebel replicant, not only fails the empathy test, but also shoots the person who gives it to him. Leon's fierce response shows, paradoxically, an almost human desire to be perceived as human. The harshness of this scene utilizes expressionist depiction of brutality to get across Leon's disassociation from human life, while at the same time letting Leon's violence express deep emotion.

In contrast to this scene is the one which follows shortly after in which Deckard discovers that, as a replicant, Rachael has memories which are not real but mechanical. Rachael does not appear to be a monstrous other, as Leon does in some ways, but the mechanical insertion of memories reminds us that genetically engineered beings, no matter how human, still cross the line between human and non-human and have something even of the non-organic in them. The fact that her dress, hairdo, and general ambience identify her as a *film noir* heroine may well add to her human features, while at the same time suggesting some distant connection with

a robot.[4]

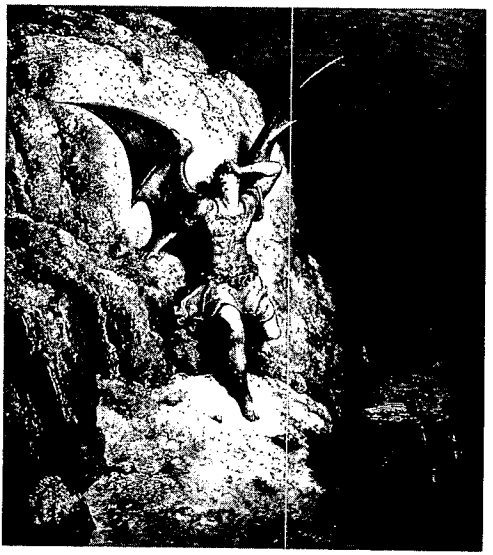
If these two early scenes suggest oscillation between identifying replicants with human life and separating them from it, a third expressionist scene begins more fully to explore the range of expressionist techniques for illustrating the empathy/disassociation dichotomy. Here Leon and Batty visit the place where Batty's eyes were manufactured. By showing the contrast between the human and animal function of Batty's eyes and their artificial, non-human construction, the director is able to get across the sense of the tortured lines and spaces of expressionist art, caught between the organic and the nonorganic, striving for life at its fullest but not quite achieving it.

This scene is closely followed by the one in which Deckard does his job of executing Zhora (the replicant most analogous to Luba Luft in the novel) and then begins to communicate with Rachael about her artificial memories. Nothing in these scenes is as powerful as the novel's description of Deckard's increasing empathy, not with Rachael but with Luba Luft – the opera singer and appreciator of Munch's paintaings. Because the film takes an opposite turn and thus blurs the theme of empathy in favor of a more traditional romance, it moves at an early stage toward an overly easy resolution of expressionist *Angst*. After Rachael "establishes" her affinity with human beings by killing Leon as he tries to revenge Zhora's death, the key romance scene between Rachael and Deckard occurs. This easy resolution to the dichotomy is continued in the final scene of the film in which Rachael and Deckard escape and are driving away to the relative haven of "the north."

(We should note, however, that the key romantic scene between Deckard and Rachael is something other than merely conventional. For Rachael's artificial memories dissolve into the living and the organic when she realizes that she only needs to use these memories to help her play the piano and to love, and she will begin to overcome the dichotomy – set by genetic engineering and represented by expressionism – between the human and that place where, as species integrity is violated, the human turns into the nonhuman.)

The ecological themes and expressionist form come to a more powerful climax not in the romantic scenes, but in several other scenes depicting the struggle of the replicants. In the first, the two rebel replicants who have so far remained at large, Batty and Pris, visit the apartment of Sebastian, creator of life-like toys. In classic expressionist guise of intermingling the mechanical and organic, they even pretend to be those robot-like objects. In the next scene, Batty, having convinced Sebastian to lead him to the person who invented and thus created him, shows his Promethean and Satanic tendencies by murdering his creator-god.

Satan as Prometheus is perhaps nowhere depicted more graphically than in Gustav Dore's essentially expressionist illustrations for *Paradise Lost,* pictures which could well be the model for the semi-final scene in the film,



The Expressionist Other: Satan
Gustav Dore

The Expressionist Other:
The Golem

the climactic battle between Batty and Deckard. During this scene, when it becomes clear to Batty that he is going to die, he finally rescues Deckard from falling off a building. Deckard sums up by suggesting that in his last moments it was life above all with which Batty had chosen to empathize. This scene is one of the most expressionist in the film, with the characters viewed in a continually distorted way, through extremes of light and shade.

Through this expressionist distortion, the figure of Batty takes on particularly human characteristics. Above all he calls forth empathy and respect. His final words at the end of the film, asking for understanding in spite of his strange life and experiences, extend the expressionist vision of Munch's "The Scream." They recall words from Dick's novel:

> At an oil painting Phil Resch halted, gazed intently. The painting showing a hairless, oppressed creature with a head like an inverted pear, its hand clasped in horror to its ears, its mouth open in a vast soundless scream... 'I think,' Phil Resch said, 'that this is how an andy must feel.' (Dick 1982: 114)

How is it, however, that Batty is able to make the transition from Promethian, Satanic rebel to the symbol of empathic quest that is Munch's screamer? One answer is that the demonic tradition in expressionism, from Milton's and Dore's Satan himself, through Melmoth the wanderer, Nosferatu, and the Golem, is always about rebels who, even as they go beyond normal human feeling, utter the scream of Munch's symbolic figure for more empathy, different empathy, the growth of empathy is new directions. The very reference to fallen angels which Batty makes as he enters the film and which helps establish his position as Satanic and Promethian rebel, furthers this link between rebellion and desired understanding: "Fiery the angels fell. Deep thunder rolled around the shore." Just as nature mimics the plight of the angels, nature, in the Munch lithograph, mimics the plight of the screamer.[5]

Expressionist images which link rebellion on the one hand and alienation and the quest for understanding on the other all serve as a bridge between Batty the Promethian and Batty the Munchian screamer. It is this transition that allows the central battle scene in the film to mirror and extend the central scene in the novel in which Deckard begins to sympathize with Luba Luft because of their common interest in Munch's figures.

Just as Munch's scream echoes through nature, and thus expands the boundaries of human feeling, so too Batty and other figures in *Blade Runner* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* ask us to broaden our understanding and respect for life different and other. For expressionism goes beyond *Angst* to achieve reconciliation when we see in the other – animal, android or monster – a being worthy of respect.[6]

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Notes

1. Arne Naess coined the term "deep ecology" to refer to that ecological philosophy which emphasized the critique of human centeredness. Cf. Naess 1986. For further discussion see Rodman 1983, Devall and Sessions 1985, Rifkin 1987, Sale 1986; the Journals entitled *Earth First, Journal of Environmental Ethics;* and Sale's occasional column in *The Nation.*

2. For an account of *Blade Runner* in terms of postmodern pastiche see Bruno 1987. Of course, *Blade Runner* actually utilizes a variety of expressionist styles and themes, not all of them aiding in explicating the human centered/nonhuman centered dichotomy. For example, Deckard is portrayed as a detective out of *film noir* expressionism and the romance between he and Rachael has many *film noir* elements. Furthermore, the crowd scenes not only harken back to the vision of the crowd in classic expressionist films, but also add a political element which was lacking in the novel. Indeed the film's depiction of a degraded and exploited mass society seems calculated to suggest the social ramifications of ecological disaster. Class divisions definitely seem to have exacerbated in this future society, and the rebellion of the replicants almost seems metaphorical for proletarian rebellion. See Kellner et al: 6. See also Eisner 1985: 151-158 for a discussion of expressionist film and crowds.

3. For a further discussion of the general link between Worringer and expressionism see Read 1977: 100-104, 216-220. For the specific link between Worringer and expressionist film see Eisner 1985: 16.

4. See Kellner et al., p. 6 for a discussion of Rachael as *film noir* heroine.

5. For "The Scream" see Willet 1970: 17. For Dore's illustrations see Milton nd. For the demonic or Satanic in romanticism and expressionism see Eisner 1985: 9, and the introduction to Maturin 1968: xiii. For another attempt to explore the connection between alienation and the demonic or uncanny in expressionist film see Prawer 1980: 108-137.

6. For a film in which expressionist *Angst* and reconciliation are more explicitly linked with animals see Martin Rosen's *The Plague Dogs* (1982).

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