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Staying Alive: Science Fiction in the Age of the Anthropocene – Philip K. Dick's Pessimistic Humanism

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Hannah Arendt begins her prevalent political treaty *The Human Condition* (1958), by marking the launch of the first artificial Moon satellite, Sputnik 1, in 1957 as a pivotal moment in human history.[1] Stating, '[t]his event [was] second in importance to no other, not even the splitting of the atom'.[2] For Arendt, 'it is the same desire to escape from imprisonment on the earth, that is manifest in the attempt to create life in the test tube'.[3] She warns against the blind arrogance of exchanging human existence, organic life connected to the natural world, for 'something he has made himself': 'a great many scientific endeavours have been directed toward making life also "artificial," toward cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature'.[4] This desire to 'cut the last tie' was first legitimised by Sputnik 1, but also later by Yuri Gagarin — the first human in space — in 1961, and by Apollo 11 in 1969, with the first man on the moon. The 1960s saw mankind and its technological mastery break through the heavens and into the stars: '[b]ut, curiously enough, this joy was not triumphal reaction [...]. The immediate reaction, expressed on the spur of the moment, was relief about the first "step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth"'.[5] Rather frighteningly, we are several steps closer to achieving this goal. The possibility of relocating humanity to another planet is something NASA is hoping to achieve with the Mars expedition in the 2030s.[6] The boundary dividing the dystopian futures of science fiction and reality is dissolving rapidly as we enter the age of the Anthropocene — the epoch in which human

[1] Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* discusses how human achievements and our existence on the planet should be, and has been, understood throughout Western history. She stresses the value of *vita activa* (active life) over *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life), and lays out the three fundamental categories of the vita activa: labor, work, and action. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]).

[2] Arendt, p. 1.

[3] Ardent, p. 2.

[4] Ardent, p. 3, p. 2.

[5] Ardent, p. 1.

[6] National Aeronautics and Space Administration, *NASA's Journey to Mars*, 2014 (updated 7 August 2017) <https://www.nasa.gov/content/nasas-journey-to-mars> [accessed 19 January 2019].

activity has become the dominant driving force of climatic change.[7] Over the course of this essay, I will evaluate the potentially damaging implications of humanity's fascination with space travel in light of current ecological discourses, and will do so by exploring the work of Philip K. Dick from 1960-1969.

Writing in the aftermath of World War II and during the Cold War, Dick's work from the sixties exhibits the destructive tendencies inherent in western ideologies of growth and expansion. He creates a host of possible futures where human society has been exhausted by overconsumption. Humans leave earth in great droves to find sanctuary from a dying world, but the colonised planets are cold and infertile. Dick's futuristic worlds differ profusely from the gleaming cities of other science fiction novels, such as the work of Jules Verne (1828-1905) and are set more recently than the far distant futures of most apocalyptic fantasies, such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). His fiction tends to look twenty-to-thirty years forward; situating themselves firmly in the twentieth century and remaining heavily entrenched in the past. Dick's *The Simulacra* (1964), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), *Ubik* (1969), and *The Man in The High Castle* (1962) all reference humanity's colonisation of space –– whether by Nazis, corporations, or refugee settlers –– but focus predominately on the deterioration of earth after mankind has abandoned it. Dick does not eagerly anticipate future technologies and the habituation of other planets, but mourns a dying earth and a dying species: the human.

An exception to this rule is *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), which divides its narrative between Terran (earth) and its Martian settler colonies. Here, Dick portrays 'Mars as a desolate wasteland [...], a harsh world of rock' in which humans 'survive the hardship of their daily exile from Earth only by means of [a] drug induced virtual-reality'.[8] Terran, like the dusty entropic world of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* can no longer shelter humanity, and yet humanity does not find salvation on other planets. Dick is critical of the inherently imperialist ideology driving the Space Race, the logic of expansion that seeks to leave man's mark not only on earth but the entire solar system. His gloomy depictions of the future largely anticipate debates surrounding technological progression and

[7] The damaging consequences of human endeavour are now widely acknowledged within environmentalist and scientific communities, and by environmental literary theory or 'ecocriticism', as a shift from the Holocene, the geological epoch that provided the appropriate conditions for mammals to thrive, to the 'Anthropocene'.

[8] Ursula K. Heise, 'Martian Ecologies and the future of Nature', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 57 (2011), 447-62 (p. 454).

posthumanism that are currently under deliberation in ecocriticism.[9] Resisting both the desire to 'escape from imprisonment on earth' and the desire 'to create life in the test tube', Dick's fiction does not look towards the stars but is, in many ways, a return to earth.

In 'returning to earth', Dick forefronts the figure of the animal to highlight the apparent disconnection between the human and nonhuman worlds in contemporary culture. The animal appears in his apocalyptic settings to reaffirm human authenticity, by identifying compassion as an advantageous and uniquely human attribute. The animal provides the chance for redemption but is also a figure fraught with irony: the desire for a natural world that human's have themselves knowingly destroyed. In both 'From Extinction to Electronics' (2003) and 'The Android and the Animal' (2009), Ursula K. Heise examines how 'wild, domestic, genetically modified, or mechanical animals' have helped reimagine the human subject.[10] She argues that the presence of artificial animals (electronically or genetically modified), raises 'complex questions about the relationship between humans, animals, and machines and their respective status in worlds where little that is purely "natural" is left', and about 'how much nature can we do without, to what extent simulations of nature can replace the "natural", and what role animals, both natural and artificial, play in our self-definition as humans'.[11]

Despite attempts made throughout history to privilege human life over all other lifeforms, Heise suggests that 'a consideration of human identity as altered by contemporary technologies is no longer complete without a concurrent account of its relation to animal modes of being'[12]. As the consequences of climate change intensify, the inter-species relations become increasingly relevant for environmentalism. To cite Donna Haraway:

> By the late twentieth century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached [...]. Movements for animal rights are not

[9] Early environmental literature, which is now recognised as 'ecocriticism', stems from Romantic notions of the sublimity of nature, but in more recent years there has been a movement away from 'realistic' forms of representation towards a broader exploration of ecocritical narratives.

[10] Ursula K. Heise, 'The Android the Animal', *PMLA*, 124.2 (2009), 503-510 (p. 503).

[11] Ursula K. Heise, 'From Extinction to Electronics: Dead Frogs, Live Dinosaurs, and Electric Sheep', in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. by Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 59-81 (p. 60).

[12] Heise, 'The Android', p. 504. See also Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

> irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture.[13]

The birth of Disnature, with the opening of Disneyland in 1955, marked in the American public consciousness a disconnection from organic nature; the 'meaning of nature shifted from its utility in the nineteenth century as a frontier resource and romantic emblem to its provision of light entertainment on television and internet in the twentieth century'.[14] Replacing the American wilderness, the 'fantastically fake landscape' of Disneyland offered a 'self-contained plastic ecosystem [...]. The environment celebrated the facsimile and simulated'.[15] For Kate Soper, 'the "anthropocentric" privileging of our own species encouraged by its "humanism" has been distorting the truth of our relations with nature and resulted in cruel and destructive forms of dominion over it'.[16] Although Dick's narratives are deeply invested in the human, and are therefore rather anthropocentric narratives, he is equally critical of what Soper terms 'speciesism'. His fiction attempts to recognise humanity's less destructive tendencies, and identifies the potential for cross-species collaboration and coexistence.

In *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, the protagonist Barney Mayerson is attacked by a Martian predator, 'a fearsome telepathic jackal'.[17] The starving animal asks him, panting, 'May I eat you?', but on pursuing him, 'it suddenly squealed, veered, and ran past, not touching him: '*"Un-clean"*, it thought to itself [...] I can't eat you; I'd be sick [...]. Can't you cleanse yourself some way?'.[18] This small interchange between human and animal signifies an important shift in the narrative. Thus far in the novel, the natural world has only been referenced in relation to the excessive heat on Terran, or the desolate landscape of Mars. The realities experienced by the characters shift between the extreme climatic conditions on both planets and the virtual worlds created by P. P. Layouts and Palmer Eldritch, neither of which are reminiscent of nature. This is the first and only encounter in the novel between humanity and the natural world. The protagonist travels to a Martian colony to atone for his sins, but in seeking redemption among

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[13] Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-181 (pp.151-152).

[14] The term 'Disnature' was coined by John Wills: John Wills, *US Environmental History: Inviting Doomsday* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 176.

[15] Wills, p. 197.

[16] Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 5.

[17] Philip K. Dick, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (London: Gollancz, 2003 [1965]), p. 152.

[18] Dick, *Stigmata*, p. 222 (emphasis in original).

the stars he encounters Palmer Eldritch, the antagonist of the novel. Eldritch is a deformed human who acquired godlike powers from an alien species; he is both *in*-human and *super*-human. He seeks to create a posthuman species on Mars, modelled on his own image, and brands his followers with his stigmata. It is the stigmata branded onto Barney that the telepathic jackal identifies as 'unclean'. The Martian settlers do not find redemption by leaving Terran; neither religion, drugs, nor posthumanism helps atone for the destruction of planet earth.

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the animal is associated with human empathy. Owning an animal becomes a necessary part of everyday life (although most of the planet's animals are dead), and is the single most important distinguishing characteristic between humans and androids:

> they'll look down on you [if they realise you don't own a real animal] [...]. You know how people are about not taking care of an animal; they consider it immoral and anti-emphatic. I mean, technically it's not a crime like it was after W.W.T. but the feeling's still there.[19]

After the death of his sheep, the protagonist Rick Deckard purchases an electronic sheep, which resembles his deceased pet in both appearance and behaviour. Even the repair truck is outfitted as an 'animal hospital something', and the 'driver dresses like a vet, completely in white'.[20] Deckard describes the difference between his organic and synthetic sheep:

> "[...]. It's a premium job. And I've put as much time and attention into caring for it as I did when it was real. But — " He shrugged.
> "It's not the same", Barbour finished.
> "*But almost*".[21]

The danger posed by the artificialisation of the natural world, from an environmentalist perspective, is that the desire for artificial animals neglects, as Heise suggests, the 'unpleasant realities of ecological deterioration and species extinction', and threatens to substitute the natural world for a synthetic natural order.[22] As animal and human bodies become increasingly replaced or enhanced by technology, and as the connection between nonhuman and human worlds disentangles, the human becomes itself

[19] Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (London: Gollancz, 2010 [1968]), p. 9.
[20] Dick, *Do Androids*, p. 9.
[21] Dick, *Do Androids*, p. 9 (emphasis added).
[22] Heise, 'From Extinction', pp. 70-71.

effectively 'disnatured', or less than human. It is the animal, ironically enough, that reminds humanity of its participation (or former participation), in the natural world. As Cary Wolfe argues, the 'other-than-human resides at the very core of the human itself, not as the untouched, ethical antidotes to reason but as part of reason itself'.[23] Our understanding of being human, in the words of Bruno Latour, 'cannot be grasped and saved unless that other part of itself, the share of things, is restored to it'.[24] Posthumanist theories that disregard the figure of the animal are guilty of the same anthropocentrism as other Western cultural and theoretical practices. For Wolfe, engaging with animal discourse — recognising the human as animal — is not only imperative for how we conceive the planet, especially with the threat of climate change, but is productive for critiquing all violent discourses and practices.

Dick may not recognise humans as animals but sees them as intrinsically bonded, both to each other and to all organic life on earth. The animal is therefore central to his critique of posthumanism. This is most evident in *Do Android's Dream of Electric Sheep?*, where humans are distinguished from androids by their aversion to animal abuse (though both share a proclivity towards violence in general). In the novel, the android is in many ways superior to the human, their only weakness is their inability to express empathy. They, unlike humans, cannot express compassion or sympathy and therefore do not see any value in animal life. The Voigt-Kampff test, an empathy test used to identify androids, consists predominately of using examples of animal cruelty to elicit an emotional response, primarily that of disgust. Dick does not fail to identify the irony that the perpetrators of these injustices are humans and not androids; a hypocrisy he draws upon to expose humanity's more detrimental characteristics. Pris Stratton and Irmgard Baty, two of the escaped Nexus-6 androids, find a spider in J. R. Isidore's flat, a human living alone in derelict San Francisco. Isidore is horrified by Pris and Irmgard, who begin torturing the spider: 'Pris clipped off another leg, restraining the spider with the edge of her hand. She was smiling'.[25] This demonstration of animal cruelty terrifies Isidore, who knows how precious animals

[23] Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 17.

[24] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 138.

[25] Dick, *Do Androids*, p. 163.

are to the remnants of human society, and cannot comprehend how the androids, who resemble human women in every likeness, could harm perhaps 'the last living spider on Earth':

> "Please", Isidore said.
> Pris glanced up inquiringly. "Is it worth something?"
> "Don't mutilate it", he said wheezingly. Imploringly.[26]

After Luba Luft, an android working as an Opera singer, is violently murdered at the hand of a fellow bounty hunter Phil Resch, Deckard remarks: 'I don't get it; how can a talent like that be a liability to our society? But it wasn't the talent, he told himself; it was she herself'.[27] It is never stated exactly in what way Luba is a 'liability', beyond the fact that she is mechanical and more talented than any other human musician. Both these aspects threaten society in the same way, by suggesting that the human is inferior to the android. The inability to easily distinguish between androids and humans, between the organic and the simulation of organic life, diminishes the value attributed to humanity. The human is no longer unique in its ability to express rational thought and can be reproduced synthetically in a lab and improved upon. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Katherine Hayles argues that androids in Dick's fiction are associated with the unstable boundaries between the self and the world: '[w]hen system boundaries are defined by information loops rather than epidermal surfaces, the subject becomes a system to be assembled and disassembled rather than an entity whose organic wholeness can be assumed'.[28] The cybernetic body both addresses and destabilises the boundaries between the human and nonhuman world, and between the organic and the synthetic. The technologisation of the human body causes the disintegration or fragmentation of the self, which can no longer be identified as completely and singularly human.

After Luba Luft's death, Deckard suspects Resch of being an android: 'I hope to god you do test out as an android [...]. You like to kill. All you need is a pretext. If you had a pretext you'd kill me'.[29] But

[26] Dick, *Do Androids*, p. 167, p. 162.

[27] Dick, *Do Androids*, p. 109.

[28] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 160.

[29] Dick, *Do Androids*, p. 109.

after undergoing an empathy test, Deckard discovers that Resch is human after all, much to Deckard's dismay:

> "If I test out android", Phil Resch prattled, "you'll undergo renewed faith in the human race. But, since it's not going to work out that way, I suggest you begin framing an ideology [...]. That would explain me as part of the human race".[30]

Deckard concludes that there must be something wrong with him, and not Resch, because he experiences empathy towards androids despite considering them objects and therefore inferior to organic lifeforms. This realisation makes him suddenly aware not only of the fact that androids imitate humans flawlessly, (so much so that he empathises with them as if they were human), but also informs him that this distinction is almost completely arbitrary when androids appear to behave more like humans than the actual humans surrounding him. Androids pose a danger to humanity precisely because they are subjects and not objects. As Hayles states:

> [t]hey think, feel outrage, bond with their fellows. Given their abilities, they should be able to participate in the social realm of human relations [...] they are not objects improperly treated as if they were social beings but are social beings improperly treated as if they were objects.[31]

In his desperate attempts to prove his own humanity, Deckard is reduced to the same murderous intent he despises in Phil Resch. At the price of killing the nexus-6 androids, he can afford to buy himself a real animal. However, just as leaving earth to start a new life on Mars brings Barney Mayerson no closer to atonement, killing the androids does not help Rick Deckard reassert his humanity. Driven by desperation and despair, Deckard arrives in the desert searching for some kind of meaning to his miserable existence. It is in this desolate landscape that he finds a trace of the natural world: 'The toad, he saw, blended in totally with the texture and shade of the ever-present dust'.[32] This extinct and supposedly sacred animal reasserts his faith in life.[33] However, on bringing the toad home to his wife, he discovers that this too is

[30] Dick, *Do Androids*, pp. 111-112.

[31] Hayles, p.169.

32 Dick, *Do Androids,* p. 187.

[33] In *Do Androids* the toad is considered a sacred animal within Mercerism, a new religion based on the life and teachings of a man named Wilbur Mercer, who is, in turn, a false messiah.

false, his wife finds a switch on the animal's belly: 'The sign is a delusion; the miracle is fake'.[34] It is too late for redemption, he has become too far removed from nature and the human.

Although complicated by Deckard's emotional investment in artificial lifeforms, the question raised by the title of the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* — which refers to the debates over whether mechanical lifeforms possess enough animal and human traits to be considered their equal — is answered by Dick in the negative. Androids may imitate humans, feel compassion for other mechanical lifeforms, and even appear more human than other humans in a technologised society where humanity shares a similar cybernetic existence to that of the android; but, as is the case with Deckard's electric sheep, the android and other mechanical lifeforms are 'almost the same, but not quite'.[35] In the book, the U.N.'s advertisement tagline, 'emigrate or degenerate', eloquently summarises this anxiety towards humanity's failure to prevent climate change on earth; an anxiety prevalent, even now, in political and ecological discourses.[36] Dick is pessimistic about society's present, past and future, with colonial and military ideologies persisting, and indeed founding, the West. The desolate future landscapes painted in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch,* and numerous other novels, do not congratulate humanity for destroying earth, nor do they offer us any kind of life-raft by which to redeem ourselves. Instead, Dick recognises both the weaknesses and strengths of his species. He forecasts doom but hopes for a better, fairer, more peaceful future; one that considers the human as part of a vibrant and all-encompassing natural world. Dick's future visions resent the technologisation of nature and the human body, and criticise man's arrogant desire to shape the planet and the solar system to his likeness. Dick offers instead a kind of pessimistic humanism which suggests an instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems. Like a disappointed but loving parent, Dick uses his pessimism to appeal to the empathetic tendencies of humanity. His doomsday narratives are not rooted in nihilism, but in a deep love for our lost and confused species. Even, and especially, now, his fiction urges us to take responsibility for our actions and prepares us for the future through scepticism and pessimism, and a relentless fondness for the human.

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[34] Dick, *Do Androids*, p. 191.

[35] Dick, *Do Androids*, p. 9.

[36] Dick, *Do Androids*, p. 5.

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