

## ***Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?: Cyborg Feminist Theory and Escaping Systematic Oppression***

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### **Abstract**

Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* depicts a future world where androids and humans interact, often indistinguishably. The novel offers one to reflect upon the ontology of identity and present views of more socially just worlds. In her feminist post-humanist essay, "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway promotes the theory of the cyborg in contention with the Goddess Feminist Movement's call to "return women back to nature." Haraway rejects the notion femininity is a divine trait attributable to an innate character for females and the view one ought to reject technological progress. The cyborg instead encourages the union between human and machine because this heterogeneity provokes questions regarding human conventions and traditions predicated on collective identities, biological determinism, and gender essentialism. This paper employs Haraway's cyborg as a lens through which to explore Dick's portrayal of individual and social interactions between humans and androids. Focusing specifically on two characters, Iran Deckard and Rachael Rosen, both challenge the traditional understanding of what it means to be human through their relationship with technology. Iran, a sixties housewife, entrenched in the domestic sphere, uses a virtual world to voice her feelings outside the real social space dominated by men. In contrast, Rachael, an anthropomorphic robot known as an android, navigates freely by deceiving humans. The novel's characterization of their interactions in society illustrates the deceptiveness of the human/ machine boundary, in addition to how technology can provide a means of escaping systematic oppressive forces.

**Keywords: feminist theory, Donna Haraway, Philip K. Dick**

### **1. Introduction**

The inspiration for Ridley Scott's sci-fi blockbuster *Blade Runner* (1982), much attention to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) still focuses on Rachael Rosen and Rick Deckard's turbulent relationship, as well as human social mastery over androids. However, another critical relationship concerning social justice is the marriage between Iran and Rick Deckard, which is only illustrated in *Do Androids?* Dick's novel takes place in a post-apocalyptic future world and was first published during the earlier stages of the Second Wave Feminist Movement. Iran thus corresponds to a sixties-styled housewife and the belief women should only work in the domestic sphere that was idealized more extensively. Her role in the marriage was not chosen through choice but rather forced upon her due to external compulsions and her inability to defy Rick's control. She remains an essentialist housewife even though she detests life in the apartment, whereas the men characters brave the outside world after World War Terminus' mass destruction.

By contrast, Rachael's artificial intelligence and appearance enables her to journey the outside world and con Rick. However, he continues to perceive her as a sexual object only. Not only does this view of Rachel stem from her artificial construction but also because she is a woman. Since the controversy surrounding human social mastery over androids stems from Rick's dilemma over Rachael's state of being, this helps indicate the patriarchal society at hand,

as the dominating human man figure ultimately decides whether his love interest should be perceived as a worthy, emotional being. Furthermore, it is important to delve deeper into the controversy of whether Rachael's existence holds value the way humans are understood, as well as recognizing Rick's decision of this matter affirms an underlying source of Rachael's oppression: that is, men's regulation of women's roles in society. Although she possesses more freedom than Iran via her technological construction, Rachael can point to a need for a culture shift that ends human bias and the disregarding of women's desires.

The purpose of this paper is to apply Donna Haraway's critical essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1984) as a tool for developing a formal analysis of how Iran and Rachael utilize technology in ways that help examine their gender-based oppression and liberate themselves from a patriarchal society. Haraway's cyborg theory understands social reality with consideration to science and the hi-tech culture. Also, the cyborg rejects rigid binary oppositions (e.g., human/machine, man/woman, self/ "Other") to eliminate delimiting identity markers. Instead, the cyborg forms identity through difference, multiplicity, and joined parts rather than fragmented wholes. Haraway's cyborg encourages the intersectionality of lived experience by eliminating oppositional thinking, and it strives to eradicate the falsity in oppressive traditions such as essentialism, naturalism and patriarchy. This paper argues that just as Haraway's cyborg theory exposes social oppositions to myth, Iran and Rachael's relationship with technology assists in uncovering the fallacy of their own systematic oppression by a patriarchal society and human mastery over androids.

## 2. Body of Paper

Donna Haraway is a feminist and philosopher of science who wrote "A Cyborg Manifesto" in reaction to the Goddess Feminist Movement's attempt to valorize women and nature. In particular, she believes Goddess Feminism promises women a divine rooting of gender identity rather than accounting for other sociocultural factors. Haraway opposes this approach to defining individuals, as this supports gender essentialism or the attribution of a fixed essence to the biological sex. She instead encourages individuals to express the truth of their own bodily realities via autobiography and self-representation as a way to challenge hegemonic masculinity in everyday life and exemplify the diversity of lived social experience. Haraway imagines a post-human body, a cybernetic organism, which defies biological determinism or the belief our physiological components control all human behavior. Its human/machine merger and consideration of the hi-tech culture makes the idea to "return to nature" irresolvable. The cyborg also situates consciousness through the total function of an organism rather than solely the physical brain. In addition, instead of reducing qualities like masculinity and femininity down to something innate, the cyborg recognizes social conditioning creates these to arrange individuals into fixed identity categories. Haraway writes, "The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot return to dust" (151). Furthermore, the cyborg does not seek satisfaction through human traditions and constructed origin narratives that drive people to strive for false ideals, abide by the traditional family model, and believe in heterosexual relationships as a normative life goal. The cyborg rejects any basis for gender derived from essentialism, naturalism, and theology but instead creates identity through difference and out of "Otherness."

Haraway speculates upon an ideal world where humans acknowledge their amalgamation with technology and are not fearful of partial boundaries, such as those pertaining to gender and other identity categories. The cyborg deconstructs collective identities, which form social oppositions such as human/machine, male/female, truth/illusion, and self/ "Other." These dualisms entail one of the two opposites to assert a role of superiority over the other. Something that does not fit into Western culture's privileged categories, such as white, male, heterosexual, or human, makes them the "Other," thereby oppressing them. The cyborg, however, challenges these boundaries via "a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, [as] the joined centers [structure] any possibility of historical transformation" (Haraway 150). The cyborg resists binary thinking since its embodied hybridity – breaching the physical/non-physical, and the organism/machine boundaries – defies the material body's integration into essentialist categories (e.g., man, woman, or machine).

While Haraway's vision relies on science and technology to complicate identity politics and problematic conventions, primarily patriarchy, she does not deny the technology domain's marginalization of oppressed gender identities. Employing irony as a rhetorical tactic, Haraway states, "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their offspring. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (151). Technology has acquired a largely traditional masculine character since its inception to current reproduction. For example, militaristic and hegemonic masculine culture predominant in war technology and video games mirrors exaggerated characteristics of masculinity turned violent. Even so, the cyborg challenges toxic masculinity by reversing the origins of its creators to abolish patriarchy's cultural dominance and detrimental social practices. The cyborg can then

function as a symbol for interpreting how patriarchal society naturalizes essentialist ideals of identity collectives and hinders authentic selfhood. Thus, it argues for the invention of one's consciousness with respect to hi-tech innovation and encouraging newer modes of acting and creating in the hi-tech domain.

The human/android binary in *Do Androids?* privileges humans due to the notion only they can exhibit empathy, even though humanity generally lacks this trait in the novel. Rick affirms the central tenet of Mercerism, human society's dominant theology promoting the idea only humans can feel empathy. Through being a bounty hunter hired by the government to kill escaped slave androids, Rick demonstrates the oppression perpetrated by most humans. When contemplating how empathy separates humans and androids, Rick determines, "[I]t resembled a sort of biological insurance, but double-edged. As long as some creature experienced joy, then the condition for all other creatures included a fragment of joy" (31). Bounty hunting allows Rick to police the antagonistic android/human opposition and helps instill the androids' "Othered" existence. This practice maintains and upholds human mastery over their environment and regards androids to be inferior. Although, the narrator makes uncertain which group is, in fact, naturally superior by noting that "[A]ndroids equipped with the new Nexus-6 brain unit had some sort of rough, pragmatic, no-nonsense standpoint evolved beyond a major — but inferior — segment of mankind" (30). This "major but inferior" divide is the empathy tenet instilling the boundaries of what it means to be human. In doing so, empathy creates a collective political identity rather than distinct identities. Androids, nevertheless, do not conform to the indoctrination inhibiting human expression, and their technological agility enables their escape from human control. This cynicism as to what group is truly superior defies Haraway's vision of subjects utilizing technology for challenging oppositional relationships to create selfhoods through alterity. Whereas the cyborg fosters the conscious and voluntary participation of subjects via mutual concerns for social justice, the android/human binary creates stringent collectives and social oppression.

Iran's entrenchment in the domestic sphere occurs in opposition to the cyborg since this points to the regulation of women's roles in society. Moreover, she dislikes her lack of choice over her essentialist role, as well as the unequal power structure of her marriage. For instance, Iran becomes upset when Rick purchases a new pet goat without asking her opinion. Upon Rick's return with the animal, the narrator describes, "[She] removed her apron, smoothed back her hair reflexively, and followed him out of the apartment. You shouldn't have gotten it without me, Iran gasped. I have a right to participate in the decision" (171). Rick disregards his wife's participation in deciding matters, and Iran demonstrates her social confinement as "the wife of Rick" by fixing her appearance when he arrives to please him, although he mistreats her. The fact Iran only exits the home after Rick points to his social authority and her subservience in everyday social matters. This paradigm, as Iran demonstrates in her closing remark, is one she would prefer not to partake in her marriage. At first, she detests Rick ignoring her feelings but then self-rationalizes and says, "Much love and very much my pleasure" regarding helping to care for the goat (171). Instead of feeling the reality of her despair, Iran presumes an outlook that benefits her husband. As mentioned previously, she displays the potential to challenge her oppressor by disagreeing with Rick's decision to buy the goat. In spite of this, patriarchal society culturally enforces her identity because she does not think how to challenge her lack of choice effectively. Iran's domestic entrapment figuratively critiques Haraway's shift from archaic essentialist politics and not basing identity out of difference from the oppressor. Rethinking multiplicity outside the old-fashioned husband/wife binary is impossible for Iran, as her enduring sociocultural preconceptions prohibits any search for connections to Rick's mastery as the source of her absent individuality.

Iran's hatred of Rick's mastery over the Penfield mood organ, a device that allows humans to dial the moods they wish to feel, corresponds with the cyborg notion that technology helps enable the examination of social constructs. Arguing over her mood settings, Iran exclaims, "Keep your hand off my settings. Her voice held bitter sharpness. I don't want to be awake" (3). It is critical how she recognizes how the human/machine union placed upon her delimits true self-expression. The mood organ is Iran's only means to understand Rick's social mastery and interpret how this hinders her identity, as technology restricts and mimics her social oppression when she is not using it herself. Rick demonstrates how employing technology to control Iran's moods hinders her from forming true, organic selfhood, in addition to blurring the boundary between truth and illusion. Indeed, it is the author's view that individuals could never comprise genuine selfhoods due to social norms and technology always interceding with human experience. In his essay, "The Android and the Human" (1927), Dick insists, "The so-called humans are becoming — and may have to a great extent been, inanimate in the sense we are led, directed by built-in tropisms, rather than leading" (187). The mood organ is a way for Dick to demonstrate how the human/machine breakdown helps form identity already interconnected with social constructs. When Rick is not altering the original context of Iran's consciousness, she grasps how the organ has encroached upon her understanding of reality — just as Haraway suggests technology can be a symbol for interpreting women's experience in patriarchal society. Haraway infers, "No objects, spaces, or bodies, are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing symbols in the common language" (163). Human social reality can be compared similarly

to high-tech codes such as system logic and boundary constraints. The characters in the novel are placed in the everyday world of social institutions and ideologies that continually mediate their personalities, and this can draw similarities with how technological pattern systems control the outcomes of the final tech product. Thus, there is no inborn model for anyone's character given the intersecting factors forming how one experiences their social reality. Also, technology comprises a predominantly masculine connotation, and women are associated mainly with nature. This paradigm draws connections with Rick's mastery over the mood organ that obstructs Iran's ability to feel the realness of her despair when she cannot alter her own moods. Just as the cyborg argues technology provides a means of interpreting social limitations, Iran conceives Rick's mastery by analyzing his treatment of the mood organ.

By dialing her own mood settings, Iran finally creates perceptions outside Rick's control, which correlates to the cyborg's goal to develop newer modes of employing technology for altering women's experiences. She explains, "I was in a 382 [self-depressive] mood; I had just dialed it. Although I heard the emptiness intellectually, I didn't feel it. My first reaction consisted of being grateful that we could afford a Penfield mood organ" (5). From using the human/machine union on her terms, Iran feels the actuality of her domestic entrapment. She effectively denies Rick's patriarchal mastery and asserts control over her genuine behaviors. In "Cyborg Bodies and Digitized Desires: Posthumanity and Philip K. Dick" (2004), Jennifer Attaway coins the term "digitized desire" to represent how technological mediation replaces firsthand desire. Attaway explains, "When human beings do not interact with the world directly, desire becomes diluted. It is from the context of secondhand experience that 'digitized desire' [can emerge]" (Attaway par. 14). Humanist scrutiny would condemn "digitized desire" as exacerbating how humans submerge themselves in a world that corrodes original, "natural" desire. However, Iran can only escape Rick's mastery by digitizing her mind, removing his emotional control from its pretense and transforming this into a numerical code unaware of any social phenomena. Thus, she changes the way Rick employs technology to suppress her desires. Her human/machine union with the mood organ points to the cyborg's reversal of social repression's origins by pointing blame to the repressor and defying Rick. Taking on the cyborg's notion of embracing difference via merging with technology, Iran ultimately recognizes her real desire to acquire choice over her body and wellbeing by changing how technology mediates her selfhood.

Iran's dependence on the empathy box, a device through which humans merge their consciousness into a virtual sphere promoted by Mercerism, allows her to operate in a realm where she can form an identity through affinity. This realm enables the remaining humans on Earth to connect with one another by feeling each other's emotions. Rather than hugging Rick, Iran runs to the empathy box to express new happiness after she halfheartedly agrees with his decision to purchase a new pet goat. At this moment, "She became involved almost at once. Rick stood holding the phone receiver, conscious of her mental departure. Conscious of his own aloneness (176). By uploading her consciousness into the virtual sphere, separate from where she is an essentialist housewife, Iran assumes the most literal form of empathy since she is neither at one with social norms or mood organs mediating her consciousness. Disembodiment allows her to embrace the most literal form of "Otherness" since embodiment is always at one with cultural and social contexts. In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), Katherine Hayles postulates, "In contrast to the body, embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture, which together compose enactment. Whereas the body is an idealized form that gestures toward a Platonic reality, embodiment is the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference" (96). Embodiment is then a continuous and nonstop development that becomes and transforms regarding its environment. It is culturally and historically specific, and its progression is taken into consideration with prostheses. Haraway suggests, "No longer structured by the polarity of public and private; the cyborg defines its technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the Oikos household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource of incorporation in the other" (151). Her human/machine breakdown enters her consciousness into a cyborg world, and she rids the patriarchal subjugations inhibiting her autonomy in the real social space, thereby erasing the man/woman opposition that relies on assuming notions of man and woman with beliefs on what is natural. Iran thus points to the possibility for humans to recognize and overthrow their oppressive stereotypes through artificial "Otherness."

Rachael points to the myth that only humans feel empathy in agreement with the cyborg's call to deconstruct the fabrication of social margins. Even though Rachael comprises a biological/un-biological body, she feels real emotions without mediating her moods via additional technology. Most prominently, Rachael throws Rick's newly purchased goat off the roof after he returns to Iran, indicating she feels pain after he neglects her. However, Rick refuses to see past society's ingrained empathy tenet. For example, "She had what seemed to her a reason. An android reason, he thought" (227). Rachael's actions result from either being jealous of Rick's return to Iran after their romantic encounter or anger over murdering her android friends. Hayles argues, "Whichever interpretation one chooses, the action is not consistent with the official picture of android psychology" (415). Either way, Rachael's action remains an empathetic response, as she realizes the emotional magnitude of the pet goat toward Rick's happiness and thus

retaliates by damaging his prized possession. Rachael's empathetic action points blame at Rick's all too human disregard of androids as emotional beings. Haraway states, "Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not remember the cosmos. They are wary of holism, but needy for connection" (292). They do not foster community through belief systems but instead make diffuse coalitions through affinity. While Rachael acted with hostility because she wished to upset Rick, her actions stem from grief due to his neglect toward her. Even though she shares a mechanical construction similar to the goat, she does not worship Mercerism's belief that owning an animal imparts someone with higher social status because it allegedly requires empathy to care for the pet. This form of empathy is a fabrication since it thrives on placing one's ego ahead of consideration for the animal or its mechanical replica. Although Rachael acts independently from Mercerism, she comprises and exhibits sporadic emotions and genuine desires to integrate herself among other beings in society. Her human/machine construction enables her to navigate freely in the real social space and directly challenge Rick's oppression.

Rick's physical attraction to Rachael, while not recognizing her as an empathetic creature, demonstrates his need to see beyond embodiment while questioning his hatred toward androids. Whereas Iran is only depicted as having "gray, un merry eyes" (3), Dick meticulously illustrates Rachael with humanlike qualities. The comparison of bodily imagery assists a reworking of the traditional embodiments of human and machine. Rick's refusal to acknowledge Rachael separate from her body shows a critique of conventional embodiment. Hayles states, "The issue of what is outside someone else's inside already supercharged psychological and political tensions complicates androidism and the human with the not-human, and the technological with the ontological" (163). Androids point to the need to see past the traditional conventions defining humans, as their condition has also been altered with technology. Rachael's human/machine make-up enables Rick to question the boundaries that define his world — or, what it means to be human — by his attraction to her body. According to Haraway, "[The cyborg] argues for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and responsibility in their construction" (150). Rachael complicates the essentialist conceptions of "human" and "machine;" however, even when Rick attempts to compare her with a human, she is limited because he views her merely as a sexual object. Furthermore, she points blame to Rick's sexist attitude for not considering Rachael's emotions apart from her body.

Even though Rick cannot acknowledge Rachael separate from her body, she makes him accept how humans and machines have integrated. At the end of *Do Androids?*, he shows no disdain toward the mechanical frog he initially thought to be biological. Rick states, "The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are" (241). Although he exhibits an anthropocentric mindset by implying the toad is inferior, he accepts its machine-animal's inorganic/organic creation. The fact he is willing to care for the frog — which requires empathy — alludes to Rick's potential to deconstruct his feelings of biological superiority. This realization only comes from Rachael undermining Rick, which causes him to question the boundaries of what it means to be human. Her destabilization of Rick's feelings of biological dominance simultaneously agrees with the cyborg idea that social boundaries are illusions serving to create systematic modes of oppression. Haraway stresses, "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and tools to ourselves. This is not a dream of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (181). Either side of the social opposition is considered the "Other" in relation to one another; although, the cyborg argues both sides of the opposition remain false constructions. Rachael alludes to Haraway's vision by making Rick realize biological life has integrated with technology. He subverts his belief of separation between the human and machine boundary. Therefore, Rachael's deception of her own human/machine body was able to make Rick acknowledge human ontology has changed with the hi-tech culture.

### 3. Conclusion

Inasmuch as the cyborg reduces social oppositions to myths, Iran and Rachel's union with technology assists in uncovering the fallacy behind their own systematic oppression by a patriarchal society and human mastery over androids. Owing to technology, Iran can glean and deconstruct Rick's social mastery. Rachael's inbuilt human/machine construction enables her to deceive Rick's control and destabilizes his human-centered reality. Their breakdown of the human/ machine boundary allows both characters to embrace the multiplicity of lived social experience while provoking the reader to question a society based upon the social domination of one group over the other.

In her critical manifesto, Haraway contends the social construction of gender and other collective identities fail to capture the intricacies and depth of lived social reality. Identity markers, such as gender and the human/machine boundary, remain oppressive because they form ideals and oppositional thinking based on rigid archetypes. One of Haraway's most notable statements from the manifesto is "There is nothing natural that naturally binds women"

(295). Indeed, Iran and Rachael prove Rick's social advantage is not natural but rather a product of their culture. Iran's reactions and manipulation toward the mood organ and empathy box, in addition to Rachael's robotic construction, proves anthropocentricity in human subjectivity does not genuinely capture a significance of what it means to human.

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