

## “Utopian Desire and the Problems of Posthuman Affect: Philip K. Dick and Iain (M.) Banks”

– Dr Daniel Bedggood, Senior Lecturer in English, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

### ABSTRACT

This paper will consider the so-called “affective turn” in relation to the representation of the human body and “other” in two twentieth-century science fiction texts: Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and Iain (M) Banks’ *The Player of Games*. Science fiction itself may be considered an “affective” genre, engaged as it is in speculation and the ensuing “pleasures of the text” through genre-fiction fandom -- functioning as an “oneiric” fantasy domain for readers. Such a view may have marginalised the work of authors like Dick and Banks. The speculative domain of “serious” science fiction, though, is often the vehicle for critical reflection on current societies and possibilities, allowing critics such as Fredric Jameson and Darko Suvin to see utopian literature to be convergent with science fiction in its affective defamilisation-refamiliarisation tactics.

Looking at Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) and Banks’ *The Player of Games* (1988), I examine their concern with posthuman affect, testing the limits of utopian desire and humanity by means of examining the body and its responses in relation to “other”. I will be using Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of “affect” and “affected” to examine both the tactics of “cognitive estrangement” used by these writers (after Suvin) and the “affected” subjects within the texts; I also draw on Fredric Jameson’s conceptions of utopian desire and nostalgia alongside theorists of the posthuman condition such as Francis Fukuyama, Donna Haraway, and Sherryl Vint to analyse the different approaches to the embodied “human”.

Examining Dick’s largely dystopian text, I will consider the central focus on “empathy” as an identifying mechanism for the human, and the putative role of animals and androids as affective others in this identification. Dick’s flawed protagonist, Deckard, is important as the self-reflexive arbitrator of the distinctions between human, sub-human and artificial other, coming to question these distinctions and voice the problems of human schizoid breaks that Dick theorises as necessary for such identification, especially apparent in the presence of arbitrary, simulated or mediated “affect” mechanisms in the novel. Viewing Banks’ critical utopian text, I will discuss the utopic, posthuman body, augmented and supplemented by technologies present in the protagonist’s hedonistic, utopian society: The Culture. Against this, I will discuss the novel’s engagement with the nostalgic appeals of the “organic” primitive: the embodied appeals of barbarism, violence and sensual agency that the protagonist “player”, Gurgeh, ultimately rejects. This rejection, however, is complicated by Gurgeh being “played” by his Culture: becoming the embodied proxy in an inter-civilisation clash, an organic avatar in a war on the Empire of Azad sublimated to the Azad game board.

Dick and Banks’ texts, then, are forerunners to the “affective turn” critical re-engagement with appeals to embodiment; yet they also speculate on problems of the scope or authenticity of bodily-situated affect in a posthuman context.

## PAPER

This paper will consider the so-called “affective turn” in relation to problems with defining the human in two twentieth-century science fiction texts: Philip K. Dick’s 1968 book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and Iain (M) Banks’ *The Player of Games*, published twenty years later in 1988. These books, I argue, offer a central concern with what might be termed “posthuman affect”: they test utopian desire and the limits of humanity by means of examining the body and kinds of “embodied thinking” especially as this relates to animal, alien and machine subjects. In this discussion, I will be touching on Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of “affect” and the “affected” within the processes of “becoming-other”; I’ll also be gesturing towards theorists like Darko Suvin and Fredric Jameson for their work on “cognitive estrangement” as tactics within speculative fiction, and notions on utopian desire and nostalgia, respectively; in the rest of the discussion, I will be framing the analysis of these two primary texts with consideration of what constitutes the “posthuman”. My contention is that writers such as Dick and Banks use what I’ll call “posthuman affect” to critique earlier understandings and definitions of the human, but also to break down the distinctions between human and others who are also represented as equally belonging within an “affective” community.

Although often considered an escapist form and the domain of fans, science fiction can encompass both play and serious concerns. As a fantastic and popular genre, science fiction allows readers to engage in “oneiric” play yet also provides a textualised social laboratory for criticism and speculation. In keeping with an “affective turn”, I can relay my own subjective experience of reading science fiction as a child: texts by writers such as Isaac Asimov, Stanislaw Lem, Andre Norton and especially Ursula K. Le Guin were transporting me yet thoroughly grounding at the same time. I recall the enjoyment I had from reading such texts alongside the ongoing engagement with ideas: the emotive connection meant that I learnt and remember aspects of physics and social science with a flavour of the novels’ contexts. Similarly, in terms of “transport” the places such texts took me in my imagination are always flavoured with the specific location where I was when I read the book: a kind of memory palace of Matteo Ricci in dusty, West Auckland kauri planks. Darko Suvin talks up such functions of science fiction as “cognitive estrangement”:

Science fiction is a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.

- Darko Suvin, *Positions and Suppositions in Science Fiction*

This combination of estrangement and cognition is important as a tool of distance or tension: placing action or concerns in a remote time or location is a common tactic that allows the familiar to be critically assessed.

Such tactics of defamiliarisation and refamiliarisation are especially crucial within utopian fiction as part of a central strategy of contrast and criticism with the immediate. For Fredric Jameson, utopian desires are often framed in relations of antinomy: each text presents what is desired as opposed to that which is not, and one utopia may be the antithesis of another. He presents a history of dialogue

of utopias that debate with each other, such as Bellamy and Morris in the nineteenth century or Le Guin and Delany in the twentieth; yet such debate is secondary to the primary criticism of each text, a kind of critical nostalgia for the present, whether expressed in positive speculation or dystopian warning. The two texts I look at today I would characterise as “critical dystopia” and “critical utopia” for their relative attitude to their subjects and following Tom Moylan’s analysis, because both of these texts are unresolved or dynamic in their projections; however, as antinomy of perspective can also be present in the competing or diverging models within a specific text, I welcome differing readings of these.

As part this focus, the utopian **body** is a site of multiple significance in speculative literature: at once, utopian tropes encourage regard for society, where the utopian body is a body corporate or social body, but community goals and form can also be revealed in the individual body. In utopian fiction, viewing the body is viewing a sign or relation to the whole, whether a representative microcosm or transgressive example. Hence, in More’s *Utopia*, viewing the naked body of the bride is an action that reflects the authority of the whole society to determine genetic health, whereas I-330 and her quixotically x-shaped facial marks draw into question the accepted knowledge of “clear” order in Zamyatin’s *We*.

These two examples set up a very human scale of reference: from Descartes onwards Humanism has been constituted by anthropocentric definitions of the human against the other: sometimes other humans, but particularly against that which is not human: the mechanic or the animal, for example (through traits like rationality, opposable thumbs, tool-use and language).

#### [slide of Descartes]

In the last decades, different forms of posthumanist thought have arisen that challenge this centrality and latently static position of the human, either through emphasizing the ex-centric nature of the human alongside other subjects, or even promoting “becoming other”.

The Critical Posthuman shift away from *cogito ergo* stasis and solipsism, which stresses “I think therefore I am”, may be noted in a sense of poststructuralist “affect” leading to posthuman recognition of non human subjects as part of a wider community. Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of “affect”, dealt with in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, encompasses the recognition of and affiliation with the other, whether rat, insect or molecule, emphasizing a radical difference in affect and “becoming-other” in contemporary cognition and identity, and in comparison with the ontological stasis of essential Humanism: “Human” as distinct. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari present a kind of “category error”, where essential differences are elided and “hybrid” categories substituted and dynamism emphasized.

Into this kind of domain, other theorists like Donna Haraway stride: her own recognition of both cyborg hybridity and human-animal reconsiderations are especially significant in discussion of the posthuman:

Communication technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies.... Microelectronics mediates the translations of labour into robotics and word processing, sex into genetic engineering and reproductive technologies, and mind into artificial intelligence and decision procedures....

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs.... Late twentieth century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.

Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", 1991.

Haraway has since gone on to argue that our relations with animals further blur the boundaries of category distinctions, consistent with the Deleuzian "becoming-other" trait.

Not all critics equally anticipate the whimper or "whinny" of posthumanism, though. For Francis Fukuyama, in his book *Our Posthuman Future*, anxiety over the shape of future human bodies seems to reflect both ethical considerations of rampant consumerism with his own concerns about the instability of his own preferred political order. Fukuyama's disgust with and fear of the posthuman/transhuman body is characterised by his sense that this goes against "human nature", reliant on an argument about what might constitute the essential features of this "nature". While Fukuyama's particular stance seems not to have progressed much from Huxley's 1930s' *Brave New World* (or Ayn Rand), it may still be pertinent to look at the two primary texts, and the bodies on display, and ask ourselves: will we or are we being replaced through a kind of techno-miscegenation?

Philip K. Dick's largely critically-dystopian text speculates on an alternative future-past world that has undergone degradation, from World War Terminus, resulting in a radioactive, junked planet, sparsely populated by humans, "sub-humans", extremely rare and thus sought-after animals, and renegade androids who have found their way back to Earth from servitude on the harsh colonies to which the more elite humans have fled.

Dick's antipathy to Cold War politics, post-war American consumerism and what he saw as a kind of schizoid capitalist mentality is clear in his general corpus: the anxiety between the authentic and the simulated, the distinction made between schizoid and schizophrenic mentality, and the case for a posthuman animism are all noted in critical writings outside his fiction:

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I draw a sharp line between the schizoid personality and actual schizophrenia, which I have the utmost respect for, and for the people who do it--or have it, whatever. I see it this way: the schizoid personality overuses his thinking function at the expense of his feeling function (in Jungian terms) and so has inappropriate or flattened affect; *he is android-like*. But in schizophrenia, the denied feeling function breaks through from the unconscious in an effort to establish balance and parity between the functions. Therefore it can be said that in essence I regard what is called "schizophrenia" as an attempt by a one-sided mind to compensate and achieve wholeness: schizophrenia is a brave journey into the realm of the archetypes, and those who take it--who will no longer settle for the cold schizoid personality--are to be honored. Many never survive this journey, and so trade imbalance for total chaos, which is tragic. Others, however, return from the journey in a state of

wholeness; they are the fortunate ones, the truly sane. Thus I see schizophrenia as closer to sanity (whatever that may mean) than the schizoid is. The terrible danger about the schizoid is that he can function; he can even get hold of a position of power over others, whereas the lurid schizophrenic wears a palpable tag saying, "I am nuts, pay no attention to me."

And:

We hold now no pure categories of the living versus the non-living... One day we will have millions of hybrid entities which have a foot in both worlds at once...

It is the tendency of the so-called primitive mind to animate its environment. Modern depth psychology has requested us for years to withdraw these anthropomorphic projections from what is actually inanimate reality, to introject—that is, bring back into our own heads—the living quality which we, in ignorance, cast out onto the inert things surrounding us. Such introjection is said to be the mark of true maturity in the individual... But one wonders: has he not also, in the process, reified—that is, made into a thing—other people? Stones and rocks and trees may now be inanimate for him, but what about his friends?

A human being without the proper empathy or feeling is the same as an android built so as to lack it... These creatures are among us... [the distinction should be based] not to origin or to any ontology but to a way of being in the world.

These sentiments are present but perhaps ambivalently expressed in a novel told mostly from the point of view of Dick's flawed protagonist, Deckard, important as the self-reflexive arbitrator of the distinctions between human, sub-human and artificial other, coming to question these distinctions and voice the problems of human schizoid breaks that Dick theorises as necessary for such identification, especially apparent in the presence of arbitrary, simulated or mediated "affect" mechanisms in the novel.

From the outset, Dick sets up problems with affect. Deckard's job is to "retire" the illegal returning Andys, based on the distinction that they are not human. Yet much of the novel focusses on the problems with determining the roles of human, sub-human, android and (real) animal with tests that appear increasingly arbitrary. The central focus on "empathy" as an identifying mechanism for the human, and the putative role of animals and androids as affective others in this identification is particularly drawn into question. The Voigt-Kampff test, based on a series of questions that relate to empathy to scenarios to do with intrinsic familial relationships and animal problems, supposedly measuring pupil and other "autonomous" reactions ("... the entrée consists of boiled dog..."), however, relies on a very subjective human evaluation, prone to error, and reliant on cultural presuppositions about "human nature", empathy to animals (specific to the value of animals on post WWT Earth) and the new quasi-religious cult, Mercerism. Likewise, the very distinction between androids and humans is thrown into doubt when androids display the ability to empathise with each other (the Batys are married, and Rachel puts herself at risk to try to save other androids) and equally arbitrary IQ testing categorises Isidore, the electronic-animal repair-man, as subhuman. When Deckard begins to recognise the schizoid characteristics of other humans like fellow bounty hunter Philip Resch, to empathise with opera singing android Luba Luft, sleep with the android

Rachel Rosen and build towards an epiphany that organic and inorganic life could be equivalent, much of the novel seems to be heading towards Dick's non-fiction points about animism and schizophrenia. However, in a novel that begins with a debate about the appropriate use of a mood organ (is it acceptable to program a mood to set a mood, or is it okay to set a mood of depression that reflects the post-war reality?), where the supposed merits of empathy are a mediated sham (the Mercer empathy box is a fake, and the TV host another android, and both engaged with when solitary), and animal ownership is a commodity market that Deckard buys into by buying and killing the increasingly human androids, perhaps the final question of the novel is to do with the convergence of the android and the human.

[ It is somewhat ironic that the key devices for defining humanity and "becoming-other" – communing empathetically with other humans are done effectively alone: either by switching on the TV and watching the android Buster Friendly impersonate a human talk show host, or switching into the "empathy box" and "becoming" the sham actor Mercer, climbing up a fake hill, yet getting real bruises from the fake rocks thrown at you. Even while he doesn't fully believe in Mercerism, and it's purported valuing of animals, Deckard still buys into buying an animal – note that this is one of the core drives in his mission to "retire" his allocated androids: the fee will help him to buy a high-status (ie rare) animal, and accord him with sense of self-worth as an empathetic human – ironically at the expense of killing "humanoid" life-forms:

- "You bought an animal.".... "You made some bounty money today"....
- "Yes, I retired three andys.... I had to buy this."

The commodity-kick of owning a real goat (Deckard and his wife agree that it staves off depression – "we can call her Euphemia") gives the couple only a fleeting connection, especially as the android Rachel pushes the goat off the roof of their apartment building. The limited position that Deckard comes to at the end – "the electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are." – modifies the rising empathy and becoming other displayed earlier in the book, and Dick doesn't finally resolve the extent to which humans and androids converge.]

Viewing Banks' critical utopian text, the question of where Dick's convergence may lead is potentially answered. Banks, writing a couple of decades later, encompasses the development of machine intelligence and citizenry and a version of a utopic, posthuman or perhaps transhuman body, augmented and supplemented by technologies present in the protagonist's hedonistic, utopian society: *The Culture*.

*The Culture* apparently have achieved a civilisation of plenty tapping into a technological advancement, and have balanced this with an environmentalist ethic and symbiosis between highly intelligent drones and organic humans capable of self-regulating their needs through genetically-engineered advantages and drug-glands. Features of such biological body control include the possibility of changing sex at auto-volition, changing physical form at whim, and living "forever", though the latter two options have become distasteful in polite society. Although the appeals of this society of plenty and freedom have obvious merits to its own creator, Banks' utopic focus on his society and its citizens' bodies (organic and inorganic) typically focusses on *The Culture's*

engagement with other civilisations. The novel's protagonist, Gurgeh, ironically displays boredom with the safety of the Culture's taste and sensibilities and is tricked into engagement with the nostalgic appeals of the "organic" primitive: the embodied appeals of barbarism, violence and sensual agency of a fully-immersive and highly-complex game played in a distant, byzantine empire of Azad.

Initially drawn into the sensory engagement of the game and the society of Azad that the game is a marginal microcosmic analogue of, the stakes at play become increasingly apparent:

What do you think of their instruments, Mr Gurgeh? Do they not sound sweet?"

"Very pleasant." Gurgeh drank a little, watching the dancers arrange themselves on stage.

"Even there, though," Hamin said, "you are missing something. You see, we gain a great deal of pleasure from knowing at what cost this music is bought... I can tell you that each of those steel strings has strangled a man. You see that white pipe at the back, played by the male?"

"The one shaped like a bone?"

Hamin laughed. "A female femur, removed without anaesthetic."...

"Do they come in matched pairs, or are there a lot of one-legged lady music critics?"...

"The drums are made from human skin; you can see why each set is called a family. The horizontal percussion instrument is constructed from finger bones.... You see, Gurgeh, one can be on either side in the Empire. One can be the player, or one can be... Played upon."

A little way into the game, Gurgeh begins to lose a match, with the attendant violence threatened as a forfeit to loss, Flere Imsaho (his drone companion / controller) decides to intervene by educating Gurgeh with the sense that there is more on the line than just a personal loss. We are shown the Azad Empire at war: destroying alien cultures (and acting in bad faith – as when it accepts the surrender of one culture then scrambles its main treasure, an irreplaceable library); yet subjection of alien races is nothing to the vile "pornographic" display of torture, available for elite view in real time, at rapidly more intense levels that the drone decrypts for Gurgeh:

"[Gurgeh's] pupils widened at first, then shrank, became pinpoints.... The screen held his gaze... fixed and steady and pointed at the flickering surface like some long-stilled moon. The screams echoed through the lounge, over its formseats and couches and low tables; the screams of apices, men, women, children.... Each instrument, and each part of the tortured people, made its own noise; blood, knives, bones, lasers, flesh, rip-saws, chemicals, leeches, fleshworms, vibraguns, even phalluses, fingers and claws; each made or produced their own distinctive sounds, counterpoints to the theme of screams.

The final scene ... Featured a psychotic male criminal previously injected with massive doses of sex hormones and halucinogens, a knife, and a [pregnant] woman... Just before term....

‘That one is live, Jernau Gurgeh. It is taking place now. It is still happening, deep in some cellar under a prison or a police barracks.’” (209)

Note the focus on the observing eye, and its observed counterpart, and how this draws into the subject observed. This, too, is a vehicle for becoming-other – where the sensory act cancels out the appeal of the sensual – and becoming-other, feeling the torture at work, sets up a new role. At this point, the primitivist affect is rejected, though this rejection is complicated by Gurgeh being “played” by his Culture: becoming the embodied proxy or avatar in an inter-civilisation war on the Empire of Azad sublimated to the Azad game board.

Embodiment is important in this journey: Gurgeh values the primitive riskiness of Azad the game and its barbaric culture as fresh and authentic, yet the reality of playing and being played and also the horrific levels of torture and repression at work in maintaining the status quo in Azad coalesce into disgust and anger, until he becomes the “body corporate” of the Culture. His drone companion, also, embodies the Culture’s attributes, while at the same time representing repressed “affect” – layers of machine and identity that cover a core of either a ferocious monster-warrior or effete bird-loving scientist.

Dick and Banks’ texts, then, are forerunners to the “affective turn” critical re-engagement with appeals to embodiment; yet they also speculate on problems of the scope or authenticity of bodily-situated affect in a posthuman context. Affect offers alternative ontologies to the characters in these books, and the possibility of “becoming-other” not just for the humans. Ultimately, however, both writers open up the possibility of non human agents equal to humans behaving in ways that may be akin to humans at their worst, suggesting that such “affective” community is not necessarily passive or neutral in potential.

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