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Does John Donne Dream of Electric Sheep?

The Role of Art in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Despite its futuristic setting, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* features several allusions to classic works of art. Although the androids have the capacity to appreciate such references on technical and even cultural levels, they lack the ability to identify meaningfully with the artworks as experiences. While the androids' appreciation of art is tethered to a rigid rubric of logic and program-structured emotions, Dick emphasizes the ways in which "organic" humans, on the other hand, synthesize their logical and emotional reactions into a subjective, personal experience of artwork. In making this distinction, Dick suggests that the ability to empathize with the moral motivations and circumstantial emotions of the human subjects within each piece, as well as the capacity to recognize subjective thematic elements and the artists' intentions behind them, are uniquely human characteristics.

One of the first allusions that Dick features comes in the form of an opera: *The Magic Flute*. Dick chooses to present this allusion when Deckard must retire android Luba Luft, a singer performing as one of the opera's protagonists. Dick's decision to include this opera is significant because truth is a central theme in both the play and his novel. Deckard observes that it is "ironic" that an android should play a role where truth is so vital, because androids inherently lack the ability to understand the value of truth to such a role (Dick 96). That is, androids' inability to empathize prevents them from understanding a character's moral

motivations. In order to emphasize this point, Dick goes on to note Luft's talent and diligence. The novel's speaker observes that "[Deckard] found himself surprised at the quality of her voice" (Dick 99). One can infer that this quality results in part from her responsible practice; for example, Deckard finds Luba marking the score when he enters her dressing room (Dick 100). However, the most defining characteristic of this finding is the lack of any attempt on Luft's part to make an emotional connection to her role. By distinguishing Luft's talent and diligence from her empathy, Dick makes explicit the difference between intellectual appreciation and emotional understanding.



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *The Magic Flute*, The Schiller Institute, United States.

In contrast to Luba, Deckard identifies with sentiments that the opera expresses. The speaker notes Deckard's reflections as he watches the performance: "'Well,' Rick thought, 'in real life no such magic bells exist that make your enemy effortlessly disappear. Too bad'" (Dick 98). That is, he yearns for the magic bells because their existence would eradicate the need to kill beings with which he empathizes. In fact, his appreciation of the art negatively impacts his job

performance. Until this point, Deckard has retired androids without a second thought; however, his present emotional experience causes him to uncharacteristically grapple with the moral dilemmas behind retiring Luft. He overextends his appreciation of the art to her performance of it, but this is a logical fallacy. Luft's ability to execute the play is independent of her capacity to identify with the character. On the other hand, Deckard's ability to discern one of the opera's themes and apply it to his personal life, as well his concern for an android artist, show that the performance moves Deckard on both emotional and intellectual levels — an effect that Luft cannot fully register. This contrast between the subjectivity of the human mind and the objectivity of android machinery proves that the capacity to engage with a protagonist's emotions distinguishes humankind from androids.

After the first attempt to retire Luft fails, Deckard recruits bounty hunter Phil Resch to help him. The two locate Luba in an art museum; as they approach her, Deckard is forced to stop so that Resch can admire *The Scream*. The novel's speaker notes that "the creature stood on a bridge and no one else was present; the creature screamed in isolation" (Dick 130). Curiously, none of Munch's versions of the painting follow this description.¹ Regardless of Dick's intentions with reference to this discrepancy, however, the speaker's thoughts regarding the protagonist's isolation remain relevant. The figure situated within the foreground of the painting

¹ Although Dick states that the subject of the painting stands in isolation, there are two figures in the background of all four versions of Munch's work. It is possible that Dick glossed over these unimportant figures for the purpose of simplicity in making his point about the androids' metaphorical loneliness. However, I would like to argue that the presence of additional people adds to the main figure's isolation; rather than simply being alone, the figure is tortured by being in the presence of those who have forsaken him.

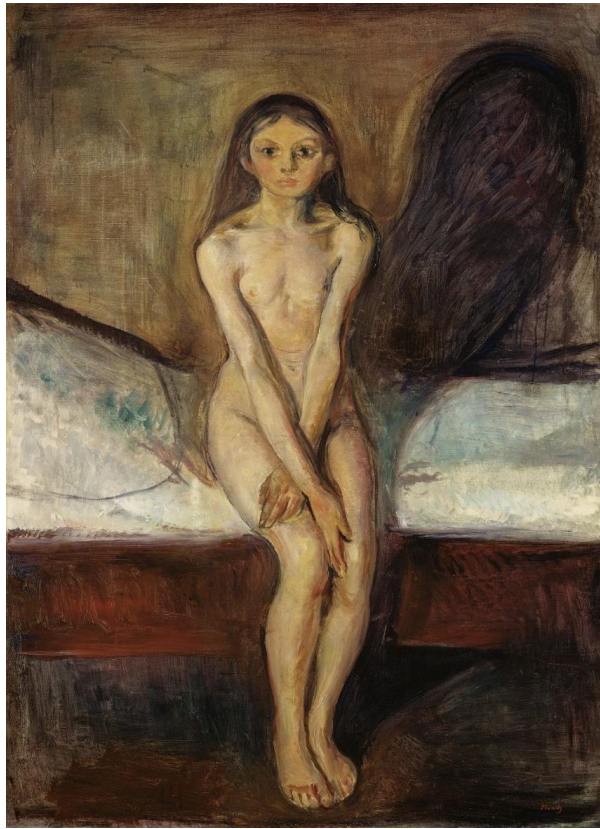
portrays what seems to be a near-insanity upon being rejected from a larger community of which they believe they deserve to be a part. Furthermore, the dark figures walking away from him shed light on their resulting feelings of isolation as others abandon them. In this way, the painting is reminiscent of androids' desperation to be part of human society. They believe themselves to be indistinguishable from humans; however, the androids' perceived lack of "human" empathy results in their being exiled from the larger community. The subject of *The Scream* symbolizes the androids' pain upon realizing they lack the necessary status to be accepted. Indeed, society's decision to coldly reject the androids embodies the lack of empathy that it cites as cause to exclude them.



Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, National Gallery and Munch Museum, Norway.

As Resch comes to these realizations, he observes, "I think that this is how an andy must feel [...] I don't feel like that, so maybe I'm not an [android]" (Dick 131). This quote shows that Resch can extrapolate meaning from the art and apply it to his own life. That is, he presents the uniquely human ability to garner an understanding of the emotions that the artist wants to portray. Ironically, his inability to relate to the painting implies his humanity; unlike androids, he feels that he belongs to a community. Although it remains unclear whether Resch is a human or an android at this point in the novel, Resch's abilities to both understand and apply the emotions that the art presents foreshadow his Voigt-Kampff test results: he is human.

After this brief pause, the men find Luft “absorbed” by another Edvard Munch work: *Puberty* (Dick 131). By including this painting, Dick implies that Luft’s lack of empathy renders her mental status that of a child. Her ability to appreciate art makes her near-human, or pubescent; however, her inability to gain any underlying emotional meaning precludes her from ever becoming truly adult. Thus, she will remain permanently solidified in a purgatory-like state between child and adult, human and android.



Edvard Munch, *Puberty*, National Gallery, Norway.

As the men arrest her, she asks for a print of the painting and Deckard buys it for her. Luft asks for the print because she possesses the intellect necessary to see herself within the painting, and Deckard agrees to purchase it on account of his human inability to separate his feelings for art from his feelings for her. After he does so, Luft observes, “There’s something very strange and touching about humans. An android would never have done that” (Dick 133). Interestingly, Luft

can intellectually identify what empathy is; however, she remains incapable of embodying it. Thus, the distinction between Resch's and Luft's reactions to art once again prove that having insight into art's emotional connotations is a luxury unique to humans.

Dick provides evidence for this point once more through a third, literary allusion. Near the conclusion of the novel, Pris explains the occupation of bounty hunter to Isidore. Upon hearing the details, he is shocked and dismayed. The speaker notes the following exchange: "It's not in accord with present-day Mercerian ethics,' [Isidore] pointed out. 'All life is one; no man is an island,' as Shakespeare said in olden times.'" After his pleas, Pris flatly corrects him: "John Donne'" (Dick 148). Pris can only connect with a piece of art empirically; that is, by correcting Isidore's mistake of attributing the work to Shakespeare instead of to Donne. In addition to lacking the ability to identify with the prose, it is impossible for Pris to acknowledge Isidore's emotions about it. Instead, she simply discusses the facts from an objective standpoint. This lack of empathy highlights the constraints inherent to being an android: Pris must experience the art through a strict lens of reason.

In contrast to Pris, Isidore identifies with Donne's metaphorical meaning by connecting his claims to his own experience with religion. In addition to his identification with the work of art itself, it is important to note the subject of the work: empathy (Donne 1305-1306). That is, Isidore finds this piece of art so compelling because it is a testament to the single quality that distinguishes him from androids. Although his fellow humans have exiled him to the outskirts of society with the label "chickenhead," Isidore continues to identify himself as a part of the human community. He does so because of his ability to empathize with a both piece of art whose subject is empathy as well as its author's intentions. The difference between Pris's and Isidore's reactions can only be described as a dichotomy; once again, it proves that humans' inclination to

empathize with the subject of a piece of art is distinct from androids' ability to analyze it.

Dick's creative decision to include allusions to other works highlights a key difference between humans and androids: the ability to understand the emotional connotations that a work presents. He implies that the ability to construe meaning from the symbols presented by an otherwise objective piece of art is inherent to this deeper, emotional understanding. Dick's making these distinctions suggests that art provides an opportunity for empathy; furthermore, the capacity to engage that opportunity defines humanity. Dick's commentary encourages humans to be brave enough to use their empathetic abilities to welcome, rather than fear, marginalized communities.

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