An Obsession with Electric Sheep: Examining a Concept in Science Fiction

Skylar Hunter

Faculty Mentor: Reed Moran J.D.
Department of Film and Electronic Arts

Abstract
In order to contextualize the work of science fiction novelist Philip K. Dick, I explore a concept that separates the imposed reality of society from the individuals’ interpretation of reality; this I call “layered reality.” Layered reality also influences the spectator to question the way in which he/she views society. The novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? engages themes of humanity, capitalism, and religion, which are central to Dick’s work in science fiction. Blade Runner, a film adaptation of Dick’s novel by Ridley Scott, examines these themes further through a visual aesthetic focusing on presenting the spectator with a hyperrealistic environment in which the themes are negotiated interchangeably. Through close reading and analysis of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, and Blade Runner, as well as literature that looks at the themes of Dick’s work and science fiction as a whole, I use layered reality to understand a possible message behind the novel and how the film allegorizes and presents that message to a wider audience.

Introduction
The words science and fiction when placed together create a perplexing definition based on exploration and creation. If science is a system of gaining more knowledge about the physical world we live in, and fiction is the ability to craft both emotional and psychological fantasy laden stories, what is the essence of science fiction? In understanding the nature of the words, I am led to believe that science fiction is the practice of discovering new knowledge about the human mind; what makes us tick. Comparatively, as fiction is a process of creation so is film, whose power lies in its ability to replicate high quality audio/visual elements of
storytelling. With that in mind, how does film make use of science fiction novels and explore the deeper recesses of the human mind? One answer could be that the audio and visual mode of creation (i.e., film) draws the viewer further into the author’s world. In essence, film takes science fiction to a different level by exploring the themes of the novel in ways that enhance the original author’s work. By recreating the fictitious worlds in the author’s novels, film takes on the method of investigating the reality of the author’s ideology in comparison with societal ideology. In order to prove this point, it is necessary to examine the work of science fiction writers and compare written works to their film adaptation.

For the purposes of this research, Philip K. Dick was chosen because he represents an author whose written work was remade successfully into a film that keeps ties to all of the themes in the novels. In this case, we will be discussing the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and the Ridley Scott film adaptation *Blade Runner* as forms of creative work that beg for exploration in order to discover the message Dick intended to present. In examining these two works of science fiction it is possible to see this concept of layered reality, through which the connection between the ideology of society and the ideology of the main character are investigated. Moreover, the novel and film depict a man whose job and social status are disconnected with his inner identity. Ironically, the ideas presented in the story are already explored in various forms of fiction written all over the world today. However, what sets Dick’s focus and ideas apart from every other novel and film is how the story is told. Through science fiction, the story is prophetic in a sense because the futuristic aesthetic allows for the author to give warnings about the direction of humanity, as opposed to a simple examination. With this concept of layering reality, Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* explores issues of humanity, capitalism, and the technological dominance of human beings. These issues are allegorized by the Ridley Scott film adaptation *Blade Runner* through hyperrealism, *mise-en-scene*, and dialogue in an effort to critique contemporary society by stating that technology will usurp human identity.
Science Fiction
Darko Suvin’s definition of science fiction follows as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (Freedman 16). Suvin’s definition classifies science fiction as different from other literary genres because it cannot fit in the realm of the fantastic, as it recognizes the existence of the real world. This occurs via estrangement, which means distancing the story from the real world created and cognition, which calls for the story to recognize its connection to and distance from the real world. These components are formed by the author who creates a world that the reader is able to recognize from a social and political point of view, understanding the issues, but realizing that the physical world is different.

With that said, Suvin’s definition still relies heavily on the ability and presence of the author, as it calls for the author to create the environment and inject the themes. In the case of Android’s and Blade Runner, the world is distanced from present time, yet is connected through the social, political, and cultural depictions in the novel and film. In the novel, Dick distances the story from the real world by destroying it through war and the construction of technology that does not exist. However, Dick recognizes the present through the concepts of capitalism (i.e., the characters’ need to consume and desire for social status) and religion (i.e., the creation of the fictional religion of mercerism, which can be connected loosely to Christianity). In the film, we get to see visual representations of how Dick envisioned his world where the technology is hyperreal (estrangement) while at the same time the past and present are maintained through the depiction of the Bradbury Building and much more (cognition). With this in mind, Dick uses the genre of science fiction to explore the concept of ideology. As such, he distances the story from the real and the fantastic in order to create recognition of the issue—ideology governs everything.

Ideology
Ideology, as defined by Louis Althusser, “assure[s] the domination of one class over others, and the economic exploitation that maintains its
pre-eminence, by making the exploited accept their condition as based on the will of God, ‘nature’, moral ‘duty’, etc” (28). Meaning, that ideology is a system that controls the individual and influences his/her direction in life, the choices he/she makes, and his/her social status. As Althusser states, “[I]t helps individuals of the dominant class to recognize themselves as dominant class subjects, to accept the domination they exercise over the exploited as ‘willed by God’, as fixed by ‘nature’, or assigned by a moral ‘duty’” (28). So, in that sense, ideology can be seen as a force that governs human consciousness and values by means of religion, government, and law. As a system that defines the role of human beings, ideology serves to create one coherent reality that each individual joins in order to fit into the confines of society. From the moment we enter the world, ideology has taken control of and begins to govern our very existence.

The ideology that governs the worlds in Dick’s novels serves as the antagonist. The main character starts out following along with society’s master plan living and working according to societal standards, until he is forced to confront his situation, which ends up opposing the ideology that governs society. In the case of the story Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? the main character, Rick Deckard, lives within a society whose ideology is constructed through massive reorganization and relocation because war has destroyed everything. There are very few living beings besides humans, animals have become a high priced commodity, a symbol of status that determines ones station, while androids have been created and used for slave labor. Deckard lives his life as a bounty hunter, killing escaped androids for money; he does not own a real live animal anymore because it died off leaving him to buy an electronic sheep. When the electronic sheep breaks down, it becomes the sole driving force behind Deckard’s life as a bounty hunter; it symbolizes his loss of manhood because he no longer is respected by the community both for having an electronic animal and letting it die. The death of the electronic sheep also brings about an ensuing drive to regain status while signifying his loss of individuality and humanity. In order to achieve the necessary funds to purchase a live animal, Deckard goes on a killing spree of sorts. Here, because of how he desires to take part in raising his social status, Deckard is governed by ideology. By believing that he
needs to increase his status in order to gain the respect of his estranged wife and wealthy neighbor (who owns a live horse), Deckard trades his humanity (killing) for monetary value. Essentially, Deckard murders escaped androids in order to satisfy both his boss (symbol of control) as well as to identify himself as being a part of society. According to Althusser:

In class societies, ideology is a representation of the real, but necessarily distorted, because necessarily biased and tendentious - tendentious because its aim is not to provide men with objective knowledge of the social system in which they live but, on the contrary, to give them a mystified representation of this social system in order to keep them in their ‘place’ in the system of class exploitation. (28)

In Deckard’s case, the obsession with obtaining a live animal in order to restore his sense of stability and status is the result of ideology. He doesn’t actually want the animal, instead it represents a change in life and by having one he is accepted into the upper echelon of society. Deckard can escape the stigma of being a murderer and a failure at home by obtaining what society determines to be a symbol of both intellectual and financial wealth. However, this apparent nod to capitalism is combated by the main character’s desire to break free of the hold placed on him by society. As Deckard murders androids, which happen to resemble humans in every aspect, he begins to wonder what it means to be human. The androids are merely robotic beings that are self-aware, yet they possess a human desire to live and be free. When Deckard becomes aware of this desire, he begins to question what determines a human being and if he fits the requirements. In Dick’s novel androids are “unfeeling, emotionless beings,” but that cannot be entirely true as the androids desire and wish for freedom and individuality, things that in Deckard’s eyes make them out to be more human than actual humans. The societal view of runaway androids is that they are dangerous beings that must be killed, but how did society determine that as a fact? Through ideology the government is able to convince people of the threat that androids possess, causing those people to manifest emotions of fear and
hate. In Deckard’s attempt to better his station and add fulfillment to his life, Deckard stumbles upon this realization that ideology is controlling the way he perceives the world and this begins to eat at him. However, *Blade Runner* takes a different approach in that the androids are renamed “replicants.” Ridley Scott made this change because he felt that the replicants were “super humans without wings” in that they were capable of exceeding every human ability, but were not able to live past 4 years. By setting a life expectancy and giving the replicants a more emotional touch, Scott creates a world where it becomes more difficult to determine what defines a human being. Scott also succeeds in establishing a system of ideology that controls how people think by setting up a negative view for the replicants in the first few scenes in the film. The result of the novel and film come to the same point in that Deckard enters a state of confusion, where he realizes that the world he lives in is just a shell, a simulation of ideas that control and dictate the direction of every individual in society. This realization forces Deckard to question his own humanity and reject the ideology presented by society. In doing so, *Android’s* and *Blade Runner* fall on this plane of post-modernity because they begin this process of examining ideology, which permeates every facet of society.

**Postmodernism**

Accordingly, postmodernism can be linked to both *Android’s* and *Blade Runner* because it “signals the death of ideology” (Hayward 300). To further that statement, postmodernism calls for individuals to question both their connection to society and to stray away from universal systems of thought. According to Susan Hayward, postmodernism “takes issue with modernism’s positive belief in progress and a unified underlying reality” (300). In doing so, one can reject ideology and form their own identity by breaking away from the simulation of society. With that being the case, postmodernism can be defined as this method of examining and deconstructing universal systems of thought. “It heralds a new skepticism about the modernist belief in the supremacy of the Western world, the legitimacy of science to legislate the construction and function of gender, and the advocacy of high art over popular culture” (Hayward 300). Of course, this is not the only definition that postmodernism carries, but in
examining Dick’s work, we can suspect that this was key to his writing. For example, in *Android’s* Deckard, after having killed a young female android, begins grappling with the idea that his job, his life are not products of his choosing. For a moment Deckard starts to consider that he may be an android, as he starts to make blind connections between his uncanny ability to detect an android and his uncertainty over whether or not he killed a human by mistake. This minor obsession pushes Deckard over into a realm of paranoia where he begins to realize that the things he desires in life are products of society and not of his own choosing. As a result, Deckard comes to the conclusion that his world and the outside world are two entirely different things, two different realities. As Hayward states, “[P]ostmodernism rejects meaning in the sense of believing that the world exists as something to be understood and that there is some unified underlying reality. Ideology becomes distinctly unstable in this environment” (307). With regard to Hayward, Deckard is assuming this postmodern ideal in his attempt to distance himself from the ideology that governs his society. The result creates opposing realities that serve as methods for self-reflection and discovery. On the one hand, ideology exists as a system that governs social consciousness, creating order. On the other, postmodernism serves as a method that uncovers and rejects ideology, creating chaos. In that respect, Dick’s work on *Android’s* falls under this concept of “layering reality,” as one reality exists to control Deckard while the other arises out of a need to find his humanity.

**Layered Reality: The Fight between Postmodernism and Ideology**

The film uses layered reality in a visual manner through the recreation of Los Angeles in a futuristic fashion. The dystopian landscape serves as a backdrop for Dick and Scott to navigate the idea of layered realities. As the novel details the opposing realities of ideology and postmodernism, through the way in which the character responds to his environment, the film details this process via a visual representation of the environment. An example of this is Deckard’s home, which is a mixture of past relics and future technologies. The many futuristic devices Deckard uses for his job litter the apartment, giving the impression of a high tech world and a focus on the future. At the same time, all of this technological
decadence is contrasted by the apartment’s interior design. In particular the patterns on the wall mirror those on the exterior of the 1920’s Ennis House built by Frank Lloyd Wright. In this sense, the devices carry the reality of Deckard’s job and his life; they symbolize his connection to and place in society. The décor of Deckard’s home symbolizes a connection to the past, meaning it is a world that no longer exists but through the representation of the character’s possessions. According to John Hill, “[P]ostmodernist architecture seeks to reconnect with its occupants by rejecting the functionalism of modernism, making use of decoration and ornamentation and mixing styles from different periods and places” (97). In relation to Android’s and Blade Runner, the mixing of culture is a postmodern element that both the novel and film employ collectively in order to further examine both the death of ideology and the loss of humanity in contemporary society.

Another postmodern concept employed by the novel and film comes in the form of the androids/replicants. The concept of parody is put into play by both Dick and Scott as the androids are made out to be representations of human beings. Parody being “an ironization of style, form and content” (Hayward 302), when applied to the androids/replicants takes on a role of satirizing human beings. Specifically, in the film, replicants stand as copies of us, yet they are better, livelier versions that can be more expressive, are aware of their mortality and seem to fight for their existence. Whereas the human beings in the film, including Deckard, represent a monotony and complacency with the way things are. An instance of this in the film arises from the replicant Roy Batty, whose desire for a life longer than four years fuels an emotion more intense than anything displayed by Deckard. This creates a contrasting image of a mechanical being fighting for life and a human being expecting to live. In looking at the replicants in this manner it is possible to see that they represent humans not as they are, but as they used to be, full of life and questions. The novel differs from the film in that it depicts androids as unemotional, mechanical, beings. Nonetheless, the androids are human in appearance and successfully confuse the main character into almost believing that he is an android. This coupled with their desire to live and be free makes them seem almost on the same level with the humans in the novel. Both the
replicants and the androids parody the human race and signify the death of emotion. In doing so, the usurping of human identity by technology occurs, resulting in the loss of the meaning of human.

All things considered, what was Dick’s purpose in layering reality to convey this overarching theme? Moreover, in a world where technology has taken away humanity and identity what is left to define a human being? John Hill states: “The dystopian character of the contemporary science fiction film might be seen to be connected with a ‘postmodern’ loss of faith in the idea of progress or the changing film representations of men with a breakdown of confidence in the ‘grand narratives’ surrounding masculinity and patriarchal authority” (Hill 98). As the worlds of Do Androids Dream of Electronic Sheep? and Blade Runner paint a bleak world of humanity’s fall from grace, they also point out a key factor in Dick’s world—the need for chaos. In Dick’s creations, chaos is the saving grace of the human character. Emotional chaos becomes the one true emotion that machines cannot emulate. The chaos that Deckard goes through once he recognizes the two opposing realities he exists within causes him to undergo a severe mental strain, a chaotic moment where he feels alive, desperate, and unsure. Deckard recognizes that he is situated within a simulation of society, law, and order, which leaves him in a state of stark clarity, a clear lens of the world he exists in. As Jean Baudrillard says, “[S]imulation is infinitely more dangerous, however, since it always suggests, over and above its object, that law and order themselves might really be nothing more than simulation” (197). Dick is layering reality not only for Deckard to discover the truth of his society, which is a simulation of false ideals and capitalistic dreams, but for the reader to try to understand that perspective about the real world.

**Conclusion**

Truly, Dick is attempting to point that fact out, that simulation is dangerous because it is created by ideology and enforced through technology. In Dick’s novels, society is governed by ideology and the main characters must try to deconstruct that ideology in order to figure out their own identity and meaning for life. By layering the reality of society (to buy things and be happy) with Deckard’s pursuit of a different reality (to reject capitalism and find himself) Dick communicates a
message of urgency to the reader, telling him/her to examine reality and identity. Scott’s film captures these ideals and allegorizes them by giving the androids more life and the humans more detachment. As the androids stand as the ultimate pinnacle of human achievement, de-humanized slave labor if you will, the humans stand as a form of de-evolution, a step backwards away from perfection. Further, the layered reality present in the novel points out that the humans, save for Deckard, fail to realize that androids are becoming like human beings by seeking independence and freedom not as a result of programming, but because they are the next step in the evolutionary process. The result leaves Deckard and the audience with a question—where does humanity fit in the grand scheme of technology?

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Works Cited


