

Policing the Boundaries: The “Mission Street Station Scene” in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)

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ABSTRACT

The essay focuses on the “Mission Street Station” episode in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). The episode revolves around two central problems: the human/android divide and fake realities. The first part of the paper concentrates on theories of classification and analyses the problems of the Voigt-Kampff test understood as a classificatory apparatus. The second part focuses on the Mission Scene as a fake reality and identifies a potentially problematic race-focused reading. Dick, a prolific essayist and public speaker, expressed his preoccupation with questions that constitute the conceptual core of the scene on several occasions. Therefore, the essay also relies on the author’s nonfiction to discover and establish the importance of the oft-neglected Mission Scene in the novel’s critical reception. (DP)

KEYWORDS: android, classification, human, nonfiction, Voigt-Kampff test

The “Mission Street Station Scene” in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) is central to the novel not only structurally (it appears exactly in the middle) but thematically as well, and hence warrants closer examination despite Dick’s suggestion that “[t]he small plot-element of the Other Police Station could be eliminated entirely” (“Notes” 157). The scene exemplifies Dick’s deep mistrust of any classification system and boundary-making process, and distils his preoccupations into a short but memorable episode.

The Mission Scene's importance is twofold: it serves as the culmination point of the Voigt-Kampff's crisis¹, and it also serves as a fake reality to distinguish between genuine humanity and androids. Numerous readings understand Deckard's final words and actions as signs of his "growing compassion" (Galvan 426) for the androids and his reaction to the crises of classification that he encounters as a constructive—rather than exclusive—approach to the definition of humanity. The Mission Scene and its aftermath implies, however, that this is only one facet of his character development. The Mission Scene and Dick's particularly relevant nonfiction show how this critically neglected episode contributes to a better understanding of how the concept of humanity is constructed in the novel.

Androids has been fruitfully examined from the perspective of posthumanism on several occasions, but the presence of this puzzling scene in those readings is either marginal or entirely non-existent.² Jill Galvan argues that the text "envisions a community of the posthuman, in which human and machine commiserate and comaterialize" (414) through the protagonists' turn from an exclusionary view of humanity "to a more sincere empathy for the humanoid robots in his world" (426). While the insightful conclusion that Rick Deckard eventually adopts a "compassionate" worldview that includes androids as well is quite convincing, it is important to note that the Mission Scene is left out of Galvan's analysis completely. The function of the Mission Scene must be different from a mere sketch of inclusive utopia, since the two separate and isolated police stations do not imply much "commiseration" and "community." Rather, the Mission Scene imagines "posthuman" in the sense that Dick explains in a 1975 essay, "Man, Android, and Machine": between the android and the human, there is no "difference of essence, but a difference of behaviour" (211), and a "posthuman" future is a society which is aware of this circumstance. Another analysis by Josh Toth accurately observes that the scene "further [highlights] the tenuousness of the boundary separating human and android" (77), but Toth decides to put the scene into the context of the

novel rather than to the fore. Seo-Young Chu's reading concerns itself with how the novel "[arrives] at the uncanny valley by generating uncertainty" (221) about the ontological status of the androids. In the scenes that Chu looks at, the ontological status of the androids oscillates between "human enough" and "not human enough," rendering their presence eerie and dangerous at the same time (236). What could be more dangerous than a vindictive android posing as a police officer? And yet, Chu does not treat the Mission scene either, even though the scene illustrates the dangers of misclassification most vividly. Gilbert McInnis—also leaving out Mission Street—interprets the text with a pessimistic take on posthumanity and makes a vital addition to previous scholarship by including Dick's nonfiction essays in his investigation. This article is not intended as a reply to McInnis's argument, since the focus is elsewhere: on the Mission Scene, the Voigt-Kampff test, and the classification system that the test represents. McInnis, though he writes about the test, does not reflect on the practical result of categorization: life or death for its subjects. His conclusion is that Dick "attempted to warn society against becoming posthuman" (110)—yet, the text allows for a reading in which the warning refers to dehumanization and the Voigt-Kampff test itself. The enduring appeal of *Androids* lies precisely in this ambiguity that allows for divergent, occasionally even contradictory readings—an ambiguity that is, to a large extent, the result of the scene in question and the problems with the Voigt-Kampff test.

One of the reasons for the incompatibility of this specific scene with the text as a whole is the semantic and thematic fog that surrounds the Mission Street building and its inhabitants. The "bewildered" Deckard fluctuates between disbelief and doubting himself: "It makes no sense. . . . Who are these people? If this place has always existed, *why didn't we know about it?*" (86, 89, emphasis in original). Since Deckard is the narrative's focalizer, it is important that all the characters are referred to as "men" and the "he" pronoun reserved for humans is used. The only time the narration self-corrects is when the chief inspector reveals

himself as an android: “[Garland] was silent then. Or rather it was silent” (97). Earlier, Deckard is spoken to by the same Garland as if he were an android: “It’s an unpleasant sensation . . . [to] find yourself a bounty hunter’s assignment all of a sudden. Or whatever it is you are, Deckard” (92). Garland suggests that Deckard might be a delusional android run amok, believing himself to be human and killing other humans—it is not surprising that to add to the confusion, the text introduces Phil Resch immediately afterwards as “a tall, fleshless man with hard-etched features” (92). The possibility that the newly introduced Resch might be an android himself further complicates the game of deceptions.

The obscurity around Mission Street does not end with the scene itself, however. First of all, Deckard says that the place is “android-infested” (99) and indeed, when they exit the building after killing Garland, they pass “uniformed police . . . conducting their routine business of the day” and “several police-like nondescript men and women” (100), supposedly all androids. Yet he never mentions the station to his superior, Bryant, and never returns to the station (it is even suggested that he is going to quit his job). From a practical point of view, it is quite irresponsible for Deckard to leave Mission Street in operation as it is, full of androids who are potentially looking for revenge. Second, the accounts of the station that other characters give differ considerably. Irmgard, Pris, and Roy (a group of escaped androids) discuss the station and they know Garland (122-25). However, when Rachael, an android in the service of the Rosen Corporation (the manufacturer of the most advanced, Nexus-6-type androids), mentions the “very cynical” Phil Resch to Deckard, she also says that “he’s nutty; he works out in left field on his own” (156). Since most bounty hunters work alone (at least Deckard and his colleague, Dave Holden do), it is pointless to mention that Resch does so as well, unless he is alone in the sense of not being associated with any agency—perhaps Rachael does not know about Mission Street, but seeing that she is quite well-informed, this is difficult to believe.

To make matters worse, a certain timeline confusion is never resolved in the story. Garland tells Deckard that he knows all his targets, because they “came [to Earth] together on the same ship from Mars” (97)—according to Deckard, “that wasn’t as long ago as three years; it’s only been a matter of months” (101). However, Phil Resch claims that he has worked at the station for three years, and all his co-workers have been there “from the start, throughout [his] three years” (101). There could be several explanations. Maybe, as Resch says, “an authentic Garland existed . . . [and] somewhere along the way got replaced” (101)—but someone would have noticed the difference, and this still does not explain why Resch worked at an isolated police station, not at the one on Lombard Street. Another possibility is that Resch has a “false memory system” (101)—but, as he points out, memory implants have been “found ineffective in humans” (101) and, indeed, he tests out as a human when Deckard administers the Voigt-Kampff test to him. None of the explanations fit, and the readers cannot interpret the scene either in the figurative or in the literal sense. The Mission Scene is incongruous with the story’s timeline, and the ambiguous connections it has to the other scenes and characters pose a challenge to incorporating it into the narrative.

The Mission Scene is literally a watershed moment not only for the characters, but for the readers as well. Its focuses are Dick’s two major preoccupations as he explains in “How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later” (1978): “‘What is reality?’ and ‘What constitutes the authentic human being?’” (260). To Dick, the two are connected: the consumption of “fake realities” (the ones created by the media, for example) produces “fake humans” (263-64). Dick explains who the fake humans might be in an earlier speech (later reprinted as an essay), “The Android and the Human” (1972), in which he argues that “authentic humanness” (188) means acting unpredictably and with no regard to external expectations, breaking rules and stirring chaos in order (188-95). In contrast to authentic humanity, Dick uses the terms “schizoid” and “android” to describe people whose actions

have a “mechanical, reflex quality” (201). The Mission Scene is a test for Deckard to see whether he can be made into a fake human—and for the readers to decide whether they believe what they are reading. The Mission Scene destabilizes both the Voigt-Kampff test and reality, and brings about the realization for Deckard that there is no “difference of essence” (Dick, “Man, Android” 211) between humans and androids. For the reader, it serves as a good warning against doling out sympathies based on whether a character is an android or not. If the reader (like Deckard) can be fooled by this fake reality, then they are one step closer to being fooled by fake humans or becoming fake humans themselves.

Classification and categorization

The cognitive unwieldiness of the scene is its most important aspect, because it functions to emphasize the difficulty of placement, categorization, and classification.³ Taking a cue from John Rieder’s *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System* (2017), let us approach the Voigt-Kampff test from the aspect of classification and categorization as theorized by Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star. According to their monograph *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences* (2000), “[to] classify is human” (1), meaning that classification is a ubiquitous phenomenon, something that humans do consciously and unconsciously every day when they try to interpret their environment and organize it into different categories. Of course, “[each] standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another,” which, as Bowker and Star remind and warn readers, is “not inherently a bad thing . . .—not bad, but dangerous” (5-6). One instance in which classification turns from dangerous to bad is the classification of people, specifically into “who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them,’ a process by which some people are dehumanized” as Maria Kronfeldner explains (625). According to Kronfeldner, the definition of human nature in dehumanizing discourses is created by “those speaking [based on what they] consider to be

their ‘essential’ characteristics” (Kronfeldner 625)—and if the other group does not exhibit those characteristics, they are excluded from the category “humanity.”⁴ According to Nick Haslam, there are two fundamental forms of dehumanization: “animalistic,” when “people are perceived . . . implicitly or explicitly as animal-like” and “mechanistic,” when people are seen as “object- or automaton-like” (258). While the subjects of animalistic dehumanization are identified as “coarse, uncultured, lacking in self-control . . . and thus more driven by motives, appetites, and instincts,” the subjects of mechanistic dehumanization are associated with “inertness, coldness, rigidity, fungibility, and lack of agency” (258). To summarize, humans organize their surroundings into all kinds of categories within classificatory systems, but this inherently neutral process can easily be co-opted into oppressive ideologies when it is applied to, among other things, human beings.

Haslam and Kronfeldner both discuss humans who are being treated as if they were animals or machines—the conundrum is that if one talks about androids being dehumanized, then it is presupposed that they are human in the first place. In the strict biological sense, androids are not human; however, the text uses the terms “android” and “human” in a *functional* sense. What Kronfeldner notes about “human nature” is also true about “android”: the term has a “political function of . . . social inclusion/exclusion” (625). In fact, Kronfeldner’s words that describe “human nature” are equally applicable to the category of androids as established by the Voigt-Kampff test: it is a “conceptual blank mould, . . . filled—depending on context—with different content” (625). In other words, whatever characteristic the in-group (or the group that aspires to be the in-group from their perspective) has and the out-group does not have is taken to be an essential staple of humanity—no matter what the characteristic is. The Voigt-Kampff test operates in this functional sense: “android” denotes beings expelled from ethics and politics precisely on the basis of their *not* being human, that is, on the basis of lacking “empathy,” which, according to the Dick’s logic, is the very

characteristic that makes us human (Dick, "Man, Android" 211-12). Importantly, however, for Dick the term "human being" is completely decoupled from biology: it "[applies] not to origin or to any ontology but to a way of being in the world; if a mechanical construct [lends] you assistance, then you will posit to it, gratefully, a humanity which no analysis of its transistors and relay-systems can elucidate" (212). The characters in the novel who expect the Voigt-Kampff test to work choose the content of their functional category erroneously: as the Mission Street police station attests, empathy can be exhibited by androids as well.

In the beginning, Deckard is so eager to differentiate himself from the androids that he cannot even decide if he should apply "animalistic" or "mechanistic" dehumanization. At one point, he says that androids are "like any other machine" (32), other times he likens them to carnivorous animals, "solitary predator[s]" (24). But the barrier can hardly ever be maintained: one of the primary examples of the fuzziness and inconsistency of the categories in the text is the Voigt-Kampff test itself, whose crisis culminates in the Mission Scene. The test is a deadly mixture of classification and dehumanization: based on only one feature (empathy quantified as reaction time difference), it can conclusively decide whether the subject is a human or an android. As a consequence, the bounty hunter can legally kill the android on the spot, without any official sentence meted out. The test is a perfect illustration of modern biopower and how the state decides over the life and death of its subjects, and it entered popular culture as a method that works infallibly.⁵

However, when the test is mentioned for the first time in the novel, it is one of the "new scales of achievement . . . by which to judge" (23), and it became the most popular because "no T-14 [an earlier model] android—insofar, at least, as was known—had managed to pass that particular test" (23). The phrase "insofar, at least, as was known" clearly raises doubts concerning the Voigt-Kampff test's efficiency. Small wonder that in the puzzling Mission Scene an altogether different test, the Boneli Reflex-Arc Test is introduced. The

Boneli test measures “[t]he reflex-arc response taking place in the upper ganglia of the spinal column,” an involuntary response of the nerve cells, a matter of only “several microseconds” (95). The fact that there could be more than one classificatory principle (the reflex-arc response and/or the Voigt-Kampff test) renders the whole classificatory process questionable and recalls Dick’s differentiation between “ontology” and “being in the world”: the Boneli is clearly a test of “morphology,” while the Voigt-Kampff is a “behavioural” examination. Deckard later learns from Rachael that the Rosen association is “working on the spinal ganglia, too” (150)—the morphological difference between humans and androids will be eradicated for good.

The Voigt-Kampff is already revealed to be problematic early in the text: Bryant and Deckard discuss humans who have a “flattening of affect” (30) which would result in them failing the test; these humans Dick would call the “schizoids.” Deckard has a licence to shoot on sight, or rather, shoot on results, which means that miscategorization is a deadly mistake – lethal for those who are mistaken for non-humans. As Bryant says pointedly: “You’d be wrong, but by then they’d be dead” (30). Further, the test not only fails in the case of dispassionate humans, but also, and most spectacularly in the case of androids. We learn that Dave Holden, Deckard’s predecessor on the job was shot when he was administering the test to an android, Polokov; Rachael’s test can hardly be called a success story;⁶ Luba Luft easily deflects and distorts the language of the questions to escape oppressive power (Galvan 419-23); Roy, Irmgard, and Pris are killed without taking the test. The only time the test works is when Deckard administers it to himself with help from Phil Resch—and even then, it only concludes that the categories it was designed to uphold are coming apart, because Deckard feels empathy towards certain androids. The breakdown of categorization and classification culminates in the Mission Scene: shortly after Deckard and Resch leave the building and kill Luba Luft, the test is applied to Deckard and never used again in the novel. It disappears with

the Mission Scene because its purpose has been fulfilled since it demonstrated the crisis of ontological distinctions based on behavior; similarly, the entire Mission Scene demonstrates the breakdown of take-it-for-granted reality in the face of fake humanity.

Interestingly, it is intuition rather than the Voigt-Kampff test that plays a significant role in the decision as to who is human and who is not. The Romantic idea of intuition, however, runs counter to the allegedly scientific basis of the test and therefore destabilizes the categorization on which it is predicated. The first instance occurs after Rachael Rosen's first test, when Deckard has an intuition that she is an android: "It, he thought. *She keeps calling the owl it. Not her*" (46). This realization is more of an intuition than a reasoned conclusion, because a few minutes earlier Rachael refers to a raccoon as "him"—Deckard's observation is not based on conclusive evidence. Another life-saving intuition comes to him in a scene shortly before he interviews Luba Luft: Deckard learns that a Soviet police officer named Sandor Kadalyi wants to accompany him on his mission. He waits for Kadalyi, and soon "a red-faced, cherubic-looking man" (73) approaches him. They exchange only a few words, when Deckard suddenly blurts out "you're not Polokov, you're Kadalyi," then he corrects himself on the prompt of Kadalyi/Polokov: "I mean you're Polokov, the android; you're not from the Soviet police" (74). There is no logical explanation as to how Deckard finds this out, but he manages to subdue and kill the impostor. Later, when they kill Garland, Resch talks about a "remarkable . . . psionic ability you develop in this business" (99)—which supposedly warned him that Garland would shoot at him. And yet, he wonders: "For three years I've been working under the direction of androids. Why didn't I suspect—I mean, enough to do something?" (101). Intuition seems to work with a large margin of error, surely not like the scientifically grounded Voigt-Kampff. What is more, intuition is also exhibited by an android—Garland explains that he "had an intuition" to intervene (96) when Deckard appeared at the station. Intuition not only questions the scientific method, but it can also

penetrate “the veil” that usually covers reality (Dick, “Man, Android” 214), in this case the veil being the recurring games of deception of which the Mission Scene is the most elaborate one.

The Mission Scene as fake reality

As suggested earlier, the Mission Scene can be seen as a fake reality and a third type of test besides the Voigt-Kampff Scale and the Boneli Arc Reflex Test. According to Dick, fake realities cannot “penetrate” authentic humans (“How to Build” 279), and so the whole Mission Scene acts as a test of the characters and of the readers as well. Significantly, Resch does not recognize or even intuit that he is working for androids—probably because his behavior is closer to androids than to humans. As Dick explains, “[e]ach of us is going to have to either affirm or deny the reality which is revealed when our ontological categories collapse” (“Man, Android” 219)—when Deckard’s ontological categories (human/android) collapse, he slowly begins to recognize behavioral ones (*behaves* human/android). He knows that the schizoid Resch is perfect for the job but doubts himself: “You’re a good bounty hunter, Rick realized. . . . But am I? Suddenly, for the first time in his life, he had begun to wonder” (114). Dick writes that “for absolute reality to reveal itself, our categories of space-time experiences, our basic matrix through which we encounter the universe, must break down and then utterly collapse” (“Man, Android” 218)—the Mission Scene acts as a gateway into this absolute reality. It has long been a point of contestation among critics whether Deckard honestly arrives (or desires to arrive) at a more inclusive conception of humanity;⁷ but maybe Deckard does not have a choice in the matter, or at least not a decisive one.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of why the Mission Scene eluded critics (and adaptation) is how ambiguously it relates to issues of race in the novel. Reading the Mission Scene as part of the social allegory of the novel might lead to worrisome conclusions, because

as Rick Instrell very well phrases it, “[h]ow can one represent oppression without at the same time being implicated in it”? (169). One of the forms of oppression staged in the novel is racism (McNamara 432-36), and the novel’s film adaptation *Blade Runner* (1982) also “codes” replicants as Black, even though there are conspicuously no Black people either in the novel or in the film adaptation (Nama 57).⁸ The oppression of the androids and their rebellion echoes not only nineteenth-century but also 1960s’ US history: it is possible to see Roy and his company (and to an extent, Garland) as stand-ins for the Black Power movement. Several androids use the social practice of “passing” to elude authorities (for instance, Luba Luft, Polokov, and Garland), while others choose to fight back and refuse to lose their identity (Roy and Irmgard Baty).⁹ The Mission Scene portrays an alternative society and a safe haven for androids, as Garland explains: “This is a homeostatic enterprise we’re operating here, Deckard. We’re a closed loop, cut off from the rest of San Francisco. We know about them but they don’t know about us” (98).

One interpretation suggests that the Mission Scene represents racial injustice and teaches Deckard a lesson in what it feels to be on the other side of the oppressive system. Even though Garland is eventually killed, the seed of doubt is planted in the head of the White oppressor Deckard, who realizes that those whom he construed as inhuman might be more human than himself. Deckard’s reaction to the events at and after the secret underground police station eventually shatters his own ideological allegiances. He has no problem with killing Garland who would do the same to him, but he does not tell his superiors about the station either. After Luba Luft’s death, his worldview is thoroughly shaken: “So much for the distinction between authentic living humans and humanoid constructs. In that elevator . . . I rode down with two creatures, one human, the other android... and my feelings were the reverse of those intended. Of those I’m accustomed to feel—am *required* to feel” (emphasis in original; 113-14). As a reassurance that his feelings are still aligned properly, he goes to

buy an expensive animal and thus reinstate himself ideologically and materially in the dominant hierarchy—but he soon realizes that he may be unable to continue his mission because the classification he applies to the world is untenable.

On the other hand, another potential reading implies that the racially oppressed are portrayed as androids, and that a troubling equation emerges between “fake humans” and Black Americans—are the Black Power leaders androidlike? After all, the fake reality of the Mission Scene disintegrates when the leaders are killed, and Deckard continues and finishes his quest unhindered by the strange episode at the station. To come back to the question posited by Instrell, it is debatable whether this representation of racism simultaneously implicates Dick himself. Is he entrapped in his own analogy of the Mission Scene and does this explain the scene’s disappearance from the rest of the novel? Even more troubling are Dick’s own words regarding the film adaptation: “To me, the replicants are deplorable. They are cruel, they are cold, they are heartless. [And they] don’t care about what happens to other creatures” (qtd. in Sammon 285). It is important, however, to also remember Dick’s own peculiar vocabulary regarding androids: “I call them ‘androids,’ which is my own way of using that word. . . . We mean, basically, someone who does not care about the fate which his fellow living creatures fall victim to” (“Man, Android” 211). Neither Roy nor Garland qualify as such creatures, because even though self-preservation is in their priorities, it is not their sole objective. A reading of race and racism onto the narrative is only accurate insofar as this form of oppression provided a culturally recognizable starting point for Dick to launch his critique of any kind of oppression based on a classification system.

Rather than acting as a fake reality per se, the Mission Scene serves to hint at the fragility and fakery of Deckard’s world: manufactured feelings, electric animals, layers of forgery. The organic cat that J. R. Isidore erroneously tries to fix is a perfect example: elsewhere, Dick imagines exchanging a Disneyland mechanical bird for a real one (thus

creating a “fake fake”) and watching the chaos ensue (“How to Build” 264). Isidore’s honest mistake is indicative of the extent that fakes invaded Deckard’s world. The core realization that Deckard faces at Mission Street is that it is impossible to judge which “reality” takes precedence, or even worse, it might be that his reality is the constructed and fake one. A sound argument can be made that Deckard adopts a radically egalitarian worldview as a reaction. Sherryl Vint sees the opportunity for change in the recovery of human-animal-nature relations, and a return to the harmonious appreciation of the triad, without the alienating effect of exploitation, objectification, or commodity fetishization (122-25). Tony M. Vinci similarly argues that the novel concludes with a “posthuman vulnerability” (110) that is not a “simple acceptance of a new, posthuman vision of subjectivity or ethics” (109), but a dynamic “openness” to others (107). In such intersubjective connections, there is a necessary “lack of classification” that is created by the subjects themselves and the relationships they enter with each other (107). However, the situation appears more paradoxical.

Classification: to renounce or to reform?

The Mission Scene is a primary site for Deckard to witness the collapse of the human-android divide and the way the station operates emphasizes the lack of dialogue between communities due to the oppression built into the classification itself—and there are no more classification systems than the one invented by humans. As Luba Luft explains shortly before her death: “I really don’t like androids. Ever since I got here from Mars my life has consisted of imitating the human, doing what she would do, acting as if I had the thoughts and impulses a human would have. Imitating, as far as I’m concerned, a superior life-form” (106). Luba here is using these terms to refer to behaviors and people’s ethical compass, an empathy-based ethical system which she identifies with—and her behavior is indistinguishable from human behavior. Her words to the brutal and cold Phil Resch testify to this: “‘You?’ Luba

Luft said. ‘You’re not human. No more than I am: you’re an android, too.’” (105). Even though androids understand the classification system and its terms, it is made clear that they are outraged by it, or they use it completely differently than the hegemonic order does. Deckard’s exposure to an alternative society further strengthens his feeling that the classification system is arbitrary, unethical, and indefensible. When Resch executes Luba Luft without remorse, Deckard exclaims: “I’ve had enough. She was a wonderful singer. The planet could have used her. This is insane” (108).

The solution, as Deckard comes to realize, is to abandon the previously used classification altogether and construct a more inclusive one. Deckard sees the boundary between empathic humans and emotionless androids violated several times: by the events at Mission Street, by his feelings about Luba Luft’s death, and by Resch’s unflinching hostility toward androids. Deckard’s resistance to classification is voiced when he says that “[e]verything is true. . . . Everything anybody has ever thought” (180). Deckard is ready to leave the calcified classificatory systems behind, and at this point it seems that classification might be abandoned completely. When he finds an electric toad in the desert, he has an emotional and philosophical revelation. He believes the creature to be organic, and takes it home to Iran, who then realizes that it is electric. She hesitates whether to inform him, and when she decides to flip the control panel of the toad open, her husband utters the often-quoted lines that are generally taken to be an affirmation of his acceptance of electric lifeforms: “The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are” (191). As Dick elaborates in an essay seven years later:

We humans, the warm-faced and tender, with thoughtful eyes—we are perhaps the true machines. And those objective constructs, the natural objects around us and especially the electronic hardware we build, the transmitters and microwave relay

stations, the satellites, they may be cloaks for authentic living reality inasmuch as they may participate more fully and in a way obscured to us in the ultimate Mind. Perhaps we see not only a deforming veil, but backwards. Perhaps the closest approximation to truth would be to say: ‘Everything is equally alive, equally free, equally sentient, because everything is not alive or half-alive or dead, but rather lived through.’ (“Man, Android” 227-28)

An almost word-by-word rehearsal of Deckard’s words from the novel, this passage offers further support for the contention that the Mission Scene condenses and showcases all the concerns that inspired *Androids*, and by Dick’s own admission, several others of his novels: the nature of reality and the quest to find authentic humanity. Deckard, however, ultimately fails at the latter—his much less frequently quoted first reaction to the toad’s origin exposes a somewhat hesitant denial of categorization: “I’m glad to know. Or rather— . . . I’d prefer to know” (191). Why does Deckard prefer to know that a creature is electric if all beings deserve to be acknowledged as having a life in an inclusive system?

The events that cluster around the Mission Scene provide a clue. The Voigt-Kampff test and the stubborn prioritization of “human empathy” are exposed for what they are: unreliable systems of classification that facilitate the oppression of androids. The experience at Mission Street incites Deckard to resist categorization altogether and move toward a more “constructivist approach” (Kronfeldner et al. 645). Constructivist approaches to human nature are “newly configured concepts of human nature that are explicitly taken to be defensible in light of the need to move beyond traditional essences” (Kronfeldner et al. 645). Deckard abandons the old practices because he realizes that the classification he internalized to divide the world into humans and androids does not work anymore. However, he does not fully relinquish categories as such, but rather draws the boundaries elsewhere and on different

grounds. After the Voigt-Kampff confirms Phil Resch as human, Deckard wonders: “Always he [Deckard] had assumed that throughout his psyche he experienced the android as a clever machine—as in his conscious view. And yet, in contrast to Phil Resch, a difference had manifested itself. And he felt instinctively that he was right” (112). Deckard realizes that he has more in common with Luba Luft than Phil Resch and he needs time to process the revelation. At the end of the novel, Deckard falls asleep without the mood organ and Iran orders new accessories for his toad—he rejects fake (drug-assisted) sleep but embraces the genuine epiphany that was brought to him by a fake animal.

Deckard’s seemingly paradoxical position and his epiphany can be better understood through Giorgio Agamben’s critique of contemporary biopolitics and biopower. Agamben in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) uses the old Greek terms *zoe* and *bios* to comment on contemporary biopolitical practices. Simply put, the former term refers to the sheer biological fact of life or “bare life” (4), while *bios* refers to how that life is lived (1), similarly to Dick’s differentiation between “essence” and “behavior” (“Man, Android” 211). One of Agamben’s critiques directed towards contemporary states is that the separation of these two aspects is just an illusion: “[t]he novelty of modern biopolitics lies in the fact that the biological given is as such immediately political, and the political is as such immediately the biological given” (148). This entanglement opens the way for abuses of power and oppressive political systems—in Dick’s novel, for instance, being an android *as such* means a circumscribed form of life and any resistance against this given order a death sentence. While traveling to Mission Street, Deckard is given a glimpse of what it would be like if his life was restricted in the same manner, sitting “[c]onscious of his defeat and failure . . . [a]nd, helplessly, [waiting] for what came next” (88).

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Deckard fluctuates between thinking of the androids as mechanical and animalistic, but the function of these constructions is the same: to

rationalize their oppression and make his job easier for him. By the end of the novel, Deckard faces the challenge of modern biopolitics: androids are construed as subordinate, as lesser-than-human by the sheer virtue of the difference between their bare life and human bare life. The assertion that “electric things have their lives, too” (191) is simultaneously an assertion that they are alive and a call to de-politicize bare life and to decouple *zoe* from *bios*. It means that from a human perspective, electric, non-human life might seem “paltry,” but what matters is the content of that life, “*bios*.” Deckard “[prefers] to know” if a creature is electric or organic because he still does not believe that it is the same quality of life, but his pronouncement conveys pity, not contempt. It is the conflation of *zoe* and *bios* that led to the biopolitical practices Agamben criticizes—hence, for Deckard, a constructive approach would depoliticize bare life and erase classification based on *zoe*, opting for one based on how people (human or android) live their lives instead.

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Notes

¹ The Voigt-Kampff test is a procedure that distinguishes humans from androids based on empathic response: according to its binary, classificatory logic of the human/non-human divide, humans are endowed with empathy, while machines (androids) are not.

² See also Benesch, Klaus. “Technology, Art, and the Cybernetic Body: The Cyborg as Cultural Other in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* and Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*” *Amerikastudien/American Studies*. Ed. Mario Klarer. 44.3 (1999): 379-92; Telotte, J. P. “Human Artifice and the Science Fiction Film.” *Film Quarterly* 36.3 (1983): 44-51, and Wheale, Nigel. “Recognising a ‘human-Thing’: cyborgs, robots and replicants in

Philip K. Dick's "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" and Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner." *Critical Survey* 3.3 (1991): 297-304.

³ Bowker and Star treat classification and categorization as slightly different: classification is a higher up process than categorisation, because the interplay of the contingent features of the classification system give rise to the categories themselves. I use the terms interchangeably here, because the primary objective of classification in the text is allocation to different categories, not for instance the description of the world or the understanding of complex processes.

⁴ Dehumanization, in conformity with the description offered by Kronfeldner, is not only ubiquitous and exchangeable, but also reciprocal (30). Indeed, some androids feel contempt towards humans: Rachael's cynical attitude towards Deckard, Roy Baty's condescension when he talks to Isidore, and Buster Friendly's plan to destabilize Mercerism are indicative of a similar attitude on their part.

⁵ This, I suspect, is because the novel's film adaptation *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott) depicts the test as the sole reliable technique to distinguish humans from non-humans.

⁶ In the beginning of the novel, when we first see the test in action Deckard tests Rachael and correctly concludes that she is an android. However, in an attempt to have leverage over the bounty hunter, Eldon and Rachael Rosen tell him that he had misidentified her and that her reactions were different from the standard because she spent her formative years isolated on a spaceship. Eventually, Deckard realizes that he was correct the first time—still, it is difficult to share his confidence about the test after this episode, especially considering that he is easily persuaded into doubting his own conclusions.

⁷ See, for example, Toth 67 and 83n4.

⁸ There might be several reasons why the scene was omitted, two of which I briefly note here. Firstly, in the film there is a shift towards anxieties concerning Asian influence and multicultural society instead of the Black-White opposition of the novel (Nama 56-60)—if that is the case, the Mission Scene may have been dropped because it was too readily recognizable as a concrete historical allusion. Secondly, though she does not mention the novel, LeiLani Nishime reads *Blade Runner* as a “passing narrative” (39) and concludes that the film is “unrepentantly assimilationist” (44)—so another possible reason is that the Mission Scene runs counter to that tendency and thus would not fit such an agenda. Interestingly, the 2009 graphic novel adaptation of *Androids* (drawn by Tony Parker) follows the novel more closely and features the scene—with Officer Crams portrayed as a Black man.

⁹ See Nishime 34-49 on passing and *Blade Runner*.

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