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# LONELINESS IN PHILIP K. DICK'S NOVEL *DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?*

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*Abstract.* The inhabitants of eerily desolated and bleak San Francisco in Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* are all depressed, lonely, isolated, and alienated. The paper strives to analyze the characters of John Isidore, Rick and Iran Deckard, Pris Stratton, and Rachael Rosen, as well as the boundaries between the human and the android based on the notion of inverse parallelism—while humans program their emotions with mood organs and thus are becoming more similar to androids, androids yearn to possess human-like emotions and become humans. The paper argues that it is loneliness that is the prime driving force behind the process of inverse parallelism.

Over time, the definition of the word *loneliness* varied little in meaning. Walter William Skeat in *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (1888) cites several synonyms for the word *lone*: solitary, retired, and away from company.<sup>2</sup> For the word *alone*, Skeat (1888) offers one but essential definition: quite by oneself. *The Holy Bible* speaks about loneliness at the mere beginning. It says: “And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (King James Bible, 1769/n.d., Gen. 2: 18). According to *The Holy Bible*, Adam was alone when he was in Eden and thus God created him a companion, his wife Eve, so that he could have someone to communicate, to spend the day, and share his life with. *The Holy Bible* thus emphasizes that a man, from the beginning of the world, was not created to be or to live alone.

The characters in Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), both human and android—John Isidore, Rick and Iran Deckard, Pris Stratton, and Rachael Rosen—feel lonely, alienated and isolated, estranged one from another while struggling to survive in the world devastated by a global nuclear war. John Isidore detests his loneliness and, as a substitute to a relationship with others, watches television all the time. Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter, is preoccupied with hunting and retiring the six renegade androids. Rick’s wife Iran, perhaps the saddest and loneliest of all the characters in the novel, finds solace and consolation in the regular use of the empathy box. Despite the fact that she is married to Rick and that they live together, they remain lonely. Rachael Rosen and Pris Stratton, androids whose lack of empathy is the only thing that differentiates them from humans, are forced to pretend that they are humans in a society that shows no mercy to their kind. In their difference, all androids seek ways to pass as humans and develop meaningful relationships with others.

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<sup>2</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary (2010) defines *loneliness* as “a feeling of being unhappy because you have no friends or people to talk to”. The Macmillan English Dictionary (2007) offers a range of synonyms for the same word such as *isolation*, *solitude*, *alienation*, *desolation*, *seclusion*.

In a postapocalyptic world facing “the disastrous effects of global war, ecological catastrophe, urban isolation, the loss of family and friends” (Vinci, 2014, p. 94), all the characters in the novel “must cope with personal and cultural wounds caused by severe physical isolation, psychological alienation, and consistent and pervasive practices of discrimination” (Vinci, 2014, p. 91). As noticed by Jakovljević (2015, pp. 94, 95, 171), the relationship between the humans and the androids in the novel is that of inverse parallelism—while humans program their emotions with mood organs and turn to virtual reality-like empathy boxes to escape the dismal reality and, as a consequence, become more automatized and more similar to androids, androids yearn to possess human-like emotions and they struggle to obtain freedom and thus become more like humans. We can argue here that it is loneliness, actually, that is the prime driving force that is behind this process leading to inverse parallelism.

### *Isidore in the All-Consuming Void*

John Isidore, an outcast damaged by radiation and abandoned by almost everyone is a ‘chickenhead’, a below-average human, condemned to a solitary life in an abandoned apartment building and forced to earn his living as a driver in a repair facility for artificial animals that masquerades as a pet hospital. He is described as one of those “occasional peculiar entities” (Dick, 2017, p. 16) who “lived alone in [a] deteriorating, blind building of a thousand uninhabited apartments, which like all its counterparts, fell, day by day, into greater entropic ruin” (Dick, 2017, p. 20). Isidore longs to be among humans, among living creatures, and to have someone he could speak, smile, cry or simply spend time with. The “masterful world-silence” (Dick, 2017, p. 20) around him is terrifying, alarming, and frightening because the world he lives in and everything in it is gradually withering, disintegrating, dying, and turning into kipple.<sup>3</sup> Desperately unhappy and alienated, he is severely depressed. In an aching void that his reality has been turning into, he has no one to turn to for consolation or comfort.

“He wondered, then, if the others who had remained on Earth experienced the void this way. Or was it peculiar to his peculiar biological identity, a freak generated by his inept sensory apparatus?” (Dick, 2017, p. 20).

And yet, although not suitable for emigration to the off-world colonies, this “inept sensory apparatus” is perfectly capable of perceiving the all-consuming void that he cannot escape from, the deadly silence which encompasses his entire being and emerges “from every object within his range of vision, as if it—the silence—meant to supplant all things tangible” (Dick, 2017, p. 19). Although left alone in an empty building and in an apartment in which kipple

<sup>3</sup> Kipple represents debris or rubbish which multiplies without the human interference.

gradually and constantly builds up, Isidore has strong determination and desire to live and do something meaningful. At one point he says that it is always “better, perhaps, to turn the TV back on” (Dick, 2017, p. 20) and not listen to the silence which fills every room of his apartment and his entire being. It is better for him to merely listen to any voices there are on Earth than hear the deadly silence which threatened to eat him alive.

“Isidore’s TV is constantly turned on and the television actually determines his activities, it creates his attitudes, preoccupies his thoughts and it even affects his limited and controlled perception of the world. His TV set receives only one channel, broadcast and sponsored by the government that continually advertises emigration” (Jakovljević, 2015, p. 106).<sup>4</sup>

Television plays a major role in his life and Isidor’s perception of reality is shaped by and limited to what this device has to offer, and this is, at the same time, everything and nothing. To Isidor, Buster Friendly, an always-on-air television presenter, is the most important person in the universe. With Buster Friendly on air almost all the time, Isidore feels that there is someone with him. However, he is not entirely aware that Buster might not be a real human being but a construct. Isidore listens to him regularly and desperately wants to believe in everything he says.

Television is not the only technical device that Isidor uses nor is it the most important one. While desperately yearning for love, friendship or companionship and while struggling to free himself off the burden of his own irregularity, Isidore often uses an empathy box for the emphatic connection (Jakovljević, 2015, p. 100). Alone for so long, John Isidore has found a way to deal with loneliness and to somehow find a will to live. He frequently uses an empathy box, a machine which allows people to connect and share emotions and feelings, through a process called fusion, during mental and spiritual identification with Wilbur Mercer, the central figure and a martyr of Mercerism, a widely accepted religion centred around the idea of empathy. Given the fact that he is “already operating in the borderland between hallucination and reality” (Hayles, 1999, p. 175), this machine, in addition to the TV, has become the centre of Isidore’s life and the only thing that keeps him living and breathing.

Burton (2015, pp. 162, 163) indicated that by merging with Mercer and other users of empathy boxes, people not only get to experience suffering, but *shared* suffering. To the people who regularly connect, even this is better than loneliness. When speaking about it to his newly discovered neighbour Pris, Isidore is thrilled and enthusiastic to have met her, but also baffled to hear that she has no empathy box of her own.

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<sup>4</sup> All the quotations which originally are not in English have been translated by the author of this paper.

“But an empathy box”, he said, stammering in his excitement, “is the most personal possession you have! It’s an extension of your body; it’s the way you touch other humans, it’s the way you stop being alone” (Dick, 2017, p. 62).

Everybody has their own box, it is personal and private, and it allows people to establish emotional communication and, if they feel alone, enjoy the company of others, or to distance themselves from the world around them. The empathy box is the way one *stops being alone*. As Hayles (1999) noticed, the moment “a human grasps the empathy box, his consciousness fuses with that of unknown and unnamed others” (p. 177). The box consoles, offers solace, and brings comfort to those who seek it. The contact with “unknown and unnamed others”, the faceless and depersonalized entities, creates the illusion of belonging—the illusion, because while connected, the user becomes yet another nameless and depersonalized entity.

### *Iran and Rick – Together but Alone*

Like Isidor, Iran Deckard faces the burden and unbearable weight of the all-consuming void that comes with silence. At one point she decides to turn off the television and, instead, to listen to the silence of the empty apartments in their building. She “heard the emptiness intellectually” but “didn’t feel it” (Dick, 2017, p. 5). She was in a mood programmed with a mood organ—she was grateful that she and Rick could afford the device, but she felt that the “absence of life, not just in [their] building but everywhere” (Dick, 2017, p. 5) was not healthy, just as her lack of reaction was unhealthy. The Penfield mood organ, according to Burton (2015, p. 154) only functions on people who do not need it, as is the case with Iran whose mood is generally low.

Instead of choosing happiness or satisfaction as her temporary mood, Iran chooses despair which additionally aggravates her mental state. Rick is irritated to learn that she has done this on purpose. The life on Earth to her is so futile and pointless that she has lost the will to live. When talking about his wife, Rick says, “She has nothing to give me”, and desperately cries, “[M]ost androids I’ve known have more vitality and desire to live than my wife” (Dick, 2017, p. 88). Rick thus feels deserted, abandoned, and perhaps even slightly betrayed by his wife and has to find a way to deal with all those emotions without her help. He wants his wife’s love, approval, support, and connection whereas she is unable to reciprocate. This is the greatest irony of their relationship, for even though they have each other they remain lonely.

Rick hopelessly searches for some sort of a connection with his wife who time and again remains coldly indifferent toward him. Their union shows that even marriage is not enough to save people from isolation and alienation. In

spite of being married and living together, notices Jakovljević (2017a, p. 170), they remain lonely and need to programme their own emotions, which makes them frighteningly similar to androids.

“Emotions turn into programmes which determine the way that people communicate, whether they will quarrel or not, in what sort of mood they will wake up or spend the day, or even whether or not they will want to watch television. They are incapable of controlling their own emotions, wishes, and needs while their feelings and moods have been radically reduced to reactions adjusted according to the number of the programme in the machine settings” (Jakovljević, 2015, p. 97).

Iran is the saddest and loneliest of all the characters in the novel. Isidore is lonely and desperate as well, but he at least seeks company and desires socialization desperately. Iran, however, does not. Her absent-mindedness and detachment from her everyday reality is so potent that it reduces her presence in her marital life and apartment to mere physical existence.

Iran spends most of her time at home, almost never encountering the outside world, and she is almost completely dependent upon the empathy box, much more than her husband. Nothing and nobody can help Iran deal with her sorrow and pain other than the empathy box. Iran often has a much stronger will to spend the day within the virtual reality of the empathy box than with her husband. The moment Iran grabs the handles of the empathy box, Rick becomes “conscious of her mental departure, conscious of his own aloneness” (Dick, 2017, p. 162).

Unlike his wife, who almost never leaves the safety of her home, Rick spends a lot of his time away from it, keeping himself occupied and engaged while searching and retiring the renegade Nexus-6 androids, the most advanced models of the kind. The money he obtains from his job as a bounty hunter serves for purchasing an animal which is something both he and Iran most desire. The feeling of rejection and the cold treatment from his wife have undoubtedly led Rick to seek solace somewhere else. While in his hunt for androids, he meets Rachael, one of the androids that work for the Rosen Association. Up to this point, Rick has perceived androids as creatures without any capability to feel, care or empathize.

His view towards the androids suddenly changes. As Burton (2015, p. 157) pointed out, Rick starts having feelings towards Rachael with whom he becomes sexually involved. Although she did not pass the empathy test, he himself conducted in the past, Rachael ceased “to be an inanimate object for Deckard” (Wheale, 1991, p. 300). The relationship with Rachael undoubtedly helps him forget, at least for a short period of time, about the loneliness within his marriage and estrangement from his wife. To Deckard, she is no longer a mere android but *almost* a human being, while the words uttered by detective Resch echo in his mind, that he should go to bed with an android first and then kill her.

### *Rachael and Pris – Lonely Androids*

Both Rachael and Pris struggle to find their place in the world full of bounty hunters. They both feel estranged by their very nature—they are androids.

The very first time Deckard meets Rachael he administers the empathy test on her. A human is “a specialized category of being that has exclusive access to empathy” (Vinci, 2014, p. 92) and it is precisely the possession of empathy that differentiates them from androids. Rachael nearly passes the test and this questions the credibility of the test itself. If the test failed it would be almost impossible to differentiate between androids and humans. As Seed (2011, p. 61) noticed, Rick himself becomes reluctant to believe that all androids are non-human and he cannot distinguish them any longer. In his essay *The Android and the Human*, a discussion about the nature of androids, Dick wrote that they were no longer constructs with a “sinister purpose in mind”, as in his early stories: “The constructs do not mimic humans; they are, in many deep ways, *actually* human already” (Dick, 1995, p. 185).

Rachael is one of the Nexus-6 androids with very few friends of her own. She works for the Rosen Association with a clear goal. Her job is to seduce bounty hunters so as to make them incapable of hunting and retiring other androids. Luba Luft, an android and one of her closest friends is killed by Rick, leaving Rachael even more alienated as she virtually becomes friendless and lonesome. Like all the other androids, she too is “ontologically and socially sealed off from the rest of dominant culture” (Vinci, 2014, p. 98) and she must fight for herself.

At one point she starts questioning her status as an android as she, in her own words, feels “something like” (Dick, 2017, p. 173) empathy towards Pris. Although she feels sorry for Pris as Rick plans to find and retire her, her empathy mainly stems from the fact that Pris is an android who not only looks like her but is completely identical to her. She fears that Rick might not be able to differentiate between them and that he might even kill her instead. The fear of replication, according to Seed (2011, p. 60), is the central subject of this novel. Rachael desperately cries: “Identification; there goes I” (Dick, 2017, p. 173). Her concern and panic come from the knowledge that she might not be real. As Vinci (2014, p. 99) noticed, Rachael now, being an android who feels for Pris, cannot identify herself as such as androids are supposed to be beings without any empathy at all. Apart from sympathizing with Pris, Hayles (1999, p. 173) pointed out that Rachael also cares about Rick and that her feelings toward him are only growing as the novel progresses. She is then neither an android nor a complete human which further complicates her identity for she can find no place of her own.

Pris, unlike Rachael, has lots of friends, or at least had them until bounty hunters found them all and killed. Vinci (2014) states the following:



“Pris has a community. She is indeed an individual among others. The trauma she articulates is the one that every human *should* be articulating: the historical loss of loved ones and the extraordinary loneliness and isolation that inevitably follow” (p. 99).

The problem she is dealing with is one entirely different from Rachael’s. The root of her isolation comes from her loss of friends. Pris, unlike Rachael, is surrounded by friends or even casual acquaintances such as Isidore. While talking with Isidore about her friends, she cries: “If they are dead, then it really doesn’t matter” (Dick, 2017, p. 137), which indicates that her friends mean everything to her. Pris has feelings and empathy for people around her which, like Rachael, places her into the category of “unrealized placement in the human/android hierarchy” given the fact that she is both “the human and the android” (Vinci, 2014, pp. 98, 99). Not only is she capable of sympathizing with her friends but she feels that life without them makes no sense and that a solitary life is no life whatsoever.

Pris, as an android, shares the feeling of aloneness with Rachael. All the androids in the novel “are excluded due to the fact that they are perceived as inauthentic, hence radically different, and thus dangerous and threatening to the integrity of humanity” (Jakovljević, 2017b, p. 120). At one point, Pris clearly and strongly articulates her innermost feelings and emotions as well as her deepest trauma. She cries: “The androids”, she said, “are lonely too” (Dick, 2017, p. 139). Androids, unlike humans, do not have access to the empathy box which might help them, if not to be happy then at least to feel less desolate. Animals are another thing cherished by humans that androids cannot have.

### *Animals as Healers*

Rick and Iran bought an animal, an electric sheep because they cannot afford a real one until Rick earns enough bounty money for it. Rick and his wife desperately desire to possess a real animal, an increasingly rare possession in a dying world. As both of them are disappointed with their marriage and with little or no hope to flee the Earth, an animal appears to be the only thing that is left to them. Since they have no money to buy a real animal, they have to settle with an electric one instead which offers a feeling of contentment as well as consolation. It also creates an illusion for the neighbours because it is important to keep up appearances—an animal that one possesses shows one’s status. There is not a single child mentioned anywhere in the novel. “Animals have taken the place of children, as objects of human affection” (Jakovljević, 2017a, p. 174). The role of animals in the novel is of no small importance, since they indicate just how desolate the world is, and how desperate its future is, and how unhappy both

Rick and Iran feel. Not being able to seek solace in each other's company, they search it in other things, or in their case, in an animal. They place all the love and affection they have upon the electric sheep which does not even reciprocate.

Animals indeed hold a prominent place in the novel. "Animals, evoking feeling in their owners and capable of feeling themselves, occupy the privileged position of fellow creatures whose lives, like human lives, are sacred" (Hayles, 1999, p. 175). Almost everybody in the novel has their own animal and those who do not are struggling to obtain one. Hadomi (1995, p. 96) pointed out that people's humanity in the novel is the experience of empathy and love not only towards other humans and androids, but to animals as well. The key to understanding the importance of having an animal lies in the fact that they help people deal with their melancholy and sadness successfully. At one point in the novel Rick asks Iran whether a real goat he has just acquired cures her depression as it certainly does his. Her answer that: "It certainly does cure my depression" (Dick, 2017, p. 158) confirms that animals have taken the roles of the healers, or have even become a powerful medicine which mitigates the feelings of depression whilst "enabling them to escape temporarily from the traumatic realities that surround them" (Vinci, 2014, p. 101). Vinci (2014, p. 101) also indicated that the goat they possess makes them look more human and more alive as they both share their innermost feelings and emotions. They need it almost desperately, both for their marriage to work and for their general welfare. The goat allows them to connect and bond and after a long time they seem to start successfully dealing with their loneliness, at least temporarily. Both of them feel overwhelming joy upon seeing it and Iran immediately wants others to feel it too, as it was not something that happens often. Iran wishes to share their joy with others via the empathy box. As Vinci observed,

"While actual animals may be bought, sold, impregnated, and ignored, the pleasure derived from them must be shared with others as a further way to exploit the animals and replace isolation with simulacral notion of community" (Vinci, 2014, p. 101).

Animals therefore have somehow become crucial and almost necessary to cure alienation, isolation, and loneliness, and if not stop than slow down the humans' gradual descent into android existence as defined by Dick. According to Dick (1995), a human cannot be turned "into an android if that human is going to break laws every chance he gets. Androidization requires obedience, and, most of all, *predictability*" (p. 191). When isolated from the others and left alone, a human becomes easy to control, and predictable, "pounded down, manipulated, made into a means without one's knowledge and consent" (Dick, 1995, p. 191).

The novel presents "a kind of religion of animal-ownership in the surviving human population" (Wheale, 1991, p. 298) where almost everybody struggles to acquire the real one, which is becoming increasingly difficult, or even to find

one, which is a very special experience that has become almost impossible in the dystopian world that surrounds them.

Rickels (2009, p. 108) noted that androids see through people's attachment to animals and realize that they do not have equal rights to them nor to the bond they bring. Garland, one of the android inspectors at the police station, when talking about their life on Earth, admits the following:

“It's a chance anyway, breaking free and coming here to Earth, where we're not even considered animals. Where every worm and wood louse is considered more desirable than all of us put together” (Dick, 2017, p. 113).

While animals have a privileged status in the novel, indicated Canavan and Link (2019, p. 442), androids are denied their basic rights. This is why Rachael pushes Rick's goat over the edge of the building, as an act of revenge. Not only do animals receive more love and respect from the humans than the androids, but there is no act that can more seriously hurt a human. When taken into consideration what animals mean to humans and how important they are, it is an act of defiance, an act of revenge, but also an act aimed to make Deckard feel more lonely, more predictable and, as a result, more like androids.

## *Conclusion*

Androids are intruders, who are completely alienated from the world and who will forever remain this “hybrid figure—part human, part machine—whose very existence calls boundaries into question” (Hayles, 1999, p. 177). Dick blurred a clear distinction between androids and humans by showing that even authentic humans can become androids if they are forced or tricked to be obedient and predictable. To Dick, an android is not merely a machine which acts and looks like a human but also a fully controlled human being. If so, the supposedly clear distinctions between humans and androids disappear.

Androids and humans in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* inspire to question these boundaries because androids tend to possess some human-like qualities, while humans often act as if they are androids. Pris, for example, “is the only character who attempts to mourn, to imagine the loss of connection to others, the dashes of silences in her statement demonstrates her inability to inhabit the fullness of her loss” (Vinci, 2014, p. 99). The loss of her dear friends, of Luba Luft, Roy, and Irmgard Baty, torments Pris so much that she feels utterly deserted without them. Unlike Isidore, who learns to manage on his own, at least for a while, until he meets Pris, androids endure a dreadful ordeal and cannot truly exist and survive without their android companions. They are regarded as machines by bounty hunters, but they are machines who “are becoming more human, so to speak—at least in the sense that, as Wiener

indicated, some meaningful comparison exists between human and mechanical behavior” (Dick, 1995, p. 184).

Androids are entities, supposedly, without empathy, but one can notice that the human characters in the novel often appear to have no empathy and they become dependent on machines: television sets, empathy boxes, and electric animals. People have lost control over their feelings and emotions, which is why every human in the novel, as noticed by Jakovljević (2017b, p. 122) may be an android, a technological replica or a fully controlled and androidized human. Rick, who goes around murdering androids, seems not to care whether they are alive or not. He has mixed feelings about Rachael. “Either way, exposure to her compromises his humanity with a touch of androidism, a possibility brilliantly realized in *Do Androids Dream* through the intimation that Deckard himself may be an android” (Hayles, 1999, p. 178). If Deckard, the bounty hunter who is in charge of administering the empathy test, is an android then all the characters in the novel could also be androids, which further blurs the differences between androids and humans.

What all the humans and androids in the novel have in common and what they all desperately yearn for is the need to belong, to be surrounded by others of their kind, and not to be alone. This is perhaps best expressed by Isidore near the end of the novel:

“You have to be with other people, he thought. In order to live at all. I mean, before they came here I could stand it, being alone in the building. But now it’s changed. You can’t go back, he thought. You can’t go from people to non-people” (Dick, 2017, p. 188).

Loneliness is a state that is disastrous if one wants *to live at all*. For humans, it means that they will gradually become *non-people*, the predictable machines incapable of empathizing. For androids, the arrival on Earth is seen as a chance for a change from *non-people* to people, but all their efforts are in vain if they stay alone. Living with the constant fear that each of them might fall under the category of being insufficiently human, there is little or no hope that things might change because they all, both the androids and humans, remain desperately lonely. To belong, therefore, be it with androids or people, is of the utmost importance for the survival.

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Усамљеност у роману  
*Сањају ли андроиди електричне овце?* Филипа К. Дика

Резиме

Становници напуштеног и суморног Сан Франциска у роману *Сањају ли андроиди електричне овце?* Филипа К. Дика јесу депресивни, усамљени, изоловани и отуђени. У раду смо тежили ка томе да анализирамо Џона Исидора, Рика и Ајрин Декард, Прис Стратон и Рејчел Розен, као и границе између човека и андроида које се базирају на појму инверзног паралелизма – док људи програмирају своја осећања уз помоћ уређаја за расположење и тако све више постају сличнији андроидима, андроиди жуде за тим да имају људска осећања и тако постану људи. Закључује се да је усамљеност заправо та која је главна покретачка снага која стоји иза инверзног паралелизма.

*Кључне речи:* Дик; усамљеност; људи; андроиди; емпатијска кутија; инверзни паралелизам; животиње.



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