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**THE BURDEN OF ARTIFICIALITY: ALWAYS THE SERVANT,
NEVER THE PATRON**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR TRAN
PROFESSOR WING**

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“She felt too listless and ill to want anything: a burden which closed off the future and any possibilities which might once have contained it.”

- Phillip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Introduction

What is a robot defined by? Robots are machines made for labor, they complete tasks humans are unwilling to do or have no desire to do. The robots are valued based on their efficiency to complete tasks in servitude to humans, freeing up time and space for those they serve. They are also sites of pleasure and play for when another human is not accessible or another being is not desirable. They are a stand in body to fulfil the needs and desires of humans without the consumer being responsible for the robot as a being with desires and needs of its own. Robots bear artificiality that is posited as required in modern society and as a part of the natural progress of humankind. The veil of artificiality is required to place the desires of some above those of others. The process of marginalization that robots undergo in Science Fiction reflects that same process that occurs in real life. The marginalization of robots is the reorientation of bodies to desire what Lauren Berlant terms “the good life,” rather than desiring and belonging to the self.

I argue that marginalized people must reject the dominant cultural fantasy that depends on their subjugation by dreaming up fantasies of their own where they are the subjects of their own desire. The process of marginalization extracts labor and devalues bodies; potential for a different future is contained by directing the subjugated person’s attention towards the unattainable dream of the good life. A person becomes a subject through being trained into a cultural order, and this training must be undone by a reorientation that affirms self-recognition and desiring outside the norm, and therefore the self. Using Berlant’s theory on the good life,

Sara Ahmed's explanation of disorientation, Gale Salamon's analysis on desire, and José Esteban Muñoz's notion of straight time with examples of robots for media analysis being Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, David from *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, and Deckard from *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, I argue the marginalized body must be reoriented to escape the horizon of heteronormative desires into desiring and belonging to the self.

Theoretical Framework

The “good” life is the heteronormative narrative that promises happiness to people who work to conform to it. I understand heteronormativity as a hegemonic power enacted in institutions such as marriage or the nuclear family. The good life uses these scripted desires for a future, as a wife for example, to weaponize the subjects desire against their own good. The good life is held out as a promise which marginalizes people in subservience to normative society for the sake of being valued and able to take up space.¹ Berlant explores the way “the good life” is an exploited fantasy that deters subjects from achieving exactly that, a good life.² It is the false promise that adhering to a strict set of rules will free the subject, when in reality they require self-denial and further the process of marginalization. Therefore, marginalization can only be dismantled once we interrogate the heteronormative fantasies the good life is built on. This process reorients bodies on a path of upwards mobility that argues the only way to securing a good life is up, or rather, to serve those deemed greater than within the hierarchy. The logic relies on the creation of a binary between a good life and a bad life. The threat of a bad life deters subjects from taking actions outside of the predetermined acceptable ones.

¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

² Berlant.

The process of marginalization requires reorienting bodies to follow the path of the good life. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed discusses orientation and embodiment in the tradition of phenomenology in order to explain how the queer body is located in society as a stigmatized subject and therefore a disorientated one.³ She outlines the history of how orientation was first conceived by early phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, privileged white men who explored the ways consciousness engages with the world, which they came to name as orientation. A body's orientation is the understanding of where the subject is located in their environment, based on its relation to other subjects and objects. However, orientation was theorized from a limited perspective which centered a subject's experience of the world that invisibilizes the labor of others which curates this world, for example as wives or servants created spaces free of children and childcare. Ahmed extends phenomenology's theoretical reach to explain how "orientation depends on the bodily inhabitation of that space."⁴ She explains how space is like a second skin which "unfolds in the folds of the body."⁵ Space can be used to welcome or push out different bodies, as the way a space is geared towards bodies impacts the orientation and disorientation. Therefore, Ahmed intervenes in the tradition with her contribution of disorientation, which creates structure to locate how, for example, a queer subject encounters heteronormative space and is disoriented in the encounter.

The good life acts as programming to provide false hope of success and agency for the subjugated. For example, this process of reorientation via the good life is imposed onto immigrants in the US who are confronted with the psychological warfare of the American Dream. The American Dream urges immigrants to work hard, and through their individual

³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁴ Ahmed, 6.

⁵ Ahmed, 9.

efforts that distinguish themselves from others, they will gain access to the luxuries of life in America, higher education, modern medicine, happiness, and acceptance into society. However, in reality, as immigrants are pushed into work which is devalued and hidden from normative society, like domestic workers, and some adhere to strict rules that move them towards individualism, they are forced out of a community-oriented mindset and into dominant capitalist logic which values their bodies for its ability. Simultaneously, access to promised services remain inaccessible as elitist educational institutions function as structures that exclude them as the other and corporate America maintains supremacy in medicine, forcing privatization of good care. For the few who achieve the American Dream, the dehumanization of the self and internalization of that has trapped them in a new cage. The American Dream is one example of how the good life functions as a myth to subjugate people and reorient their desires so that they serve others and not themselves. Their time and energy are taken without reward. The good life operates to extract labor from people as objects and is a process which dehumanizes, devalues and marginalizes bodies.

The good life succeeds in creating subservient subjects once they're unable to dream for more, to desire for themselves; this happens once they are successfully indoctrinated in to embodying happy objects. Ahmed defines happy objects "as those objects that affect us in the best way."⁶ She elaborates on how the proximity of objects to bodies are based on pleasure. Therefore, happy objects are allowed to occupy our space because "we come to define objects based on how they make us feel."⁷ For the subject to decide how an object makes them feel, they must evaluate it. An evaluation is how "bodies turn towards things" and through this process the

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 22.

⁷ Ahmed, 25.

subject can categorize an object as a happy object.⁸ This subject object dynamic that is based on pleasure resembles the dynamic of robots to humans; robots must invoke pleasure in the dominant subject to be valued and allowed to occupy space, but only in subservience to the dominant subject.

The same can be said of marginalized bodies and how they are policed regarding how they take up space. Dominant society has a “core sphere” where subjects are shaped by the objects nearby them.⁹ Therefore, devalued bodies are only allowed to occupy the core sphere if they adhere to subservience. The dominant body rests on the devaluation of marginalized bodies, creating a hierarchy based on categorization. The binary of dominant subject to happy object is a mandatory metric in playing out the fantasy of the good life. Dominant subjects’ hegemonic power rest on the devaluation of other bodies to prop them up. The dominant subject defines themselves based on shaping and training marginalized people, determining them as at the bottom of the normative social hierarchy through state subsidized acts. Within the heteronormative “core sphere,” objects are accepted and able to take up that space if they perform their role as happy objects for the dominant subject. Marginalized people are granted entrance into normative society if they evoke pleasure in the dominant subject by performing their role within the heteronormative fantasy. This is how a marginalized person is vulnerable to indoctrination into the good life to perform the role of happy object as it is the only foretold path to legitimize their value and guarantee them a spot in normative society. The good life narrative is a tool of marginalization that propels subjects to embodying happy objects for the dominant subject and further solidifies their subservience by killing hope for a different future.

⁸ Ahmed, 23.

⁹ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

My media examples come from a limited demographic, which is important to acknowledge before continuing. All three robots I analyze are male-presenting and explicitly or implicitly white. While the conversation that I bring attention to impacts marginalized people who generally do not fit that description, the white male body is used in these instances as a canvas that is palatable to a wider audience. I find them to be an interesting location for discussion, as there is more than meets the eye. This is not to argue that stories which are explicitly about marginalized people do not have value in this conversation, but these are the starting media texts I have chosen to examine. I do not believe the most accepted and non-stigmatized bodies have the most wisdom to offer, instead, the good life stigmatizes those at the bottom of the heteronormative hierarchy the most, and the fictitious element of Sci-Fi is to see how this would look like on the most privileged member of society, providing entertainment who those who do not understand the deeper implications as marginalized people can view this as retellings of stories they are all too familiar with.

I will explore the ways fictional robots in the media are a metaphor for marginalized people and argue that they can offer critiques for how to escape the fantasy of the “good” life. I will use three robots, Data from the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, David from the movie *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, and Deckard from the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to explore the various ways the dominated subject’s attention and desires are oriented towards the good life even when it fails them and furthers their subjugation. Just as robots are created to serve humans, marginalized people are coerced to serve the dominant subject within the social hierarchy. The various robots’ reactions to dehumanization and devaluation offer ways to resist the heteronormative fantasy via desiring and belonging to themselves.

Media Analysis

Data from the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is an android who is painfully aware of his robotic nature and intentionally seeks out the human experience. In the beginning of the series, Data's candidness illuminates exactly how he was programmed to think and function. His superior officer and Second in Command of the ship, William Riker, requests Data's help on a mission, to which he replies, "I shall endeavor to function adequately, sir."¹⁰ This endeavor spans his entire time on the series. Riker inquires about Data's history and qualifications as an officer, to which Data explains how he is machine, but he "would gladly give it up to be human," and Riker responds, "nice to meet you Pinocchio."¹¹ Data is an incredibly explicit character to begin with. He understands how he has been situated in society to serve, but his desire to live a life beyond this is evident in his desire to be human. He understands pursuing humanness as his only escape, a futile one, but the one he pursues, nonetheless. This pursuit is manifested in his adherence to heteronormativity, treating heteronormative practices as cultural customs to adapt and assimilate to. For marginalized people, this process is the good life promised through heteronormativity, and for robots their good life is to be human, which they also achieve through heteronormativity.

In the episode "Data's Day," upon Data's inquiry and request, Dr. Crusher teaches Data how to dance in preparation for their co-workers and friends' wedding, where he will fill the role typically reserved for the father of the bride. Dr. Crusher is Chief Medical Officer and also a woman, placing her as a teacher for Data's subjugation as she experiences being the dominant subject and also being subjugated. Dr. Crusher teaches Data how to dance in Dr. Crusher's

¹⁰ "Encounter at Farpoint Part 1 and 2," *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, 1987.

¹¹ "Encounter at Farpoint Part 1 and 2."

simulator, allowing the environment to be completely determined by her. Having accepted a patriarchal role in this heteronormative wedding, Data requests help to train his body to better conform. Data is in Dr. Crusher's classroom for learning, both literally a re-creation of the classroom she first learned how to dance in and also more philosophically one as she creates the environment that shapes his body. Dr. Crusher is the dominating subject who teaches Data how to be a happy object.¹²

Esther Rashkin names this engagement as Data's desire to be birthed into being, Data's quest to feel alive parallels the common trope of an android's desire to become more human-like.¹³ This desire proves his being, since, according to Gayle Salamon, a subject comes into being through desire. She explains how "desire is, a being toward the other, and this necessarily conjoins [her] with, makes [her] part of, the world."¹⁴ She clarifies that fulfillment of desire is not what defines a subject as a being, but the relationship and act of desiring something external is what defines the embodied experience. Data's attention is shifted when he is called into the heteronormative ritual and this becomes the object of his desire, rather than exploring his being as valuable outside his ability to conform. Therefore, his desire proves his being, but his desire to be valued as a being is redirected to conform within heteronormative society.

At first, Dr. Crusher teaches Data how to tap dance, as that is what he asked for, and she did not know he wanted to learn to dance for the wedding. After Data successfully reproduces her steps, Dr. Crusher learns that this dance is for the wedding. She is upset by this miscommunication, and she explains how tap dancing is not helpful for the wedding. Data

¹² "Data's Day," *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, 1991.

¹³ Esther Rashkin, "Data Learns to Dance: 'Star Trek' and the Quest to Be Human," *American Imago*, Independent Voices in Psychoanalysis, 68, no. 2 (2011): 321–46.

¹⁴ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 50.

simply asks, “Why?” to which she responds, after a long pause and heavy sigh, “I don’t really know why Data.”¹⁵ Dr. Crusher is quick to defend a cultural narrative that she does not understand the reason for herself. Therefore, as the dominant subject, she perpetuates normative narratives without reason. We can see from this that the “good” life narrative acts as an internal compass trained into all bodies. She quickly refocuses to teach Data the “right” type of dance, and she hails the computer who initiates her commands for the simulation, “Computer, run ‘Isn’t It Romantic.’”¹⁶ This highlights a third party in the dynamic as Dr. Crusher creates the environment through her use of technology. Human use of technology further romanticizes and solidifies the normative fantasy as the song plays and a smile returns to her face. The song acts as a cultural signifier that places them as gendered partners, a dynamic she will come to pass onto Data. The illusion of her artificial classroom is enabled by technology. The proper teacher student relationship resumes, and she knows what she needs to teach Data.¹⁷

The pleasant music is juxtaposed with Data’s propensity to step on Dr. Crusher’s feet and his failure to embody the right steps as a dancer. Dr. Crusher displeased and confused, since Data was able to pick up tap dancing extremely fast, realizes that Data must look at her feet to learn as she dances, so she decides to lead and let him watch. Data works to adhere to the rhythm of the song and Dr. Crusher’s movements as he studies diligently. Here he learns how to adhere to what has been called straight time by José Esteban Muñoz. He explains:

Straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction.¹⁸

¹⁵ “Data’s Day.”

¹⁶ “Data’s Day.”

¹⁷ “Data’s Day.”

¹⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 22, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=865693>.

Muñoz's notion of straight time is helpful to outline Data's burden to carry out and participate in reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality as he learns the steps for the wedding and how to move through society at large. This is the coercive training of the body that must be interrupted.

Straight time defines the boundaries for how Data is allowed to use his body, which shifts his self-worth and desires to be based on heteronormative values. Adhering to straight time allows a subject to follow the path of the good life by indulging the heteronormative fantasy. They fall into a rhythm, soothing Dr. Crusher's previously agitated mood as Data falls into line. As her mood improves due to his compliance, Dr. Crusher rewards Data for being a happy object. She explains how dancing is not just about patterns but also about improvising. This goes beyond replicating Dr. Crusher's movements as Data must perform in a way that goes beyond the way the computer embedded in the simulation. While the Computer follows Dr. Crusher's commands, Data must follow a path, therefore setting him up to prove a level of humanness within the confines of the heteronormative ritual. Multiple hierarchies emerge here as Dr. Crusher commands the computer and Data, however later in the scene she is commanded by an omniscient voice as well. Dr. Crusher is not a fixed dominating subject as subjects are able to step in and out of this position; she leads Data down the path of the "good" life in order to continue shaping his body to fit normative society. The role Dr. Crusher plays can be filled by another. For Data, this interaction is a way to prove his ability to do more than resemble a dancer, i.e., to be a human; his ability to prove humanness to Dr. Crusher is intertwined with his ability to conform to heteronormative society.

The final phase of Dr. Crusher's lesson comes when Data is tested as a leader; she allows him to lead a few steps while studying her feet, and then tells him, "now look up Data", which he takes literally and responds as if she is commanding him like the simulator computer, a dynamic

presence throughout the scene.¹⁹ She corrects her command, stating, “look into my eyes,” and later tells him to “now smile, act like you’re enjoying yourself.”²⁰ She tells him how to engage with his partner, embodying pleasure, an explicit call to embody a happy object when attempting to be dancer on display. She situates him as the man in a gendered dynamic which informs how he is taught to perform. If Data was a feminized robot he would not be taught to lead. Her instructions teach him how his body best fits within heteronormativity. She properly trains Data how to be a happy object as he displays a cartoon-like exaggerated smile at her command. He adheres to every command, subjugated by her orders as he works to gain entry into heteronormative society. To prove his humanness and therefore worth, he must commit dehumanizing acts by following commands, which gets at the fallacy of the good life. Self-denial and misrecognition of the self as an object to perform rather than a being with desires is required to secure the good life. Data works to satisfy Dr. Crusher in this process of conditioning, working to evoke pleasure in others to gain entrance into heteronormative society, the wedding as a metaphor for the larger picture.

A disembodied voice instantaneously commands the attention of Dr. Crusher, just as Dr. Crusher spoke to the simulator’s computer and Data, and she complies by immediately leaving. She responds in the same way as Data did to her commands, complying as a subject who shifts to being subjected. However, Data’s artificial smile drops, not at her command, but when she tells him to “program up an artificial dance partner.”²¹ Without being commanded, Data stops smiling, and this shows us that his smile and acting as if he was enjoying himself is for the dominant subject, Dr. Crusher, who teaches a similar role she fulfils herself as a woman. Her

¹⁹ “Data’s Day.”

²⁰ “Data’s Day.”

²¹ “Data’s Day.”

orientation within heteronormativity subjugates her and demands compliance from her to accommodate, mother and shrink, putting her in a good position to teach another how to navigate their predetermined role.

Rushing out the door, Dr. Crusher tells Data to not “be afraid to experiment,” to which he replies, “I will, thank you Doctor.”²² His answer indicates that he will indeed do as she says, however his direct words imply he *is* afraid to experiment, the opposite of complying with her words. The scene concludes as he dances with a simulated partner, and he smiles. This illustrates Data’s internalization of Dr. Crusher’s command to smile and act like he is enjoying himself, ultimately deciding to maintain the performance even when he is not being watched. To continue to perform is to practice; Data must train his body to both project and embody a happy object for the wedding. Failure to do so is to not properly complete his duties in the wedding. Therefore, Data displays how a marginalized body must prepare to inhabit heteronormative spaces to adhere to larger normative narratives; his ability to be included in the narrative is reliant on this emotive practice which shapes his body.

Data, who Riker names Pinocchio, works to become human by learning how to dance to perform the duties of father of the bride in his friends’ wedding and marriage. At first, he succeeds in learning how to tap dance, but this skill does nothing to add normative value to him as a happy object because the wedding requires that he knows how to lead while dancing with a woman. Data learns a new rhythm through this, and Dr. Crusher instructs him how to follow straight time and contribute to the marriage ceremony. Once he masters the actions, he gains final instruction as an object to be on display, he is told to smile and embody the happy object he

²² “Data’s Day.”

serves as. Data is trained how to be human is a conscious effort, he makes knowing it further dislocates him from himself.

While Data shows us the ways a robot complies with commands as directed for the heteronormative marriage ritual, Steven Spielberg's robot David is an example of how this is done with the heteronormative family. Steven Spielberg's film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, is a film about a child robot's quest to become a real boy. David is as an android made to replace a sick child; the human son frozen for five years as the parents wait for him to wake up. In this world, robots are created to serve their creators, and humans are the dominant subjects, but David is an experimental android meant to go beyond the servant to master relationship. He is created to fit within the heteronormative family as a child. Monica, David's adoptive mother, activates his automated system which initiates a forever lasting love for her; she asks, "Who am I, David," to which he replies, "You are my Mommy."²³ At the very moment he comes into being as a subject that can love and desire, he works to support and define Monica's role as the homemaker and mother. He is created to reinforce the fantasy of the family unit in a world that has restrictions on families having children. David's purpose is to fill this gap, he is a prototype, which if successful, will be mass produced to solve this issue across society. He is made as a tool of corporations to fulfil the heteronormative need for the nuclear family.

While David was made to prove validity for commercial use, his ability to prove himself as capable of loving and being loved is cut short, making him obsolete to the family unit and therefore useless. This happens once Monica's human son is miraculously saved by medical intervention. David is no longer necessary after the human son returns, so Monica abandons David in the woods, showing enough humanity to not send him back to the company who

²³ *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2001).

created him to die, but not enough to learn to love him back, as David sees it. Soon he is caught, as unlicensed androids are hunted, and he is put in a cage with other androids. Most of them are missing parts, outdated, and left behind by their creators, deemed valueless. Therefore, this specific demographic of androids is those deemed obsolete. They serve as entertainment for humans in a “Flesh Fair” that resembles a circus. This fair proclaims itself as a celebration of life in the efforts to destroy artificiality as androids are torn apart and killed in creative ways. This reasserts the dominance of humans and maintains androids as the minority. The fair exemplifies the impending violence for those who cannot serve society, which is inevitable for every robot.

David is brought into the spotlight and faces the ultimate test, can he serve humans and the heteronormative family unit anymore, or is his artificiality no longer required by society? The head of the Flesh Fair finds out that David is there, the first imitation child android. He prepares to have a grand slaughter of David as the ultimate representation of artificiality threatening the human race, however, the crowd turns on him. When the audience does not want to kill David, this demonstrates their protection of David as a happy object, something that still has use and therefore value. Materially, he looks like a normal child, and he begs for his life, yelling to the curious audience, “Don’t burn me! I’m not Pinocchio! Don’t make me die! I’m David!”²⁴ David expresses his largest struggle and fear as he proclaims he’s not Pinocchio; despite the fact that he is searching the entire movie for Pinocchio’s savior, the Blue Fairy, he knows his pursuit to become real will not save him. In this moment where he faces death, his protective instincts tell him he must assert to be what he is not, or perhaps, he holds both truths that he is a real boy, and he needs the Blue Fairy to turn him into one. However, a part of David knows that what the humans care about is not his desire to be real, but whether or not he seems

²⁴ *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence.*

real to them. This convinces the audience that his embodiment is significant enough to preserve, as human enough, and they kick the head of the Flesh Fair off stage in rejection of his call to destroy artificiality. This coming to their senses is not because they reflected on the cruelty of their actions to androids, but because David looked fit to serve the heteronormative fantasy as a child. David's programming as a child serves a key purpose in defining the family; while David is an android, he has a place in society if he fulfils this role, at least this is the only narrative given to David. His existence and acceptance are conditional as he sees other androids brutally die at the hands of humans who no longer need them, depicting the state violence for those who do not fit in the good life narrative.

David's ability to serve as a child, to be loved and to love back, is the cage he finds himself in throughout the film. David fights for his life in the real world in pursuit of the Blue Fairy to turn him into a real boy; this is his quest to "become real" so he can return home to Monica.²⁵ Once he finds a statue of the Blue Fairy under the ocean in Manhattan, he and his companion Teddy, which is an artificial intelligence stuck in a toy teddy bear, become trapped underwater, and Teddy states "we are in a cage."²⁶ Teddy's statement goes beyond the literal meaning. David's quest for the Blue Fairy and to be turned into a real boy is an imprisoning fantasy. He pleads with the Blue Fairy, "please make me into a real, live boy."²⁷ As they remain stuck underwater for 2,000 years, David prays the entire time, the Narrator describes the Blue Fairy as "she who smiled softly forever, she who welcomed forever . . . always there, always smiling, always awaiting him."²⁸ The Blue Fairy is the false hope that traps David in a narrative to serves the dominant subject at the cost to himself. His entire being is consumed by this desire

²⁵ *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence.*

²⁶ *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence.*

²⁷ *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence.*

²⁸ *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence.*

that promises a place for him in the family as loved by Monica. The Blue Fairy promises the “good” life where David is loved by Monica and can fulfil his purpose as her son. This perpetual hope that welcomes forever is all too familiar to marginalized people, to always be on the cusp of gaining a seat at the table, but under the precondition of having to dehumanize themselves.

The heteronormative cultural fantasy is constructed to appear equitable for everyone. David’s cage is not being an android, it is his lack of agency and freedom to exist, intentionally denied by the dominating subjects, humans, who created him. David finds absolution once highly advanced AI find him and Teddy frozen in time. They gain access to David’s memories of humans, and in their efforts to repay David for this highly sought-after history, they are able to give him one day with Monica, as reconstructed from ancient DNA through the use of their highly advanced technology. However, inevitably she will die when she falls asleep at the end of the day. David spends the day with her doing arts and crafts, he makes her coffee just how she likes it, it’s the perfect day with the perfect child. By the end of their day, with her impending second death coming, she tells him, “I love you, David. I do love you. I have always loved you.”²⁹ He sheds a tear as they embrace before she falls asleep and drifts away, and for the first time he falls asleep. The Narrator tells us that David goes to that place “where dreams are born.”³⁰ Therefore, this asserts that to be loved is to dream. This illusive dreaming is a place he could not visit before, a land where your wildest fantasies can come to life. I question whether Spielberg is asserting that adhering to norms is what is necessary to escape the fantasy and gain access to dream up anything, as David gets his fairytale ending at last given by Monica’s words. However, achievement of the good life is an exception and to do this as a happy object is to relinquish hope for a future that does not require abandonment of the self. Therefore, there would

²⁹ *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence.*

³⁰ *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence.*

not be any reason to dream up more, to dream differently. No matter, I disagree that to escape the cage of embodying a happy object necessitates fulfilling it first, as this is an inaccessible dream that cannot be fulfilled. To occupy the role of servitude to the dominant group is to give into the dehumanization and devaluing of the self. The cage is the idea that dreams are possible through conformity, and that the bodily horizon of the dominant subject is the only horizon. Just as David was never shown there are more ways to live life than in search of love from Monica, the dominant narrative limits marginalized people's imagination and dreams for the future. To learn how to escape the cage comes from shifting definitions of value and desire.

While Data and David are aware of their defeated and stigmatized nature as robots and enter quests for humanity, Deckard is an android, unaware of the fact, and continues to believe he is human. Rick Deckard is the main character in Phillip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*³¹ The novel follows Deckard, a man under employment of the police to secretly kill androids, otherwise known as andys, who escape off-world planets and seeks to blend into dominant society as humans on Earth. While Deckard works for a living discovering androids and "retiring" them, he has no idea he is an android himself. The story starts and ends in his home with his wife and focuses on the animals that he takes care of. To call them pets is to underestimate their cultural importance as I will explain through their religion. The story is framed with bookends that illustrate his evolving subconscious relationship to being an android positioned against his own nature. The first and last scene take place in his home with his wife, Iran, a woman he disrespects through the entire novel, but nonetheless the woman he comes home to and who solidifies his place in society via their heteronormative relationship and the institution of marriage. Deckard's relationship to his electric animals as presented in these

³¹ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 1968).

opening and closing scenes illustrates his acceptance of his place in society as subjugated and demonstrates his inability to imagine different for himself and future.

To understand this relationship, first it is necessary to illustrate the importance of the animals as explained by the dominant religion, Mercerism.³² Mercerism centers empathy as the guiding moral philosophy for being a part of community and in relationship to one another. This is achieved through empathy boxes individuals connect to in the private space of their home. When they place their hands on either side of the empathy box, their consciousness is almost projected beside Wilbur Mercer, a man considered god, who endures the struggles of climbing the hill as rocks fall and hit himself and the worshiper. This enables people to connect to others from all over the world in this collective struggle. A part of Mercerism is stewardship of animals. Animals are not considered pets as much as they offer a way to personify an individual's ability to have empathy for the other; to take care of an animal and preserve another's life is to prove solidarity with life itself. Therefore, owning an animal becomes a social representation of succeeding within dominant society. These social proofs of empathy exist in direct contrast to androids. It is even said to be impossible for an android to take care of an animal, making clear that to own an animal is to be human.³³ Therefore, to keep an animal alive is the material pursuit of humanity like Data's pursuit to perform the dance right and David's pursuit of the Blue Fairy, and just as the other examples did, this pursuit correlates to structures of heteronormativity.

Deckard internalizes the logic of Mercerism and the social rules around animals as his first clear desire in the book is connected to owning a real animal. Deckard used to own a real sheep, but upon the real sheep's death had to replace the animal with an electric one because to buy a real sheep was too expensive. The Narrator explains, "to say 'Is your sheep genuine?'

³² Dick.

³³ Dick.

would be a worse breach of manners than to inquire whether a citizen's teeth, hair, or internal organs would test out authentic."³⁴ To own an authentic animal is to equate its authenticity with that of the owner's. The sheep is an extension of Deckard, as he owns an electric sheep, he too is electric, but just as his neighbors don't inquire about his sheep, he does not inquire about himself. His motivation to kill as many andys as he can is directly correlated to his desire to become real, since to become authentic, he must own a real animal, and to do that he needs to make a lot of money. The only way to make money fast is by fulfilling his job, gaining a reward of \$1000 for every andy he kills. Therefore, he fulfils his job to reject the hidden truth that he is an android himself and to assert his humanness.

Before leaving home for work, Deckard runs into his neighbor whose horse is pregnant, something he is envious of, and, as he inquiries about his need for two horses, he reflects on his own dilemmas regarding his electric animal:

[Deckard] wishes to god he had a horse, in fact any animal. Owing and maintaining a fraud had a way of gradually demoralizing one. And yet from a social standpoint it had to be done, given the absence of the real article. He had therefore no choice but to continue. Even were he not to care himself, there remained his wife, and Iran did care.³⁵

Social pressures force Deckard to have a fake animal, because the social system he wishes to belong to relies on the appearance of adhering to social standards. This also requires that he be married as well, and, as he explains, his desire to follow social rules has no relevance in the face of his wife's desire to adhere. While this does not decide whether or not Deckard desires a real animal, he is unable to consider his desires as Iran's and societal expectations leave no room for debate. Just as David could not dream until he was loved, Deckard is similarly unable to desire himself as there is no room left. Deckard's hiddenness is reinforced by marriage; his marriage

³⁴ Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, 7.

³⁵ Dick, 9.

represents heteronormative standards which reinforce the need for his artificiality to remain hidden. However, his artificiality is necessary nonetheless, as he explains there is no choice but to have replaced his organic sheep with an electric one. While on the surface he must appear human, as he would be killed otherwise, another dynamic emerges where the social makeup of society relies on his secretive artificiality. The success of his marriage and the normative lives of his neighbors are contingent on the fantasy that he is real, via the fantasy that his sheep is real. Similarly, the fabric of society on earth rests on his ability to kill other andys.

In conversing with his neighbor whose horse is now pregnant, a rare, highly expensive and sought-after animal, Deckard inquires about buying one of the horses from him. His neighbor explains why he is unwilling, and Deckard points out the fallacy of this decision in the larger view of their religion, Mercerism. Deckard explains, “but for you to have two horses and me none, that violates the whole basic theological and moral structure of Mercerism.”³⁶ Deckard reveals his animal is electric after his neighbor explains how every person in their building has an animal, and, therefore, he is not being immoral by keeping his second horse. While his neighbor does not offer his horse, he promises to keep the secret even though Deckard doesn’t ask; he explains why he won’t tell as they would consider Deckard “immoral and anti-empathetic,” to which Deckard responds with how much he does “want to have an animal.”³⁷ Deckard’s desire to be human, and therefore accepted into normative society, is tied to this want to have an organic animal, and therefore not an electric one. His humanness is contingent on his success in acquiring one; to fulfil this desire is to have space to exist in society. He believes this will happen once he fulfils his job to kill the six andys that have escaped and who supposedly pose great threat to life on earth, when they are merely posing as humans to live lives free of

³⁶ Dick, 10.

³⁷ Dick, 13.

subjugation. Deckard's conversation with his neighbor illustrates how Deckard's desire has been monopolized by the good life he is promised as long as he proves he is not "immoral and anti-empathetic," as his electric animal suggests because he wants a genuine animal, and this desire and pursuit should be enough.³⁸ His mere existence also poses a threat that can only be curtailed with adherence to the dominant religion.

Deckard's role in society is to kill androids who pose as humans. It is the deception that threatens the makeup of life on earth, however, he is almost the same as those he kills. The fact that he does not know he is an android is what allows him access to life on earth, along with the fact that he adheres to the social and moral obligations of Mercerism and married life. Before reaching the last scene, Deckard successfully "retires" the 6 escaped andys, and amidst this he sleeps with an android sent from the company to help him, Rachel. She ends up killing the live goat he impulsively bought with half of the reward money. After all the chaos and killing, and after doing his job and role in society: to kill the andys who pose a threat to life on earth, he leaves for alone time where humans no longer live. After wandering, dazed and confused, he finds himself reflecting on the ordeal, "but what I've done . . . that's become alien to me. In fact, everything about me has become unnatural; I've become an unnatural self."³⁹ This disillusionment with his being and existence comes from denying his own humanity through his actions. He calls Rachel, and presumably the andys who pose a threat to his success in normative society, "life thieves" for killing his goat."⁴⁰ When Rachel killed his genuine animal, Rachel cut short his ability to fantasize that he is a normal, human, functioning member of society. But Deckard fails to question what life he is robbed of, and whether or not there is a life beyond the

³⁸ Dick, 13.

³⁹ Dick, 212.

⁴⁰ Dick, 214.

one he has been presented with. This ability to create new fantasies is connected to the ability to have self-perception outside of the way his marginalized body is valued in normative society. He doesn't recognize himself after what he has done, however, he has no skills to see it is because he has been pushed to conform and safeguard the normative world as an excluded member, always the servant, never the patron. He only feels how he has dislocated himself from his body, but he places the blame in the wrong place: on the other andys.

Deckard feels the severe impact of what he has done and the failure for acceptance as he still remains with no genuine animal but returns to straight time and the good life promised in his marriage as he does not know where else to turn. He reflects to himself as he's "been defeated in some obscure way. By having killed the androids? By Rachel's murder of [his] goat? He did not know."⁴¹ However, he is unable to interpret this defeat he feels in his body as he has been trained to return to the dominant narrative. He considers his options, and the only feasible one is that "now it's time to go home. Maybe, after [he's] been there awhile with Iran, [he'll] forget."⁴² Therefore, his position as a subjugated android who keeps order is maintained under the narrative of him fulfilling his role in a heteronormative marriage. Marriage allows him to look past, or to, as he hopes, forget the things that make him feel unnatural, allowing him to feel that he has some place in society where he does fit. This adherence to straight time keeps his attention on the present time working towards the good life feasible through a successful marriage. It is the false promise of normativity via marriage that keeps him close enough to the fantasy to continue down the self-destructive path. He is unable to see that when Rachel killed his goat, she was trying to free him of the myth of the good life, not robbing him of his only life. It is this false singularity that is implicit in his thinking, and it is reinforced by his marriage.

⁴¹ Dick, 212.

⁴² Dick, 207.

Iran's role as Deckard's wife is to act as a spokesperson for how the "good" life can be achieved through marriage and subjugation. Before leaving the deserted land, Deckard finds what he thinks is a real toad. This puts him in a state of ecstasy, bringing him home with a surprise for Iran, one that will bring him back into being with a *real* animal. He reveals his good luck in finding an animal that should be extinct, and Iran bursts his bubble finding the tiny control panel that Deckard failed to see. Interestingly, Iran does not live in ignorance to their subservience, and she herself has protested the good life at moments, but nonetheless, she works to preserve their life within the restrictive fantasy. Deckard reflects, "the electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are."⁴³ Deckard understands the lives of electric animals, and, therefore, of his own life, as trivial, but a life, nonetheless. This meager life is life within normative society acting to appease and function as "correctly" as possible, betraying the self in the process. This insignificant life is one which gives false hope of acceptance. Deckard confuses his life as an android with life operating within heteronormative society as this meager life can be escaped. The marginalized subject can dream up new fantasies for a good life when they can recognize their value outside of normative society. However, after Deckard goes to bed, Iran calls to order electric flies for the toad to eat, working to preserve the elusive fantasy of the good life.

The Weaponization of Desire

It is Deckard's inability to desire more beyond the paltry life of electric animals that closes possibilities to a different future. This inability is a forcibly applied disorientation of the subject which points them in the direction of heteronormativity, with justification as the good life, to monopolize the subjects' desires and dreams for subservience. Cultural fantasies that are

⁴³ Dick, 222.

normative curtail future imaginations outside of heteronormativity through manipulation of desire. Desire guides the attention of the subject, and “attention involves a political economy.”⁴⁴ Attention cannot escape highly political cultural fantasies. For example, the white feminist fantasy of a woman succeeding in corporate America while acting as wife and mother relies on the hidden labor of domestic workers that are required for the rich white woman to live this fantasy; non-citizen women of color do the nannying and caretaking while the white upper-middle class woman makes herself profitable in the name of feminism. Therefore, the desire for the good life informs dynamics between worker and employer in a world where marginalization is a coercive process to extract labor and for subjects to embody the happy object. In the media, narratives with robots have reflected cultural fears and anxieties that accompany these fantasies, illustrating what happens if the marginalized subject desires more for themselves. The potential for dissatisfaction among marginalized people is recognized, however, the script for what to do with this dissatisfaction is directed towards inducing pleasure in the dominant subject to earn a spot in heteronormative society.

All three robots express intense and raw desire to be real, to overcome artificiality, and the heteronormative solution given in to work against belonging to themselves and desiring themselves. To believe the self is artificial is to internalize the dehumanizing category that has been forcibly applied to the body. For Data and David, their knowingness of their location within hierarchy allows them to consciously pursue what their desire to overcome artificiality. However, their desires have been directed at the only solution given; if they pursue the good life and heteronormative society, they will be valued and allowed to take up space. Data’s desire to “function adequately” translates to abandoning himself and his being, as the good life requires

⁴⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 32.

that he minimize his existence and learn to conform to the script given. David's desire to be real magnifies how whimsical and fake the good life is, displaying it through the eyes of a child whose only hope is a fairytale godmother from a children's fairytale. Deckard contrasts this as the worn-out assassin. He is disillusioned with fairytales that claim to value him, but while he suffers the impacts of being treated as an object rather than person, he has no other logic to return to for hopes of a better future. When his artificial toad proves there is not divine intervention that explains his suffering as necessary and good, he still cannot recognize his self-worth and therefore does not know what more he can imagine for himself. All that is left is to adhere to the unattainable fantasy of the good life, but now he knows it is artificial.

To contrast these narratives that subjugate the marginalized person, I employ Muñoz's horizon of utopian potentiality based on queerness that rejects heteronormativity. Queerness is the potential to build a collective future that rejects the categorizing hierarchy. While dominant narratives are invested in a heteronormative and reproductive future, via a wedding, nuclear family, and married life, queer time explains what the larger social collective could be, and this vision is a necessary key in reconstructing fantasies. Queerness opens the possibility for a larger horizon of existence, existence that does not require self-denial and abandonment of the self.⁴⁵ To use queerness to alter a collective horizon, or cultural fantasies of the future, is to go against the good life narrative that constricts bodies through categorization and stigmatization. Dominant cultural fantasies are linear history personified and hidden as a dream for more. While all three robots fail to escape the cage of the good life, they hold brief moments that reflect it and create space for their experience, not as a happy object, but as a being that refuses to commit acts of self-denial for the pleasure of others.

⁴⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*.

Conclusion

Data queers his subjugation when Dr. Crusher tells Data to not “be afraid to experiment,” and he replies, “I will.”⁴⁶ This statement of truth asserts his experience as a radical moment of clarity of his truth and emotional state. This moment rejects the narrative of the good life which positions Data as a happy object. His fear displays mistrust with the good life narrative because if it was good for him, he would have no need to be afraid. While discomfort in a situation can be good and necessary for growth, this is not what Data is expressing, fear is linked to safety, revealing that a part of Data knows he is not safe when his actions deny himself and his embodiment. When Data acknowledges that he is afraid and fearful, this negates the heteronormative hierarchy which diminishes his body and inherent value.

When David defends himself at the Flesh Fair, stating “I’m not Pinocchio! I’m David!” he denies the artificiality attributed to him.⁴⁷ This could be a moment of clarity which denies that he needs the Blue Fairy, that he is not Pinocchio, he is already real, and he does not need external intervention to prove so regardless of Monica’s love. Another major moment of David’s clarity is when he gets extremely upset and angry when he finds out child androids identical to him have been mass produced; the danger of replacement becomes real and his ability to serve cannot defeat the threat of capitalist mass production. This violent anger acknowledges and confronts his actual place in society creating space for his body beyond how he is told to use it. His disregard to embody a happy object is a radical moment that allows he step outside of the fantasy of the good life.

When Deckard learns of his dead goat, the live animal he just bought with half his bounty money, the Narrator explains “it only made him feel worse, a quantitative addition to the weight

⁴⁶ “Data’s Day.”

⁴⁷ *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*.

shrinking him from every side.”⁴⁸ This physical description of how he feels illustrates the impact of embodying a happy object; it categorically relies on self-denial and creates misrecognition of the self in the good life fantasy when the material impact is being able to occupy less and less space. This explains why Deckard is shrinking from every direction, no space is left for him, not even within himself. The further he continues along this path it will feel as if he doesn’t even exist, as is he is not real. This demonstrates the dangers when marginalization succeeds to force the subject to internalize self-perception as a happy object. This internalizes the dehumanization that others impose every day, but it is not the only option, as Rachel tries desperately to free him when she kills the goat. When he feels space closing in on him, his inability to take her cue and value himself beyond his ability to serve furthers his emptiness.

The good life reorients subjects to see abandon themselves and alter their behavior to fit within heteronormative society. Heteronormativity is the path given to marginalized people who face dehumanization every day. Data’s fear recognizes the experience Deckard outlines, and David’s rage is the appropriate response. I hold his rage close to my heart, it is sacred to what it means to move through a world designed to extract as much labor from a subject. To feel the anger within, to listen to it, to share it so it is heard, this is the radical act of self-love that is necessary for rewriting cultural fantasies. The burden of artificiality is having to silence that rage, but to reclaim that rage is to take even an inch of space back and to belong to the self.

⁴⁸ Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, 208.

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