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PWR 1 - Against the Machine

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The piece I present for rhetorical analysis is not strictly a work of anti-tech rhetoric. Like all good arguments, it enfolds the positive and negative of the tech-laden future we have built. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*,better known as *Blade Runner*, written by Philip K. Dick in 1968, above all else, forces the reader to contemplate the mutilation of their own humanity in the face of an AI ridden world. Wrapped around a detective story, the book raises the issues of personhood in a world with synthetic consciousness, the consequences of unintended AI freedom, and the social structures defined by rampant consumerism and the slavery of a mechanical underclass. Dick uses a variety of rhetoric, most distinctly an appeal to pathos, to guide his audience through the major philosophical questions raised by artificial intelligence. By bringing these considerations to the mainstream, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* deserves not only to be considered a foundational piece of science fiction, but a valuable part of the anti-technological discussion.

The book itself centers around a detective, Rick Deckard, who is tasked with finding and killing sentient androids that have escaped Mars and their enforced labor. With each successful murder, Deckard finds himself growing closer and closer to the robots he is hunting. An android becomes a friend, another a comrade, a final one a lover, all his moral exhaustion finally pitted against the idea that he himself might be a robot. This successive series of entanglements and psychological shocks perform the same function for Deckard and the audience, raising the question of empathy and the personhood of an intelligence that is made, not birthed. Can you feel the pain of something you know to be artificial? Is a synthetic brain enough to make a person? Rick Deckard acts as Dick’s opinion on this topic. By following the character you are guided by the author’s own thinking, though his points are made lightly. Deckard ultimately must submit. By first establishing that artificial sentience has value unto itself similar to that which is inherent to humanity, Dick places upon Deckard the consequence of their death, as morally corrupt as the murder of a human. The emotional strain of a synthetic life is then coupled to the moral turbulence of capital punishment and slavery. Deckard is an executioner, he kills sentient beings whose primary crime was escaping their forced servitude and seeking a better life for themself. In the end, the pressure on Deckard’s, and the reader’s, emotions is too strong and they must submit that android life is indeed, life. The following conclusion is that humans can feel empathy for androids.

Deckard’s story is not as simple as the one laid out above. One complexity that entices the reader into greater philosophical consideration is the author’s discussion of consumerism and status in an android society. In *Blade Runner*, androids are not the only synthetic life. Alongside the humanoid robots there are robotic animals of every kind, frogs, goats, sheep, etc.. In the late stage capitalist world, with an environment destroyed by overconsumption and war for resources, to own a flesh and blood animal is the highest form of luxury. Those who can not purchase a real animal are forced to settle for their electric counterparts. There is no outward difference between the electric animals and those birthed. Even the truck that comes to fix Deckard’s broken sheep is made to look identical to one that would care for an organic animal. To society, to his neighbors, to the world, Deckard is the owner of an honest to god sheep, and he hates it. The societal tableau, even when no one is aware of his deviancy, enforces feelings of poverty and dissolution. Because Deckard does not own a real animal he is hopelessly unsatisfied with his position in society and tries desperately to get an organic pet. While our own world may never see the loss of its animals and the advent of their electrical counterparts, we are just as subject to technologically enforced societal structures. Already, your place in our social structure can be classified by the technology you consume. To not stay up to date with the latest iPhone, or god forbid use an Android device, is seen as a mark of poverty. Even old industries, such as automobile manufacturing, have bent to the technological hierarchy, rendering a Tesla, hyper-teched, a must-have luxury.