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William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) tells the story of Case, a “console cowboy” who is unknowingly recruited and manipulated by an artificial intelligence named Wintermute, forced to help the AI break free of its cybernetic constraints and merge with its twin AI, Neuromancer. In having Wintermute and Neuromancer merge at the end of the novel, Gibson solidifies artificial intelligence as being the dominant player in the relationship between humans and technology, having now found a way of doing what only humans could do before: self-improve. Case recognizes the dominant position of technology, and his own subordinate position, in the novel’s Coda when he asks the newly transformed Wintermute: “So what’s the score? How are things different? You running the world now? You God?”¹ As is evident by this quote, and by Case’s reversal of fortune, Gibson provides a stark warning regarding the potential loss of human identity in the modern technological age. Similarly, Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) is set following World War Terminus, a radioactive cataclysmic event responsible for having killed off a significant portion of human and animal life. Following WWT, much of the surviving population has fled to Mars and other planetary colonies in a mass exodus in order to escape the lingering radioactivity; however, as these humans continue to emigrate, some androids (or “replicants”) reverse the course of this exodus and instead arrive on Earth. These androids – due to their sophistication, resemblance to humans, and destructive potential – are banned from roaming free, and bounty hunters such as Rick Deckard have been commissioned to “retire” them. This process, however, becomes ever more difficult to do as Rick begins to feel empathy towards the replicants he is set to retire, and it is in their image that he starts to see the two sides of himself and humankind, recognizing his capacity for both love and destruction.

In their respective texts, Gibson and Dick both envision the place of humanity in a world dominated by technology, and both perceive and illuminate the dystopian possibilities that may result from such exponential development of technology. By invoking Marshall McLuhan’s observations regarding technological dominance and the resulting “discarnate man,” this essay will aim to show how the numbed interiority of the characters depicted in *Neuromancer* and *Do Androids Dream?* is a result of their interactions with technology which has *massaged* them into new forms of being. By “new forms of being,” I am referring to the ways in which certain “human” attributes, such as empathy, are conceived of as being outdated responses in the technological age. As such, the characters in both novels are being conditioned away from experiencing these sensations and responses, and thus the line between the human and the post-human becomes ever more blurred. Furthermore, to expand upon an idea posited by Nigel Wheale in the article “Recognising a ‘human-Thing,’” I will show how, by using AIs and replicants as doubles (or doppelgangers) to the human characters, both *Neuromancer* and *Do Androids Dream?* ultimately depart from conventions of science fiction by turning the focus away from the non-human, and back towards human emotion, touch, and empathetic response.

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1 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984), 270.

THE ARTIFICIAL SUBSUMING THE NATURAL

In *The Medium is the Message*, Marshall McLuhan makes a slight alteration to his earlier aphorism “the medium is the message,” shifting his focus to the *massage* of technological effects that continuously exert pressure upon humans. Though both aphorisms are profoundly linked with McLuhan’s observations of the new electronic environment, the idea of the *massage* of technological effects offers a deeper understanding into the physiological changes that result from our interactions with technology, a turn away from studying the subliminal effects. As explained in *The Medium is the Message*:

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.²

According to McLuhan, media and technology create environments that affect humans both psychologically and physically, not only changing the ways in which we interact with each other, but by also forcing an alteration of the senses due to the adaptive response to such external stimuli. McLuhan wants the reader to become aware of the internal and external changes being experienced, and the mosaic (or collage) technique used in his books is an attempt at waking up his readers and making them aware of the maelstrom of technological effects constantly swirling around them. However, generally speaking, in *The Medium is the Message*, McLuhan gestures towards the idea that modern humans are not becoming aware at all, and are instead being physically and cognitively “massaged” into new modes of behaviour while hazed by a sensory fog that impairs their perception. As written in McLuhan’s *Book of Probes*, “the new media are not bridges between man and nature – they are nature,”³ and they appear to be forces dominant to human life largely due to the fact that their power goes undetected.

McLuhan also places great emphasis on science fiction, specifying it as being the genre of experimental art that is best equipped to warn against the increasing dominance of technology: “Science-fiction writing today presents situations that enable us to perceive the potential of new technologies... Now we have to adjust, not to invent. We have to find the environments in which it will be possible to live with our new inventions.”⁴ Gibson’s *Neuromancer* acts as a prime example of McLuhan’s belief that science fiction can allow us to “perceive the potential of new technologies,” seeing as, in this novel, Gibson envisions many things that were later manifested into reality, and which are of common use and/or discussion in the contemporary world: the internet, sophisticated artificial intelligence, and the preservation of consciousness. At the same time, the technological advancements depicted in *Neuromancer* are contrasted by a decline and breakdown in social order and humanity. Further, just as McLuhan sees the modern technological environment as having swallowed the natural world, the opening sentence of Gibson’s novel relays a similar image: “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.”⁵ This sentence, which embodies the cyberpunk genre, brings awareness to the inversion of order that has occurred, one in which the natural world (the sky) has been subsumed by the artificial (television), a process that has resulted in the widespread deadening of emotions and interiority, and which has left the external world in a state of disarray.

Carl Gutierrez-Jones reads *Neuromancer* in relation to Ray Kurzweil’s concept of the “technological singularity,” which refers to the belief that artificial intelligence will eventually “feed on its own abilities to improve, and thereby quickly surpass, current human functioning with stunning speed.”⁶ In Gibson’s

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2 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2001), 26.

3 Marshall McLuhan and David Carson, *The Book of Probes* (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2003), 18-19.

4 McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*, 124.

5 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 3.

6 Carl Gutierrez-Jones, “Stealing Kinship: *Neuromancer* and Artificial Intelligence,” *Science Fiction Studies* 41, no. 1 (2014): 69.

novel, exponential technological growth of this sort has already run its course. Many AIs have already been produced and, though they are denied autonomy, the fear of their rapid self-improvement has resulted in the Turing Police force being created, whose job it is to monitor and destroy any AI “attempting to operate outside of state-mandated limits.”⁷ Importantly, it is due to this technological dominance that the characters experience a desire to merge with it, as merging with the dominant force is a way for them to achieve a perceived sense of elation or transcendence. The novel is almost entirely told from Case’s perspective, and Gibson’s technical, at times hypnotic, narration indicates that Case’s perception and interiority has been dramatically altered due to his interaction with technology, and the ways in which it has *massaged* him into a new mode of being. Not only does Case literally have his central nervous system damaged and internal organs replaced, but when he is jacked into cyberspace he experiences a sensation similar to the surgical rearrangement of his insides. This indicates that his physiology has been altered as a result of the symbiosis underway: “Case gasped as his internal organs were pulled into a different configuration. The deck and construct had fallen painfully to his lap.”⁸

Whereas the external landscape described in *Neuromancer* is the result of rampant urbanization — which is thus consistent with the artificial subsuming of the natural world — Dick’s *Do Androids Dream?* depicts a barren, disintegrating and deserted world. As Dick states: “The entire planet had begun to disintegrate into junk, and to keep the planet habitable for the remaining population the junk had to be hauled away occasionally . . . or, as Busted Friendly liked to declare, Earth would die under a layer—not of radioactive dust—but of kipple.”⁹ Apartment buildings are empty; televisions only seem to pick up one channel; and many species of animals have gone extinct or are incredibly rare. As explained by Nigel Wheale, “At the verge of its extinction, the natural world becomes a valuable commodity; the process of collecting and buying the living merchandise itself accelerates the destruction, increasing scarcity, raising prices.”¹⁰ In the post-apocalyptic world envisioned by Dick, the natural has not only been subsumed by the artificial (like in Gibson’s novel), but has been obliterated by the technological “advancements” and by human misuse of this technology. Dick parallels the disintegrating external environment with a crumbling of human interiority and emotions, and, in an attempt to preserve these last vestiges of humanness, characters such as Rick Deckard want nothing more than to own a real animal. Rick wanders through this barren and disintegrating landscape as part of his own exodus in which he searches for meaning, questions his position as a bounty hunter, and grapples with the violent actions that are to reward him with what he most desires: a real animal that can be cared for, bonded with, and loved at a time when human empathetic responses are on the decline.

NUMBING THE HUMAN SENSORIUM

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan explains that experimental art allows people to perceive “the exact specifications of coming violence to their own psyches from their own counter-irritants or technology.”¹¹ Counter-irritants are described as mechanisms intended to reduce (or counter) the affects or injuries caused by modern technologies; however, in the mechanical and electronic age, these counter-irritants often take the form of other technologies. McLuhan then warns that these kinds of counter-irritants can have effects opposite to their positive intentions, instead causing physical and/or psychological stress, and thus becoming “a greater plague than the initial irritant, like a drug habit.”¹² McLuhan’s statement is significant for many reasons, but perhaps most important is the way in which he draws an explicit connection between technological use and drug addiction, a comparison that is apt when analyzing *Neuromancer*. While the external world of *Neuromancer* is described as having contracted — it seems as though the characters travel between continents instantaneously — a new dimension of space has opened up before them, expanding at an infinite rate. This new realm of cyberspace provides its users with the sense of infinity, and it is from this vastness that they experience elation.

7 Gutierrez-Jones, 71.

8 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 223.

9 Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 87.

10 Nigel Wheale, “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, no. 3 (1991): 298.

11 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: Mentor, 1964), 71.

12 Ibid.

When the reader is first introduced to Case, he is described as an addict experiencing withdrawal symptoms, unable to access the “consensual hallucination” of cyberspace after stealing from his former employers. As retribution for Case’s actions, his employers “damaged his nervous system with a wartime Russian mycotoxin” so that he would never be able to enter into the matrix again.¹³ This event represents a violent breach in the human-technology symbiotic process, but is a rupture that is necessary because it reveals how heavily addicted to the matrix Case had been (and still is). Having been unable to access cyberspace for a year, Case experiences a burning desire to re-enter this limitless, transcendental realm: “A year here and he still dreamed of cyberspace, hope fading nightly. All the speed he took, all the turns he’d taken and the corners he’d cut in Night City, and still he’d see the matrix in his sleep, bright lattices of logic unfolding across that colorless void.”¹⁴ As is evident by this quote, cyberspace is not only described by its hallucinatory properties, but it is also related to “speed,” a stimulant. When Case is locked out of the matrix, he uses stimulants to alter his brain in ways similar to the technology he longs to re-establish contact with; however, it is cyberspace that is the real drug for Case. The stimulants simply provide an artificial experience to him.

Though the characters in *Do Androids Dream?* are not described as being addicts per se, they do engage in a “consensual hallucination” in ways similar to Gibson’s description of cyberspace. McLuhan refers to modern media and technology as being “an extension of the central nervous system,”¹⁵ a notion predicated upon the fact that electricity is not a human invention; humans *are* electricity. Therefore, to McLuhan, the external circuitry of the technological environment is modelled after the neural networks found in human physiology, an externalizing of internal, biological processes. In Dick’s novel, John Isidore refers to empathy boxes in McLuhanian terms: “But an empathy box ... 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.”¹⁶ As with the “consensual hallucination” of cyberspace described by Gibson, when one tunes into an empathy box their external surroundings dissipate and they instead see a man named Wilbur Mercer ascending a hill. Importantly, this is not a passive, observational experience, but a physical and emotional one. The user “enter[s] into the landscape of drab hill, drab sky” and appears to assume the position of Mercer, experiencing the same pain as this elderly man ascending a hill.¹⁷ The empathy box is supposed to represent a communal experience in which anyone attuned is engaged in a shared empathetic response; however, as Wheale insightfully mentions, “[t]his religious empathy, or feeling-with, is generated and experienced through technology.”¹⁸ Though the empathy experienced through the empathy boxes is supposed to stay with the characters once they are again attuned to the outside world, the implication here seems to be that if the experience of togetherness is false, then empathy cannot *truly* be experienced.

McLuhan conceived of the “discarnate man,” a figure who adapts to electric technology to such an extent that “[t]heir old physical beings are entirely irrelevant to the new situations.”¹⁹ This is to say that the “old physical beings” had acclimatized to the old environment prior to the advent of electric technology, but once the new technological environment was introduced and began to swallow the old environment, a new adaptive process necessarily began. According to McLuhan, this new form of human is both “[m]inus his body” and “minus his private identity,” existing as “a disembodied intelligence.”²⁰ The term “disembodied intelligence” takes on multiple meanings when analyzing *Neuromancer*, not only referring to bodiless intelligence such as the AIs and the Dixie Flatline (whose consciousness is preserved on a ROM), but also referring to the experience Case undergoes when jacked into the matrix. Gibson describes Case as follows: “He’d operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth

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13 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 6.

14 Ibid, 5.

15 McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 40.

16 Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, 66.

17 Ibid, 22.

18 Wheale, “Recognising a ‘human-Thing,’” 299.

19 Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (Concord, Anansi, 1995), 370.

20 Ibid.

and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix.”²¹ Console cowboys such as Case have “a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh,”²² and, as McLuhan notes in the above passage, this seems to be because their “old physical beings” are irrelevant to the new, cognitive-driven realm of cyberspace, a new reality that mimics human interiority and sensation: “the cyberspace matrix was actually a drastic simplification of the human sensorium.”²³ Symbiosis, then, can be understood as an adaptive process undergone by humans as a way of acclimatizing to the technological landscape and the new dominant forces of intelligence. In *Neuromancer*, however, in order to live with these new forces, the characters must escape their physical bodies and become posthuman. They must become one with the technology that controls them.

Similarly, McLuhan’s notion of the discarnate man also manifests itself in *Do Androids Dream?*, evident by the empathetic regression experienced by many of the human characters, a regression that makes them begin to resemble the replicants they aim to destroy. Dick identifies empathy as being the one characteristic that separates humans from replicants in this world, and this is why Rick administers Voigt-Kampff tests, to see if potential replicants emit empathetic responses to cruel scenarios. The new Nexus-6 models of replicants, however, are more sophisticated and more “organic” than the previous models, and this makes it ever more difficult to tell the difference between them and their human counterparts.²⁴ Furthermore, and as a reversal, the identification of replicants is also complicated because “some people suffer from a ‘flattening of affect’, and in the test situation could be mistaken for robots, on this criterion.”²⁵ We therefore see two simultaneous processes occurring that lead towards a convergence of human and android, organic and artificial: as replicants are progressing to become more like humans, humans are regressing to become more like replicants.

This idea of emotional regression is alluded to by the character John Isidore, who describes empathy as an outdated human response. In Chapter 7, John recognizes that his co-workers do not show the same empathetic responses that he does to seeing dead robotic animals:

On the other hand, the synthetic sufferings of false animals didn’t bother Milt Borogrove or their boss Hannibal Sloot. So maybe it’s I, John Isidore said to himself. Maybe when you deteriorate back down the ladder of evolution as I have, when you sink into the tomb world slough of being a special—well, best to abandon that line of inquiry.²⁶

John Isidore suffers from “distorted genes,” an aftereffect of the widespread radiation caused by WWT, and this has left him with impaired cognitive functioning. He refers to himself as a “simple” or a “chickenhead,” and describes himself as having undergone a radical mental regression due to the radiation damage sustained. However, this passage is significant because in it John attributes his empathetic responses to his mental regression, as if this slip “down the ladder of evolution” has occupied him with outdated human characteristics, ones that are no longer beneficial or purposeful in the new artificial world. Paradoxically, it is John’s “regression” that saves him from being turned into an example of McLuhan’s discarnate man, and throughout the novel Rick is engaged in a similar battle, holding onto these last vestiges of human emotion as the landscape surrounding him becomes ever more empty.

A RETURN TO THE CORPOREAL

As Wheale explains, “[a] common reason often given for not paying attention to science fiction is the supposed lack of ‘human interest’ in the genre: technology dominates to the exclusion of developed personalities or relationships.”²⁷ However, Wheale also notes that Dick’s novel, in particular, is an exception to this notion because “it explicitly plays with confusions between human personality and artificial or machine-

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21 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 5.

22 Ibid, 6.

23 Ibid, 55.

24 Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, 198.

25 Wheale, “Recognising a ‘human-Thing,’” 299.

26 Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, 72.

27 Wheale, “Recognising a ‘human-Thing,’” 298.

derived intelligence.”²⁸ Gutierrez-Jones seconds this notion when discussing *Neuromancer*, explaining that though some critics argue that cyberpunk texts have a preoccupation with “an overriding desire to escape the body [and become] a mind without a body,” others believe that works like *Neuromancer* explore “the intermediation of human and machine intelligence.”²⁹ These aspects of *Neuromancer* and *Do Androids Dream?* are not exclusive to these two novels, and the refocusing of science fiction back onto the human was of interest to many of the “New Wave” SF writers in the 1950s and 1960s, such as J.G. Ballard, who inverted the trope of “outer space” and instead aimed to investigate the near future and “inner space,” the changes to human interiority as affected by our interactions with modern technology and architecture. Where Gibson’s and Dick’s novels differ from the New Wave, however, is in their focus on human touch, emotion, and empathetic response, in future worlds where human-technology symbiosis has already run its course, and technology has literally embedded itself into the human body and changed the sensorium.

I earlier identified the ways in which Case exhibits a disdain for flesh and bodily interaction, and is instead overwhelmed by the radiant power of the matrix to the point of wanting to merge with it. Though this is true, it is also important to note that when Wintermute orders Case’s body to be healed so as to allow him access to the matrix once again, the AI also orders for fifteen sacs of mycotoxin to be placed in his body, sacs which are slowly dissolving.³⁰ Should Case not abide by Wintermute’s instructions, the release of the mycotoxin would not only cause Case significant bodily harm, but likely kill him. In this regard, when Case re-enters cyberspace, it is in a very different way, seeing as he is reminded that his “life” is anchored to his *body*, not to an artificial domain.

Furthermore, though he initially expresses a disdain for the body, “Case’s relationship with Linda Lee, and later with Molly, invites him to rethink the meaning and value of embodiment,” and he slowly begins to understand how “physical instantiation is inseparable from meaning, thought, and agency.”³¹ Early in the novel, Case doesn’t have much interest in the “simstim” device which allows him to become “a passenger behind [Molly’s] eyes,” seeing, hearing, and feeling everything that she does.³² He shrugs this device off as a “meat toy,” and is much more interested in injecting his mind into cyberspace than experiencing physical sensation. Paradoxically, however, this technological device – as well as Case’s convergence with cyberspace – ultimately works to shift his attention back to his body, and he is reminded of the intimacy experienced with his previous lover, Linda Lee. During one of Case’s “flatlining” episodes, *Neuromancer* sends him to a virtual beach where a construct of Linda Lee awaits him. It is at this moment that Case experiences an epiphany:

It was a place he’d known before; not everyone could take him there, and somehow he’d always managed to forget it. Something he’d found and lost so many times. It belonged, he knew—he remembered—as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh that the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body in its strong blind way could ever read.³³

It is during this “flatlining” episode – when his body experiences a temporary death and his mind is jacked into a virtual world – that Case is dominated by bodily impulses. In other words, it is during this moment of all mind and no body that, paradoxically, Case is returned to, and reminded of, bodily sensations, made aware of the emotions that defined humanity prior to its absorption into the technological world.

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28 See note 27.

29 Gutierrez-Jones, “Stealing Kinship: *Neuromancer* and Artificial Intelligence,” 80.

30 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 45-46.

31 Gutierrez-Jones, “Stealing Kinship: *Neuromancer* and Artificial Intelligence,” 80.

32 Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 56.

33 *Ibid.*, 239.

CONCLUSION

Wheale explains that in every historical period “human-Things” have been imagined as entities which test or define the contemporary sense of human value: the incubus or succubus in Christian tradition, the Golem in Jewish folklore, Prospero’s Ariel and Caliban...and of course Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.³⁴ It is the same for the replicants envisioned by Dick and the AIs envisioned by Gibson, both of which are products of the technological age. Throughout his personal exodus, Rick Deckard searches for meaning, questions his own actions, and ultimately learns to simultaneously identify with and distinguish himself from the androids he aims to retire. It is through the image of the replicants that he learns about his own destructive potential, as well as his ability to still feel empathy, even though this response is fleeting, and is disappearing from the world around him. As for Case, though he initially exhibits a “contempt for flesh” and has an overwhelming desire to allow his symbiosis with technology to occur, memories from his past relationship with Linda Lee surface and he is reminded of physicality, of bodies caressing each other in emotional embrace.

Both Gibson and Dick turn away from the impulse of science fiction to explore the endless amount of technological uses and capabilities, and instead use technology—the empathy box and simstim device, respectively—to mediate interactions between the characters and their lost sensations and emotions (even if only temporarily). It is because of this “regression” to a state of “human” that existed prior to technological dominance that the characters are prevented from becoming examples of McLuhan’s theorized discarnate man, void of body and/or interiority, and are instead reminded of, and willingly give into, sensations of embodiment.

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34 Wheale, “Recognising a ‘human-Thing,’” 298.

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