

e. *Menura Superba*: posthuman dreams of ersatz animals

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Introduction

... he ascended clad for venturing out, including his Ajax model Mountibank Lead Codpiece, to the covered roof pasture whereon his electric sheep 'grazed'. Whereon it, sophisticated piece of hardware that it was, chomped away in simulated contentment, bamboozling the other tenants of the building. Of course, some of their animals undoubtedly consisted of electronic circuitry fakes, too; he had never nosed into the matter, any more than they, his neighbors, had pried into the real workings of his sheep. Nothing could be more impolite. To say, 'Is your sheep genuine' would be worse breach of manners than to inquire whether a citizen's teeth, hair, or internal organs would test out authentic. (Dick 1977: 10-11)

Katherine Hayles' definition of what it means to be posthuman, extends beyond the anthropocentrism often implied by discourse around techno-progressive and bio-conservative approaches, to include a shift in assumptions about subjectivity - from the possessive (rational and objective) individualism of Modernist thought, to a subjectivity where there is 'no difference or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.' (Hayles 1999: 3)

These demarcations are made problematic and ambiguous in Phillip K. Dick's speculative fiction *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Dick's speculative fictions are not essentially about technology, as Bukatman notes, the target of Dick's satire is the 'mythifying uses to which [technology] is directed by forces of instrumental reason.' (Bukatman 1993: 53) While Dick's work has been noted as employing

science fiction to explore speculative futures of capitalist production, technology and subjectivity, we are interested in the way Dick unsettles the ontological ground of what constitutes human. Specifically, in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, by asking whether humanity may be measured not by an ability to reason, but rather by an ability to empathise with and care for other species, and perhaps by way of extension, the environment in which we live.

This paper discusses the artwork *e Menura Superba*, and the influence of the broad question - what it means to be posthuman - through the making of this interactive sculpture, based on the form of the Australian lyrebird. Such a discussion necessarily requires consideration of the different approaches to animals and the environment, as seen through the lenses of our selected sources of inspiration, and in the context of information about the impacts of human influenced climate change.

Dreams of electric lyre birds?

In Philip K. Dick's fictional, yet potentially prescient future, most animals have become extinct. The only humans remaining on Earth are those too sick to leave the planet. To maintain sanity in this dystopia, people use a form of technology enabling them to select emotional states to suit the needs of any given day. They measure their social worth through ownership of and care for (real or ersatz) animals. This society maintains a strong code of etiquette rendering it impolite to inquire whether one's animal is real or not. Yet despite this care for ersatz animals, there exists an intolerance of ersatz humans (androids), who are eliminated by bounty hunters should they fail a test (the *Voight-Kampff* test), which looks for 'normal' human emotional responses to questions that are principally focused around empathy towards animals.

Our desire for relationships with species (life) other than the human species extends into simulated worlds where we build robotic pets¹, or breed and keep virtual creatures². Whilst none of these simulations are as lifelike as those described in

¹ For example see robot pets like such as the Sony Abio and the Ugobe Pleo animatronic dinosaur.

² There are numerous virtual pets for example Tamagotchis, Facebook cats, or Norns in the *Millennium Interactive Creatures*

Dick's novel, the emergence of this form of ersatz animal has prompted research into the ways humans interact with real as opposed to ersatz animals.³

The range of interactions between our human society and animals are many and varied. From pets to food, curiosities to national treasures, animals are loved, revered and feared. We selectively breed pets for companionship, keep collections of species in zoos and theme parks, engineer transgenic species for art and science, and employ animals from the humble earth worm to guide dogs. Our life on the planet is marked by this cohabitation, yet despite the superior intellect implied by Humanism (or perhaps because of this perspective), the need to achieve sustainable cohabitation, whilst long recognised, has proved difficult to achieve.

e. Menura Superba considers fictional, historical, and contemporary interactions with animals to discover what this behaviour reveals about shifting and static views on the nature of humanity. From an historical context, we considered the practice of displaying taxidermy specimens and live species. This was a popular activity among Kings, nobility and wealthy travellers during the centuries marked by European exploration of the rest of the world. As some of the world's first 'tourists' they collected these specimens for display in their homes as trophies of the exotic lands they visited, and like the characters in Dick's novel, these animals served also as symbols of wealth and status.

Knowledge of the Australian lyrebird reached Europe principally through the work of English ornithologist John Gould, who collected specimens of a significant number of Australian birds, including *Menura Superba* (the lyrebird), for sale as a valuable commodity. Of Gould's collection Smith notes '*Menura* specimens, whether for display or dissection, were among his most valued acquisitions, parcelled out to leading ornithologists and anatomists as well as to wealthy patrons (2007: 579).

When Enlightenment scientists worked to discover, study and preserve exotic fauna and flora found in the new world, they presumably did not intend this knowledge to enable destruction of the environments they explored. Nevertheless, indications of this potential were evident in the way these animals were objectified as symbols of wealth and status. A quote from John Gould's *Birds of Australia* describing how to

³ For example see studies such as *Robotic Pets and Children: A Developmental Study*. Melson, G. Beck, A.M. and Friedman B. (2004), *Robotic Pets and the Elderly*, Edwards, N. and Beck A.M. (2004)

capture a *Menura* specimen, illustrates the problematic nature of this early form of scientific study:

Another successful mode of procuring specimens, is by wearing a tail of the plumaged mail in the hat, keeping it constantly in motion, and concealing the person among the bushes ... it will be attracted within range of the gun.
(1848, Vol 3: 34)

Whilst the humanist approach to nature demonstrated a broad aesthetic appreciation, it was/is most valued as a source of raw materials, for processing into tools that improve the quality of human life. In Australia, the area known as Botany Bay perhaps best illustrates this objectification of natural resources. So named by botanist Joseph Banks because of its abundance of previously unknown plant species, significant amounts of native vegetation has now been cleared from land in the area to accommodate a shipping port, an airport and an oil refinery. Just 324 hectares of preserved bush land remain.

In contrast to this approach to nature, Dick's novel taps into a posthumanist sense that we are perhaps defined by our symbiotic connections with the ecosystems we inhabit. In Dick's future, destruction of species has progressed to the point where most large mammals, birds and reptiles, are incredibly rare or extinct. Care for animals is a civic duty, and vegetarianism is no longer an exception, but rather the rule. Yet whilst the characters in Dick's world would be repulsed by our historical and contemporary treatment of animals, vestiges of objectification remain as ownership of animals (real, taxidermied or ersatz) continues to be a form of commodity fetishism. The value of each animal in the fiction is listed in *Sidney's Catalogue*. Those who cannot afford a real animal purchase artificial animals and care for them as if they were real, in an attempt to maintain social standing.

About the work

In addition to its historical value as a trophy specimen, the lyrebird was selected because of the way it provides a measure of human impact on ecosystems. The lyrebird is known for its unusual calls that include the ability to mimic other birds' calls and sounds generated by human technology. For example, lyrebirds have been observed mimicking the sounds of cameras, car alarms and (disturbingly), chain saws. (Attenborough 2002) Thus the lyrebird is a gauge of our acoustic environment

as it mimics sound pollution, an often over looked interaction between human society and the natural world.

Our depiction of the lyrebird was taken from Gould's 1840-1848 painting of the lyrebird. We chose this stance because, despite his work as an ornithologist and a scientist, and his observations of wild specimens, he chose to depict the animal with its tail held in an unnatural upright position. In the wild, lyrebirds hold their tails out towards the back, in a line parallel with the ground. The tail only comes into the depicted upright position as the bird lifts its tail up over its head, extending the feathers out towards its front, during courtship displays.



Figure 1. Superb Lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*) Published in *The Birds of Australia* 1840-48. Artists: J. Gould and E. Gould. Lithographer: E. Gould.

Smith argues that Gould manipulated his illustrations of the lyrebird, (and another Australian bird the bowerbird), to create an avian symbol for the royal family, and to align with aesthetic values of the day (making the bird notably reminiscent of the peacock though less ostentatious) (Smith, 2007).



Figure 2. A male Superb Lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*) displaying courtship behaviour⁴

The selectively inaccurate representation of animal characteristics is, perhaps, symbolic of the way animals come to have meaning within human society, and are involved in defining what it is to be human (and post human), whilst also allowing humanity to separate itself from the animal kingdom.

In this work the naturally shy lyrebird, becomes curious. It is especially attracted by colourful clothing, and will sing and change the colour of its plumage in an attempt to attract an audience. This colour change is based on the bird's observation of its environment.

Through an embedded camera, *e. Menura Superba* collects images of colours from the audience's clothes, and builds a repertoire to display on the 35 tricolour LEDs placed under its polycarbonate plastic plumage. Abstract patterns from animal skins, plumage and plant textures, are displayed on OLED screens in the eye of the bird's tail. Other materials were sourced from post consumer waste (off cuts of stainless steel, brass, plastic, fibre optic and aluminium mesh). In addition to this visual mimicry, the bird mimics sound, but not in the same manner as the live specimen. Instead, it seeks out acoustic niches and selects suitable calls. Its repertoire ranges from known birdcalls through to sounds of human built-environments.

⁴ Source: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lantfarku.jpg> visited 18 May 2009



Figure 3. *e. Menura Superba*. Gavin Sade and Priscilla Bracks 2009.
 Photograph: P. Bracks & G. Sade.

Conclusion

In Dick's fiction we see the final struggles of the liberal human subject in the face of a range of forces, not least of which being the destruction of the planet's environment, and the presence of artificial humans who are as real as technologically enhanced humans.

It is not so much the anthropocentric definitions of the posthuman that we find interesting - rather the changing relationship between the natural world and humanity that may be seen in the human and posthuman subject. The possessive individualism of Modernist Humanism, and the liberal capitalism fostered by this philosophy, are based on a narrow interpretation of Darwin's survival of the fittest. Most people do not consider themselves 'animals' as such. In reference to Darwin's 'survival of the fittest', we have discarded the second (and most important) part of his

statement - survival of the fittest *organism, within its environment*. By defining ourselves as human, we have sought to separate ourselves from the natural world, but in doing so we have destroyed significant portions of the environment upon which we are dependant. The blurring of boundaries that characterize the posthuman presents us with this stark reality.

The longing of Dick's characters feel for the environment lost, also reveals an innate relationship between humans and the environment, which extends beyond its function of sustenance. Perhaps, even if it were technologically possible, the majority of humanity might find it did not actually want to fully separate themselves from the environments that support life. In *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind* (1973) Bateson points out that the unit of survival in Darwin's theory is actually *organism and environment*, as opposed to the popularly received Darwinian unit of organism alone, and that this is equivalent to the unit of mind and subject.

At this juncture, we find ourselves somewhere between the two figures, not yet posthuman but no longer liberal humanist either. *e. Menura Superba* was produced as a catalyst for thought about our position somewhere along this continuum of humanity.

Irrespective of standpoints such as bioconservative vs. technoprogressive, it is perhaps more important to consider whether one defines their humanity by the exploitation of technology, tools and resources, or, as part of the rich pattern of life on planet earth. The worlds promised by posthuman technology are indeed rich with possibility, but without corresponding steps to ensure the sustainability of technology and human society within the planet's Holocene ecosystems, we wonder whether the quality of that experience will remain rich if the environments become poor.

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