THE MELANCHOLY ANDROID

ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SACRED MACHINES

ERIC G. WILSON

THE MELANCHOLY ANDROID

This page intentionally left blank.

THE MELANCHOLY ANDROID

On the Psychology of Sacred Machines

Eric G. Wilson

Cover photo: Brigitte Helmas, the Machine Man in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Courtesty of Photofest.

CONTENTS

This page intentionally left blank.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This page intentionally left blank.

INTRODUCTION

Obsession is the blurring of human and machine, a condition in which a woman or a man falls into the blind repetition of the motor. In this state—seductive but dangerous—the person nears the android, the creature with no will of its own. The man obsessed and the oiled android are both inhabited by a force beyond their control—an internal power in the case of the human and an external one in the machine's instance. Human beings often take perverse pleasure in this condition—in the ecstasy, almost miraculous, of escaping the ego, the awkwardness of self-consciousness. But this pleasure can quickly turn to pain, the gnawing sense that growthless motion is as monstrous as the jerking robot. This is the tension of obsession: the soul pulled asunder between transcendence and horror.

This book on the psychology behind the creation of androids grew out of obsession, my fixation on three films that I could not stop watching: Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Peter Freund's *The Mummy*, and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*.[1] I was addicted to these movies: Lang's ravishing city and the gorgeous Brigette Helm as an android; Freund's hypnotic Egypt and his melancholy Karloff; Scott's reveries bathed in amber as well as Rutger Hauer's ghoulish face suffused with blood.

But these seductive qualities cannot account for my irrational desire to witness these movies *every single night*. These pictures had become more than cinema. They had metamorphosed into mirrors of my hidden depths, parts of my constitution of which I was barely aware. Viewing these pictures, I felt strange potencies at work, latent during the day of waking and working, emergent only before the crepuscular pictures of the celluloid. These impulses—evoked by Helm's erotic grace, Karloff's eyes ruined with longing, Hauer's desperate gaze—were complex blendings of fascination and fear: awful.

On the one hand, these films on exquisite machines pulled me away from my grating self-consciousness, allowing me to live for a time outside my skin, to transcend my ego. They empowered me to play the dignified

android, untroubled by the rift between thought and action. On the other, these same movies, meditations on the tragedies of mechanism, revealed the pernicious consequences of blending organ and machine: the possibility that machines might usurp humans or that humans are machines. These pictures troubled me with the idea that I might be, without knowing it, a machine.

I soon realized that my obsession with the films was double: an instinct for Eden, forms undisturbed by shame, and a fixation on the fall, the ruins of history. This twofold obsession was inseparable from the machines on the screen. These androids figured my twofold drive. These machines were products of a hunger for Adam or Eve unfallen, motions informed by love. They were pernicious manifestations of fallen time, worship of death. My obsession with these films was a masked cathexis on machines. My hold on these machines was hope for transcendence, terror toward determinism.

An attempt to account for my attraction to androids, this book is a tractate on the psychological modes generating three types of android: the mummy, the golem, and the automaton. I argue that humanoid machines reflect forms of melancholia that have resulted from what human beings have perennially called "the fall." These kinds of dejection are inseparable from self-consciousness, the painful rift between mind and matter, knowing and being. To heal these splits, humans have created mechanistic doubles untroubled by awareness of self. These new Adams embody the spiritual potential of their suffering creators—the possibility that human beings might be able to transcend their self-centered fears and desires and return, egoless, to Eden. However, though these mechanisms often issue from noble longing, they sometimes emerge from selfish urges to perpetuate the ills of the fall. In these cases, the android is not a redemptive technology but a stifling contraption—not miracle but monster.

IMAGINED ANDROIDS

That the machines that seduced me were cinematic is revealing. Imagined humanoids prove more psychologically complex and intriguing than actual androids. More supple and manifold than the somewhat limited machines in the history of technology, the artificial humans from the realms of film, myth, and literature tend to double the obsessions of their creators, their conflicted yearnings for both love and loathing, life and death. In this way, the androids emerging from human imagination constitute psychic projections as much as physical collections. Though certainly the humanoid machines from the annals of history inevitably

reflect to some degree the fears and desires of their creators, empirical androids are simply too limited in scope and gesture to manifest in interesting ways the concerns of their makers. Actual machines thus constitute rather crude approximations of their creators' overt and covert dreams. Virtual humanoids, in contrast, are subtle phantoms of their makers' interiors, revelations of conscious as well as unconscious reveries. The androids haunting the edifices of the imagination serve as especially luminous unveilings of hidden psychologies concerning the machine. These fantastical mechanisms bring to light what might well be true of all relationships between human beings and artificial doubles, regardless of whether this relationship is historical or imagined. To study the androids of cinema, myth, and literature is possibly to sound the origins of all machines. The source of mechanisms is likely sacred obsession: the holy yet accursed longing for eternity—endless life, painless death.

In attempting to understand relationships between melancholia and mechanism, I in this book focus mainly on the virtual androids dwelling in myth, literature, and film. However, I do not neglect the humanoid machines of historical annals. The actual talking statues of antiquity, the mechanical men of early modern gardens, the complex automatons of the enlightenment: these palpable contraptions and the philosophies behind them (coming from the likes of Hero of Alexandria, René Descartes, and Julien Offray de la Mettrie) provide interesting material examples of the mechanical reveries. Even if these physical humanoids are not as psychologically subtle as the more tenuous androids of the imagination, they nonetheless ground my analyses of sadness and machines. They show that the manifold mechanisms of culture are closely connected to the cogs of the laboratory, that empirical machines are inspirations for or results of imagined engines, either sources or precipitations. In this way, historical humanoids suggest that the psychological patterns of imagined humanoids are not simply occasional phenomena—not merely the fantasies of poets—but possibly enduring archetypes of experience, deep structures of heart and mind.

If the humanoids of the technologists help to substantiate the speculations of the poets, then imagined androids—the primary focus of my book—work to reveal the hidden psychologies of actual androids. Whether the mummies, golem, and automatons of myth, literature, and film inspired or resulted from empirical androids, this much is clear: the artificial humans of the imagination, like spiritual antitypes of material types, fulfill and reveal the interior spaces of external humanoid building. Imagined androids form psychic doubles of physical androids, tenuously visible phantoms manifesting the secrets of their fully bodied siblings.

Material androids moor their immaterial familiars. Immaterial androids manifest their material companions. To study this relationship

is not only to practice a form of medieval typology—a quest rising from shadowy types to truth, matter to spirit. To meditate on this linkage is also to engage in a modern version of allegory: psychoanalysis, a descent from consciousness to the unconscious. The stories of actual android makers and the machines that double their desires resemble the noon-time mind, the empirical day. The tales of virtual machines and their imagined creators suggest the midnight disposition, the shadows of dreams. Reversing expectations, psychoanalysis—whatever form it takes—claims that the wisps of reverie are more substantial than the data of the understanding, that the unconscious revealed by dreams is the ground of filmy consciousness. In unveiling the quintessence of solid machines—in elevating the gaze from body to soul—phantom mechanisms also illuminate the underworld of these same springs and cogs, the abysmal realms beneath Olympian reason.

This relationship between the spiritual and the secular, sacred allegory and profane psychoanalysis, suggests the familiar theory of correspondences: physical activities (the descent to the unconscious) are analogous to spiritual activities (the ascent to soul). Even though these motions move in opposite directions and even though they inhabit different planes of being, they reach the same end. Both travel from visible to invisible, outside to inside, known to mysterious. The way up and the way down are the same. As it is above, so it is below. But whichever direction one journeys, one must carefully navigate, for the placeless palaces of spirit and the unmapped region of the unconscious are alike decisive for one's condition. In these realms, one either discovers the Eden for which one has longed or finds the Gehenna one has dreaded.

To make an android—in history or in dream—is to walk this razor's edge between transcendence and neurosis. In studying this risk, my book necessarily meditates on the relationship between creator and product. Generally, the connection between maker and android falls into one of two categories: the machine is projection either of unconscious desires or conscious ideals. In the former case, the humanoid embodies characteristics that its creator pretends to loathe—dark, disturbing energies disdained by the conventions of daytime. However, though consciously claiming to hate the traits of the android, the maker secretly loves these same qualities, for they are really the contents of the unconscious externalized. The android constitutes a double of its maker's unknown regions, often irrational and unseemly. Like Mr. Hyde to Dr. Jeykll, as the monster to Victor Frankenstein, the android manifests its creator's unmapped interiors. It proves uncanny, a return of repression, unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. This is doubling as splitting, with the creator and the creation figuring two halves of what should be a full self. In the latter case—the android as double of conscious ideals—the artifi-

cial human externalizes its maker's spiritual yearnings: impossible notions of perfection, visions of a paradisiacal condition never known on earth. But this artifice, even though it might have been fashioned as a sort of idol to be worshipped and imitated, often becomes a reminder of distance and division—the gap between the actual and the ideal, the discord between matter and spirit. The ideal double sometimes exacerbates the very longing that it was meant to assuage and thus proves an object of hatred as well as of love. This kind of humanoid also proves uncanny, unearthing not repressed desire but the mystery of being, the abysmal and disturbing expanses of existence that the reason must for its survival often forget. Stoking the soul but shattering the ego, this ideal android recalls the beautiful yet destructive phantom in Shelley's *Alastor*; it reminds of the white specter guarding the watery *omphalos* in Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. These are doubles not as forgotten halves but as implicit wholes: repetitions of spiritual potential.

In meditating on androids as doubles of psychological states, I inevitably often treat machines as if they embody the mental dimensions of their creators. In doing so, I am self-consciously committing a version of Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy." I am attributing human fears and desires to nonhuman entities. Far from being a logical fallacy—a category mistake—this blurring of human and machine proves an accurate reflection of the enduring relationship between creators and humanoids. Even if the android does not really possess human loves and loathings—does not, as *Ding-an-sich*, bear these traits—it seems to embody these qualities, for it constitutes a projection of its maker's interior. The appearance of the android reveals human depths that its own cogs can never achieve. Likewise, though the human being cannot by definition be a machine— cannot comprise man and mechanism at once—he can obsessively dream of androids and take on the qualities of his projections. The mechanical behaviors of a human illuminate how the inanimate husk of the android hides humid emotions. When I in this book discover in the android sadnesses that a machine simply cannot experience and in the human mechanisms that organs could never contain, I trust that my rationale and meaning are clear: I am focusing on the interpenetrations between human beings and humanoid machines that frequently occur in the contexts of melancholia.

CRISIS OVER THE VIRTUAL

These melancholy interpenetrations between men and machines have been around since the days of ancient Egypt, when priests, saddened by death, labored to imbue human statues with ever-living gods. However,

since the romantic age of the early nineteenth century, when machines for the first time threatened to take the place of humans, these gloomy relationships have been especially intense. Our contemporary age is the nervous heir of this romantic condition and faces this question of identity—do humans or machines hold sovereignty?—in an extreme and frightening form.

Having pushed the industrial age into the digital one, ours is the time of virtual reality. Experiences in the digitalized pixels of the computer screen feel more real than events in the actual environment of breathing bodies. To download the gaze into a cool screen vivid with moving images is to enter into humming life, a perpetual whirl of figures. To touch smooth, beautiful flesh, decaying more each instant, is to feel dreamy, insubstantial, strange. We fear computer viruses as much as biological ones. We want our machines to be as friendly as our colleagues. We require our computers to survive; they are extensions of our consciousness. We increasingly yearn for cosmetic surgeries that make us at least part machine, organs propped up with artificial components.

This ubiquitous blurring between human and machine has produced unprecedented emotional and epistemological confusions. Our images of human beauty are often weird amalgamations of plastic surgery and biological development. If one falls in love with such a vexed physical surface, how is one to know if one yearns for the organ or the mechanism? This ambiguity of the heart quickly leads to epistemological crisis: how can one know the difference between apparent and real, determinism and freedom, automatic and autonomous? At stake is not only the oldest question in the book—what is existence?—but also the most pressing existential concern: who am I?

Postmodern technology has unexpectedly spawned a return to the most ancient philosophical speculations on ontology, epistemology, and ethics. In a contemporary world confused over the difference between human and machine, we face the harrowing possibility that being, knowing, and agency are impossible to establish. This crisis urges recent thinkers, regardless of their commitment to empiricism, to search for stable principles beyond the irreducibly ambiguous material plane. If physical data will not reveal whether a creature is fated or free, then perhaps metaphysical realms will. Postmodern conundrum opens to the oldest broodings: the visions of Egyptian priests searching for undying life beyond growth and decay; Platonic ideals of perfect forms unsullied by corrupt earth; Gnostic hopes that this material world is but the lurid dream of a false god who will one day awaken to the true deity beyond the stars.

This rather bizarre homology between ancient metaphysical speculation and recent technological awareness has found interesting expres-

sion, appropriately enough, in the movie theater—both the cave of ancient Plato and the laboratory of trendy visionaries of the virtual. The last decade has witnessed a surprising explosion of what might be called "Gnostic cinema," movie-house illusions paradoxically devoted to the notion that all matter is unreal. Examples of these conflicted pictures include *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *eXistenZ* (1999), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Dark City* (1998), and *Pleasantville* (1998).

Each of these films suggests that the only way to escape postmodern philosophical crisis is through transcendence, either elevation to the spirit or descent to the unconscious. Each picture intimates this liberation in content and form. In content, each depicts the world as a prison of technologically generated appearances surmounted only through some vitality beyond the empirical. In form, each proves an irreducible contradiction—computer-produced illusions espousing life beyond the virtual—and thus a self-consuming artifact pushing viewers toward a third term beyond representation.

The three films on which I was fixated and which inspired this book fall into this category of Gnostic cinema, devoted alike to ancient spiritualism and recent technology. Lang's *Metropolis*, Freund's *The Mummy*, and Scott's *Blade Runner* all brilliantly use the most recent production technologies of their periods in order to explore the horror of mechanism and the hope for transcendence. Each broods on this melancholy double bind through an android. Helm's robot is simultaneously seductive and destructive. Karloff's mummy features the slow grace of melancholy wisdom and the mechanical lethargy of the zombie. Hauer's Replicant combines indifferent violence and tortured beauty.

My book partakes of the spirit of the films from which it grew in two ways. First of all, like these films—and like all instances of Gnostic cinema—my study, regardless of the historical period on which it focuses, is a sustained meditation on our contemporary condition: a philosophical and psychological crisis generated by ambiguity over the difference between organ and machine. The book stays close to this harrowing situation from which we cannot escape: we are made to love machines that we want to hate; we are expected to loathe mechanisms we yearn to love. Second, and also in connection with these films of a Gnostic bent, my book places itself at odds with itself in the hope, probably doomed to fail, for transcendence. This conflict is a linguistic one. Though my study is grounded on traditional argumentation—a thesis proved with evidence—it is also committed to the lyrical mood of film, literature, and myth. This tension between intellectual argument and poetic atmosphere, similar to the cinematic strife between regularized technology and dreamy ambience, intimates a third term possibly

capable of reconciling logic and lyric. What this third term might be, I cannot say, though I suspect that it is more ideal than real, more optative than indicative.

THE HUMANOID'S HISTORY

This book studies the archetypal patterns by which dejected humans have related to their artificial doubles. It focuses on conditions that have remained similar in kind (though they have differed in degree of intensity) throughout history, ranging from the building of crude statues to the construction of artificial intelligences. These repeated situations are characterized by the humanoid machine in three related forms: as manifestation of melancholy, as figure of holiness and horror, as double bind intimating a third term.

These recurring structures, though, as I have suggested, are not static. Pitches of historical intensity bend the forms in one way or another, stretching here and relaxing there, expanding and contracting. Even if each historical period that I study is organized by a spectrum running from machine as miracle to machine as monster, each period emphasizes a different span of this spectrum. The ancient and classical periods tend to inflect the humanoid machine purely as a sacred contraption, a physical manifestation of spiritual consciousness. The medieval and early modern segments of history are prone to be torn between seeing the android as vehicle for transcendence and viewing this same machine as violation of order. The Enlightenment period continues to meditate on the religious densities of the humanoid but also looks at the artificial human in secular lights: as a prime example of our technological prowess or as a notable instance of human hubris. In the romantic age, the first period (as mentioned earlier) actually threatened by the possibility of machines usurping humans, the android becomes a bizarre amalgamation of each of these points along the spectrum, represented as sublime god and gothic monster, exquisite work of art and execrable affront to nature. Heir of the romantic age and its successors, our contemporary period (as already noted) brings the conflict between human and machine to extreme crisis, for it entirely collapses the difference between virtual and real, prosthesis and bone, and thus renders this spectrum of android perspectives superfluous. If everything is a machine, why even try psychology, the fine gradations of the emotionally fraught mind?

My book negotiates this difficult interplay between structure and metamorphosis mostly in Western contexts. Though I occasionally consider the non-Western visions of ancient Egypt or medieval Israel, I focus on how these contexts get translated into the philosophical and psycho-

logical categories of European intellectual history. This emphasis is not unwarranted, for the theories and practices surrounding the mummy and the golem, though they might have arisen from non-Western sources, have perennially fascinated the minds of the West and have become enduring components of Western thought. In focusing on Western histories of ideas, this book does not pretend to make universal claims. What this study says about human beings and humanoid machines might not apply to the technologies of the East. One would like a new Joseph Needham to study relationships between Western and Eastern perspectives on the android.

This book is limited in other ways as well. Emphasizing psychological and philosophical elements, it only glances at the political components of android making. One could devote an entire study to how the history of androids illuminates issues of gender, race, and class. The history of the term "robot" suggests how the history of humanoids might address political oppression. The word originates from the Czech *rab*, "slave," by way of another Czech word, *robota*, "work." Karel Capek coined the term for his play of 1921, *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*. This drama depicts artificial humans as a race of slaves who rebel against their masters. Taking this etymology and this theme as cues, one could fruitfully study these trends: humanoids are often females made by male inventors, outcasts concocted by careless creators, and servants designed by imperialistic scientists.[2] Though my focus has not allowed me to explore these currents, I am convinced that more study of the politics of android building—which would complement the work of Donna J. Haraway and Claudia Springer[3]—is needed.

This book is also limited in the scope of its examples. One can find rich instances of the android throughout Western mythology and folklore, ranging from the automatons of Daedalus to Roger Bacon's talking head. Likewise, one can discover interesting artificial humans in the canons of Western literature, reaching from Homer's artificial maidens, detailed in the *Iliad* (c. 800 BC), to Philip K. Dick's human replicants, described in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). One also encounters myriad humanoids in twentieth-century cinema, with Paul Wegener's *The Golem* (1915) on one end of the spectrum and Steven Speilberg's *A. I.* (2001) on the other. Any of these instances of artificial humanity might well embody psychological dimensions of android building. However, as I have already intimated, the most complex, rewarding examples of melancholy machine making come from the romantic age, beginning roughly in 1798 with Coleridge and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, and approximately ending in 1855 with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The writers of this period experienced unprecedented mechanical possibility. After

the technological innovations of the eighteenth century, it appeared, for the first time in Western history, that machines might overcome man.

This possibility charged the machine with new intensity. Though certain technological devices had carried an uncanny aura in the eighteenth century—as Terry Castle has shown in *The Female Thermometer*[4]—in the nineteenth century the monstrous and the miraculous potentialities of machines evoked especially Faustian desires and fears. On the one hand, it appeared as though the efficient machine literally might return humans to their godly origins; on the other, it seemed as though the violent engine in reality might result in hell on earth. This duplicitous situation—melancholy longing for origin, morbid terror of end—generated a literary interest in androids never before encountered. In Germany, this was the period of Heinrich von Kleist's "On the Marionette Theater" (1810), a meditation on the prelapsarian grace of puppets; of E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1816) and "The Automata" (1821), tales on the weird qualities of artificial humans; and of Goethe's *Faust, Part Two* (1832), a depiction, among other things, of a redemptive homunculus. In England, this time witnessed Coleridge's contemplations on the somnambulist, the human turned machine, in "Kubla Khan" (1797, 1816); Mary Shelley's version of the golem, the clay form animated, in *Frankenstein* (1818); and De Quincey's own lucubrations on sleepwalking in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821). These years in America saw Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799), a novel on somnambulism; Poe's explorations of mummification in "Ligeia" (1838) and "Some Words with a Mummy" (1845); and Hawthorne's analysis of machines and perfection in "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1846).

Though I glance at android examples beyond the romantic period (mainly at the androids of cinema), I primarily instance my psychological speculations on humanoids with this period's store of tales. What emerges from this archive is this conclusion (at which I have already hinted): our contemporary age—call it postmodern or posthuman or whatnot—is still struggling with the great confusion of the early nineteenth century, when the divide between human and machine blurred and disappeared. This is the legacy of the romantic age, and it still informs our disposition and our despair, and it thrives in virtual events taking place daily in our ubiquitous movie houses.

The nature of my psychological speculations is another limitation in this book's scope. When I say "psychological," I have a particular set of ideas in mind: not contemporary theories of clinical psychologists but more dated ideas of doctors of the soul, those visions keen on healing the enduring disorders associated with the fall—the decline from innocence to experience, unity to division, consciousness to self-consciousness. This canon of psychologists includes Ficino, the Renaissance philosopher who inflected Hermetic philosophy into a cure for melancholy; Kleist, the