



**"Legitimizing Illegitimate Power: Technology and Nature as Fictive Mediators"**

by Megan Krelle



Within both Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen*, technology is used to challenge the hegemonic ideal that the natural is of more value than the artificial. This prevailing valuation is explored through the examination of the societal power structure, which asserts the dominance of one group and their ideals over any other, and the way that value is constructed and legitimized by the ruling centre of the society. Consequently, both *Androids* and *Alif* are texts in which the use of technology is legitimized if it is used to support the hegemonic ideal (and thus to assist in legitimizing the ruling class' power), yet is deemed illegitimate if it threatens to replace or seriously challenge the central power's position. The legitimacy of the central power structure in their claim to dominion is therefore at stake in the valuation of the natural/artificial, and technology is used to mediate and undercut the centre's authority.

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is set on an Earth contaminated by radioactive dust, resulting in the deaths of a large portion of animals and affecting human reproduction and genetic material. The novel follows Rick Deckard — a bounty hunter charged with 'retiring' (i.e., destroying) a highly

intelligent group of organic robots called the Nexus-6 androids. Originally built as servants, these androids have escaped from the colonies on Mars to seek emancipation and freedom by masquerading as humans on Earth. As Rick hunts the 'andys,' he starts to question the morality of retiring the androids, particularly as he becomes emotionally attached to an andy named Rachael Rosen, who is revealed to be protecting a group of escaped androids.

*Alif the Unseen* is set in 'The City', an unstated location in the Persian Gulf in the Arab Emirates. The book follows Alif, a hacker who works to secure various groups on the Internet against the state security censors and the figure known as The Hand. After being trusted with a manuscript of a mythical book called the *Alf Yeom wa Yeom* — or *The Thousand and One Days*, purportedly a work by the jinn — by his former lover Intisar, and while being hunted by state security, Alif and his friend Dina stumble upon the world of the *Unseen*, where they are helped by a shape-shifting jinn named Vikram. Additionally, Alif is assisted by Sheikh Bilal, a religious leader who attempts to hide him from the State's forces. Both are arrested and tortured, but escape State custody with the help of NewQuarter, an ex-hacker. The novel ends when Alif and

The Hand use two computer programs that Alif had designed to engage in a virtual battle that is tied closely with a spiritual battle taking place between the Unseen jinn. They inadvertently crash the Internet and the utility grids, plunging the city into chaos, which instigates a revolution in the streets.

The power structures of the societies within the two texts can be considered through the centre-periphery model, a “spatial metaphor used to describe and explain the unequal distribution of power in the economy, society, and polity.”<sup>1</sup> In this essay, the centre is conceived of in terms of being both the “people who occupy positions” of authority — those who are the “top decision makers” — as well as a space in which people and values are located.<sup>2</sup> As Edward Shils notes, the centre exerts dominance over those who live in the particular society, and the “order of symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern the society” are located in this central space.<sup>3</sup> The centre is therefore a position where the ruling authorities of

society are located. In contrast, S. Pietikainen and H. Kelly-Holmes consider the periphery to be “marginal, the opposite of the centre, the boundary or outer part of it”;<sup>4</sup> those who are most marginalized and least valued according to the values and ideals of the centre are therefore positioned further out in the periphery.

Furthermore, R.D. Jessop notes that the relationship between the legitimization of values and the centre is circular: “the central values are those espoused by the ruling authorities, the ruling authorities are those whose power is legitimated by the central values”;<sup>5</sup> the centre therefore privileges and legitimizes values which reasserts its own authority and hegemony. In order to position one particular group as superior or worth greater value, there must be an oppositional group with which to judge it against — an ‘Other’ which the hegemonic group defines itself against.<sup>6</sup> Value is therefore “relational and practical, the outcome of processes of negotiation and contestation,” and hegemonic

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<sup>1</sup> S. Pietikainen and H. Kelly-Holmes, “Multilingualism and the Periphery,” in *Multilingualism and the Periphery*, eds. S. Pietikainen and H. Kelly-Holmes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Sivert Langholm, “On the Concept of Center and Periphery,” *Journal of Peace Research* 8.3/4 (1971): 274, 273.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Shils, “Centre and Periphery,” in *The Logic of Personal Knowledge: Essays Presented to Michael*

Polyani on his Seventieth Birthday 11th March 1961, (Illinois: The Free Press, 1961): 117.

<sup>4</sup> Pietikainen and Kelly-Holmes, “Multilingualism,” 3.

<sup>5</sup> R.D. Jessop, “Exchange and Power in Structural Analysis,” *Sociological Review* 17.3 (1969): 417.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Kerslake, *Science Fiction and Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 8.

ideals must therefore be considered in contrast to the ideals of an Other.<sup>7</sup> Within both *Androids* and *Alif*, those who occupy the centre have their hegemonic position threatened by another group through the use of technology: in *Androids*, this centre-space is occupied by a human faction which is threatened by the group of escaped androids, while in *Alif*, the central position is occupied by the ruling government, and they are threatened by a number of groups who oppose their rule - more specifically, groups who express discontent on the internet.

However, technology itself does not threaten the centre; rather, it is when technology is used in an illegitimate manner that it is threatening to the centre's hegemony. Of course, it is the centre which has the power to define what is legitimate and what is not — therefore, anything which threatens the centre's power will be considered illegitimate, in order to ensure hegemony is maintained. Within both *Androids* and *Alif*, technology is used in a way which contests the centre's hegemony by presenting an artificial construct as a possible replacement. Joseph Francavilla

discusses this notion in the figure of the 'double', and posits that, "there is often competition or rivalry between doubles for the same space or location, the same position or rank, the same right to existence...This competition further implies the threat of displacement: the original self may lose its uniqueness and its identity to the other self which replaces the original."<sup>8</sup>

Within *Androids*, the androids function as the double for the human subject — apart from a bone marrow test, the only way to discern an android from a human is to test for a lack of empathy. The fact that androids are visually indistinguishable from humans is an issue because they are an artificial construct which can easily replace a human subject. Eventually created for colonists, the TV asserts that androids are "custom-tailored...designed specifically for YOUR UNIQUE NEEDS, FOR YOU AND YOU ALONE" — they are explicitly created to be subservient to humans, to be treated as inferior beings.<sup>9</sup> The distinction between human and android must be maintained in order to legitimate the humans' power over the androids, and to validate the way non-

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<sup>7</sup> John Frow, *Cultural Studies & Cultural Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Francavilla, "The Android as Doppelgänger," in *Retrofitting Blade Runner: Issues in Ridley Scott's Blade Runner and Philip K. Dick's Do*

*Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, ed. J. B. Ker-  
man, 2nd ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green  
State University Popular Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric  
Sheep?*, (London: Phoenix, 2012), 13.

humans are treated (as inferior); there must therefore be a distinction which defines them as being non-human.

Yet the distinction between android and human becomes extremely blurred - the Voigt-Kampff scale, used to determine empathic response, is not infallible, for “a small class of human beings could not pass the Voigt-Kampff scale,” and, though official ideology states that androids cannot feel empathy for each other, Rachael sleeps with bounty-hunters in order to protect other androids, so that the bounty-hunters “won’t be able to retire more androids; it won’t be just me, it’ll be the Batys and Stratton too.”<sup>10</sup> Officially, a distinguishing characteristic (lack of empathy) is identified which positions androids as inferior and this is used to reassert the centre’s hegemony over them; however the fact that this distinction is repeatedly called into question throughout the text is problematic for the legitimacy of the centre’s power and threatens to undermine it.

In a similar manner, the internet acts as the double in *Alif* — the virtual space being a double for the ‘real’ world, which threatens to displace the government’s authority. The virtual space of the internet is a place which

allows anonymity, and therefore it can obscure the social class of the user when they operate within the virtual space. The obscuring of social status online is in contrast to the clearly defined and observable social stratification in the real world — the City was “a place that boasted one of the most sophisticated digital policing systems in the world, but no proper mail service. Emirates with princes in silver-plated cars and districts with no running water.”<sup>11</sup> This social division highlights the fact that there is a specific ruling class which occupies the space of the centre — the aristocracy, the princes and their wealth — and the centre therefore wishes to maintain this hegemony. The internet presents itself as a new space (though virtual) where the government must also maintain and assert its hegemony over; it is dangerous if the government does not censor the virtual space of the internet because it would allow conflicting ideals an equal platform to be expressed on, and if this space of equality transitioned into the real world, then the government’s hegemony is threatened. The internet is therefore tightly controlled, and “every forum is monitored for illegal expressions of distress

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<sup>10</sup> Dick, *Androids*, 30, 158.

<sup>11</sup> G. Willow Wilson, *Alif the Unseen*, (Melbourne: Allen & Unwin, 2012), 15.



and discontent” to prevent the loss of control.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the internet presenting a palpable threat to the government, the virtual realm is considered to be a space of less value than the real world, which assists in constructing the assumption of illegitimacy and ineffectiveness of the online resistance in affecting real change. Alif’s assumption that the “State crushed people like him because it could, not because it saw them as a real threat” demonstrates that Alif himself does not consider his actions to be a legitimate threat to the government.<sup>13</sup> His assumption on why the government targets hackers, because “it could” as opposed to being a “real threat,” highlights the way Alif buys into the government’s construction of the virtual space as an illegitimate threat which cannot affect the real-world hegemony and control of the State. For Alif, there is a clear division between online and offline resistance against the government, for he had not considered the online resistance to be able to have real consequences in the real world — “[h]e had not believed, not truly. To choose a new name, to sit behind a screen and harry a few elites; the Hand was right, it had felt like a game, a fiction.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 236.

Yet it is precisely because the virtual space does represent a serious threat that the State must continue to assert the hegemony of the real over the artificial; if the virtual space, which allows multiple valuation systems to be considered equally valid at once, is considered to be as equally valid as the real-world space, then resistance to a hegemonic regime is given legitimacy. NewQuarter notes of the revolution that, “[c]omputer geeks did this. We told these ruffians they could all have a voice, but they had to share the same virtual platform<sup>15</sup> — this idea that “they could all have a voice” undercuts the State’s claim that their value system is more valuable than any other regime. For the government, the virtual space threatens to replace the real-world space with a system that values multiple viewpoints, which would destabilise the centre’s power and position as the only valid system; the virtual must therefore be suppressed and considered as a space which can have no impact on the real world and the legitimacy of the government’s claim to power.

The legitimacy of the centre’s power is therefore seen in both texts as contingent on maintaining the current hierarchy, one which identifies a

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 381.



specific ruling group as the legitimate source of power; in both texts, this hierarchy can be seen to be upheld through a valuation of the natural/real over the artificial/fiction. However, both texts are shown to question the legitimacy of this natural/real versus artificial/fiction valuation, as sanctioned by the centre, by questioning the right and logic the centre uses to maintain its position through the way technology is portrayed and used.

Within *Androids*, it is through the contradictions presented between the officially sanctioned view — that humans (and the natural) are more valuable than the artificial — that the centre's legitimacy is undermined. Empathy is used as a marker by the centre as that which defines a human, and it is therefore important for humans to visibly demonstrate empathy to reinforce this value. The ownership of a real animal therefore becomes an important social marker, as well as proof of one's identity as a human and morality. Yet the ownership of electric animals also occurs, and is socially acceptable as long as it remains unknown that an animal is electric. Rick asserts of his neighbours that "some of their animals undoubtedly consisted of electronic circuitry fakes;

he had of course never nosed into the matter any more than they, his neighbours, had pried into the real workings of his sheep";<sup>16</sup> this passage illustrates that the electric animals serve an important function in maintaining the social expectation of animal ownership, and, moreover, that it is understood to be a widespread practice.

However, it is critical that the illusion of owning a real animal is maintained — if maintenance is required for an electric animal "[t]he repair outfit's truck is of course marked 'animal hospital something.' And the driver dresses like a vet," an important fraud required to maintain the visibility of adherence to the ideal of real animal ownership.<sup>17</sup> Electric animals are, in a sense, a necessary evil — Rick acknowledges that "[o]wning 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."<sup>18</sup> The fact that real and electric animals are practically indistinguishable is condoned instead of condemned by the centre is because it (ironically) reasserts the centre's notion that empathy is the distinguishing characteristic of humanity, and animals do not threaten to

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<sup>16</sup> Dick, *Androids*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

replace the centre in the way that androids do.

Yet Rick comes to an understanding that “[t]he electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those are,” and is therefore satisfied with his fake toad.<sup>19</sup> Iran’s commitment to look after the electric toad, and claiming that “[m]y husband is devoted to it,” is crucial because the toad is an extinct species — any neighbours would know that the Deckards’ do not own a real animal.<sup>20</sup> The toad is unable to enact its role legitimately (i.e., to maintain the idea that one must own a real animal) because the Sidney’s catalogue clearly defines it as being extinct. Rick therefore explicitly rejects the value placed on the natural over the artificial, and also rejects the concept that empathy defines what it means to be human. This has further implications for human hegemony — if the artificial and natural both have a right to their lives, then the poor treatment of androids, and the central position humans have in power relations, no longer maintains legitimacy.

In a similar manner, technology in *Alif* is used to explore and highlight the impact the artificial has in ‘real’ life, and undercuts the notion that there can only be one valid perspective and

valuation within society, thereby challenging the State’s hegemony. Sheikh Bilal’s comment, “[w]e are living in a post-fictional era...we can sit in a mosque and have a debate about the fictional pork a fictional character consumes in a video game, with every gravity we would accord something quite real,” highlights the way *Alif* undercuts the value in distinguishing the real and the artificial.<sup>21</sup> By positing that they live in a “post-fictional era,” the novel asserts that the virtual or artificial does indeed impact the ‘real’ world by collapsing the distinction between the two. If there is no fiction — and therefore everything is ‘real’ — then everything has impact and can influence the ‘real’ world. If eating fictional pork can have moral or religious implications in the real world for a person, then any ‘fictional’ thing can also have real-world value and effects; it cannot be considered inferior to ‘real’ concerns, because it has a real impact.

Furthermore, *NewQuarter* raises the fact that the tendency to devalue the fictional/artificial is because of the importance placed on rationality: “I think we’re going back to the way things used to be, before a bunch of European intellectuals in tights decided to draw a line

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<sup>19</sup> Dick, *Androids*, 191.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, *Alif the Unseen*, 370.





between what's rational and what's not. I don't think our ancestors thought the distinction necessary."<sup>22</sup> His comment highlights the value their society placed on the rational, and notes it as a modern valuation which has been endorsed by the centre — a distinct shift from the past which allowed the rational and irrational to co-exist.

The accepted blurring of rational and irrational in the past meant that humans and the jinn, "acknowledged one another," and could co-exist together.<sup>23</sup> Vikram recalls "there were days when the world was crawling with walis and prophets who could stare right at us, but that was a long time ago. Now it's different."<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the walis and prophets — those who could see the jinn — are affiliated with Islam, suggesting that religious belief in the past acknowledged the jinn and their domains as real, and allowed them a more central position within society. Indeed, the jinn are "straight out of a holy book,"<sup>25</sup> and the validation of the jinn's position in society (as real beings) stems from people's acceptance and belief in the religious text — a belief which acknowledged the existence and reality

of the jinn because the delineation of rationality was considered unnecessary.

However, the modern emphasis on rationality and the 'real' affected the way people approached religion, which consequently impacted the jinn's position in society. The jinn who escorts Alif, NewQuarter, and Sheikh Bilal through the Empty Quarter asserts, "Belief is dying out. To most of your people the jinn are paranoid fantasies who run around causing epilepsy and mental illness. Find me someone to whom the hidden folk are simply real, as described in the Books. You'll be searching for a long time";<sup>26</sup> despite their explicit documentation within religious texts, the jinn are now discounted as "paranoid fantasies" — a devaluation which categorises belief in jinn as irrational and denies them an existence in the 'real' world. The modern religious belief system adheres to the centre's valuation of rationality, and therefore rejects the jinn as imaginary beings; Intisar writes in her thesis, "The suggestion that the Alf Yeom is the work of jinn is surely a curious one. The Quran speaks of the hidden people in the most candid way, yet more and more the educated faithful will not admit to believing in them,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 303.

however readily they might accept even the harshest and most obscure points of Islamic law.”<sup>27</sup> Increasingly, religious belief is based on rationality, a viewpoint becoming more widespread among “the educated faithful” — a term which itself suggests a rejection of the irrational within religious belief. Consequently, it is the burgeoning mass of “educated faithful” who discount the existence of jinn because the centre posits it as irrational for them to exist.

Since the centre now places immense value on the rational, it relegates belief in the jinn to the periphery. To a rational mind they cannot exist, and they subsequently remain unseen to the majority of humans who share this belief. Vikram comments, “You think I am an ordinary man who has gone a little mad. Well, that’s what I get for spending too much time hanging around the periphery of the seeing world. There is danger in being seen as too real”;<sup>28</sup> in order for Vikram to exist in the eyes of the (human) society, he cannot be considered to be a jinn. When he is visible to humans, he must be defined as a man in order to remain as a legitimate subject within human society. Yet, even as a man, he can only exist on the “periphery of the seeing world,” and must be

considered “a little mad” because he asserts the reality of the existence of the jinn — a claim contrary to the centre’s position, which thus pushes him to the fringes of human society. Indeed, Alif initially rejects that Vikram could be a jinn because it would be irrational for him to believe otherwise; despite realising that Vikram’s legs were “leonine,” Alif nevertheless asserts, “Of course he was human. What else could he be?”<sup>29</sup> Alif clearly rejects the possibility that Vikram is not human precisely because he values the rational over the irrational — a valuation endorsed by the centre. However, the fact that the jinn do exist and affect the ‘real’ world undermines the centre’s valuation of the rational, and thereby challenges the legitimacy of the centre’s hegemony. Instead, NewQuarter’s assertion of a return to the past valuation system — which posits the distinction between rational and irrational as unnecessary — presents the idea that contradictory systems can co-exist equally and operate within the same space, even if it defies rational thought.

Technology within these texts is used to explore and question the idea upheld by the central power that the natural or real is more valuable than the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 93.

artificial. Within *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the androids are positioned as the Other in order for humanity to be defined and asserted as being of central importance. Yet ironically the society is heavily reliant on technology, and relies on artifice to maintain the illusion that the natural is of more value. This valuation, in turn, is used to justify the right for humans to treat anything non-human as inferior, yet the logic used to reassert human hegemony is shown to be extremely problematic; in light of the logic of society, androids and humans are actually indistinguishable, and therefore the hegemonic legitimacy of humans is non-existent. Technology destabilises the human identity and the power structure which asserts it as supreme.

In *Alif the Unseen*, the main piece of technology is the internet — a virtual space in which resistance against the State can occur. It is through this medium that different groups can exist and be considered equally, which undermines the prevailing idea of a hegemonic power. Despite being a virtual space, the internet is ultimately shown to be as important a space as the real world in allowing disparate groups to come together as equals and enact real change. The emphasis on considering different perspectives as equally valuable

also challenges the validity of one hegemonic power asserting control over others, and consequently undermines the validity of the government. Thus, the representation of technology within both texts is used to contest the legitimacy of a central hegemonic power by contesting the way value is placed upon that which is considered natural and that which is considered artificial.

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