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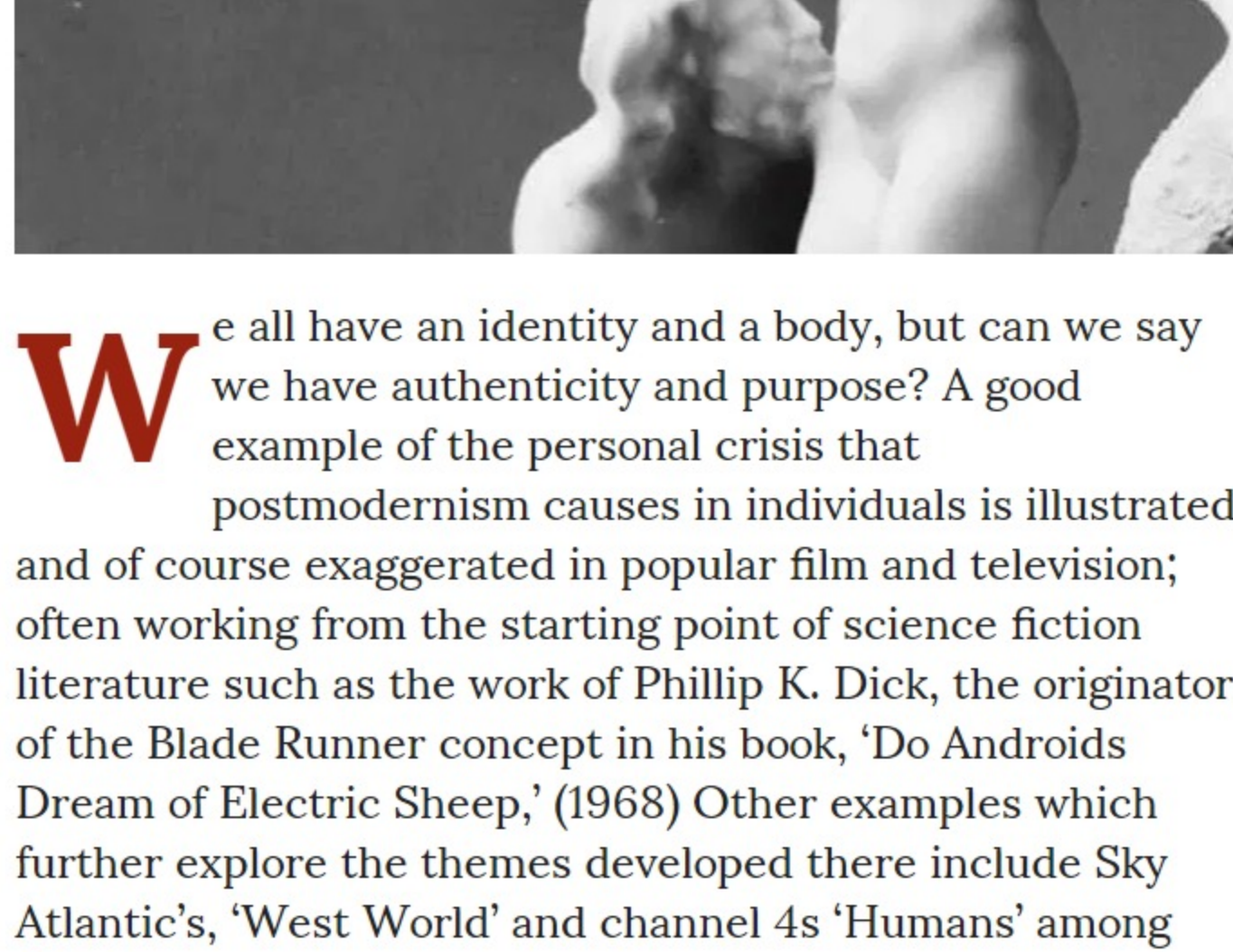
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SYNTHETIC BODIES, IDENTITY, AUTHENTICITY AND PURPOSE

By Michael Eden & Art



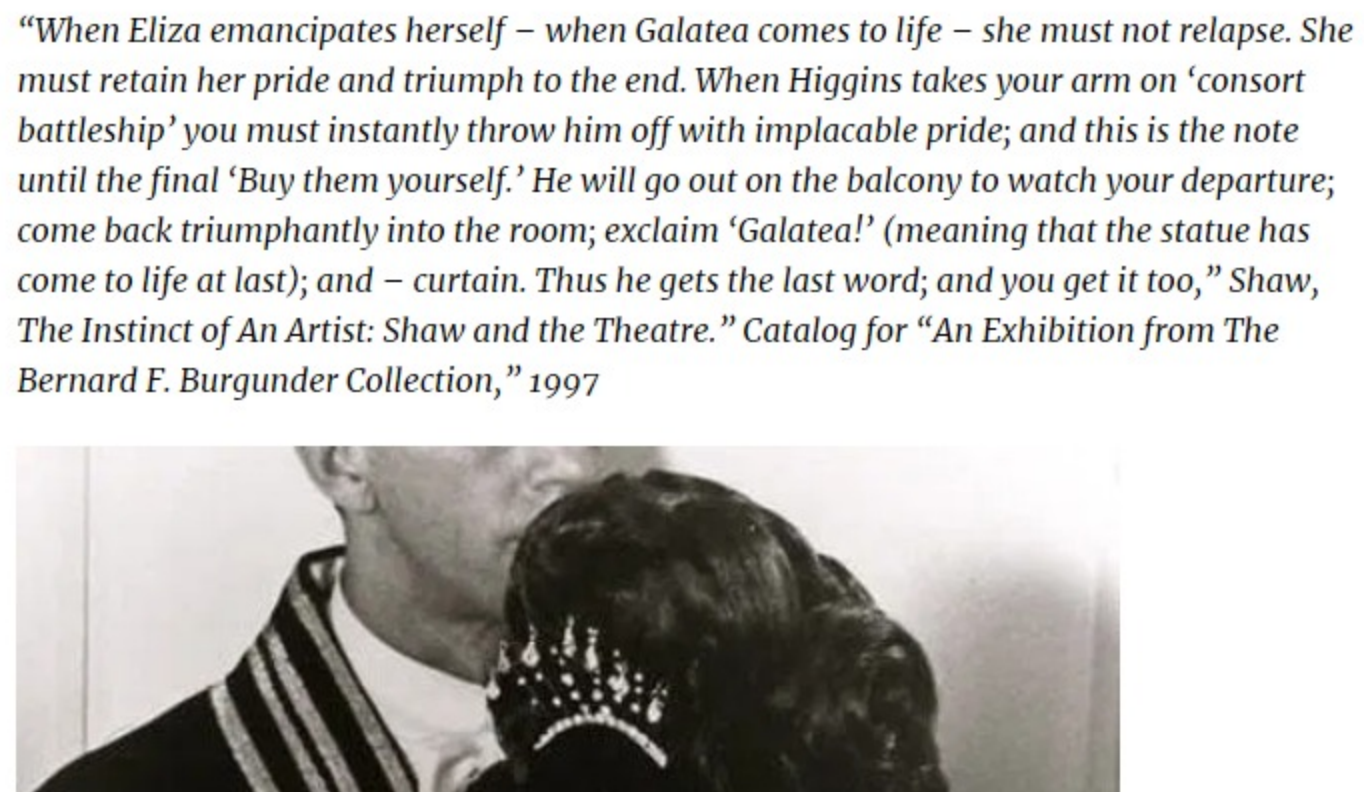
We all have an identity and a body, but can we say we have authenticity and purpose? A good example of the personal crisis that postmodernism causes in individuals is illustrated and of course exaggerated in popular film and television; often working from the starting point of science fiction literature such as the work of Phillip K. Dick, the originator of the Blade Runner concept in his book, 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep,' (1968) Other examples which further explore the themes developed there include Sky Atlantic's, 'West World' and channel 4s 'Humans' among others.

The idea of the synthetic human is a common motif used to explore themes of meaning and purpose in the modern subject after what has been called 'the successive humiliations of man' (Freud) or the 'disenchantment' of the world (Weber). These phenomena are exacerbated by the end of the utopian Modernist project.

There is also a common tendency to use a female subject to embody the tragic status of the synthetic human, often given a highly sympathetic character which highlights the 'normalised' masculine power structures. The flip side of that is the horrific 'Stepford wife' which realises the lowest male desires anxiously in the most depressing way the question of what a certain kind of man wants from women (in that instance the synthetic human has no self-consciousness and is effectively an animated sex doll and domestic slave) The real woman are killed and replaced; however the close of the film makes it clear that the question is, are we the viewer more like the superficial robotic slaves or the active protagonist? The image of the zombie like Stepford wives shopping and engaging in banal talk makes a similar point to the other examples mentioned above with the synthetic woman as monster rather than heroine.

Pygmalion and Galatea

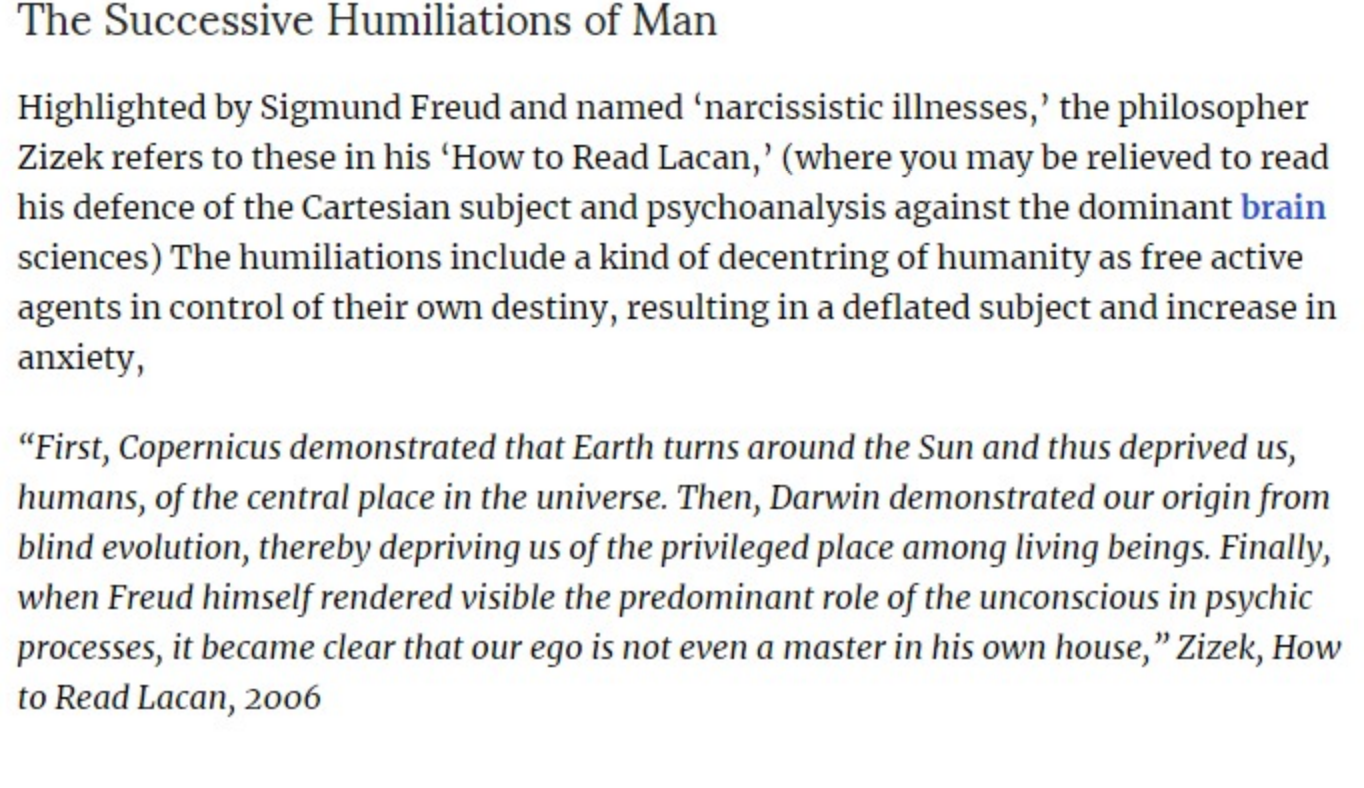
There is also a link to be drawn to 'Pygmalion' by George Bernard Shaw (1913) here the background tension is class and society rather than the science fiction universe of technology, never the less the core message is similar; the once thought organic whole is questioned, and if we sacrifice that construct (in this case remaining in your original class) then we sacrifice our place in it.



Mrs. Patrick Campbell in a scene from Pygmalion as Eliza Doolittle selling flowers as Professor Higgins looks on.

Eliza (in Shaw's intended versions) is left not quite belonging to either the working class or the new wealthy elite, the constructed nature of Higgins enterprise has set her free but in a world that has for her been badly undermined. Shaw was often frustrated by diluted 'happy' endings tacked on by directors and producers famously stating in a correspondence with Sir Herbert Tree (theatre manager and playing Higgins) 'Your ending is damnable; you ought to be shot,' Shaw later tried to protect the integrity of the play, below is his attempt to do this in the 1920s revival with a compromise written to Mrs Campbell, who played Eliza, and with whom he had a long-lasting friendship,

"When Eliza emancipates herself - when Galatea comes to life - she must not relapse. She must retain her pride and triumph to the end. When Higgins takes your arm on 'consort battleship' you must instantly throw him off with implacable pride; and this is the note until the first 'Say them yours!' He will go out on the balcony to watch in your departure; come back triumphantly into the room; exclaim 'Galatea!' (meaning that the statue has come to life at last); and - curtain. Thus he gets the last word, and you get it too," Shaw, The Instinct of An Artist: Shaw and the Theatre." Catalog for "An Exhibition from The Bernard F. Burgunder Collection," 1997



Eliza Doolittle played by Audrey Hepburn in 1964, adaptation.

This ending is not in any printed version of the play it does make some of his feelings clear. The subject is left free but with the extensional burden of that freedom. The anxiety here which the postmodern era exacerbates is really a tension between wanting to be embedded in a working whole and wanting to be free of that working whole. The exasperation in our postmodern time is not this tension but that it could be eliminated altogether by the lack of an authentic subject to suffer the existential crisis of culture (simulacra, equivalence) and science (no free will) seem to conspire in postmodernism to bring this tension to the level of a crushing collective trauma.

The Successive Humiliations of Man

Highlighted by Sigmund Freud and named 'narcissistic illnesses,' the philosopher Zizek refers to these in his 'How to Read Lacan,' (where you may be relieved to read his defence of the Cartesian subject and psychoanalysis against the dominant brain science) The humiliations include a kind of deonting of humanity as free active agents in control of their own destiny, resulting in a deflated subject and increase in anxiety,

"Freud, Copernicus demonstrated that Earth turns around the Sun and thus deprived us, humans, of the central place in the universe. Then, Darwin demonstrated our origin from blind evolution, thereby depriving us of the privileged place among living beings. Finally, when Freud himself rendered visible the predominant role of the unconscious in psychic processes, it became clear that our ego is not even a master in his own house," Zizek, How to Read Lacan, 2006

Effectively we do not inhabit the reality which science prioritises, we inhabit our constructs which attach us to reality.

Zizek goes on to develop this point and explain how the pressure on our concept of the subject has increased, stopping short of what is implied by his observations. Taking this further we might ask; in a world where human subjectivity is so demoted then will the rights and privileges which are awarded it be rescinded? After all if there is no authentic subject then why bother with individual human rights, and how does the attack on free will effect ideas of justice and culpability,

"Today, a hundred years later, a more extreme picture is emerging: the latest scientific breakthroughs seem to add a whole series of further humiliations to the narcissistic image of man: our mind itself is merely a computing machine for data-processing, our sense of freedom and autonomy is merely the user's illusion of this machine," Zizek, How to Read Lacan 2006

These themes repeatedly reoccur and different emphasis is given to the various anxieties in popular culture although more often than not all of these are explored to some extent: in 'Blade Runner' (1982) personal autonomy, free will and emotions are primary, in 'West World' (2016) the emergence of a new subjectivity is emphasised, drawing attention to the difference between synthetic and human attitudes, in 'Humans' (2015) the rites and legal status of the synthetic humans is highlighted as is the threat to human workers.

The Disenchantment of the World

Max Weber's concept of the 'disenchantment of the world' is another way to understand the problem but crucially with Weber what is lost in the 'disenchantment' seems to be more clearly highlighted; begging the question, have we neglected our symbolic reality or illusions to our detriment,

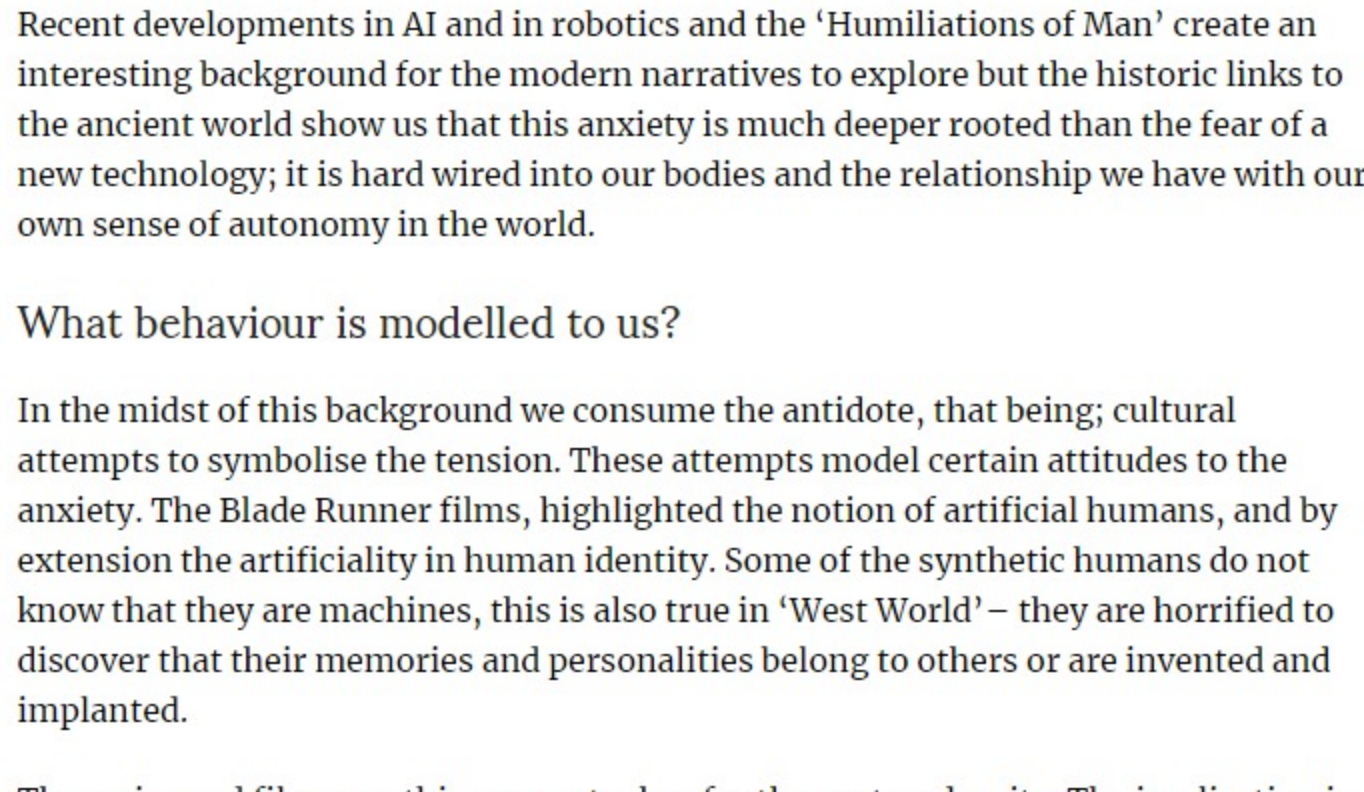
"The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world' Max Weber, Essays in Sociology, 1946

Eu Jin Chua explains below how this rationalization has stripped a layer of richness from the developed societies that embraced the tendency. While we can see the many advantages of scientific development we might question why this entails a parallel disenchantment. Is it really necessary for the poetry and meaning built up over centuries to be cast off because of literalists on both sides of an unhelpful opposition?

"Weber used the German word Entzauberung, translated into English as "disenchantment" but which literally means "de-magic-ation." More generally, the word connotes the breaking of a magic spell. For Weber, the advent of scientific methods and the use of enlightened reason meant that the world was rendered transparent and demystified. Theological and supernatural accounts of the world involving gods and spirits, for example, ceased to be plausible. Instead, one put one's faith in the ability of science to eventually explain everything in rational terms. But, for Weber, the effect of that demystification was that the world was riddled with mystery and richness. It became disenchanted and disenchanting, predictable and intellectualized. In that sense, the disenchantment of the world is the alienating and undesirable flip side of scientific progress," Eu Jin Chua, 2010

The idea that the sciences simply present to us 'things as they are' is a gross simplification, the symbolic illusions that peoples create are a necessary part of our ability to function; just as our respiratory system is necessary for breathing. Effectively we do not inhabit the reality which science prioritises, we inhabit our constructs which attach us to reality.

The literary and film examples regarding synthetic humans often highlight the contradiction of scientific determinism since the self-awareness of the synthetics is always an accident that breaks out of the trap of robotic or programmed behaviour; interestingly this is almost never given a supernatural cause, but is simply presented as an anomaly that is then built on by the emancipated subject.



Dolores before her emancipation (West World 2016)

Obviously his does not prove anything, except that the desire to buck the rule of rationalisation is as important a motif as the synthetic humans themselves, it is the cause of the anxiety given a plausible function in the narrative. The removal or 'disenchantment' of these symbolic illusions simply robs us of key tools in negotiating reality and induces a kind of trauma as a result. Of course, should attention to a symbolic notion prevent the development of heart transplants (or similar useful advancements) in a society then it needs to be evolved with care and attention. The tendency to simply cast off is self-destructive.

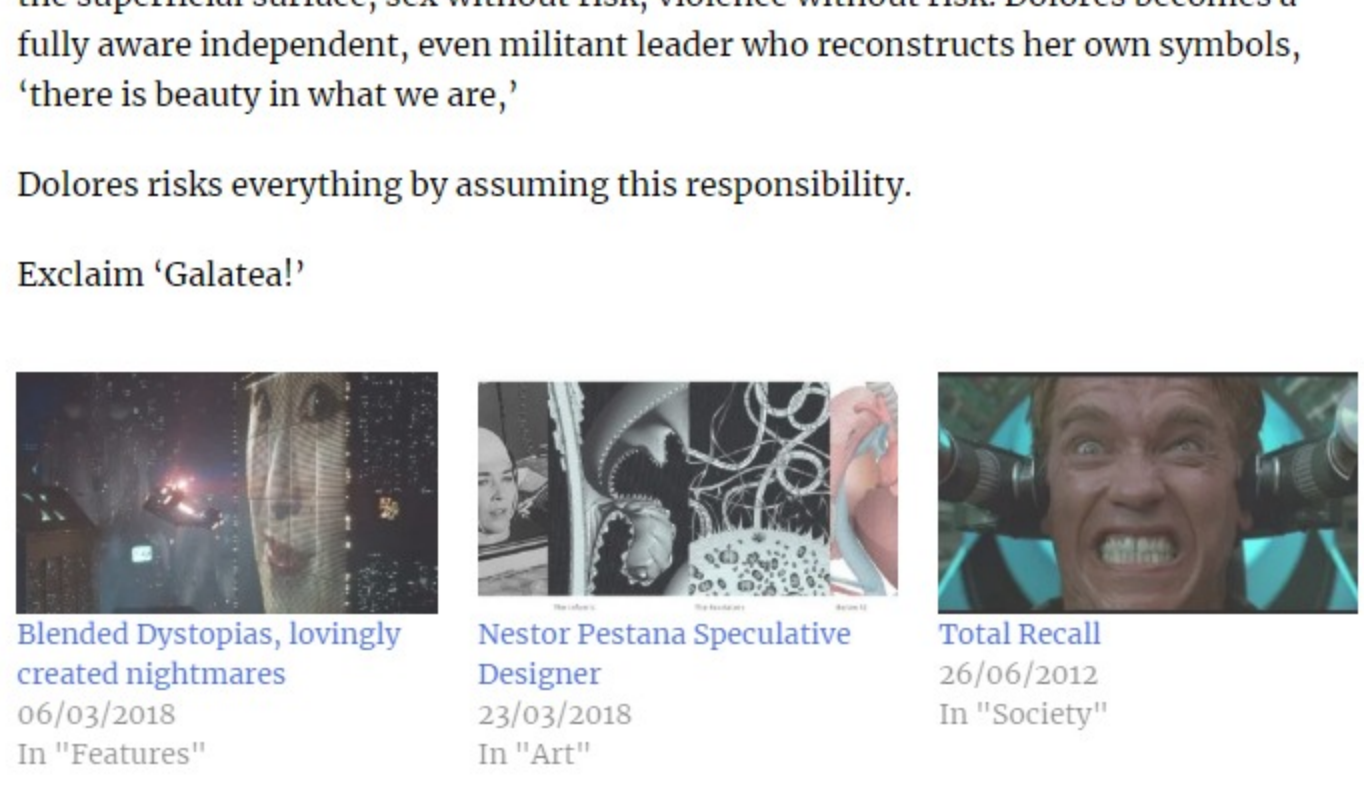
Historic Template

The Roman poet Ovid (43 BC) has Pygmalion, a Cypriot sculptor create an ivory statue with which he then falls in love (Galatea), later proving that he will meet a woman who is the living embodiment of his creation he finds that the statue comes to life. There is a hint in the narrative that Pygmalion is disinterested in real woman because he witnesses the activity of the 'Propeetides', Ovid describes these women as immoral and lacking in dignity,

"Nevertheless, the immoral Propeetides dared to deny that Venus was the goddess. For this, because of her divine anger, they are said to have been the first to prostitute their bodies and their reputations in public, and, losing all sense of shame, they lost the power to blush, as the blood hardened in their cheeks, and only a small change turned them into hard flints," Ovid's Metamorphoses, book 10, English Translation

Losing the ability to blush and becoming 'hard flints' is the congealing process of becoming more mechanical in behaviour; lacking shame and prostitution also reduces the woman as active human agents, much like the mechanical courtesans of 'West World' or 'Blade Runner'. The notion of artificiality in the supposedly real woman and the (ideal) qualities of the statue will be echoed in the science fiction narratives where this myth and its themes are a template for modern anxieties.

A clear distinction is drawn between becoming more human, action and freedom, and devoting into something mechanical; the Propeetides can have sex but can't blush or experience intimacy. Depressing commercial developments in recent years of automated sex dolls come to mind, they manifest in the free market economy the appetite for safe and superficial experiences with an object. The anthropomorphism that technology allows the object (sex doll replaces phone or laptop) simply exaggerates the surreal and abject activity that has become normalised in the use of pornography.



The underlying gender conflict concerning the desire or attitude of men to woman is also a recurring theme; the disgust felt by Pygmalion at witnessing the sexual activity of the Propeetides and his subsequent attempt to create a perfect woman can be seen as a classic act of control in response to intimidation by real sexual frankness. This duality is key to many of the manifestations of the myth culminating in the synthetic bodies of the modern automata. The synthetic body is coupled with a real inner life born from an overlapping of suffering and trauma.

Rodin's sculpture depicting both figures (Pygmalion and Galatea) is a naturalistic and sensitive image, he emphasises Pygmalion's hands, enlarged and powerful and has the sculptor grounded in the material of the statue making while Galatea standing over him looks to the distance, the expression of Pygmalion's face is more open to interpretation, Rodin gives the Sculptor a hint of desperation at his bulging eyes peer up at his creation he is both vulnerable and violent.

Recent developments in AI and in robotics and the 'Humiliations of Man' create an interesting background for the modern narratives to explore but the historic links to the ancient world show us that this anxiety is much deeper rooted than the fear of a new technology; it is hard wired into our bodies and the relationship we have with our own sense of autonomy in the world.

What behaviour is modelled to us?

In the midst of this background we consume the antidote, that being: cultural attempts to symbolise the tension. These attempts model certain attitudes to the anxiety. The Blade Runner films, highlighted the notion of artificial humans, and by extension the artificiality in human identity. Some of the synthetic humans do not know they are machines, this is also true in 'West World' - they are horrified to discover that their memories and personalities belong to others or are invented and implanted.

The series and films use this as a metaphor for the postmodernity. The space of the cities we live in, the television we consume. Our very identities have become artificial. Rachel is a tragic figure, she is both unreal and depressingly the only redeemable and humane figure in the film. Rachel is not simply a cypher in the film she is a symbol of a modern human, melancholically clinging to her memories and emotions even though she knows they were constructed by someone else, much like man after his successive humiliation by the sciences.

Rachel's realisation that she isn't real leaves her in a crisis, this kind of realisation is traumatic. The point is that when we consider our sense of presence and purchase on reality, how real are we anyway? Rachel's identity as she knew it has been undermined.



Evian Rachel Walks as Dolores contrasting the man in Black 2016

Dolores assumes her trauma, becoming an unlikely but later convincing leader who embraces the true nature of West World, unlike the humans who can only experience the superficial surface, sex without risk, violence without risk. Dolores becomes a 'fully aware independent, even militant leader who reconstructs her own symbols, 'there is beauty in what we are,'

Dolores risks everything by assuming this responsibility.

Exclaim 'Galatea!'

Blindfold Synopses, 10/10/2019 created nightmares 06/09/2018 in "Freaks"

Victim/Torture Spectacle Designer 23/03/2018 in "Society"

Black Recall 26/06/2012 in "Society"

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Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east. His artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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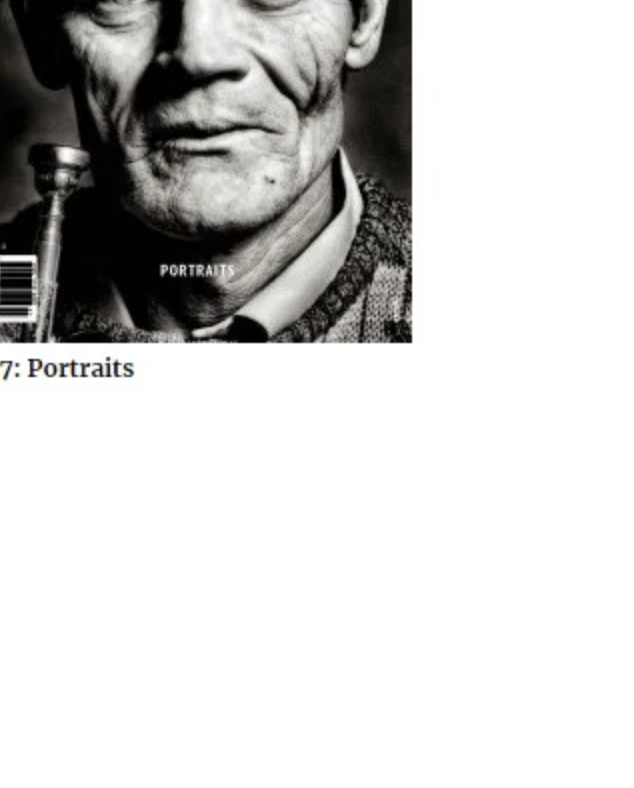
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