

Book Review

Gibson, Rebecca. *Desire in the Age of Robots and AI: An Investigation in Science Fiction and Fact*. New York and London: (Pivot Series) Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 141 pages.

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Reading *Desire in the Age of Robots and AI* feels very much like reading the future of anthropology. In the last few decades, we have all become very used to multi-sited works of ethnography. Many of my own graduate students, however, wish to pursue what I have come to think of as location-free anthropology. Topically oriented, they prefer to explore an idea, or an issue, or a problem, without the necessity of wondering how it is going to become ‘located’ in the sense of a Malinowski-inspired fieldwork project. Worried, I ask them: “Yes, but where does it occur?”

“Nowhere and everywhere” is the common reply. Or, at least it would be if they could more carefully articulate what to most of them remains more of an inchoate aspiration rather than a well-thought out research plan. It may be that the work of Rebecca Gibson will serve as a model for such a plan; a signpost toward how we might hope to conduct high quality anthropology in the age of multi-media saturation and COVID-19 (and no doubt future ‘crises’ of a similar making).

Gibson is interested in both actual life and imaginary life; in our standard-life interactions (intimate and otherwise) with robots and our fantasy-driven interactions with the androids and other non-human beings of fiction. Sex-dolls, advances in Artificial Intelligence, science fiction and horror novels, medically driven excursions into cyborg reality, films, graphic novels, websites, and digisexuality are all grist for her mill. Everywhere and nowhere. Here and there. None of this involves fixed locations, more or less stable communities, or locations that are not subjected to constant change and relocation.

Desire, for Rebecca Gibson, refers to far more than sexual longing. Many forms of emotional attachment, loneliness, and alienation are explored in relation to real or imaginary companions that just happen to be robots or robot-like entities. In fact, so many different topics are considered in the book that it is difficult to know how to review it without doing injustice to its multifaceted dimensionality. But for me, what ties everything together is her extensive use of the writings of Philip K. Dick. Like Dick, Gibson seems preoccupied with a single and seminal question: What is real? (28). How do we know 'reality' when we see or experience 'it'? For both authors, this is not a vague philosophical question. Rather, it involves us in a discussion about how we should act with and toward non-human beings, including beings that would not conventionally be considered to fit under the rubric of the 'organic,' at least as we understand this term at the present time. Are we justified in 'enslaving' robots, assuming that they should remain content to serve us in any way that we find pleasing? Gibson suggests, for example, that "what we must consider is whether in making sex-bots, we are creating a generation of enslaved, sentient, emotionally capable beings." (103) Do characters such the human-killing androids in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* or the alienated creature that appears in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* help us to 'other' similar beings to such an extent that we feel free to do the kinds of morally reprehensible things to them that has been done to so many 'othered' human groups? No, these are not arid philosophical questions; they are contemporary ethical dilemmas. Especially if advances in A.I. continue along the paths that they seem to be following.

But Gibson doesn't leave this issue as a form of mere speculation. Instead, she invites the reader to consider ten key factors that have been identified as desirable characteristics or traits that humans look for when falling in love, then shocks us by suggesting that each of these traits "are all possible, to varying degrees, in current robotic technology" (11) We are talking about such things as 'reciprocal liking,' 'arousal/unusualness,' and 'mystery.' The author pulls out these traits or characteristics time and again throughout the book and uses them to explore human and non-human relationships for what they can help us learn about exactly how 'other' non-humans might really be. In the final analysis, Gibson suggests: "Humans have three emotional needs that robots can serve: the need for companionship, the need for validation, and the need to find a sense of accomplishment in what we do" (102). But the author does

not stop there. She turns things on their head by also considering whether or not humans will be able to satisfy robot needs, robot desires, and perhaps even robot love.

I really don't want to give away too many of the conclusions that Rebecca Gibson finally, painstakingly, arrives at about human/robot relationships. I would much rather you read the book for yourself, as so much of the pleasure comes from the twist and turns, the searching questions, the 'turning things on their head' that she subjects us to as part of the journey. But I do want to mention one final thing. Gibson does a masterful job of weaving the material that can be found in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* as well as the two films it has inspired (*Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049*) in and out of her considerations. As someone who has also written about this book and used it to teach numerous university classes, I can confidently say that Gibson's fine-grained analysis of these works alone is worth the price of the book. Among many other things, Gibson's book is a masterclass in how to analyze literature and film and turn them into useful bits of evidence for a larger ethnographic study.

I would recommend *Desire in the Age of Robots and AI* for both undergraduate and graduate courses in Anthropology, Folklore, Sociology, Film Studies, Literary Anthropology, Science and Technology Studies, Human Sexuality, and so much more. It is no less than a cogent exploration of what it means to be human in the contemporary world. And you can't get any more ethnographic than that.