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<http://www.skenejournal.it>

[info@skenejournal.it](mailto:info@skenejournal.it)

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù

P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

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## Hamlet and the Android: Reading Emotions in Literature

### Abstract

In her self-defined 'neo-Stoic' view of emotions, philosopher Martha Nussbaum adopts a classic eudemonistic perspective and defends the thesis that emotions are not blind forces, but cognitive responses to different situations, as well as forms of evaluative thought. Some of Nussbaum's points in *Upheavals of Thought* (2001) will be part of the theoretical premises of my argument. In particular, I wish to propose that literature has always and variously focused on the singularity of emotions and their cultural situatedness, that literature has often also meta-commented on the emotional experience, and that this is part of its own aesthetic and ethical value. My thesis will be developed with close reference to an early modern tragedy, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and a postmodern novel, Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* I have chosen to deal with these two texts because my aim is to illustrate elements of continuity and difference in the view of emotions in a humanist and in a posthuman(ist) cultural context, and to highlight the anthropological and cultural shift from the one to the other.

KEYWORDS: Emotions; cognitive and emotional effects of literature; aesthetic implications of emotions in literature; theories of emotion in post-emotional societies; *Hamlet*; Philip Dick

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,  
That he should weep for her?  
*Hamlet* 2.2.36-7

. . . an android bounced helplessly about  
when confronted by an empathy-measuring test.  
(Dick 1996: 30-1)

### 1. A Theoretical Premise: Emotions as Cognitive and Evaluative Experiences

In her self-defined 'neo-Stoic' view of emotions, philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2001: 31) adopts a classical eudemonistic perspective and defends the thesis that

\* University of Bergamo – [angela.locatelli@unibg.it](mailto:angela.locatelli@unibg.it)

emotions are not blind forces, but cognitive responses to different situations, as well as of evaluative thought: "If we think of emotions as essential elements of human intelligence . . . without emotional development, a part of our reasoning capacity as political creatures will be missing" (3). Nussbaum suggests that emotions are intelligent and that they are concerned with a person's flourishing, not simply in an immediate utilitarian sense, but in terms of the realization of a complete, meaningful, fulfilled, 'good life'. In other words, emotions sustain various evaluative processes in relation to the subject's important goals and projects.

Her general thesis in *Upheavals of Thought* is richly articulated in a number of points, the most salient of which seem to me to be the following:

1. emotions are singular, i.e. highly individualized and situated;
2. emotions are culturally specific;
3. emotions are related to childhood patterns of attachment;
4. emotions play a significant role in both ethics and aesthetics.

I propose that literature has always and variously dealt with these issues, and I shall in particular try to show this by focusing on the singularity of emotions, their cultural situatedness, their aesthetic and ethical value. My point will be developed with close reference to an early modern tragedy, i.e. *Hamlet*, and a postmodern novel, Philip K. Dick's 1968 *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. The differences between views of emotions and their individual and collective significance in an emblematic humanist context, such as Shakespeare's and, in a post-human(ist) context, the one critically anticipated by the American novelist, will also be highlighted with reference to the works of contemporary philosophers, cultural critics, and writers of literature. Before my own reading of *Hamlet* in the terms proposed above, I will briefly discuss Patrick Colm Hogan's reading of the tragedy (2008: 339-55) as an interesting literary instance of the fact that emotions are related to childhood patterns of attachment (*sensu* Nussbaum, point 3 above).

By looking at *Hamlet* and at *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, I also wish to demonstrate that literature deals with emotions in terms that are exquisitely 'literary', i.e. distinctively different from the approaches we may call 'analytic', 'diagnostic' or 'scientific'. In this sense, literature provides a unique and highly specialized knowledge of emotions.

Nussbaum insists that literature is a royal road to empathy and ethically desirable emotions. Unfortunately, the issue of the concrete possibility of eliciting negative emotions (hate, disgust towards different others, disrespect, violence) is not sufficiently addressed in her argument. However, in agreement with her on the prevalently beneficial effect of the emotions elicited by the reading of literary texts, I believe that literature is highly educational, and socially valuable, not only because it increases the

reader's awareness of the characters' and of his/her own emotions, but also because by appealing to the emotions as/and judgments, literature provides, corroborates, debates or questions the beliefs, opinions, and values expressed in any literary text (Locatelli 2007b, 2008, 2009, 2015). I have also proposed that, with and beyond all of this, the practice of literary interpretation is endowed with an important meta-ethical dimension (Locatelli 2009, 2017). I believe we can easily find in literature as such (and not exclusively, as one would expect, in the comic genre, in the *Bildungsroman*, and in the works we call 'realistic'), ample evidence of how societal norms are either conducive to or repressive of specific emotions and behaviours, and how social mores imply specific collective evaluations of emotions.

The fact that emotions are culturally specific seems particularly important, not least because it reverses a traditional mainstream and 'romantic' view of emotions as originating and essentially ending in the individual. Emotions in this commonsensical perspective are seen as a very intimate affair, as a purely self-directed and self-motivated symbolic action. However, Nussbaum valuably reminds us that: "if emotions are evaluative appraisals, then *cultural views* about what is valuable can be expected to *affect them very directly*" (2001: 157; emphasis mine). She adds: "societies impart different views about appropriate objects for an emotion, views that, again, shape experience as well as behavior" (162). With reference to 'anger', for example, she points out that: "Romans approved a far larger menu of objects for extreme, even murderous, anger than do modern Americans" (163). This not only demonstrates that "emotional taxonomies themselves vary across societies" (ibid.), but also that such taxonomies may vary across gender lines, as in the case of aggressivity, which is "subtly encouraged" (ibid.) for American boys while "similar behavior in girls is sharply discouraged" (ibid.).

Patrick Colm Hogan (2008) has similarly suggested that social factors strongly influence the specification of emotion, and that literary narratives give ample evidence of this. His focus is here primarily on romantic love, as a trans-cultural emotion and narrative pattern:

... social ideologies contribute significantly to the idealization of romantic love. Consider a standard plot sequence that involves the chaste damsel being abducted by the villain and saved by her true love – a staple of romantic storytelling from the Ramayana to Hollywood westerns. ... Such plots almost invariably co-opt the idealized union of the couple into a stable social order – specifically, a heteronormative order, as queer theorists would rightly emphasize. I take it that none of this is determined by the neurobiology of emotion. To the contrary, in fact, such narratives work against the instabilities of emotion – for example, in identifying romantic union with marriage, which in practice restricts the possibilities for the dissolution of that

union. Indeed, more generally, we might expect dominant ideology to focus with some frequency on unstable junctures in human motivational systems. (345)

Nussbaum's and Hogan's observations suggest, like the important earlier studies of James R. Averill (1980) and Rom Harré (1986), that diverse social norms contribute to society's emotional repertory, and that shared norms and ideologies determine the desirability of specific emotions in different social contexts. Some emotions are prescribed in certain cultures, while others are deemed inappropriate. The case of the Balinese girl laughing and being playful before and after her fiancé's funeral is a striking example (Nussbaum 2001: 162) of radically different cultural attitudes and practices, and of the different evaluations of what an appropriate emotion (grief, in this case) may be in given circumstances. In this sense one can speak of a social construction of emotions, as far as societal norms and attitudes impact on the emotional experience and related behaviour. I will show that *Hamlet* debates from different angles the appropriateness of grief, as well as its social orchestration and implications.

## 2. The Singularity and Situatedness of Emotions

Nussbaum suggests that emotions are singular, highly individualized and situated: "The object of the emotion is seen as important for some role it plays in the person's own life . . . the emotions are in this sense localized" (2001: 31). I will now elucidate some implications of this idea in relation to *Hamlet*. I will also, and perhaps more importantly, propose that this tragedy is one of the most complex and articulate definitions of the nature of emotion, of its modes of expression, and of the emotions' individual and social effects, not only in early modern times, but in a long wave and emblematic humanist perspective that extends from antiquity to the first half of the twentieth century, and reaches the threshold of postmodernity and of the post-human. In this humanist perspective emotions are intrinsic and not negotiable elements of human subjectivity.

However, before I do this, let me recall Patrick Colm Hogan's (2008) reading of this tragedy because he interprets *Hamlet* in terms that are compatible with Nussbaum's observations on emotions and early childhood attachments. The issue of early attachments is for Patrick Colm Hogan central to the tragedy and to the emotional life of most of its protagonists. He specifically focuses on the early infantile experience of attachment and its impact in adult life, and interprets the emotional dynamics of *Hamlet* as "a story of grief and attachment, including romantic love" (348). Hogan writes:

When Hamlet seeks Ophelia in the grave, he is seeking the same sense of secure attachment that he felt with Yorick and with his father, and that has been lost as one became a skull, another became an impalpable ghost, and the third became a fleshy but inanimate corpse. . . . Hamlet quarrels with Ophelia. But his eventual descent into her grave indicates that his attachment to her was never broken. Her patience with his mistreatment strongly suggests her enduring attachment as well. (350-2)

In his reading, Hogan notes that Hamlet, differently from Horatio and the sentinels, does not fear the Ghost, and suggests that this is due to the Prince's early attachment to his father. Likewise, since attachment dispels disgust, Hamlet is only partly disgusted with Yorick's skull and is not at all disgusted by Ophelia's corpse in the grave. In Hogan's opinion, this indicates a deep attachment to Ophelia on his part, despite the fact of their bitter confrontations, including his cruel or vulgar remarks to her. Hogan suggests that this attachment to her is never broken and that it is reciprocated by Ophelia (given the kindness with which she takes his abuse).

Attachment was crucial also in the relationship between Old Hamlet and Claudius and the brother's murder is "foul" because it broke such bond. Old Hamlet's order to revenge would then stem from his insecurity as to Hamlet's filial attachment and his loyalty.

Hamlet displays attachment to his father, but he feels betrayed by Gertrude and thus expresses an open disgust for her, particularly in the 'closet scene'. He feels that their bond of attachment is severed. Disgust towards her and the female body follows precisely upon this emotional pre-condition, and I would add that it eventually backfires on Hamlet's own disgust about his own "sullied/solid flesh".

Hogan concludes that:

Shakespeare has altered the standard idealization primarily in sharpening a conflict that is always present in prototypical romantic narratives – the conflict between parental attachment and romantic attachment. More exactly, Hamlet's loss of his father in effect drives him to seek a substitute attachment figure. At the same time, he feels that he should remain loyal to his father. (352)

But let me now come to my reading of the tragedy, starting from Nussbaum's notion of the ineliminable reference to oneself in the emotional experience:

Emotions contain an ineliminable reference to me, to the fact that it is my scheme of goals and projects. They see the world from my point of view . . . In short the evaluations associated with emotions are evaluations from my

perspective, not from some impartial perspective; they contain an ineliminable reference to myself. (2001: 52)

When the itinerant actors come to the Danish Court, Hamlet asks one of them to insert a few lines in a speech in the play that alludes to “Priam’s slaughter” (2.2.429). The play that the actors will stage is the means through which the Prince activates his meta-dramatic scheme of “catching the conscience” of the King, through an accusatory play, instead of avenging his old father by literally killing Claudius. Not (fully) suspecting the prince’s purpose, the actor complies with Hamlet’s invitation, and gives a demonstration of his performative skills with a “passionate speech” (ll. 432-46). What the actor does not realise is the effect of his heightened performance on Hamlet’s own ‘conscience’, an effect soon conveyed to the audience, when the prince begins his soliloquy (ll. 527-83). In this speech, not only does the Prince typically lament his own state, and reproach himself of cowardice, but he offers brilliant and thought-provoking considerations on the singularity of the emotions, as well as on the complex interconnectedness of truth and the expression of emotion in a humanist perspective. Hamlet’s musings also foreground the multifarious intersections of emotions (both felt or feigned) with the multiple ways in which they can be communicated:

HAMLET        (*Exeunt ROSENCRANTZ and GUILDENSTERN*)  
 Now I am alone.  
 O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!  
 Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
 That from her working all his visage wann’d,  
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,  
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
 With forms to his conceit? and all for nothing.  
 For Hecuba!  
 What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,  
 That he should weep for her? What would he do,  
 Had he *the motive and the cue for passion*  
*That I have?* He would drown the stage with tears,  
 And cleave the general ear with horrid speech,  
 Make mad the guilty and appal the free,  
 Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed  
 The very faculties of eyes and ears.  
 (2.2.527-44; emphasis mine)

Hamlet’s words clearly confirm that the cause and object of emotion is either relevant, or irrelevant, only in relation to a singular subject. The ur-

gency of Hamlet's emotions is bound to a very personal perspective: he claims that "the motive and the cue for passion" he has is entirely and exclusively his own. My opening quotation: "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, / That he should weep for her?" foregrounds what I would like to call the intransitive quality of the emotional experience, the intensely personal relevance of what is felt, the singular emotional "motive" alluded to in the Prince's words.

I wish to show that an important reflection on the phenomenology of emotions lies at the core of Hamlet's argument, an argument which begins, as we have seen, by confirming Nussbaum's aforementioned notion that "emotions contain an ineliminable reference to me" and that "they see the world from my point of view"; Hamlet's argument is then further developed in a philosophical and aesthetic direction.

### **3. Experiencing and Expressing Emotion: *Hamlet* as an Emblematic Humanist View of Emotions and the Subject**

The multifarious nature of the emotions and the possibilities as well as the difficulties and the impossibilities of their representation are central to artistic mimesis and hence to aesthetics. The relationship between *emotions felt* and *emotions expressed* is far from linear, and *Hamlet* sheds light on the complexity of such relationship in both ordinary life and art. Being the subtle rhetorician and meta-dramatist that the Prince is, he cannot but forcefully interrogate the adequacy of dramatic representation and its emotional effects in the very moment in which he plans, intervenes, and directs the play-within-the play.

Hamlet invites speculation on the adequacy of emotional expression, both at a psychological and at an aesthetic level. In fact, his soliloquy in 2.2 articulates aspects of the emotional experience that have challenged philosophers and theorists of aesthetics since Aristotle. His sophisticated musings highlight the power that fiction has to trigger emotion, and the power of the actor's art to produce the visible, physiological response of emotion even *in absentia* of a genuine involvement and of a proper cause. The emotional "workings" of the actor are in this sense "for nothing"; his emotion is masterfully feigned, and yet it is moving, because in turn it produces emotion in others. Hamlet is fully a humanist in his love of language and in his trusts that art (the play-within-the-play) will bring forth the most deeply buried or hidden emotions. He is convinced that the play will elicit guilt in Claudius, lead him to externalize his emotion, and to confess the murder. The "conscience" he wants to catch is the seat of emotions, as well as of moral sense, in a classic humanist view.

The actor's "passionate speech" in Act 2 chimes in Hamlet's mind with an issue that is ever-present in this tragedy, i.e. the question of the possibility of differentiating between truth and falsehood, and, more specifically, between feigned and sincere emotions. Hamlet compares and contrasts the power of sincere external 'gestures' *versus* mere emotional postures, and yet he has to acknowledge that there may be a physiological effect in the professional 'acting' of any emotion.

Since his very first appearance in the play, in 1.2, authenticity is indeed a problem the prince of Denmark is obsessed with. It powerfully surfaces in the context of the official courtly 'management' of the mourning for old King Hamlet. Grief is a crucial emotion in the play, first and foremost for the young Prince, and grief and melancholy are the first emotions upon which the distinction between false and true emotions are tested and illustrated. Hamlet's "inky cloak" (l. 75) is the unequivocal signifier of his sadness, and the icon of the Prince's dominant emotional state. It is – he claims – the expression of his genuine emotion, but it is also an object of public display. Not so, i.e. not genuine, are the public rituals and the conventional propositions of grief uttered by both Claudius and the Queen. When made public, Hamlet's personal grief inevitably acquires political implications and, as such, it may become a dangerous political weapon. In this tragedy, the emotions of grief, mourning, and melancholia have both a private and a public dimension, and the expression of grief is both a personal and a social matter. As a public reminder of the old King's assassination and usurpation, Hamlet's black cloak is a sign of an emotion which is, in turn, supposed to produce emotions in those who see it: it invites sadness and indignation on the part of all Danish subjects, and may thus even incite their rebellious solidarity. This is, of course, what Claudius cannot tolerate in Hamlet's public mourning, the true reason behind his pressing invitation to suppress such emotion. Claudius knows that grief in Denmark is a weapon that may become a road to subversion. His falsely benevolent, but imperative injunction to Hamlet to abandon his 'cloudy' mood is a necessary political manoeuvre for the promotion of the general acceptance of his own illegitimate authority.

KING            Though yet of Hamlet our dear brother's death  
                     The memory be green, and that it us befitted  
                     To bear our hearts in grief and our whole kingdom  
                     To be contracted in one brow of woe,  
                     Yet so far hath discretion fought with nature  
                     That we with wisest sorrow think on him,  
                     Together with remembrance of ourselves.  
                     Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,  
                     Th'imperial jointress of this warlike state,  
                     Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,

With an auspicious and a dropping eye,  
 With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,  
 In equal scale weighing delight and dole,  
 Taken to wife.

(1.2.1-14)

Claudius's opening sentence is a manifest self-justification and a defence of his own, now royal, interests (his "wisest sorrow" ultimately leads to "remembrance of ourselves", rather than to remembrance of the dead). Claudius's ambivalent "sorrow" seems to promote a philosophically balanced and wise view of emotions against an otherwise excessive grief ("In equal scale weighing delight and dole"). The usurper, clearly aiming at co-opting the Court's consensus, represents himself as a composed even 'stoic', and therefore trustworthy leader, and depicts Hamlet as a young man unduly overruled by emotion. But the king's false conscience is exposed by the crafty oxymorons decorating his speech ("a defeated joy"; "an auspicious and a dropping eye"; "mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage"). The oxymoron connotes Claudius's discourse as a contradiction in terms, and above all as a speech in which genuine emotions and the words expressing them are clearly split asunder. On the contrary, through the icon of his black cloak and his repeatedly resentful remarks, Hamlet displays his authentic and relentlessly provocative emotions. The black cloak is the very first image we have of him, the object that will forever define him as a sad and embittered youth, one who is not ready to comply and to relinquish powerful emotions (grief, rage, sadness). He polemically rejects Claudius's self-righteous posture, and reacts with what will be his habitual wit and punning against the crafty and calculated rhetoric of the Court (e.g. KING "But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son..." / HAMLET "A little more than kin, and less than kind", 1.2.64-5; KING "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" / HAMLET "Not so, my lord, I am too much i' the sun", ll. 66-7). The Queen tries then to mediate between them by voicing a mainstream proverbial attitude towards grief in early modern culture (see Paster, Rowe, and Floyd-Wilson: 2004); however, her proposal sounds shallow and trite *vis à vis* Hamlet's discomfort:

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| QUEEN GERTRUDE | Good Hamlet, cast thy nightly colour off,<br>And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.<br>Do not for ever with thy vailed lids<br>Seek for thy noble father in the dust.<br>Thou know'st 'tis common: all that lives must die,<br>Passing through nature to eternity. |
| HAMLET         | Ay, madam, it is common.<br>(1.2.68-74)  |

In fact, Hamlet replies “Ay, madam, it is common”, thus deliberately punning on the word “common” and activating one of its negative meanings, i.e. ‘vulgar’. He rejects her conventional words with contempt (contempt being another powerful emotion in young Hamlet, particularly evident, for instance, in his exchanges with the obtuse, obsequious and pompous Polonius). Hamlet defends the elevated moral dimension and authenticity of his grief as opposed to the self-interested postures of the vulgar, and he upholds the singularity, even the unique quality, of his emotional condition as opposed to the general fraudulent display of emotion at Court. When the Queen reproaches him for being “so particular” (l. 75), and not aligned with the majority, as well as for being stubbornly ‘emotional’, Hamlet returns to a central question: that of emotional authenticity, a crucial issue in a play that relentlessly debates the gaps between reality and appearance. In his reply to the Queen, Hamlet exploits all the semantic innuendos of the word “seem” in order to claim for himself a sincere emotional grief which is antithetical to the hypocritical outer forms of Court rituals:

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| QUEEN GERTRUDE | If it be,<br>Why seems it so particular with thee?  |
| HAMLET         | Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not seems.<br>'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,<br>Nor customary suits of solemn black,<br>Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,<br>No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,<br>Nor the dejected havior of the visage,<br>Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,<br>That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,<br>For they are actions that a man might play;<br>But I have that within which passeth show<br>These but the trappings and the suits of woe.<br>(ll. 74-86) |

The Court's grief is a simulation, a mere “show”, but Hamlet's grief is true and “deep within”, and his cloak does therefore “denote him truly”. As such, he is entitled to the boundless and inconsolable sadness that Claudius and the Queen reproach him for. In this context one may profitably recall what Martha Nussbaum writes on the appropriateness of an emotion. Taking grief as a specific example and Chrysippus as a philosophical antecedent, she writes:

Chrysippus plausibly said that grief (along with other emotions) contains not only the judgment that an important part of my life has gone, but that it is right to be upset about that: it makes a truth-claim about its own evaluations. It asserts the real value of the object, it says that getting upset is a response to something really important, not just a whim. (Nussbaum 2001: 47)

Hamlet is (self)justified in his bitterness and sadness: his loss is irreparable, and his emotion is 'appropriate', given the circumstances.

Against this backdrop, the play offers further important considerations on the difference between sentimentalism and true emotion. If it is true that Hamlet is not immune from the former (in parts of his soliloquies he sounds more self-pitying than sad), we must acknowledge that his emotion is never feigned. Hamlet's early meditation on the difference between 'being' and 'seeming' is a motif traversing the tragedy, a tragedy in which, not surprisingly, detection and spying plots orchestrate much of the action.

Hamlet's acute perception of emotional insincerity links the court scene in Act 1 to the 'Hecuba speech' in Act 2, an important connection for a reading of the tragedy in the light of various theories of the emotions in daily life and art. The actor's 'real' bodily effects of a feigned emotion fuel and re-fuel Hamlet's obsession with emotional sincerity. Reading Nussbaum after *Hamlet* (and vice versa) gives a new depth to her thesis on emotional 'falsity'. She makes a relevant distinction between false and fraudulent emotion when she attributes the possibility of mistaken emotion mostly to an emotion rising from a wrong belief, but she also acknowledges the possibility of "fraudulent" or "feigned" emotions, which are, as I have argued, the most relevant aspect of the tragedy's treatment of in/sincerity.

Nussbaum writes:

The fact of having an emotion depends on what the person's beliefs are, not on whether they are true or false. So if I believe my mother to be dead and grieve, and she is not really dead, my emotion is in that sense false. We are not likely to speak of it as "false grief", since the term "false" means both "not accurate" and "fraudulent", and in this context we standardly use it to mean "fraudulent" or "feigned". We do not want to confuse the important issue of sincerity with the issue of true or false content, and so we will call the grief "mistaken" or "inappropriate", rather than false. But the propositional content is nonetheless false. (2001: 45-6)

In this sense the Court's emotions are "fraudulent", and antithetical to Hamlet's.

Hamlet's manifest awareness of the absolute singularity of emotions foregrounds the question of the relevance of any emotional experience in relation to the subject's aims, to his/her existential position and his/her relationships. This question, as I have suggested, lies at the core of Martha Nussbaum's observations on "the intelligence of emotions" and their eudemonistic significance.

The singularity of emotion, specifically of what Hamlet (in the exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in 2.2) calls his "disposition" plays a central role in his sense of self and in his perception of

the world. The euphoric humanist view of man expressed in Pico's oration *De Dignitate Hominis* and echoed in Hamlet's own famous words "What a piece of work is a man!" (2.2.302) is immediately tinged with the dysphoric overtones of his pervasive melancholy. The noble subjectivity predicated and taught by a philosophical tradition is here colliding with an equally strong (and perhaps even stronger) dejected subjectivity articulated by the felt emotions. A powerful sense of the subject informs this and most of Hamlet's musings, orchestrated as they are on the oscillation between emotion and intellect, an oscillation that consistently lends support to the narrative of a strong humanist subjectivity. By addressing a traditional philosophical perspective and simultaneously probing his own emotions, Hamlet is indeed a character of 'modernity'. He can also continue to conceive of himself as irreducibly 'other' from the conventional identities of the characters at Court (who define the subject almost exclusively in terms of social roles). This integral and inalienable sense of self is the central element of the humanist world, and it is precisely what will be challenged with the rise of a post-human(ist) episteme. Fear of the dismantling of this traditional subject, with his/her rootedness in a singular emotional life lies at the core of Philip Dick's 1968 novel.

The singularity of Hamlet's emotions suggests that they are the most 'personal' and irreducible element in human subjectivity, an idea that gains salience in the context of the great cultural movement from a humanist to a post-human(ist) cultural perspective and that invites a 'dialogic' reading of Shakespeare's tragedy and Dick's novel as a useful tool for cultural criticism. The evolving relationship between humans, machines and prosthetic extensions (see Callus, Herbrechter, and Rossini 2014) prompts us to tease out and interpret in the landscape of postmodernity traces of a significant cultural metamorphosis. This seems to be one of the decisive factors in the relatively recent and strong resurgence of interest in the emotions. This interest can be interpreted as the need to provide a response to the (real or imagined) threat of extinction of the emotions themselves in the post-human context.

#### 4. A Pervasive Resurgence of Interest in the Emotions:<sup>1</sup> Why Now?

The emotions have been under philosophical scrutiny since Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics. The disciplines of rhetoric, philosophy, and literature have

<sup>1</sup> A bibliography on the recent developments in the study of the emotions in various fields would be far too vast to be satisfactorily listed here. For a comprehensive and critical overview, I refer readers to the recent volume: Jandl, Knaller, Schönfellner, and Tockner 2017.

enjoyed a generally unquestioned primacy in the Western understanding of the emotions for centuries, and they still remain viable and very valuable approaches to the issue. However, new disciplines are now dealing with the nature and purpose of the emotions in such diverse fields as literary theory (see Hogan 2003, 2008, and 2011; Holland 2009; Keen 2007; Klein, Markham, and Suhr 2009; Jandl, Knaller, Schönfellner, and Tockner 2017), semiotics,<sup>2</sup> philosophy (see Goldie 2000) and the cognitive sciences (see Damasio 1995, 1999, and 2003; Vincent 1994).

With the advent of psychoanalysis and phenomenology in the early decades of the twentieth century, emotions and the unconscious have challenged the dominance of reason in the definition of human subjectivity. Moreover, Freud's conceptualization of aspects of the uncanny as a blurring of the boundary between the animate and the inanimate, acquires a timely significance in an age in which "[t]he cloning, engineering and marketing of life" (see Kimbrell 1997, and Locatelli 2007a) is a growing social practice. Since then culture seems in various degrees to have been concerned with the attempt of redressing the balance of the traditional philosophical position which opposed the superiority of rationality to the inferiority of the emotions, and the supposedly greater epistemic value of systematic philosophy over the emotional knowledge of poetry and fiction.<sup>3</sup> The contemporary interest in the emotions is also related to shifts in science, specifically in the neurosciences, and finds a strong incentive in the current disciplinary specialisation enhanced by the latest advances in global technology.

In other words, we witness a new perception and cultural assessment of emotional realities in relation to the radical anthropological shift from a humanist to a post-human(ist) understanding of subjectivity. Emotions have become an object of ambivalence. On the one hand, they are still generally deemed highly self-specific and endowed with cognitive and ethical power (as I have argued so far with reference to Nussbaum). In this sense, emotions seem the most tangible 'proof' of an irreducibly individual existence, and one of its most significant core elements. They have come to be seen as the strongest guarantee and protection against the loss of a singular human character. On the other hand, emotions are still suspicious, no longer in traditional philosophical terms, but as problematic cognitive states that in their fuzziness resist the massive channelling of human thinking into ultra-rapid problem-solving and functional dimensions.

<sup>2</sup> See Rutelli 2003. Section 20 of her volume is devoted to a "Semiotics of the Passions" and fruitfully develops the theories of Herman Parret, Jacques Fontanille, and Algirdas Julien Greimas.

<sup>3</sup> The rapprochement between contemporary philosophy and literature on the part of Derrida, Deleuze, Badiou is clearly central to this process.

Emotions are still demonised, not so much in epistemic terms (as was the case in classical philosophical debates), but insofar as they challenge patterns of predictability and the imperatives of social governance required in a late capitalist consumer society (see Jameson 1991 and 1998). They are seen as extravagant, prodigal, uneconomical states in the context of what Don DeLillo, in his well-known novel *Cosmopolis*, has called “cybercapital”. In this context, emotions express the willed affirmation of individuality *vis à vis* the homologation of thought along purely rational and functional lines. As such they are threatened by the imperatives and practices of late-capitalist technologies that have a direct impact, not only on them, but more in general, on modes of social communication and thinking. The question then becomes: can emotions survive the shift to the post-human? There are no easy answers to this question, which obviously transcends the scope of this paper, but one can certainly find in literature, philosophy, and the social sciences abundant traces of this pervasive kind of questioning and multiple articulations of what it implies.

In fact, several writers of fiction in recent decades (from William Burroughs to James Graham Ballard, from David Cronenberg to Don DeLillo, from Philip Dick to Jonathan Franzen, from Fay Weldon to Ian McEwan, from Kazuo Ishiguro to Julian Barnes) demonstrate that the question of emotions in the post-human context remains a crucial one. Writers of fiction have been grappling with the emotions of subjects that have been alternatively defined as: fetishes (Pasolini 1975), commodities (Bauman 2007), simulacra (Baudrillard 1981), terminal and virtual identities (Bukatman 1991).

## 5. Androids, Terminal Subjects, and Prosthetic Emotions

Given the above framework, I will now (re)turn to a literary text in order to tackle this issue more specifically. As I have suggested, we can register in the cultural landscape of postmodern fiction traces of a significant metamorphosis of the subject and a concomitant change in the nature and function of emotions. Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is one of the early and most eloquent narratives of this cultural and anthropological mutation.

The setting of this 1968 dystopic and ‘prophetic’ novel is what is presumably left of planet Earth in 2021, a polluted surreal space in which man-made androids are supposedly banned, but ever more present and indistinguishable from the remaining humans. Richard Deckard, the protagonist, is an official bounty hunter whose job is to find androids and ‘retire’ them.

This novel, made very famous for being the cue of the film *Blade Runner*<sup>4</sup> is a meditation on the uncanny cultural dismantling of the human/non-human distinction. As such, it is also an archetypal text on the liminal crossing from humanist to post-human(ist) views of emotions.<sup>5</sup>

Empathy is undoubtedly the central emotion in the novel: in particular, it is both asserted as the hallmark of the human, but also as something undergoing deep and irreversible change, due to the onset of cyber/cyborg technology. The scattered and mostly bereaved humans still roaming the earth after the global catastrophe that had led most to move to Mars, have at their disposal psychotropic and prosthetic machines (including an empathy box) that technologically orchestrate different daily moods; the remaining humans also 'passionately' cultivate ownership of any living creature left on the decaying planet (but more often than not they have to settle down with electric replicas of sheep, horses, spiders, etc.). They are increasingly interacting with sophisticated androids returning from Mars (where the man-produced androids had been sent as labour). Androids are perfect replicas of humans, hardly distinguishable from them, except for their inability to experience empathy. This is the basis of the test to which bounty hunters submit suspect intelligent creatures when trying to assess their android identity.

Another feature of the humans left on earth is that they have a sort of religion: it is called "Mercerism". Given the features of this religion, we can think of the name as a distortion of "mercy&consumerism". With its emphasis on the experience of fusion, Mercerism maintains a sense of empathy in the cyber world. This sort of 'pseudo' religion of compassion prompts humans to cultivate a (putatively original) sense of community, and this is unquestionably perceived as the relevant social significance of this emotion, while empathy is deemed utterly useless, it is contested and obstructed by the intelligent androids roaming the Earth.

Two short passages incorporate salient elements of the novel and spell emotion as a uniquely human phenomenon linked to a "group instinct" and to a sense of community:

He had wondered, as most people at one time or another, precisely why *an android bounced helplessly about when confronted by an empathy-measuring*

<sup>4</sup> *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott; script by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples; starring Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, etc.; it has become a cult movie in the realm of science fiction and noir.

<sup>5</sup> The recent (2017) sequel to *Blade Runner*, i.e. *Blade Runner 2049* (directed by Denis Villeneuve; screenplay by Hampton Fancher and Michael Gree; starring Ryan Gosling, Harrison Ford, Ana de Armas, etc.) demonstrates that interest in this issue is far from waning. Similarly to its earlier prototype, the film rehearses the challenges of replicant and human interaction (in particular at the 'new' level of sex and procreation).

*test.* Empathy, evidently, existed only within the human community, whereas intelligence to some degree could be found throughout every phylum and order including the arachnida. *For one thing the empathic faculty probably required an unimpaired group instinct;* a solitary organism, such as a spider, would have no use for it; in fact it would tend to abort the spider's ability to survive. It would make him conscious of the desire to live on the part of his prey . . . ultimately the empathic gift blurred the boundaries between hunter and victim, between the successful and the defeated . . . Oddly, it resembled a sort of biological insurance, but double-edged. As long as some creature experienced joy, then the condition for all other creatures included a fragment of joy. However, if any living being suffered, then for all the rest the shadow could not be entirely cast off. *A herd animal such as man would acquire a higher survival factor through this;* an owl or a cobra would be destroyed. Evidently the humanoid robot constituted a solitary predator. (Dick 1996: 30-1; emphasis mine)

The difference between human and android is predicated precisely on the divide between "herd animals" and "solitary organisms", a putatively 'original' difference explaining why empathy is the central and uniquely human emotion. But is the original instinct destined to be impaired with the advent of intelligent androids superseding humans on the planet? Is the supposedly human instinct for empathy destined to last, or eventually to being altered in the new context, when either androids will predictably get the upper hand on earth and 'retire' humans, or when humans will identify with an android identity, when they will desire and try to be like androids? In either case, the end of empathy, of emotion in general, and the end of 'the human' are posited as synonymous. The prerogative of androids, i.e. their emotionless intelligence, is clearly illustrated in the following passage:

The girl eyed him. "I don't see any relation."

"That's what Mercerism is all about." Again he found himself puzzled.

"Don't you participate in fusion? Don't you own *an empathy box*?"

After a pause the girl said carefully: I didn't bring mine with me. I assumed I'd find one here."

"But an empathy box," he said, stammering in his excitement, "*is the most personal possession you have! It's an extension of your body; it's the way you touch other humans, it's the way you stop being alone.* But you know that. Everybody knows that. Mercer even lets people like me –" He broke off. But too late; he had already told her, and he could see by her face, by the flicker of sudden aversion, that she knew. "I almost passed the IQ test," he said in a low shaky voice. "I'm not very special, only moderately; not like some you see. But that's what Mercer doesn't care about."

"As far as I am concerned," the girl said, "you can count that as a major objection to Mercerism." *Her voice was clean and neutral;* she intended only to

state a fact, he realized. The fact of her attitude toward chickenheads. (66-7; emphasis mine)

“Her voice was clean and neutral” depicts the psychological attitude of the android girl who clearly has no desire for the experience of compassion. She actually despises this emotion, and her aversion suggests that she would have little use for any other. In this novel, emotions (of the kind known in the previous centuries) do not seem to survive the post-human.

## 6. A Postemotional Society?

What literature has expressed on emotions and the post-human has also been the focus of philosophers and theorists of culture in recent times. The current scenario interpreted by novelists and artists bears interesting affinities with that of contemporary social critics. In the Sixties and Seventies, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s scathing critique of modernity as the new “desecrating religion” of consumerism (1975) anticipated Zygmunt Bauman’s critique of a “liquid modernity” (2000) and a consumerist post-modernity: “In the society of consumers no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity” (Bauman 2007: 12). Pasolini had already spoken of the consumer as a “stupid fetish” of the human. In Bauman’s words, the emotions (joy, satisfaction) induced and felt by eager consumers are intrinsically fraudulent emotions (in the sense given above):

Fully fledged consumers are not finicky about consigning things to waste; ils (et elles, bien sûr) ne regrettent rien. As a rule, they accept the *short lifespan* of things and their preordained demise with *equanimity*, often with only thinly disguised *relish*, and sometimes with unalloyed *joy* and the celebration of victory. The most capable and quick-witted adepts of the consumerist art know that getting rid of things that have passed their use-by (read: enjoy-by) date is an event to be rejoiced in. (2007: 86; emphasis mine)

If we return to Nussbaum’s neo-Stoic view that emotions are ethically valuable because inscribed into the long-term mechanism of *eudaimonia*, their precariousness and undesirability in times dominated by the logic of the ephemeral becomes more intelligible. Consumerism prescribes the pragmatic, empirical and even philosophical logic of acceleration, of short-term goals, and of a concomitant continuous production of waste. Consumerism needs and promotes short-term goals, and thus makes long-term eudemonistic aims quaint at best, or downright obsolete. In this scheme, the pressures of mass consumerism entail a ‘modern’ homogenisation and/or fracturing of individual emotional lives, in a process that has also been called “The McDonaldization of Society” (Ritzel 2004). Social theorists, including George

Ritzel (*ibid.*), David Riesman (see Denny, Glazar, and Riesman 2001), Scott Bukatman (1991), and Stjepan Meštrović (1997) have variously interpreted the post-human as post-emotional. Their conclusions do not greatly diverge from those of Philip Dick's novel.

Riesman's well-known distinction of three cultural types, i.e. the tradition-directed, inner-directed, and outer-directed individual, explains the rapid shifts from tradition to postmodernity. The latest subject is no longer attuned to the behavioural rules of preceding generations, which would actually hamper his social success. However, the outer-directed individual is less autonomous and capable of leadership than the former inner-directed subject, while his behaviour is simply functional to the evolving social organisation. This is the subject in "the lonely crowd", whose dominant emotion is a pervasive anxiety to 'fit in' and 'be like the rest'. One of its relevant consequences is a complete and uncritical loss of the singularity of the emotions. Stjepan Meštrović *Postemotional Society* is, not surprisingly, predicated as a development of the social situation outlined in Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*. It is written in the context of the trials on the war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and of the abuses perpetrated at Abu Grahیب. The emotional estrangement involved in these situations seems to redefine basic traditional emotional concepts and, more broadly, to signal an unprecedented sceptical and even averse cultural attitude towards traditional emotions. Hence the adjective "postemotional" applied in the title of Meštrović's book to contemporary Western society.

Ritzel's subjects move in a similar direction: they have already introjected the imperatives of efficiency, quantification, manageability and control, at the cost of emotional singularity, thus further subscribing to the rules of global financial techno-bureaucracy. Only a few decades earlier the dominant emotions of McDonaldized subjects would have been defined as states of "alienation" in the sociological discourse of the Frankfurt School. In fact, the pervasive falsity of feeling generated by and experienced in the new globalised professional contexts, and in the "fatal strategies" of Baudrillard's eponymous 1983 text, threatens the former humanist strong bond between emotion and identity in unprecedented terms. In the postemotional condition, subjects are intent on becoming efficient, predictable, outer-directed, manageable, in other words they seem intent on imitating the androids of Philip Dick's novel. A blurring and eventual erasure of the boundaries between the private and public sphere is part and parcel of the "postemotional" and post-human(ist) anthropological and cultural shift that I have been dealing with. In the postmodern age emotions, far from being the hallmark of singularity, tend to become 'impersonal', i.e. fungible. On the other hand, the desire to relinquish emotions as a painful condition could be interpreted as a defensive mechanism of the post-human(ist) subject, who may be un-

dergoing a paradoxical identification with the trauma of emotional loss experienced in the machine-directed world of incipient cyber-capitalism and postmodern techno-networking. Novels such as Fay Weldon's *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) are valuable tools in making sense of this evolving scenario.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, literature has undoubtedly contributed to the knowledge of emotions by providing an immense repertoire of 'case studies', and it has uniquely illustrated the historical and social variations of emotions in relation to changing definitions of human subjectivity, while, at the same time, providing a special assessment of emotions as cognitive human realities.

Literature displays both the ability to represent and to provoke emotions, and it achieves these goals according to its changing poetics, and with a specific awareness of the historical conjunctures in which literary works are produced and received, as well as of the times and places represented in novels, poems and plays.

Literature exponentially multiplies the meaning of what goes under the general labels and abstract terms of 'sadness', 'joy', 'love', 'hate', 'grief', 'anxiety', 'rage', 'melancholy', 'envy', 'resentment', 'gratitude', 'compassion', etc. In fact, the unique character of a novel, poem, or play and the highly individual emotions of each literary character and narrator enrich the notion of each of these emotional terms, whose meaning cannot be restricted to the one given in any dictionary or disciplinary glossary.

When sufficiently complex, literature can capture the individual emotional experience of a plurality of greatly different subjects, in widely different time and space contexts. Literature thus provides a unique vantage point for the observation of emotions, while avoiding the abstract generalisations of either an essentialist or a reductive paradigm. Because of this, it can support a subjective but not relativistic ethics, and promote reparative strategies against the experience of the loss of emotions.

Literature's irreducible attention to emotions in their 'partial' perspective, confirms that literature is not a science, and it is not a normative program, nor does it need to be, insofar as it is concerned with the truth of the particular and with the illustration and critique of specific cultural strategies. It is in the field of both the representation and the evocation of emotion that its resistance to the loss of the 'human' in the 'post-human' is most visible. In this sense, literature displays an interesting resilience against the impersonal homology of emotional lives and the pressures of cyber/cyborg space. The

complexity of artistic literature is uniquely capable of accounting for the non-linear phenomenology of the emotions in their specific historical and cultural unfolding.

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