

Science Fiction Re-Visioned: Posthuman Gothic in *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams*

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In this essay, I analyse two episodes from the recent television series, *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams*. I contend that, by adapting Philip K. Dick's short stories from the 1950s for the screen, the creators of "Impossible Planet" and "The Commuter" offer an important new perspective from which to appreciate the value of his early fiction, which is too often dismissed by critics as juvenilia. Moreover, by re-visioning Dick's work as posthuman Gothic narratives, the episodes refract long-standing Gothic anxieties about alterity and (post)human existence through a lens that is more often associated with science fiction. This hybridization is instrumental to *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams'* interrogation of the paradigmatic binaries between life/death, interiority/exteriority and reality/virtuality. In my analysis, I use Rosi Braidotti's theory of posthuman death, as well as Roger Luckhurst's concept of Weird zones, to illuminate how *Electric Dreams* explores some of the existential issues that arise from human-technological imbrication.

Keywords: Philip K. Dick; *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams*; posthuman; Gothic; adaptation; science fiction

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La ciencia ficción re-visada: el gótico posthumano en *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams*

En este ensayo analizo dos episodios de la reciente serie de televisión *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams*. Sostengo que, al adaptar los cuentos de Philip K. Dick de la década de 1950 para la pantalla, los creadores de "Impossible Planet" y "The Commuter" ofrecen una visión

nueva e importante, a través de la cual podemos apreciar el valor de su primera ficción, que es a menudo descartada por los críticos como juvenil. Además, al revisar el trabajo de Dick en calidad de narraciones góticas poshumanas, los episodios reflejan prolongadas ansiedades góticas sobre la alteridad y la existencia (pos)humana a través de una visión que se asocia más frecuentemente con la ciencia ficción. Esta hibridación es fundamental para el cuestionamiento que *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams* lleva a cabo de las dicotomías paradigmáticas entre vida/muerte, interioridad/exterioridad y realidad/virtualidad. En mi análisis utilizo la teoría de la muerte poshumana de Rosi Braidotti, así como el concepto de zonas extrañas de Roger Luckhurst, para aclarar el modo en que *Electric Dreams* explora algunos de los problemas existenciales que surgen de la imbricación humano-tecnológica.

Palabras clave: Philip K. Dick; *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams*; poshumano; gótico; adaptación; ciencia ficción

1. INTRODUCTION / RE-VISIONING *PHILIP K. DICK'S ELECTRIC DREAMS*

The television series *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams* (hereafter, *Electric Dreams*) premiered on the UK's free to air network, Channel 4, in September 2017. The following year, it was transmitted globally on Prime Video, Amazon's over-the-top (OTT) subscription platform. Developed by the well-known science fiction (hereafter, SF) television producers Ronald D. Moore and Michael Dinner for Channel 4/Sony Pictures, *Electric Dreams*' ten episodes are based on different short stories that Dick (hereafter, PKD) wrote in the 1950s. Although the use of such a celebrated author's name in the series' title is a clear strategy to capture the attention of his many fans, it also foregrounds how, through being adapted for television, PKD's stories become defamiliarized 'dreams.' As a result, the episodes might be disconcerting for those spectators who are already acquainted with the author's shorter fiction. Nevertheless, I believe that the series offers an important new way of viewing not only PKD's early stories but also a certain type of contemporary SF television production by drawing attention to their posthuman Gothic motifs. Indeed, while PKD is commonly thought of as one of the foremost exponents of twentieth-century SF, I contend that his work is inherently inflected by a posthuman Gothic sensibility in its concern with duplication (on both a thematic and stylistic level) and the destabilization of (human) identity. Although Adrienne Rich defines her concept of a "re-vision" in specifically literary terms, an "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (1972, 18), I argue that this process is particularly significant for the adaptation of PKD's work on screen. Re-visioning is, therefore, a deliberate textual practice that the creators of *Electric Dreams* use to demonstrate the continued value of his early work, which academics too often myopically dismiss as being juvenilia (see Easterbrook 1995). The series provides an illustrative example of how, in the science-driven world of the early twenty-first century, SF and the Gothic frequently meld into and inform one another by providing futuristic and technologically oriented explorations of the uncertain limits between life and death.

In the following analysis, I establish a critical bifocality that, on the one hand, illustrates how *Electric Dreams* re-visions PKD's stories as inchoate explorations of the posthuman condition, a mode of being that is ever more relevant to life in the early twenty-first century. At the same time, by refracting his work through a specific hyphenation of the Gothic, the episodes offer us an important lens through which we can better understand how this textualization can offer an affirmative non-anthropocentrism. Owing to its emphasis on repetition and connectivity, posthuman Gothic is highly referential. After all, while *Electric Dreams* is an eclectic anthology of texts written between 1953 and 1955, the title plays upon that of PKD's most famous novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* ([1968] 2010). In consequence, this essay analyzes not only the intertextual (which promotes an understanding of the entanglements between the series, PKD's work and other implicit intertexts), but also "hypertextuality," a technological linking that draws attention to how *Electric Dreams*

“transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends” (Stam 2005, 31) its literary urtexts. The hypertextual, then, not only emphasizes the (dis)similarity of the episodes in *Electric Dreams* to PKD's stories, but it is also a principal mechanism through which they come to have a distinctly posthuman Gothic sensibility.

Electric Dreams' opening credit sequence begins with an extreme close-up of an eye (00:03), a symbolic indication of how its episodes will re-vision the work of this iconic SF author. In fact, the credit sequence encodes one of *Electric Dreams*' most predominant posthuman Gothic tropes: that of how the commonplace becomes “cognitively estranged” (Suvín 2016, 15). For example, as the camera travels through a darkened urban street, a garish neon sign displays the outline of a naked female form with four breasts (00:15). In another sequence, a heavily pregnant man caresses his stomach as he is glimpsed through a window (00:20). Images of provocatively defamiliarized bodies also feature, hypertextually, in the episodes themselves, such as when the white, heterosexual historian George Miller, from PKD's 1954 story, “Exhibit Piece,” becomes Sarah (Anna Paquin), in *Electric Dreams*' “Real Life” (Reiner 2017), a lesbian police officer whose virtual reality avatar is the African American George (Terence Howard). Here, the episode's transgressive re-visioning of PKD's protagonist illustrates how the series engages with posthuman Gothic anxieties about subjectivity and bodily integrity, motifs that find their precursors in PKD's early work.

By pursuing this argument, my analysis of *Electric Dreams* interrogates the complex dialectic that is at play between the literary and the televisual, both of which are forms of technological production. At the same time, I acknowledge the produced nature of my own reading, which does not “flow naturally from the text” (Haraway 1991, 141), whilst also emphasizing the textual ‘response-ibility’ of each spectator. As a result, by framing my discussion of *Electric Dreams* in terms of the ethical dilemmas that posthuman Gothic confronts, I contend that *Electric Dreams* responds to the challenge posed by Donna Haraway, to “reimagine” and “re-live” (textual) bodies in ways that “transform the relations of same and different, self and other, inner and outer, recognition and misrecognition” (1991, 3-4).

2. POSTHUMAN GOTHIC / TELEVISION SERIATION

Although SF's longstanding interconnection with the Gothic has already been recognized by Brian Aldiss (1986, 18), in recent years, a popular form of television drama has emerged that, whilst being marketed as SF, displays all the hallmarks of posthuman Gothic. Elsewhere referred to as Gothic SF (Wasson and Alder 2011) or technogothics (Edwards 2015), my privileging of posthuman Gothic over other similar categorizations is intended to specify how the (near) futuristic and scientific premises on which these productions are based are mere plot devices for a Gothic-informed exploration of the trauma, spectrality, and alterity that advanced technologies can produce. Roger Luckhurst detects the origins of this new Gothic vector in the

scientific and biomedical revolution that began in the 1960s (2015, 84). But in the early twenty-first century, posthuman Gothic has moved into the mainstream with successful television drama productions on HBO (*Westworld*; *Raised by Wolves*), Channel 4 (*Black Mirror*; *Humans*), and Netflix (*Altered Carbon*; *Love, Death & Robots*), amongst other platforms, dramatizing the notion that what we understand as human is in a state of radical and potentially unsettling flux.

Nowadays, human existence has become so embedded in a technological paradigm that it has provoked a much-feared disruption of the binaries between “life and death, organism and machine, human and non-human” (Edwards 2015, 3). In such an apocalyptic climate, Gothic has flourished because, as Edwards suggests, it “fixates on monstrosity, disintegration, and mutation” (2015, 11). In fact, Gothic itself has mutated in a way that problematizes the typical observation that SF looks to the future while Gothic looks to the past (Botting 2008b, 131; Spooner 2010, ix). Furthermore, while the disturbing potential of new technologies has, historically, been largely the domain of SF, this space has more recently become entangled with a posthuman Gothic that takes as its subject “a new order of liminal ontologies” (Luckhurst 2015, 84). Holly-Gale Millette has described this hybrid genre as one that incorporates “critical developments in posthumanism (theory) with less recent gothic forms of science fiction (writing) in representing the universe, its knowable life forms, and our anxieties within it” (2021, 1193). In doing so, it is distinct from steampunk in that it explores the ecological and cybernetic dilemmas that the contemporary (rather than historical) world faces. Moreover, I believe that posthuman Gothic also exceeds the dystopian technophobia that characterizes cyberpunk or technoir. Although Anya Heise-von der Lippe has rightly argued that posthuman Gothic often expresses “unease” about “losing ourselves in a multitude of corporeal as well as discursive possibilities” (2019, 218), I think that the genre also explores hybridized forms of subjectivity in increasingly positive terms. This illustrates one dimension of what Catherine Spooner identifies as the “new lightness” (2010, xi) of much of twenty-first-century Gothic by suggesting that affirmative visions of the posthuman condition can emerge from these narratives, as they do in the two episodes from *Electric Dreams* that I analyze in this essay.

The specific textualization of posthuman Gothic that *Electric Dreams* embodies can be described as a “seriation,” the term that N. Katherine Hayles borrows from archaeological anthropology to describe a pattern of “overlapping replication and innovation” (1999, 14). An anthologized television production, its standalone episodes nevertheless interconnect with each other, with PKD’s stories, and with various diverse intertexts. Further entanglement is also provided by *Electric Dreams*’ uncanny diegetic spaces, which refract long-standing Gothic anxieties about posthuman otherness through a technological lens more often associated with SF. Through exploring the outcomes of this intertextual hybridization, we can better appreciate how PKD’s interrogation of the paradigmatic binaries between life/death, interiority/exteriority

and the material/digital demonstrate the posthuman Gothic concerns that are at play in his work. Indeed, if the uncanny results from “[t]hings which do not stay in their place” (Botting 2008a, 106), then *Electric Dreams*’ uncanniness arises from its casting of PKD’s (historical) literary body as a textual spectre that haunts the seriation’s posthuman Gothic imaginary. The diegetic worlds that *Electric Dreams* creates are self-reflexive, sometimes ironic, sites. They project onto our television screens contemporary ethical and existential anxieties about technological mediation, the precarity of human (bodily) integrity and the need for non-anthropomorphic ecologies. In doing so, the characters in the seriation undergo emotionally intense, sometimes horrifying, subjectivized experiences of otherness, or being other(ed), that critically illuminate how *Electric Dreams* is “in discussion with [humanism’s] ghost” (Millette 2021, 1197).

To illustrate these ideas further, my discussion will now turn to two episodes from the television series/seriation that display key aspects of how PKD’s stories are re-visioned in posthuman Gothic terms. More specifically, I believe that both “Impossible Planet” (Farr 2017a) and “The Commuter” (Harper 2017) both critique the transhumanist paradigm that promotes human enhancement through technology. My analysis intersects with two critical frameworks that enhance our understanding of the way in which *Electric Dreams* provocatively melds SF, Gothic and other generic intertexts to produce an innovative form of television drama. In doing so, these frameworks enable a more nuanced reading of the series’ ethical subtexts that challenges its reception (and marketing) as SF. My close reading of “Impossible Planet” is informed by Rosi Braidotti’s theory of posthuman death and, as such, analyzes how PKD’s nostalgic lament for an environmentally devastated Earth becomes, in *Electric Dreams*, a meditation on non-anthropocentric becoming on a cosmic scale. In contrast, “The Commuter” details a strange, augmented reality called Macon Heights that intersects with the protagonist’s experiential world. Drawing on Roger Luckhurst’s concept of zones, I explore how the episode uses longstanding Gothic tropes of suffering and uncertainty to examine the aesthetic and philosophical possibilities of hybridity that result from such a human-technological interface.

3. “IMPOSSIBLE PLANET” / POSTHUMAN DEATH

“Impossible Planet,” the second episode in *Electric Dreams*, was written and created by the British director David Farr. As in PKD’s 1953 short story on which it is based, the narrative focuses on Irma Gordon (played by Geraldine Chaplin), an old woman who wishes to travel to Earth, the planet on which her grandparents were raised. More specifically, she wants to visit Elk River Falls, a beauty spot in “Carolina” with “a natural pool so clear you could see the bottom” (13:31). To this end, Irma pays the two-man crew of the spaceship, Dreamweaver 9, the exorbitant fee of “two kilo positive” (07:27) to go there. However, it seems that she does not know what we, as the beneficiaries of the episode’s omniscient narration, come to discover: that Earth, as

it was in her grandparents' day, "no longer exists" (06:45) and that, in the unspecified year of the story's diegesis, it is now sterile and abandoned, an almost forgotten outpost of ancient human civilization that was last inhabited in 2451. Instead of going there, the spaceship is, in fact, heading for Emphor 3, a planetary doppelgänger that, like Earth, has "one moon [...] [and] a solar system dominated by one major sun" (08:23). Owing to its toxic atmosphere, this is where Irma dies at the end of the episode and, in this way, the typical SF/Gothic motif of the journey into the unknown takes on added significance because her death is metaphorized as the "frontier of the incorporeal" (Braidotti 2013, 137).

Irma Gordon is 342 years old (rather than the 350 years that she has lived in the source text), and it is implicit that her longevity is the result of advances in human biotechnology. In this limited sense, Irma's character might seem to embody the transhumanist's technophilic optimism that, one day, we will "eradicate aging as a source of death" (O'Connell 2017, 2). Nevertheless, she has "lost her hearing" (05:48) and relies upon a hand-held device to translate others' speech into written text. Sometimes "more of a barrier than an aid" (17:40), this technology (which is not present in PKD's story) facilitates Irma's social interactions and, as such, illustrates how, through our use of similar devices in the contemporary world, we are all (to some extent) already cyborgian. However, "Impossible Planet" visually downplays the state-of-the-art technology that typifies most television SF and that is hinted at in PKD's original text. Whereas in the published story, Irma's assistant is a "gleaming robant, a towering robot assistant" (Dick 2017, 41), in Farr's adaptation, RB29 (Malik Ibheis/Christopher Staines) is stylized with a distinctly vintage aesthetic.¹ Although the android's name echoes that of *Star Wars*' (Lucas 1977) iconic character, R2-D2 (Kenny Baker), its bronze, metallic body and clunky, mechanical movements are more reminiscent of the same film's protocol droid, C-3P0 (Anthony Daniels). Something of a pop cultural throwback, therefore, "Impossible Planet" visually debunks the technological ultramodernity that is inherent to the transhumanist project. Instead, the episode's apparatuses are both kitsch and prone to significant failure. Whereas the robant in the short story mentions that "they have stopped giving [Irma] sustentation treatments" (Dick 2017, 43), an indication that the biotechnology exists to prolong her life (even if it is denied to her), in Farr's adaptation, RB29 says she has a "heart condition" and that "she will die in the next two months" (16:16). Through this hypertextual re-vision, "Impossible Planet" emphasizes medical science's inability to save Irma, and thus her frail physique serves as a powerful embodiment of the fallacy implicit within transhumanism: that the indefinite extension of human life through technological means is of self-evident benefit. In this way, PKD's posthuman Gothic dream (or nightmare) of biomedical technology's insufficiency illustrates the contemporaneity of his vision.

¹ While the character of RB-29 is performed by Malik Ibheis, his voice is provided by Christopher Staines.

"Impossible Planet" hypertextualizes the advanced technology imagined by PKD as retro-futurism. By doing so, the episode reveals how posthuman Gothic destabilizes temporality through repetition and entanglement—such as in its visual echoes of *Star Wars*, for example. Indeed, by considering "Impossible Planet" in terms of its technological production, we can better understand how intercutting helps to depict time as a destabilizing source of con-fusion. Although not present in PKD's original story, the primary narrative in the episode is, sporadically, intercut with a fragmented scene in which a young couple go skinny-dipping at Elk River Falls. These characters, we are led to believe, are Irma's grandparents and, as such, we, initially, interpret this moment as an external analepsis: a spectral flashback from Irma's historical narrative that has become, stylistically, fused with the diegetic present. However, in the episode's finale, we realize that we have, perhaps, misread the scene and that its status is, therefore, much more problematic. It is equally possible, for example, that the incident at Elk River is actually a flash-forward to the hallucination that Irma will experience at the point of her death: a blissfully nostalgic memory (or fantasy) of her younger self and her lover. Such deliberately ambiguous moments of ana/prolepsis in the episode produce a poly-temporality whereby past, present and future become merged. Time is thus depicted as a continuum, an endless flow of existence that exceeds anthropocentric demarcation. As a result, Farr's re-vision of "Impossible Planet" exploits television technology to exaggerate the disorienting telaesthesia that is hinted at in PKD's text, a time(lessness) that is "somewhere between the 'no longer' and the 'not yet'" (Braidotti 2013, 137). By doing this, we can read posthuman Gothic as a textual practice that deconstructs anthropocentric temporality.

The motif of time as an excess also spills over into the portrayal of the episode's characters, an aspect of "Impossible Planet" that, once again, derives from Farr's posthuman Gothic re-vision of PKD's story. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of the episode—which is absent from the original text—concerns the sexual frisson between Irma and Brian Norton (Jack Reynor), the much younger space captain who looks exactly like her grandfather. Norton's role as Bill Gordon's doppelgänger (or vice-versa) is confirmed when the former is shown a photograph of the latter (28:55), their physical resemblance thereby destabilizing the other's somatic and temporal integrity. Irma's incestuous desire for her grandfather/Norton firmly pushes against the boundaries of how third-age sexuality is usually represented on the television screen. In fact, there is a distinctly vampiric dimension to the depiction of Irma, a figuratively undead 342-year-old who seductively kisses Norton (28:26) and then convinces him to dress up in the clothes that her grandfather used to wear (39:54). While Luckhurst offers the zombie as an example of the Gothic's "new dead" (2015, 84), Irma might be understood in similar terms because her re-visioning as a psychic vampire indicates *Electric Dreams'* interrogation of the complex interface between life and death. Less a frail "old lady" (23:50) than a predatory (post)human Other, she beguiles Norton with her declaration that "I dreamt you [...] deep in my heart. And I think you dreamt me too"

(29:03). Following his enchantment by Irma, Norton quickly abandons his partner, Barbara (Georgina Campbell) and their plans for social and professional advancement, deciding, instead, to accompany Irma onto the poisonous surface of Emphor 3. It is there, at the episode's close, that they die together. Starved of oxygen from the planet's noxious air, we witness their final, shared hallucination in which they swim in the water of Elk River (46:03), an idyllic re-vision of PKD's text where Irma "[sinks] down in a heap, into the salt ash" (Dick 2017, 50). With this textual modification, "Impossible Planet" draws out what is cryptically implied by Irma's death in the original story: that, by dying, she experiences a posthuman fusion with the material environment.

The ending of "Impossible Planet" resonates particularly well with Braidotti's theory of posthuman death, a reading that allows us to see the non-anthropocentric ecology in PKD's Gothic-inflected story. Accordingly, Irma's mission to reach Earth can be understood in terms of her desire for imperceptibility. As Braidotti explains: "What we most truly desire is to surrender the self, preferably in the agony of ecstasy, thus choosing our own way of disappearing" (2013, 137). Rather than death being an absence, or lack, Irma's and Norton's demise is re-visited as a generative flow whereby they sacrifice their atomized, individual selves to become an inter-relational energy that embeds them within the material universe. Not only do they submerge their bodies into the landscape at Elk River Falls, but they also undergo a posthuman Gothic fusion with their spectral Others—Irma's grandparents—whose clothing they both put on, and then take off. Significantly, in Farr's vision of "Impossible Planet," it is Norton who chooses to die alongside Irma, whereas, in PKD's original story, it is her faithful robot, whose programming dictates that it follows her to its own, inevitable, destruction. Irma's suicide pact with Norton in "Impossible Planet" has been criticized by several online reviewers. Brian J. Robb describes it as a "cop out" (2017), while, for Louisa Mellor, it simply does not "stack up" (2018a). However, I think it helps to look at the episode through the lens of posthuman Gothic. Dissatisfied with the priorities of late capitalism that obsess his "unpleasantly aspirational" (Mellor 2018) partner—from whom he is physically and emotionally estranged, despite their technological connectedness via videocalls—, Norton comes to realize the need for an existence that is more ecologically attuned. This notion is illustrated, symbolically, when he renounces his share of the money that Irma has paid for her journey into space (43:24). Although Robb thinks that Farr's decision to double the original fee mentioned in PKD's story is taken "for no good reason" (2018), it does serve to emphasize the potential wealth that Norton gives up: the equivalent, we are told, of "five years' salary" (09:11). Thus, he swaps economic materialism for what Braidotti calls "vitalist materialism [...], a radical immanence" (2013, 136) that is beyond individual death. In doing so, Norton foregoes the "narcissism, paranoia and negativity" (Braidotti 2013, 137) that are the hallmarks of humanist subjectivity in favour of becoming a "zoe-driven subject [that] is marked by the interdependence with its environment" (Braidotti 2013, 139; emphasis in the original). For Braidotti, 'zoe' represents the critical move within posthumanist thought that expands the concept of life towards the non-anthropocentric.

In the episode's closing scene, the internally focalized vision of Elk River Falls that Norton shares with Irma is both illogical and profoundly con-fusing. After all, it makes no rational sense that two people can have an identical mental experience. However, as a posthuman Gothic re-vision of PKD's story, their psychic hybridization here displaces the binary-oriented thinking that is inherent to the humanist paradigm, and which separates life from death, inside from outside and self from other. Central to the hypertextuality of "Impossible Planet" is the notion that death is neither transcendent nor hierarchical. Instead, it is a merging "into the milieu [...] of the earth itself and its cosmic resonance" (Braidotti 2013, 137). This might seem somewhat ironic in the context of Farr's adaptation. After all, Irma and Norton are not subsumed into the Earth at all, but into the toxic landscape of Emphor 3 (a noteworthy modification of PKD's original story). However, I think that this is, in fact, precisely the point. While Mellor bemoans the fact that the episode "left her furrowing her brow" (2018), by not dying on Earth, Irma and Norton's self-destruction becomes an act of non-anthropocentric deterritorialization on an intergalactic scale. They are transformed, in short, into a "complex singularity" (Braidotti 2013, 137), two bodies that, through their affective assemblage, become interrelated with the non-human life of the cosmos. In this sense, the ending of "Impossible Planet" does not have an end. Instead, it represents Irma and Norton's ecological immersion within Lovecraftian deep time. Their posthuman Gothic entanglement, therefore, enacts a shift away from monadic existence towards the amorphous and the universal. As such, their deaths are affirmative because, with the dissolution of their individual identities, they become constituted by cosmic multiplicity and infinitude.

The radical dis-location that "Impossible Planet" enacts is, I believe, most profitably viewed through the lens of the posthuman Gothic. By journeying to the turbid environment of Emphor 3, Irma and Norton are displaced from the Earth that has, historically, grounded human existence. Instead, they become part of a vast, amorphous universe that cannot be easily categorized or resolved. Nevertheless, Farr's adaptation is suffused with "nostalgia [...] for an earth that no longer exists" (Farr 2017b, 40). The lack of capitalization in the director's explanation here is significant as it indicates a longing for embeddedness, a grounding in the energized materiality of the cosmos, rather than being a lament for planet Earth. Put in Braidotti's terms, it expresses a desire for "the unfolding of the self onto the world, while enfolding the world within" (2013, 193). Viewing "Impossible Planet" via Braidotti's work helps to reveal the episode's entangled, intertextual dialogue both with PKD's short story and, more generally, with the humanist orientation of much SF. The defamiliarized space that Emphor 3 represents—a planet that Irma is told is Earth, but which is not—contrasts with the verdant idyll of Elk River Falls. This is a radically re-visioned topos where human beings are immersed in, or embodied by, their environment, not separate from or dominant over it. However, the episode's closing tilt shot draws our attention away from Irma and Norton and towards the intense light of the sun. At this point, the accompanying non-diegetic soundtrack becomes more sombre, and we are reminded

of an analeptic reference earlier in the episode to the Earth having been destroyed by a solar flare in the year 2673 (07:46). “Impossible Planet” ends, therefore, on a distinctly dissonant note. However, by opting for this denouement, Farr’s adaptation displaces PKD’s apocalyptic metonym that the geriatric Irma is the “ruined face of the planet” (2017, 51) with a story that questions anthropocentrism. As Irma and Norton disappear from our gaze, they become absorbed into space where the human is no more, or less, significant than anything else that exists in the vast timelessness of the universe.

4. “THE COMMUTER” / OTHER-ED ZONES

While “Impossible Planet” re-visions PKD’s interest in the ecology of posthuman death—a motif that reinterprets his provocative ideas for contemporary audiences—, “The Commuter” considers the potential impact that technology can have on individual and collective subjectivities by reframing this classic SF motif in posthuman Gothic terms. Written by Jack Thorne and directed by Tom Harper, “The Commuter” is based on PKD’s 1953 story of the same name. Starring well-known British actor Timothy Spall in the role of Ed Jacobson, the third episode in *Electric Dreams* shifts its diegesis from Lewisburg in the U.S. to Woking, a town in the London commuter belt. Ed works at the local railway station and it is there that he encounters a mysterious female customer who asks for a “five-day return” (02:47) to Macon Heights, a destination that does not exist on the network map. After following her onto the train, Ed is surprised to discover that there is a town at the exact location that she has described, an idyllic, other-worldly place that is shrouded in mist. Ed returns to Macon Heights on several occasions throughout the episode, firstly to find solace in its peaceful atmosphere and then, later, when attempting to locate his son, Sam (Anthony Boyle), who has disappeared.

Thorne’s teleplay switches the roles of Ed and his co-worker, Bob Paine—who is the one that travels to Macon Heights in PKD’s original story—and re-visions the railway customer from Ernest Crichton, a “little man” with a “[s]mall wrinkled face [...] [and] [t]hinning hair” (Dick 2017, 24-25), to the younger, more elegant Linda (Tuppence Middleton). From the outset, therefore, “The Commuter” establishes its posthuman “ethics of transformation” (Braidotti 2013, 189). Linda, at least initially, appears to be a seductive fantasy figure for the middle-aged and unhappily married Ed; and this reading is, perhaps, encouraged when Ed tells a coffee shop waitress (Hayley Squires) that “[he] is looking for Linda” (36:08)—an implicit reference to the title of the late-80s romantic pop hit by Hue and Cry. The opening lyrics of “Looking for Linda” are a spectral intertext that overlaps with Ed’s personal situation: “I wasn’t looking for Linda, but Linda found me / Hiding away on the slow train home” (Hue and Cry 1988).² However, like the song, which characterizes Linda as a troubled enigma, “The

² Linda’s depiction as a smoker in “The Commuter” might be in reference to the song’s lyrics, which mention that “[s]he’d spent thirty-five pounds on one pack of ciggies” (Hue and Cry 1988).

Commuter” subverts expectations by depicting its female protagonist, not in romantic terms, but as a Gothic anti-hero. Having discovered the dead body of her father following his suicide, Linda is a trauma survivor who now gives others, including the waitress, who was raped as a teenager, access to the “divine” (17:37) alternate reality that is Macon Heights. Yet, while her motives for doing so are, ostensibly, altruistic, Linda also preys on the vulnerable people she “save[s]” (44:11) by indoctrinating them with a questionable philosophy: “The answer to life’s problems is to stop living in reality” (41:30). Indeed, it is revealed that following her father’s death, Linda herself “disappeared” (25:46) rather than facing up to the trauma that she had suffered—a parallel to the character in Hue and Cry’s song, who absconds on the train to escape from her domestic troubles. Thorne’s pop cultural-SF/Gothic bricolage, therefore, provides an engaging new context in which to reappraise PKD’s critique of insidious technological progress.

Linda’s ghostlike (non-)presence haunts “The Commuter.” She appears, then vanishes at will and, in one moment of visual defamiliarization, her body is subsumed into the (im)material landscape of Macon Heights (44:13). This location can be profitably interpreted through Luckhurst’s concept of zones. These he defines as liminal, meta-critical spaces that “re-mark on their own dissolution” (2011, 23). Here, Luckhurst is thinking, specifically, about the textual-geographical locations in canonical Weird works like *Roadside Picnic* (Strugatsky [1977] 2012) and *Nova Swing* (Harrison 2006). Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that his work on textual topologies is particularly relevant to an understanding of posthuman Gothic in “The Commuter.”³ Although Luckhurst mentions transculturation, critique, collaboration and imaginary dialogue as examples of “the literate arts of the contact zone” (2011, 24), we might also add adaptation to this list, given that it is a means through which intertexts become hybridized and re-visioned. Luckhurst’s description of zones as “never easy spaces to occupy: [...] often unnerving and transitional” (2011, 24) is a productive way to think about Macon Heights.⁴ (Dis)Located on the outskirts of the urban area, a twenty-eight-minute train ride from Woking station (08:00), this (non-)town is a disorienting, technological Other that conflates real world mundanity with fantastic virtuality. During “The Commuter,” we are told that, some years ago, a proposed new town development called Macon Heights was denied planning permission. Rather than being a place that “doesn’t exist,” it is therefore one that “almost existed” (25:14), which, as the character Martine (Anne Reid) suggests, is “somehow different” (25:49). The town’s quasi-existence represents an important posthuman Gothic re-visioning of

³ The denomination of those who visit Macon Heights as ‘commuters’ can be read as an intertextual play on the “stalkers” (Strugatsky [1977] 2012, 4) in *Roadside Picnic*, who illicitly sneak into the text’s enigmatic and hazardous zone.

⁴ It is fitting that, in a story about the interface between reality and virtuality, shooting for “The Commuter” occurred both on a sound stage and in an actual physical place. The experimental new town of Poundbury, on the outskirts of Dorchester in south-west England, was used for the location shoot, although the town was still under construction at the time. It is scheduled to be completed in 2025.

PKD's text. In that story, Macon Heights is eventually discovered to be a real place on the railway line between "Jacksonville and Lewisburg" (Dick 2017, 31). As a result, PKD offers a nightmarish 1950's vision of suburban sprawl where the town "couldn't exist without warping the city. They interlocked" (2017, 35). However, in Thorne's teleplay, Macon Heights is rendered a hauntology, a spectral site that has been displaced from/by history. It is "not supposed to be [there]" (19:40) but it, nevertheless, inscribes itself onto the English landscape. By viewing Macon Heights in this way, not as a metaphor, or a mental projection of Ed's troubled psyche, but, rather, as a materially existent non-place (that is both absent and present), Thorne's Macon Heights embodies the Weird potentiality of virtual or augmented realities.

The uncanny defamiliarization that characterizes the town is created, in large part, through the episode's technological production. Cinematographer Olli Downey uses sombre monochromes to depict Woking, with a grey colour palette dominating the scenes at the station, while dark green and nicotine-tinged orange frames convey the unhealthy atmosphere inside Ed's home. These provide stark, visual contrasts with the blue, open skies that are repeatedly seen above Macon Heights. However, by shooting on 35mm film, sometimes with double exposure, Downey's occasional use of old anamorphic lenses gives him the focal drop off and bokeh that is needed to create the town's disconcerting, off-kilter contemporaneity. In addition, Julie Berghoff and Lisa Hall's meticulously crafted set design establishes a series of embedded stylistic patterns throughout Macon Heights, from the strategic placement of twins and identically costumed extras to the repeated use of strong blues and yellows that offset Ed's grey station uniform. These reduplications reinforce the town as visually, and disconcertingly, Weird, a notion that is illustrated in one shot when several buildings are revealed to have only façades and no interiors (39:11). In another, Downey places the camera at a ninety-degree angle so that it appears Ed is walking vertically up the frame rather than across it from left to right (39:55).

Seeing the episode through the lens of posthuman Gothic allows us to perceive how the repetitiveness that Macon Heights embodies is reminiscent of Luckhurst's description of the non-modern, "a space that refuses the spatial and temporal separations of modernity" (2011, 31). In fact, time is reconfigured as a potentially endless loop with Ed bumping into the same, recently engaged couple at ten-minute intervals on three occasions (18:03; 28:59; 38:37). These glitches in the space-time continuum induce in spectators the same confused reaction as they do in Ed, who "[doesn't] understand" (29:06) what he is witnessing. This is particularly evident in relation to the plotline about his teenage son—an angst-ridden, Gothic narrative that is, hypertextually, revisioned from PKD's story where the protagonist is the father of a newborn. In the episode's first domestic scene, Ed returns home to find Sam being cautioned by the police for an unspecified violation against a fifteen-year-old girl who "laughed at [him]" (05:50). He is characterized as a deeply disturbed young man who gets "angry" and "scare[s] people" (06:03), especially women. Sam's physical assault of his mother, Mary

(Rebecca Manley) (09:34), leads his counsellor to warn that, as the psychotic episodes are becoming more frequent and his violence more extreme, his parents should prepare for a deterioration in Sam's condition (10:40). However, on the next occasion that Ed is seen at home, in a scene that follows on from his first visit to Macon Heights, Sam no longer exists and, instead, Mary sadly reflects on their failure to have children: "I always thought we'd have a boy. Things happen, I guess, or they don't" (22:35). The profound disorientation that this moment provokes is further compounded when, later in "The Commuter," Ed wakes during the night and hears spectral jazz music coming from the spare bedroom (31.27), the same place where he and Sam had earlier listened to a Louie Bellson record. Then, in a scene that is resonant with Gothic dread, Ed climbs the steps into the darkened attic, where he is surprised to discover videotapes, an out-dated technology, that contain recordings of Sam as a young boy. As in "Impossible Planet," the rupturing of narrative temporality here reflects the episode's use of blending and destabilization as posthumanist textual practices.

The doubt that surrounds Sam's (non-)existence and, by extension, the question as to whether Ed is "mad or sane" (35:07) are the key posthuman Gothic ambiguities that destabilize the episode's signification. At times, we are left wondering, as Ed himself does, if he is "ill" and if Linda is a "symptom of [his] illness" (19:21). Furthermore, we begin to consider the possibility that Ed's son is merely a technological chimera, a figment of his disturbed imagination. However, the final scene in "The Commuter" confirms that Sam is very much alive and, thus, the section in which he has apparently disappeared—almost thirty minutes of the episode's fifty-minute runtime—occurs because Linda has removed him from Ed's personal history. As she states, with an ironic nod to Thorne's adaptation of PKD's story, "You can rewrite everything" (42:50). Through Linda's technological mediation, therefore, Ed becomes, effectively, other-Ed, a spectrally transhumanist version of himself whose life has been enhanced—a textual overlap with "Impossible Planet," where Irma's life is ostensibly 'improved' through medical science. Sam's disappearance occurs when the Weird excess of Macon Heights spills over into Ed's experiential reality, an idea that is textually inscribed by the contrasting mise-en-scenes that depict him walking home. On the first occasion, the street on which Ed lives is squalid, with unkempt lawns, an abandoned, rundown vehicle in a neighbour's front garden and litter spilling onto the pavement (05:01). Sodium street lighting, barking dogs and the diegetic sound of gangsta rap contribute to a menacing atmosphere that foreshadows the later revelation of Sam's unpredictable violence. However, upon returning home after his initial visit to Macon Heights, the same location is now transformed into a pristine suburban street, with bright, white lights and manicured gardens that can be glimpsed in the background of the frame as Ed walks (21:20). In tandem with a pleasant, non-diegetic soundtrack, the placement in the frame of a modern blue car and yellow garden flowers illustrates how Macon Height's augmented reality has become, transgressively, inscribed onto the aesthetic design of suburban Woking. PKD's original narrative can be glimpsed here as a textual

spectre. However, Thorne's "The Commuter," which is no longer concerned with the mechanics of urban change, re-visioned modern technology as a source of posthuman Gothic anxieties, a more insidious and personally invasive phenomenon that has the capability to affect an individual's subjective experience of the (im)material world.

Linda's decision to "extinguish" (40:58) Sam from Ed's reality is taken to give him the chance to experience life without parental turmoil. To achieve this, however, he must accept that Macon Height's (un)reality is preferable to a disharmonious existence in which Sam will "go to jail. He'll do terrible things" (42:30). As Linda bluntly tells him: "Your son was a shit son, and you were a shit father to him" (41:34). Sam's disappearance, therefore, puts Ed at risk of losing himself—of becoming permanently other-Ed—through the alterity that technological mediation potentializes. By re-visioning the Weird zone of Macon Heights here as a dynamic Gothic interface between the human and the technological, we can better understand how Ed's experience reflects a posthuman mixed-reality paradigm. After all, by dissolving the boundaries between Woking and its Weird Other, Macon Heights becomes an immersive space that is, effectively, indistinguishable from the real world.

It might seem that "The Commuter" offers a distinctly technophilic understanding of posthuman existence. For one thing, when Ed begins to realize that there is a more sinister dimension to Linda's "help" (39:32), his refusal to deny the suffering that his son has caused leads to a malfunction in the town's technological augmentation. Instead of the smiling, welcoming strangers that Ed has previously encountered in the street, he is now accosted by nightmarish Gothic visions of trauma, from the Asian man who has been brutalized by racists to the despairing mother whose young child is going to die (35:31). Furthermore, given that this scene occurs after Ed has watched the videotapes of Sam as a younger child, the act of viewing his family's history on archaic VHS opposes the technologically induced amnesia that is experienced in Macon Heights, an augmented zone where traumatic memories are overlaid with a simulation of "happiness" (43:32). While the town offers "new possibilities, a new life" (43:02), Ed remains steadfast in his commitment to the non-augmented world.

Nevertheless, "The Commuter" illustrates how, through Ed's immersive experience of posthuman otherness, he becomes more consciously aware of his love for his son, despite both their personal failings. By accepting responsibility for Sam, even though Ed admits that he has been "frightened of him" (38:06), Thorne's re-visioning of PKD's work also, implicitly and hypertextually, rewrites the trope of paternity in the Frankenstein story. As Ed tells Linda: "He's what I made" (43:02). In consequence, the posthuman experience of fusion between material and virtual realities allows Ed to overcome his fear and thus frees him from his redundant nostalgia for the less troubled life that was captured on the videotapes. Although, at times, experienced as a Gothic-tinged waking nightmare, Ed is nonetheless empowered by his immersion in Macon Height's Weird zone. In common with "Impossible Planet," the episode's denouement is distinctly open-ended as it concludes with the disturbing possibility that Sam will

do significant harm to others in the future. Despite this, “The Commuter” promotes a view that life is worth living even if it contains manifold personal traumas. Indeed, by refusing Macon Height’s visual economy of endlessly self-enclosed repetition, Ed discovers his ethical relationality not only with Sam, but also with those other commuters who, in looking to negate their past, resign themselves to “a life without truth” (45:23). Instead, he insists to Linda, he will tell them what “they’re going to lose” (43:21). In doing so, Ed vocalizes an affirmative interconnection with the community that transforms his “classically negative” (28:43) attitude into an affirmative “love” (42:59).

5. CONCLUSION / PKD RE-VISIONED

Electric Dreams provides an illuminating example of how several recent dramas entangle futuristic, technologically mediated diegeses with the longstanding Gothic motifs of alterity, trauma and spectrality, a hybridization that I have identified as being characteristic of posthuman Gothic. While further work is still required to draw out the commonalities between *Electric Dreams* and other such popular television dramas, reading the series in this way—that is, against the grain of its marketing as SF—better enables our appreciation of PKD’s prescient shorter fiction, which often deals with scientific paradigms that are highly appropriate to life in the twenty-first century. The selected episodes from *Electric Dreams* that I have discussed in this essay are thought-provoking re-visions of two of PKD’s earliest stories. Through disruptively and creatively melding diverse genre motifs, they illustrate how popular culture’s interrogation of the (post)human condition has become increasingly visible (and mainstream) in the early twenty-first century. Harnessing the critical insights provided by Braidotti’s theory of posthuman death and Luckhurst’s work on Weird zones has further helped me to articulate some of the ethical and existential questions that are contemplated by posthuman Gothic, a genre that destabilizes the humanist fantasy of textual/bodily integrity through its exploration of disruptive fusions. More specifically, these theoretical frameworks have provided an insight into how *Electric Dreams*’ re-visioning of PKD’s work produces an affirmative understanding of the posthuman that is absent from other, more technophobic SF and Gothic texts.

As hallmarks of the posthuman Gothic, the intertextual and hypertextual have been central to my discussion of “Impossible Planet” and “The Commuter.” Through these notions, I have elaborated a form of spectator respons-ibility that emphasizes textual production and interpretation as both technological and entangled. In doing so, my analysis has tried to illuminate some of the ways in which disorientation and defamiliarization emanate from *Electric Dreams*’ uncanny, retro-futuristic diegeses. By dying on Emphor 3, rather than on Earth, Irma and Norton’s anomalous, cross-generational romance leads them to a more ecological understanding of non-anthropocentric dying. They become transformed, through destroying their individual

bodies, into an interrelational energy that embeds them within the amorphous infinitude of the cosmos. In contrast, Ed's unhappy existence with his psychologically disturbed son leads him to the augmented world of Macon Heights, a distinctly Weird zone that offers him temporary respite from reality. Suffused with the Gothic tropes of trauma and haunting, "The Commuter," nevertheless, explores the need for commitment to a materialist understanding of life and a sense of community with, rather than immunity from, other 'commuters' who have also experienced suffering.

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