

Management Learning

Exploring the Human(ities) through Dehumanizing Robotic Imaginaries

Journal:	<i>Management Learning</i>
Manuscript ID	MLQ-20-0239.R1
Manuscript Type:	Book Review
Abstract:	

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Manuscripts

Exploring the Human(ities) through Dehumanizing Robotic Imaginaries

Book review. *The Robotic Imaginary. The Human & The Price of Dehumanized Labor* by Jennifer Rhee, 2018, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 226 p. paperback ISBN 978-1-5179-0298-8, USD 27.

Robotic imaginaries fascinate, upset, haunt us. Shows like *Westworld* and movies like *Blade Runner* or *ExMachina* suggest a future in which humanoid robots outperform humans, challenging us as superior beings. Upon closer inspection however, one might ask what kind of human conception are such claims built on. And what is the human, anyway? In her book, *The Robotic Imaginary. The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor* Jennifer Rhee, associate professor of English, takes us on a trip across the last seventy years to explore the conception of the human in and through robotic imaginaries (loosely defined as “robotic visions and technological relations” p.2) as we find them in technology and culture. In doing so, she questions the “givenness” of the human, its knowability and predictability as well as the way robotics and artificial intelligence (AI) equate humans and machines. This is not because she objects machines or technological relations per se. Her thinking is clearly indebted to “theorizations of the posthuman and the nonhuman” (p. 3). But she is wary of the way *anthropomorphism* - the attribution of human qualities onto non-human entities - is playing out. While anthropomorphism claims to open up and extend the human, it actually puts forth a very narrow conception of it, dehumanizing those humans who do not fit often based on race or gender. Should we care?

As we are facing rising economic inequality and ecological exhaustion, the human condition is unsettled, triggering explorations of hybrid forms of being that “move beyond the human”. Largely missing from this discourse are questions of exclusion. The movement thus risks to reinscribe “existing hierarchies and their material

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3 consequences” (p. 175), and to re-instantiate “those same exclusions and erasures” (p.
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5 3) that have come to define the human in the past. A critical lens is needed if we wish to
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7 undo the current status-quo and create new forms of equality and human-robot
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9 relations.
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13 At its core, the book demands to abolish political philosophies of libertarianism
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15 that privilege “the few over the many”, a logic that is wide-spread among Silicon Valley
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17 techno-utopists in favor of anthropomorphism. To make her argument, Rhee draws
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19 together three narratives: the technological advancements in robotics and AI and their
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21 underlying assumptions; a critical reading of the western capitalist system and its
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23 devaluation of certain forms of human (and robotic) labor; and an interpretation of
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25 cultural and literary robotic imaginaries that is informed by feminist ethics. Ultimately,
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27 Rhee wishes to recuperate the human from dehumanizing ideals such as sameness,
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29 recognizability, and productivity. In doing so, she also reclaims the humanities’ critical
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31 force to generate imaginations beyond technical or economic imperatives.
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37 The technological narrative maps the developments in robotics and AI from the
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39 1950’s onwards: from conversational intelligence (*ELIZA*, *Watson*, *Siri*, *Alexa*), through
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41 situated robotics (*Shakey*), sociable robots (*Kismet*), to contemporary war drone
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43 technology. Rhee meticulously explores each of them and illustrates how only what is
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45 known and familiar to the scientist (or funder –in the U.S. traditionally the defense
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47 industry) as being human finds its way into the robotic imaginary. For example, the
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49 famous *Turing Test* for machine intelligence (also referred to as imitation game) rather
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51 than objectively drawing the boundary between humans and machines heavily depends
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53 on the judge’s (gendered, racialized) expectations of what defines a “human” response.
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55 Similarly, *Cybernetics’* celebration of cyborgs is developed vis-à-vis the dehumanization
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57 of the “enemy other” (e.g. Japanese soldiers), illustrating how “the robotic imaginary in
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3 its various forms has always had at its constitutive center gendered devaluation and
4 racial dehumanization” (p. 176). While Rhee’s review is insightful for anyone unfamiliar
5 with robotics and AI technology, it is a (necessary) simplification of the fields’ diversity.
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10 A small irony for a book that fights narrow conceptions.

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13 Intertwined with the technological narrative is an economic one in which Rhee
14 discusses care, domestic, emotional, and drone/war labor as typical sites of structural
15 inequalities and increasing automation. She borrows from critical management studies
16 concepts such as racial and emotional capitalism, and emotional and immaterial labor to
17 problematize the devaluation of labor and the conceptual links between robots, labor
18 exploitation, and dehumanization. Those dynamics are questioned in and through
19 literary robotic imaginaries including Karel Capek’s 1920 play *R.U.R. (Rossum’s*
20 *Universal Robots)* as the first literary text to inquire the human condition through a
21 robot lens. Richard Power’s novel *Galatea 2.2.* and Spike Jonze’s film *Her* are reviewed to
22 challenge how female care labor tends to be dehumanized through its portrayal as
23 something that machines can provide better than humans. Ira Levin’s 1972 novel *The*
24 *Stepford Wives* serves to question the devaluation of domestic labor, telling the story of
25 how women are murdered by their husbands and replaced by compliant, robotic
26 doubles. The novel is often cited as feminist critique of how patriarchy reduces
27 aspirational, educated women to mindless robotic housewives. But Rhee does not agree
28 with this interpretation, pointing to how it privileges white, college-educated
29 housewives, while failing to address women of color and white working-class women,
30 undermining female solidarity and further devaluing domestic labor. Racial
31 dehumanization and exploitation is also at play in *ExMachina* where a white *femme*
32 *fatale* is able to escape her closed world with the help of an enslaved Asian humanoid. As
33 a modern-day *Frankenstein* (a classic imaginary that Rhee omits), the film also invites a
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3 reflection on the human condition under algorithmic control. Philip K. Dick's novels *We*
4 *Can Build You* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* on the other hand, reflect on
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6 emotional labor and how the power to define what is expected (think of U.S. Homeland
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8 security surveillance systems) serves to justify and further stabilize power and
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10 privilege, excluding and dehumanizing anyone who does not comply. To readers familiar
11
12 with (science) fiction, Rhee's choice might seem unusual as several literary sources are
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14 missing (e.g. fiction by Stanislaw Lem or Isaac Asimov). But her aim is not to be
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16 exhaustive but to problematize. To achieve this, she admits her choice is deliberate (p.
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25 Rhee's turn to the humanities also includes a selection of robot art that proves
26
27 essential for her claims. The art works complement the analytical approach by shifting
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29 the focus from cognitive questioning to an embodied knowing and experience of the
30
31 human as an interdependent, vulnerable, and unpredictable being. Nam June Paik *Robot*
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33 *K-456* and the performance piece *The First Accident of the 21st Century* establish care
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35 and interdependence as constitutive for social and technological relations, emphasizing
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37 what feminist writers have defined as an "ethics of care" (p. 65). Stelarc's hybrid works
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39 *Fractal Flesh* and *Ping Body* entangle the artist's body with a technological apparatus.
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42 Through interactions with the audience, affective experiences of interdependence and
43
44 shared responsibility for one another's vulnerability are created, exemplifying Judith
45
46 Butler's notion of "common' corporeal vulnerability" (p. 96). Other installations such as
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48 *Swarming Emotional Pianos* by Erin Gee allow to explore how machines can shape
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50 emotions and (collective) aesthetic experiences as part of an ethical inquiry into the
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52 ways in which "demands for emotional expression do not police, exclude, or monetize"
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58 (p. 131) but instead, can create spaces of coexistence between technology and human
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3 emotions beyond normative corporatized and commodified demands of performance
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5 and surveillance.
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8 The need for an ethical inquiry is most evident in the chapter on drone
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10 technology. To challenge *Cybernetics*' robotic imaginary and its continued influence on
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12 U.S. drone policies, Rhee wishes to defamiliarizes and destabilizes the ethnocentric
13
14 Western Subject position. Teju Cole's *Seven Short Stories about Drones* create a
15
16 perplexing effect of knowing and not-knowing and Omer Fast's short film *5'000 Feet is*
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18 *the Best* defamiliarizes what is seen as familiar, most powerful around the issue of race.
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20 They cast the human as "perpetual unknowable and unfamiliar" (p. 29) and put forth the
21
22 notion of "knowing as not-knowing" (p. 162), contrasting with *Cybernetics*' claim to
23
24 omniscience. The book closes by making an alternative claim, one that echoes Donna
25
26 Haraway's notion of objectivity's partiality by "accounting for positions and knowledges
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28 other than one's own without claiming them or mediating them through one's own
29
30 experience" (p.162). How to conceive of the human? Rhee suggests: "as an unimaginably
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32 capacious category that refuses dehumanizing exclusions" (p. 178).
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39 While not a body of new theoretical thought, the book's cross-disciplinary
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41 approach and its commitment to the humanities provides a refreshing take on robots in
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43 management and organization studies and offers several contributions to *Management*
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45 *Learning* and this Special Issue on the *Unsettled Humanities*.
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49 The book's primary concern are the consequences of (corporate)
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51 anthropomorphism that are born by those who are excluded and dehumanized. As we
52
53 live in a moment when organizations increasingly apply automated and predictive
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55 technologies to manage, control, and surveille the human workforce, the humanizing of
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57 machines and transhumanists' mission to extend the human ironically mark the
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59 emergence of new forms of exclusion and dehumanization. Rather than race and gender
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3 alone, questions of technological augmentation will come to define who is included and
4 who is excluded. Bringing attention to how anthropomorphism is linked to processes of
5 dehumanization and exclusion, Rhee extends the current debate and offers a critical
6 reading of a dynamic that those who have the privilege of engaging in (by deciding
7 who/what gets humanized), tend not to be aware of. The book's insistence that we ask
8 of every robotic imaginary who it de/humanizes is an important addition for a reflective
9 management and research praxis that builds on the human ability to question
10 assumptions and engage in self-reflection.
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22 Rhee's reading of popular culture illustrates what is at stake. For scholars
23 interested in pedagogics, the wide array of robotic imaginaries reviewed in the book can
24 be used as starting point for a reflection of the underlying assumptions and conceptions
25 that shape students' lived experiences of working conditions and organizational
26 contexts (Bell, 2008). It is a way to practice inclusivity and to translate abstract
27 discussions about the consequences of new forms of organizing, making the
28 consequences of the "unsettling" potentially more "real". But *Westworld*, *Blade Runner*
29 or *ExMachina* do not foretell the future and Rhee reminds us not to read those films
30 "literally". We would miss the critique. By de-familiarizing our present, the robotic
31 imaginaries invite the exploration of possible futures. While the (tech) industry tends to
32 fetishize and exploit the technological element of science fiction, claiming its message
33 "for the here and now" (Heffernan, 2019, p. 12), fiction's strengths is its fictiveness. It
34 does not make any claims to the "truth" but leaves questions about the future and what
35 it means to be human *open* (Heffernan, 2019, p. 12/134). It is this openness that provides the
36 opportunity to experiment with the future and to learn from it. The art works featured in the
37 book support this kind of imagination as they move beyond rational scrutinizing and
38 analytical reasoning. Through the confrontation, we gain an affective, embodied and
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3 “felt” understanding of the unsettling, become unsettled ourselves, and develop through
4 personal and collective experiences of vulnerability and interdependence, a sense of the
5 unexplored possibilities that are yet to define human-robot relations.
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10 The humanities are unsettled. But they haven’t lost their ability to unsettle. To
11 move forward, Rhee dares us to break away from asymmetrical patriarchal and
12 enlightened, libertarian, techno-utopist ethics that have dominated the fields of robotics
13 and AI until now. Abandoning ideals such as property and individualism, she advocates a
14 turn to feminist ethics, which holds the potential to transform ethics “into a philosophy
15 of human liberation” (Richardson, 2019, p. 117) and to create greater economic and
16 political equality in relations that move beyond the human. How to save those ideals
17 from co-optation? Now, as in the future, Rhee concludes, the need for attention to
18 dehumanizing exclusions will “continue to assert itself with urgency” (p.178). *Sorry To*
19 *Bother You* would be my starting point.
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