

# REFLECTIONS

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## DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC CATS?

Some people are dog persons, and some are cat persons. I've looked upon dogs, generally, as nothing more than annoying woofy creatures, though I can appreciate (from a distance) the elegance of a greyhound or the cuteness of a Yorkshire terrier. But cats, quiet, sinuous, graceful, beautiful cats, have always been a part of my life. I didn't have one as a child, much as I liked the ones I would occasionally meet in the streets; my parents didn't care for free-ranging animals around the house, so my boyhood pets tended to be easily confined critters like white mice or turtles. But as soon as I left college in 1956 and set up housekeeping for myself, I acquired a kitten—a gift from the science fiction editor Robert W. Lowndes—and I have had a succession of cats ever since, enjoying their companionship for fifteen or twenty years at a time.

I have fond memories of Radames, the virile tomcat of the 1960s, who filled the New York publishing world of the era with his offspring, and petite Siamese Jezebel, who lasted so long that she found herself transplanted from New York to California when she was twelve or so, and loved it, and the fluffy Plurabelle, who spent the 1980s perched on my shoulder every afternoon, and the dainty little sisters Kitfo and Couscous, who kept my wife and me amused for twenty-one years until very recent times. Humans are designed to outlive their cats, and it's always traumatic when we do, but when the inevitable happens there are always more cats in the pipeline: the current residents, the sisters Clio and Circe, date from 2015, and I suspect these two, who are a very sturdy pair, are destined to outlast me, unless I live to be very old indeed.

One problem with living to be very old indeed is the risk of some form of senile dementia, which would make it difficult to care for one's cats in one's extreme old age. I don't regard myself as being at high risk for dementia, having already reached a pretty lofty age without showing any signs of it; but one never can tell, and I do know that even if I'm wildly demented ten years from now, I will still love cats and want them around me. Cats are quite self-sufficient; if they live indoors, as ours do, about all they require is for someone to feed them a couple of times a day and to look after their sanitary needs. Unlike dogs, they don't demand to be played with or need to be walked whatever the weather might be or insist on your company round the clock: when cats feel a need, they let you know, and the rest of the time they go their own way. But if I grow goofy in my nineties, there will still be the problem of giving my cats such care as they require. And I'm happy to say that the high-tech crowd is working on that problem at this very minute.

I'm talking about the Joy For All Companion Pet, which is nothing other than a robotic cat that Hasbro, the big toy company, has had on the market the past two or three years. A Hasbro advertisement for the Joy For All cat tells us that it is "designed to bring comfort, companionship, and fun for your elder loved ones. With realistic fur, purrs, and meows, and sensors that respond to petting and hugs with familiar, cat-like actions, Companion Pets deliver a soothing, joyful experience that inspires smiles, laughter, and fond memories for people of all ages."

It sounds like something out of the satiric science fiction of half a century ago. In Frederik Pohl's story "The Midas Plague," from 1954, a small boy is expecting a puppy for Christmas but gets a robot instead. "Your mother and I have something much better than a puppy for you," his father says. "Just take a look under the tree there—it's a

*robot*—a full-size, thirty-eight-tube fully automatic companion robot. Go ahead, Morey. Go right up and speak to it. Its name is Henry. Go on, boy.” The little boy is not pleased. And in Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), population density is too great to permit people to own live pets, but robot substitutes are very popular. (“Going over to his sheep, Rick bent down, searching in the thick white fleece—the fleece at least was genuine—until he found what he was looking for, the concealed control panel of the mechanism.”)

But that was then, and this is now, and the science fiction of those long-ago years is now the commercial product of today, available from Amazon.com for a couple of clicks and a hundred dollars. The Hasbro Joy For All cat’s very name is worthy of Dick or Pohl, and either of them could have written the advertising copy Hasbro provides:

—Authentic cat sounds!

—Movements that mimic a real cat!

—Soft and cuddly pet inspired by real feline breeds!

—Features VibraPurr technology for purrs that sound and feel like real purrings!”

Judging by a photo I’ve seen of a furry white object with a pink nose, they could fool one into thinking they are cats, if, I suppose, one is not entirely in one’s right mind. Judging by one report posted on the Amazon site by a contented purchaser, they do do the job:

“I bought my first orange tabby cat on November 18. It was a huge hit with my eighty-nine-year-old father-in-law—he has dementia, and in recent months has been pulling further into his figurative shell. He LOVES the cat. He believes it is real, talks to it, pets it, interacts with it. His mood has improved dramatically, and he is more alert. This cat is a FIVE-STAR concept and a FIVE-STAR addition to the lives of older people (& their caregivers).”

Well, yes, very touching, and also very Phildickian, and a bit on the creepy side, too. The cat experience without the need to look after the cat. But the Hasbro folks are not content to stop at mere VibraPurr technology. According to an announcement from them late in 2017, the National Science Foundation has made a three-year one-million-dollar grant to a group that calls itself ARIES, standing for Affordable Robotic Intelligence for Elderly Support, a joint project of Hasbro and the Brown University Humanity-Centered Robotics Initiative, with the goal of providing the robotic kitties with—I gasp—*artificial intelligence!*

“It’s not going to iron and wash dishes,” says Bertram Malle, a professor of cognitive, linguistic, and psychological sciences at Brown. “Nobody expects them to have a conversation. Nobody expects them to move around and fetch a newspaper.” What the enhanced Joy For All Companion Pet will do, its developers hope, is help its elderly owner keep track of doctor’s appointments, locate misplaced objects, and take necessary medications on schedule. This would be accomplished, apparently, by gestures, a tap of the paw, perhaps, not by verbal cues. There doesn’t seem to be any desire on the part of the researchers to make the robot cats talk. “Cats don’t generally talk to you,” one of the computer scientists at Brown noted, “and it might be upsetting if they did.”

I’m glad to hear that. I don’t want my current cats to be able to speak to me. I suspect that if they could, they might have some not very kind things to say. Cats, however cute and cuddly they may look, are self-centered little entities who may not really be as nice as we want to think they are. I very much prefer that they keep whatever is on their minds to themselves. But I think I am safe there. No cat has ever been known to utter a word of any human language, and, though they may understand some of the things we say to them, they don’t care to let us know that they do. When I was about six, I encountered a cat sitting under a bush near my home, greeted it, and thought I heard it say

“Hello” to me, but cats don’t say “Hello,” and that was just my overactive imagination at work, transforming a little “meow” into a comprehensible word. What the cat might really have been saying was, “Don’t try to mess with me, you nasty smelly oversized pest.” I have never heard any of the many cats I’ve lived with over the years say anything in any language I can understand, though I do think I can decode certain sounds they make that might mean “It’s about time to feed me now” or “If you lie down on the couch now, I can sit on you and keep myself warm.” And even at that I’m only guessing. But that’s okay. I would rather not know what my adorable cats are really thinking about me and the life I provide for them.

If I end up living with an intelligent Joy For All cat in the year 2034, when Clio and Circe have gone to their eternal reward and I have forgotten how to put toothpaste on the toothbrush, I won’t want it to talk to me either. I doubt that I would want Joy For All to nag me all day long with brusque uncomplimentary feline commands. (“Take your pill, you big jackass! Why do I have to keep nagging you about it all the time!”) An amiable little nudge of a furry paw would suffice, I think.

But I hope to be able to get to the end of my days without needing a robot pet to prod me through my daily chores, and I expect to be functional enough to be able to remember to open the cat-food cans for the real-life felines who share my life in my doddering dotage. Still, the science fiction writer in me can’t help being fascinated by the Joy For All concept, even if what I feel is what Joseph Conrad called “the fascination of the abomination.” And if only Fred Pohl and Phil Dick were alive today to see robot cats come stepping out of their twentieth-century pages into the world of our era!