



# Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination

By Minsoo Kang

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From the dawn of European civilization to the twentieth century, the automaton?better known today as the robot?has captured the Western imagination and provided a vital lens into the nature of humanity.

Historian **Minsoo Kang** argues that to properly understand the human-as-machine and the human-as-fundamentally-different-from-machine, we must trace the origins of these ideas and examine how they were transformed by intellectual, cultural, and artistic appearances of the automaton throughout the history of the West. Kang tracks the first appearance of the automaton in ancient myths through the medieval and Renaissance periods, marks the proliferation of the automaton as a central intellectual concept in the Scientific Revolution and the subsequent backlash during the Enlightenment, and details appearances in Romantic literature and the introduction of the living machine in the Industrial Age. He concludes with a reflection on the destructive confrontation between humanity and machinery in the modern era and the reverberations of the humanity-machinery theme today.

*Sublime Dreams of Living Machines* is an ambitious historical exploration and, at heart, an attempt to fully elucidate the rich and varied ways we have utilized our most uncanny creations to explore essential questions about ourselves.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

In this broadly synthetic work of outstanding acuity, Kang takes the reader on a fascinating journey through various episodes in European intellectual history, from ancient Greek, medieval, and Renaissance magic and mechanics, early modern mechanistic philosophy and mechanical, vitalist, and early Romantic revolts against mechanized humanity, 19th-century fantastic literature and protests against the industrial age, all the way down to the figure of the robot in early twentieth century theater and film or more recent narratives of robotic and cybernetic futures in film and science fiction. Kang's work is distinguished from other writings on the automata by its bold range and balanced attention to literary and fictional works, alongside scientific objects and philosophical discourse. There is scarcely a reference to automata not here considered, all perceptively situated within a richly drawn series of historical contexts. Kang offers a survey in the very best sense, integrating primary and secondary accounts of automata and artificial life, all the while probing the centuries-long fascination with and anxiety about mechanical bodies that resemble living beings. In fluent yet erudite prose, Kang presents a captivating and accessible narrative about the provocative figure of a self-moving machine. (Joan Landes, Pennsylvania State University)

Sublime Dreams of Living Machines argues effectively that the automaton is both a central idea and a conceptual tool in the Western imagination. It makes a significant contribution to the field through its broad-spectrum approach to automata not just as performing objects or technological curiosities, but as key material objects for the study of intellectual history...[Kang's] careful focus on how the significance of the automaton changed from one context to another is matched by his thorough understanding of key theoretical conversations about the intellectual and cultural meaning of the automaton... Critical insights...pepper the book and make for highly compelling reading...Kang's study makes an important and welcome contribution to the field through its wide range of historical examples and nuanced critical inquiry. (Kara Reilly *Technology and Culture* 2012-07-01)

#### About the Author

Minsoo Kang is Associate Professor of History at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

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