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Does a Cold War Culture Dream of Destruction?: Sixties Paranoia and Philip K. Dick

Under the roaring, swinging glitz and glamour of social revolution and "Flower Power", the Sixties was a decade wrought with suspended fear and a looming presence of discord, of pressure above and below the surface, just waiting for the right moment to fissure and split the United States into fragments. Luckily, such devastation never tore the country apart, but the paranoia still stood strong for decades, coating the nation in a thick, tense blanket. And Philip K. Dick, publishing his science fiction novels in the midst of it all, had the perfect opportunity to capture this national—and personal—trepidation between the pages of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, published 1968. The novel portrays futuristic forewarning capturing the struggle of human identity as it faced off against the rising intelligence of technology and consumerism, the question of human rights, the destruction of the environment, and a Cold War enemy who may or may not be preparing to strike—the issues carving out the decade of the novel's birth. Through an apocalyptic forecasting highlighting the potential future of a country littered with the fear of the Cold War, environmental and social disaster, and even obliteration, Philip K Dick in the text of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? provides a vessel for the people of the Sixties to contemplate the paranoia of the world they faced by showing it reflected right back at them in a futuristic wasteland.

Before addressing the importance of 1960s paranoia throughout the individual novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, it is necessary to first consider how the time period shaped

Philip K Dick's own personal paranoia and doubt of the rapidly changing and progressing world around his working life. Though the source of Dick's skeptical views on reality cannot be perfectly traced, it can be inferred that his early life had largely to do with it—he was born prematurely with a twin sister who died shortly thereafter, and the event and his mother's reaction to it tormented him all his life (Rickels). As Dick himself stated in an interview with Gregg Rickman phrased in Laurence Rickels' biography I Think I Am: Philip K Dick, his mother herself "bordered on paranoia all the time" and made him wonder if he should have died along with his sister, Jane (Rickman). Perhaps growing up surrounded by paralyzing fear of reality allowed him to absorb the trembling, tension-filled era of the 1960s with the same ideology. As it is in most time periods, fear was secondary, partially subconscious, and in most cases, thrown on the backburner in favor of the euphoria and revolution occurring at the same time. But Dick's inherent discontent and cynicism allowed him to see past it—Steven Best and Douglas Kellner in "The Apocalyptic Vision of Philip K. Dick" state that "the strong undercurrents of pessimism in Dick's work respond to cold war conformity and stabilization in his 1950s and early 1960s" (Best, Kellner 190), or, in other words, that Dick was prone to "embracing the paranoia of the 50s and 60s" (Palmer 6) instead of feigning its nonexistence, as popular culture often prefers. His works explore that paranoia, revealing "deep fears of war, social breakdown, nuclear Armageddon, and military technology and political tensions escalating out of control" (Best, Kellner 190). Dick's fears manifest in the settings and plots of his works, and especially the protagonists—who "tend to be fearful and harassed men who strive to interpret and deal with alienating forces beyond their control" (Freedman 18). And the reason for these paranoid characters is due to them living in a world "not wholly unlike our own" (Freedman 19) of decades past—one dominated by conspiracy and unknowingness. For this is the personal world

Dick grew up in, and this is the real world Dick faces as he pens his novels. His work blends the "hysteria and entrapment, fragmentation and high anxiety" (Palmer 6) of its time and of its author, allowing for a unique view into multiple facets of 1960s paranoia.

One of the most prominent underlying fears of the 1960s and the preceding decades was that of the growing power of the Soviet Union and its infiltrating communism, which culminated in the "Red Scare" of the 50s and a looming aftershock of a tremor within the country—a tremor built by the continued fear of a power growing greater than the United States' own (Whitfield). Communism, the Cold War, and the assault it gave to the United States' culture "unleashed a fear and loathing that weakened [the country]" (Whitfield VII). In Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, Philip K. Dick absorbs this fear and projects it onto the primary "villains" of the novel: androids built to mimic human life that pose a hazard as they sneak their way down to Earth and require specialized bounty hunters to identify them and take them out. The act of locating and identifying these androids with a personality test has an eerie resemblance to a McCarthyism-esque notion of "dangerous" communism hiding among us, giving rise to the seeking out and eliminating of such threat. Throughout the novel, there are several mentions of "androids posing as humans" (Dick 38) and the consequences that might befall lead bounty hunter Rick Deckard if he "can't pick out all the humanoid robots" (Dick 38). The connection between the androids and the Soviets is further executed by the first android mentioned being called "Polokov," a clearly Russian name, and the fact that Polokov himself was posing as a member of "the Soviet Police" (Dick 92). Even the Rosen administration, which creates the androids, has a "factory representative" located out "East" (Dick 28) in Russia, solidifying the link. It is said that "cold war geopolitics are in the background of [Dick's] novels that display ordinary people threatened by political and technological forces beyond their understanding and

control" (Best, Kellner 190), which is clearly seen in Deckard's task to destroy the technologically-advanced androids before they destroy him.

This concept of androids representing the Soviets not only implies a hunt for communism throughout the novel, but the fear of the rising Cold War, the fear of what the Soviets—or the androids—might do next. When a new model of androids, the Nexus 6, is released, it is implied that the people "just accept the new unit as a fact of life" for it has "always been this way, with every improved brain unit that's come along" (Dick 29). This could be thought to mirror the back-and-forth dance of the Cold War, with both the United States and the Soviets constantly improving their weapons, technology, and intellect in the contest for power and fearing what the other might develop or do next. And thus, as the United States sought to overtake the power of the Soviets, so the bounty hunters seek to "kill the killers" (Dick 31), the "solitary predator" (Dick 31) of the android. For the characters of the novel, "an escaped humanoid robot...equipped with an intelligence greater than that of many human beings...epitomized the Killers" (Dick 32), similarly to how the United States demonized and feared Soviet intelligence and prowess. Dick suggests in this vein of paranoia that no one can be trusted, not even the police, as Deckard discovers a faux police station run by androids themselves (Dick 112). By the end of the novel, Deckard "had acquired an overt, incontestable fear directed toward...the androids" (Dick 191), as Dick and the rest of the United States grew to fear the building Soviet forces. Ultimately, Dick is warning his people of Soviet power, implied through the androids as they gain control of "the colonization effort" (Dick 45) on Mars—a hint to the Space Race—and gain also an unreleased "February supplement" (Dick 45) to a catalogue, implying economical fears of communism overpowering our marketing system. Through his clever use of androids, Dick showcases the struggle of a country littered with Cold War jitters and its attempt to make sense of the tension

and fear in the air, culminating in Dick's own personal warning—a fictional, apocalyptic world with a very real, very prominent threat.

Along a more narrow focus, Philip K Dick also expresses Cold War tensions by hinting at the Space Race between the United States and Soviet Russia with the use of colonization throughout the novel. The idea of Space Race competition stemmed initially from the nuclear arms race following World War II, just as a nuclear-infused "World War Terminus" caused the people of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? to pressure themselves into colonizing Mars. This left the novel's inhabitants desperate to leave Earth behind, and even designing television advertisements warning citizens to "emigrate or degenerate!" (Dick 8), reflecting the importance of competitive space travel in the 1960s and the surrounding decades. While the competition in the novel may not be between two nations and their technological capabilities of space travel, a sort of battle wages between those who can emigrate and those who cannot—sparking fear in the heart of John Isidore, who is unable to travel due to his status of lesser intelligence, even if "loitering on Earth meant finding oneself abruptly classed as biologically unacceptable" (Dick 16). For the United States in the mid-late twentieth century, fear of the Soviets winning the Space Race may not have meant the end of the world, but to Dick, the idea of growing space technology represented something larger, just as it does to John Isidore and his people—the overhaul of the modern human race as we know it. The more immediate fear of the decade might have been losing the Space Race, but Dick's personal views on the matter suggest that "space travel is...potentially catastrophic", as he had "grave worries about space technologies in the historical context of nuclear weapons and cold war rivalries" (Best, Kellner 190)—therefore suggesting that the power given to mankind by conquering space might lead to corruption of that power, and the Space Race's "friendly competition" turning into catastrophe. His representation

of this "catastrophe" is depicted using a novel that shows "humans producing new forms of technology that...overpower and devastate them" (Best, Kellner 190). Within the novel, the rivalry between Earth and Mars is what rejects those like Isidore, and it is even what creates the android infestation to begin with, due to androids illegally traveling to Earth. When the United States skyrocketed off into the final frontier in the 1950s, it left those behind loaded with a plethora of questions and fear—fear of the Cold War competition, of the Space Race, and perhaps most of all, fear of the horrendous possibilities and potential catastrophes if such power of space travel and space technology is placed into the wrong hands. Philip K. Dick embraces that fear almost two decades later and explores the possibilities of it, using his novel as his vessel.

However, although the androids of the novel may metaphorically represent the fear and tension underlying the 1960s United States' perception of the Soviet Union, they quite literally manifest another facet of the decade's growing unease: rapid advancement in technology. One aspect of the Cold War involved the rapid, competition-fueled creation of new and dangerous weapons, catalyzed by the development of nuclear bombs and furthered by new war technologies as tensions escalated (Whitfield). This led to a popular fear of what might happen in the future now that humankind possessed the power to destroy itself, which is another angle of paranoia Dick plays on with his use of technology in Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, where humans create the power to destroy their own identity with android technology that surpasses "several classes of human specials in terms of intelligence" (Dick 30). Best and Kellner in their studies note that "Dick is clearly skeptical of [technology's] impact, especially when in the hands of dark and destructive...groups" (Best, Kellner 191), and the Rosen company becomes such a dangerous group by engineering the Nexus-6 androids, which threaten the human identity just as

war technology poised a looming threat over the United States at the time the novel was written. These androids are described as "evolved beyond a major...segment of mankind" (Dick 30) and have "more vitality and desire to live" (Dick 94) than even humans like Deckard's wife. Throughout the text, there are several instances of androids mistaken for humans and vice versa, as the androids can come "awfully damn close to undermining the Voigt-Kampff Scale, the only method [bounty hunters] have for detecting them" (Dick 60), and some androids, such as bounty hunter Phil Resch, believe they are entirely human. Even Deckard himself begins to "empathize with androids" (Dick 174) as if they are human, and is terrified of the notion. In the context of technological paranoia, by providing his readers a view of a world where technology can dominate and overpower the human persona, Dick alludes to a warning of technological advancements—including explosives, gases, and environmentally destructive energy systems—in his modern times and what might become of the human race if it grows able to destroy itself with them. The novel states that "a humanoid robot is like any other machine; it can fluctuate between being a benefit and a hazard very rapidly" (Dick 40), and in that same vein, Dick prophesizes a society in which science and technology, the so-called "forces of inevitable human progress" (Best, Kellner 191) in the Sixties, become hazards instead of benefits, exemplified by the Nexus-6 androids, highlighting an America with an underlying, building fear of the prowess of technological innovation.

These technological innovations around the 1960s not only generated the fear of explosive war possibilities and the destruction of humanity, but also created a growing unease of consumerism and commoditization and if the shiny new media of televisions and commercialization had the power to drive humanity to a much less shiny decay. Dick as an author was fixated on the idea of human identity and what it meant or did not mean to be human,

and his interpretation of the growing media is one of immense concern about the change in human identity due to exposure to such a commodity-fixated culture. He once again projects his fears and the fears of the times through apocalyptic vision in the novel, where humankind can use products to "dial and see" (Dick 4) what their mood will be, where buying an animal is dependent on "catalogue value" (Dick 10), and where the public is so incapable of basic human emotions that they use "empathy boxes" to tune them into feeling connected to their peers. The idea of animal pricing and commoditization of moods and human empathy presents "penetrating portraits of a society ruled by obsessive consumption and the fetishism of commodities" (Best, Kellner 194), which is precisely what Dick was so afraid of during his time in the late 1960s. Dick's fear-induced foretelling "portrays humans drained of all natural feeling, becoming more controlled by media and society, thus questioning what is left of humanity in a high-tech world" (Best, Kellner 194), a reflection of media's rise in post-World War II times and the threat it posed to human identity—and the fear Dick had of such a notion.

Perhaps the most poignant example of this phenomenon is reflected in the novel through the eyes of John Isidore, who lives alone in his apartment with only his television to occupy him, where he slowly watches the world around him turn to "kipple", which he describes as "useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match" (Dick 65) that "reproduce" themselves when left unattended to. Kipple is made to represent the idea of entropy, of a world moving toward complete decay and destruction. In general, "entropy is indeed the prototypical condition for Dick's futuristic world" (Best, Kellner 197) and Isidore maintains that "kipple drives out nonkipple," meaning that "no one can win against kipple," as "the entire universe is moving toward a final state of total, absolute kippleization" (Dick 65). To Isidore, everything is becoming kipple—"everything in the building" (Dick 20) is, "the world in which [Mercer, icon

of the "empathy box"] climbs is a cheap, Hollywood commonplace sound stage which vanished into kipple years ago" (Dick 209), and "the thousands of specials throughout Terra [are] turning into living kipple" (Dick 73). Isidore is Dick's vessel for entropy, for his prediction that succumbing to media, technology, and commodities will turn the human race into its own form of kipple, and for his question of what might happen to humankind if it is further drained of empathy and productivity. Evidence of media paranoia runs rampant throughout the world this novel creates, reflecting a 1960s America struggling to keep its identity amidst an onslaught of commercials and commodities, and Philip K Dick's pessimistic vision for its future.

And along one final path of thought, Philip K. Dick's expression of the building worry and fear of the 1960s also reflects the rise of environmental concerns of the decade. The modern environmental movement had just seen its own birth a few years prior to the penning and publication of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? with the release of a different novel, Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, which brought the harsh truth of environmental destruction to light, leading to a surge in environmentalist groups and developing governmental action by presidents Kennedy and Johnson (Geary). With a building cultural awareness of the destruction humans cause to animals and biological structures through their hazardous technology, it makes perfect sense for Dick to incorporate environmental paranoia in his novel—which he does much in the same manner as any other trepidation he explores: by building a post-apocalyptic world in which the fears have come true. In the world of Richard Deckard and John Isidore, following the "World War Terminus" that sets each fear and trouble into action, the environment has become a dust-filled wasteland, spilling over with "radioactive motes" and "the taint of death" (Dick 8). It is noted that following the war, "the sun ceased to shine on Earth" (Dick 16) and then "first, strangely, the owls had died" (Dick 16). Owls, typically, represent wisdom, and perhaps it can be

inferred that without wisdom of how we and our technology harm the world around us, that world will disappear as it does between the pages of this novel, as "species upon species had become extinct...foxes one morning, badgers the next, until people had stopped reading the perpetual animal obits" (Dick 42).

It is perhaps this lack of human sympathy for the habitats and species around them that devastates our Earth—for it is not societal structures in Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? that take the beating: police, corporations, and technology still reign, while it is nature that slips through the cracks, showing a vision of what the future might look like if environmental wisdom and concern is not hearkened to. That vision is a world where "no one has seen a star in years" (Dick 227), where "those who could not survive the dust had passed into oblivion" (Dick 8), and where Deckard cannot even find a simple toad that isn't fake, for they have been "extinct for years" (Dick 236). Dick's warning is of a world where life can no longer be found among the barren remains of what humankind has destroyed, a world where life is "carefully buried up to its forehead in the carcass of a dead world" (Dick 238). Dick plays on the newfound national concerns of extinction and destruction and uses them to build his apocalyptic vision, a vision where the worst-case scenario of such concerns is brought to life.

All in all, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? is the mask beneath which Philip K Dick can hide the face of a fearful 1960s America, a brewing vat of uncertainty, blame, and doubt, projected at the Soviet Union, the buildup of technology and media, and the treatment of the environment. Dick in all his paranoia engineers an apocalyptic prophecy of a human race controlled, dominated, and stripped of its identity, reflecting the fears of the times and Dick's personal ideology. And "if paranoia is an ideology, it remains a stubbornly privileged one. And no modern writer has produced that ideology more rigorously than Philip K. Dick" (Freedman

22). Dick states that his "loss of faith in the idea of progress...extends over [the decade's] whole cultural milieu" (Dick, as cited in Sutin, 1995, p. 54), and it can clearly be concluded that his novel comments on the multiple facets of this fear and faithlessness. Ultimately, the novel allows the people of its times to contemplate: what might the future hold if nothing is done? Will humankind "move toward technocracy...produce ever more deadly weapons of mass destruction...destroy ever more species, deplete the earth's natural resources, and utterly self-destruct?" (Best, Kellner 198) Philip K Dick imagines a world where each of these fears comes to life, creating a stark vision harkening destruction for the people of the late 1960s, a reflection of the discord lurking just beneath the disco-coated surface.

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