

The Hand of Wilbur Mercer

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Philip K. Dick's career in general, and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in particular, lies in the long shadow of two things: his religious experiences in 1974 and the 1982 film *Blade Runner*. The former consumed the last 8 years of the author's life, yielding not only his final four novels—three of which are bona fide masterpieces—but also his legendary theological journal *The Exegesis*; the latter, which Dick didn't live to see, jolted the realms of both SF and mainstream film and, arguably, changed them forever. It's difficult to think of *Androids* without the esoteric reference frame of latter-day mysticism or the exoteric one of Hollywood action movies (or, better, the delightfully Phil Dickian mixture of both).

So, then, let's consider *Androids* out of those contexts, through a historical-bibliographical nerd lens: written in 1966, the same year that Dick wrote *Ubik*, it recycles character names and themes from a couple of then-unpublished works for which the author felt quite a bit of affection. J. F. Isidore rewrites Jack Isidore, the holy fool hero of the *Confessions of a Crap Artist*, as a mutated nebbish. *Crap Artist* was one of several non-SF novels Dick wrote in the late '50s and early '60s, and the only one published during his lifetime: in 1974, he selected it as the best, or at least most immediately publishable, of those novels, and released it through Paul Williams' Entwhistle Press. The android Pris Stratton also comes from a then-unpublished story, an SF one this time: she owes her name (and much else besides) to Pris Frauentzimmer, the sociopathic inamorata of *We Can Build You*. This mainstream/SF hybrid was written shortly after *The Man in the High Castle*, in 1962, but didn't see print until it was serialized in *Amazing Stories* in 1970. In addition to Pris, *Androids* borrows its general theme—the differentiation between the android and the human—from *We Can Build You*. But where the earlier novel explored those themes in a frankly dreary domestic melodrama (with a couple of friendly simulacra thrown in), *Androids* wraps them into a fast-paced chase story about killer robots run amok. You can just see Dick, in 1966, brooding over those rejected manuscripts languishing in a drawer: *They want pulp? I'll give them pulp!* And the irony—of this novel in general, and arguably Dick's career as a whole—is that “they” just might be right. Dick is at his best when he throws himself unabashedly into the pulp playground, and *Androids* is the proof.

Dick's particular talent is to blend frenetic narrative and mind-blowing philosophy so thoroughly you can't tell where one ends and the other begins. “I am a fictionalizing philosopher, not a novelist,” he writes in one *Exegesis* entry. “My novel & story-writing ability is employed as a means to formulate my perception.” In the *Exegesis*, of course, the storytelling gives way to the philosophy (and what a philosophy it is!). But even without his religious experience and his voluminous writing about it, Dick would merit recognition as a major theologian and moral philosopher, largely on the strength of *Androids*, which skillfully lays out a fully-realized ethical system. His conception of the android and the human—and the blurring of that distinction in a technological society—constitutes a compelling ethical challenge. Dick had long since settled the question of what defines the authentic human: empathy. (Later, when *Exegesis*

research had given him the vocabulary, he'd identify his conception of empathy with the New Testament ideal of *agape*.) That solution to the question remained more or less unchanged throughout Dick's later works, as did other aspects of the philosophy laid out in *Androids*. When Horselover Fat's skeptical friend Kevin poses the problem of evil in *VALIS*—a much more deliberately Philosophical Novel than *Androids*—his challenge comes in the form of an unjustly-killed cat, all but quoting Hannibal Sloat's speech written a decade before.

*Androids* explores, expounds, complicates, and even satirizes the philosophical and moral ideal of empathy more fully and satisfactorily than any highbrow, cerebral essay ever could. Deckard, the human bounty hunter, is losing his empathy, becoming more and more like the (allegedly) cold and emotionless androids he is tasked with hunting. And those androids, as their construction becomes more complex, are beginning to be less and less distinct from the humans they approximate. Compound this with irony: Deckard's entire purpose for staying in his job, for eroding his humanity, is to buy his wife an animal, the empathic-devotional object of Mercerism. And more irony: Mercerism has become so ingrained in this bleak, despairing society that owning an animal is no longer about authentic empathy; it's just the latest example of capitalist object-fetishism and social competition. They are bought, sold, and traded like cars, or appliances, or rare science fiction pulps, or any other commodity you can think of—they are not authentically *loved*. Even human empathy, it seems, may just be an imitation. It's almost inevitable, then, that Mercer and the entire religion of the empathy box are revealed to be a fraud. He's no alien messiah, Buster Friendly reveals; he's an out-of-work actor hired by forces unknown to pretend to die for humanity's sins.

Ah, but here's where things get *really* interesting: because both Deckard and Isidore have religious experiences involving visions of Mercer—and these experiences feel completely authentic, perhaps more authentic than any other event in the novel. Like Tagomi's breakthrough, in *Man in the High Castle*, into a parallel world that might be our own, they cannot be described as hallucinations—they represent the legitimate in-breaking of another, more mysterious level of reality. It's not clear if Mercer himself is real, or if this higher reality is simply using the image or idea of Mercer as a vessel—but it doesn't really matter. What Mercer communicates is *true*. And here we have a vital kernel of Philip K. Dick's religious thought, nearly a decade before the pink beam would zap him: some things may be true *even if they are false*; and indeed, that falsity may be a key aspect of their truth. Reality sneaks into our universe by concealing itself against the background. Dick labored for hundreds of pages to work out this idea in the *Exegesis*, but it's already fully realized in the handful of pages devoted to Mercerism in *Androids*. (The excision of this religion and its prophet from the story of *Blade Runner* has always struck me as an enormous central lack in the film's world.)

Dick's universes have shaky walls and insubstantial foundations. But throughout it all—and this is where I think many of Dick's academic admirers get him wrong—he never abandons hope that an authentic ultimate reality exists. At the core of all of that anxiety over disintegrating realities, unstable universes, and time-slips, there is a faith that something *real* is hidden beneath the veil, and that it can and will break through that veil to help us. And it is that hope, more than the surface anxiety, that gives his stories such power. Entropy may erode the visible universe, but we can glimpse the unchanging

reality—call it Ubik, VALIS, Zebra, God—shining through the cracks, and trust it to reach in and pull us out before *we* disintegrate as well.