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## “Useless Objects”: Kipple and What It Represents

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Professor Corey

Frankenstein: Myth of the Monstrous

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“Useless Objects”: Kipple and What It Represents

In his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Philip K. Dick presents a dark, gloomy, apocalyptic world in which much of the earth has been destroyed by nuclear warfare and the majority of the human population has fled to Mars. In these depressing circumstances, the remaining Earth-dwelling humans fill the figurative voids in their lives by means of several venues, such as mood organs, Mercerism, empathy boxes, and animals. And while all these things are filling up the figurative voids in the characters' lives caused by the atomic bomb and the emigration of most people to Mars, the physical clutter called “kipple” is filling up all the literal voids left when people abandoned their homes. I postulate that Dick uses kipple as a physical embodiment of the figurative void-fillers. If it is accepted that kipple is the physical manifestation of all the venues used to fill the figurative voids in the characters' lives, then it follows that Dick's negative portrayal of the kipple reflects his opinion of the figurative void-fillers. In the course of this essay, I intend to establish this by discussing how each void-filling venue is presented in *Androids*, how they are portrayed in some of Dick's other works, and how they affected Dick's own life. I will thereby demonstrate that Dick uses the negative description of kipple to symbolize the futility of drugs, religion, and consumerism when it comes to solving mankind's problems.

As Judith B. Kerman phrases it in her essay “Private Eye: A Semiotic Comparison of the Film *Blade Runner* and the Book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*,” kipple is Dick's

invented term for “epidemic clutter and decay” (72). Lejla Kucukalic portrays it in an even more negative way in her book, *Philip K. Dick: Canonical Writer of the Digital Age*, when she refers to kipple as “a force of death that is overpowering the world” (72). Finally, Dick himself makes it clear that kipple possesses no positive traits and serves no actual purpose when Isidore, a character in *Androids*, defines it as “useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match or gumwrappers or yesterday’s homeoscope” (Dick 65). In fact, kipple is a dangerous void-filler; Isidore warns Pris that, when left unattended, “kipple reproduces itself...driv[ing] out nonkipple” (65). In the cluster of apartment buildings where Isidore lives, for example, kipple “has taken over completely” (65). Therefore, since the substance that is physically filling up all the voids left on Earth is not portrayed in a very positive light, Dick evidently does not think very highly of the venues that are used to figuratively fill voids.

One of those figurative void-fillers is the Penfield mood organ, which represents recreational drugs. According to Andrew M. Butler, Dick most likely named this invention after Wilbur Penfield, who conducted experiments in which he used electricity to stimulate the parts of the human brain that influence the senses (109). This theory is supported by the character Iran’s statement that the mood organ “stimulates [the] cerebral cortex” (Dick 6). Thus, the mood organs can be compared to drugs because both have the ability to induce different states of mind by stimulating the user’s brain and both allow the user to “manipulate his or her own feelings” (Kerman 71).

*Androids* begins with Rick Deckard being awakened by “a merry little surge of electricity” from his mood organ, which indicates that he has become dependent on this device for his everyday routine (Dick 3). Over the course of Rick’s conversation with his wife, Iran, it is revealed that the mood organs can cause their users to experience an extremely vast range of

emotions, including happiness, inspiration, hope, despair, depression, satisfaction, creativity, and even “the desire to watch TV, no matter what’s on it” (6). Rick seems to find nothing wrong with manipulating his emotions in order to feel artificial happiness, but Iran is not as confident in the mood organ’s success as a void-filler. She tries to explain to Rick “how unhealthy it [is], sensing...and not reacting” (5). She is also very reluctant to use her mood organ, and Rick finally dials for emotions for both of them.

By the end of the novel, however, Rick’s viewpoint has changed. Even though Iran suggests that he dial his mood organ, he chooses not to use it to comfort himself, even after the crushing disappointment of finding out that the toad he found is artificial. And the book ends with Rick falling peacefully asleep while Iran “fixe[s] herself at last a cup of black, hot coffee” (244). With this simple and minor scene, Dick powerfully contrasts the novel’s end with its beginning. The novel started, as I have mentioned, with Rick using his mood organ to wake up, which led to a stressful argument with his wife that was left somewhat unresolved. In contrast, the novel ends with the balanced, tranquil image of Rick falling asleep without the aid of his mood organ and Iran using coffee, rather than the mood organ, to achieve her desired state of mind. In this way, Dick demonstrates that the use of a mood organ is not the most efficient way to solve one’s problems—a fact that Rick and Iran realize by the end of the novel.

While *Androids* reveals Dick’s opinions on drugs somewhat obliquely by means of the mood organ (which, while possessing the properties of a drug, is not actually one), several of his other novels illustrate his aversion to drugs in a much more blatant manner. Three such novels are *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *Now Wait for Last Year*, and *A Scanner Darkly*. Jason P. Vest describes how the characters in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* become addicted to a narcotic that is given to them by the title character. The colonists later discover that

Eldritch is actually an extraterrestrial who has been using the narcotic to manipulate them, and they find that they “cannot escape Eldritch’s influence” once they have ingested the drug” (Vest 117). Eldritch’s scheme is to control all the humans by “employ[ing] narcotics to trap people into artificially induced hallucinations” (120). In other words, the drug creates a new reality for each person who ingests it, and Eldritch has complete control over all these realities. This is a more extreme version of what happens to the characters in *Androids*. In a way, Rick and Iran lose control over their own actions when they dial for certain emotions; for example, the mood organ can make them wake up, watch TV, or dial for other emotions (Dick 3, 6).

The second example of an anti-drug novel is *Now Wait for Last Year*, in which characters ingest a drug that allows the user to travel to the past or the future, but also causes “irreversible neurological damage” (Vest 155). To make matters even worse, the drug is also “a weapon of war designed to addict its user after one dose” (155). Like the narcotic in *Palmer Eldritch*, this drug takes away the characters’ already “tenuous control over their lives,” which was one of Dick’s main criticisms of drugs (158).

Dick’s third anti-drug novel is *A Scanner Darkly*, which serves as a “homage to the losses caused by the careless and naïve use of drugs” and contains several autobiographical elements (Kucukalic 38). This novel centers around Bob Arctor, a drug user and dealer who, in an alternate life, is an undercover policeman whose assignment is to spy on and arrest drug dealers—including himself. The drugs have caused so much damage to his brain that his consciousness has split in half, allowing him to pursue himself without realizing it. This novel reflects Dick’s own drug use, as well as the experiences suffered by many of his friends. As Neal Conan mentions in his radio broadcast, “The Adaptations of Philip K. Dick,” the end of the book “includes a long list of Philip K. Dick’s friends whose lives were damaged or ended by

their problems with drugs” (Conan). This novel, as well as the two previously mentioned ones, strongly emphasizes Dick’s view of mind-altering drugs and their negative effects.

The final source of proof that Dick viewed drugs as negatively as he viewed kipple can be found in Dick’s own life experiences. For more than a decade, Dick used LSD and a variety of amphetamines and antidepressants. This prolonged drug use had several damaging effects on Dick’s life, and in many interviews, he adamantly condemns the use of drugs. For example, in an interview, he describes an experience one of his friends had had with drugs, where the man, after taking LSD, had become convinced that the tigers printed on his shower curtain were attacking him. In terror, the man had torn down the curtain, taken it outside, and set it on fire. Dick sums up his disgust for drugs with the statement that that is what drugs really are, “some guy in his backyard burning his shower curtain” (Dick qtd. in Vitale). In Dick’s opinion, the loss of control over one’s own emotions and actions—epitomized for Dick by a man burning his shower curtain out of fear that it would attack him—was the worst property of drugs. That explains why so many of his novels depict characters losing control over their lives after ingesting drugs. Even *Androids* contains a vestige of this loss of control by means of the characters’ use of mood organs, which control their emotions.

However, the negative effects Dick suffered as a result of his drug use went much further than a loss of self-control. Dick frequently took LSD and developed an addiction to speed, and the use of both of these drugs led to several psychotic breakdowns. He was often “beset by strange moods and visions,” which put a strain on his relationship with his fourth wife, Nancy, who was pregnant at the time (Kucukalic 36). Dick’s unstable state of mind—and the misery he felt as a result of the drugs—is made evident by one of the panicked journal entries he wrote shortly after the birth of his daughter Isa: “Saw the baby as the horrid vegetable. Had Nancy (my

wife) hide my .22 pistol. Bees in head. Helplessness” (Dick qtd. in Kucukalic 36). This passage was recorded shortly before Dick wrote *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Soon after the book was published, Dick’s drug use finally led to the disintegration of his marriage to Nancy. After her prolonged attempts to put an end to Dick’s drug use had failed, Nancy had decided to leave with Isa, who was three years old at the time. The loss of his wife and daughter increased Dick’s depression and desperation, which in turn led to a suicide attempt (Kucukalic 37). Over the course of 1971 alone, he was admitted, due to his drug use, to three medical hospitals and two psychiatric hospitals (39). Since *Androids* was written and published in the middle of this dark and tumultuous period in Dick’s life, it is logical to conclude that the events in his life influenced some aspects of the novel.

Dick’s increasing disillusionment with drugs is most clearly shown in Iran’s use of the mood organ. Although she appears to use it on a regular basis—like Rick, she has programmed a schedule into her mood organ—she is beginning to doubt the effectiveness of this void-filler; she tells Rick that “wanting to dial is right now the most alien drive [she] can imagine” (Dick 7). Furthermore, when she finally does use the mood organ, she dials for “a six-hour self-accusatory depression,” which surely reflects Dick’s own experience with drugs (4). His drug use led to long bouts of depression and feelings of self-worthlessness, and his depression was certainly self-accusatory as he contemplated his four failed marriages, two of which had resulted in him losing custody of a daughter. Later in the novel, while still under the influence of her Penfield-induced despair, Iran tells Rick, “I’m so tired and I just have no hope left, of anything” (94). This statement epitomizes the despair and hopelessness that Dick often felt under the influence of drugs—the hopelessness that drove him to repeatedly attempt suicide (Kucukalic 38). Just as the mood organ made Iran feel depressed and self-accusatory, the drugs Dick used filled him

with hopelessness.

By studying the way drugs are portrayed in Dick's novels, the effects drugs had on his life, and then considering this information in conjunction with the mood organs—which, like drugs, are mind-altering devices—in *Androids*, it is reasonable to conclude that Dick's aversion to drugs also applies to the concept of the mood organs. Dick knew from his own experiences with drugs that one of their worst effects was the loss of self-control. His novels, too, emphasize that drugs cause people to lose control over their lives. The characters in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* are completely under Eldritch's control once they take his drug, the characters in *Now Wait for Last Year* lose control over reality as the dangerously addictive drug that they take sends them back and forth through time into alternate worlds, and Bob Arctor in *A Scanner Darkly* loses control over his own brain and identity as his consciousness splits into two men who pursue each other. And it is this property—the loss of control—that makes the mood organs such an empty and false void-filler. The mood organs provide temporary comfort, but they also give the user a complete loss of control over his or her emotions and actions. And in Iran's case, the mood organ's main function is to make her hopeless and depressed, just as Dick's drugs plunged him into bouts of despair. Therefore, the mood organs, although seemingly helpful and beneficial, are just as useless as the kipple that fills empty space with garbage.

Other venues used as void-fillers are Mercerism and empathy boxes, which Dick uses to represent the institution of religion. Once again, Dick's view of institutionalized religion is made evident by the way it is portrayed in *Androids* and by the effect it had on Dick's life. On the surface, Mercerism seems to be a positive thing—it separates the humans from the androids—but if examined more carefully, it is not all that it appears to be. To begin with, all religious rites and practices are “dependent on and mediated by machines” (Kucukalic 69). In fact, humans have

their “deepest emotional and religious experiences” by means of their empathy boxes (Kerman 71). Humans’ claim that practicing Mercerism and feeling empathy distinguishes them from androids is severely undercut by the fact that these experiences are only possible through the use of technology and machines. Therefore, Mercerism is not as important and beneficial as most humans believe it to be.

Furthermore, humans continue to practice Mercerism even after it is revealed to be a sham. Philip E. Kaveny notes that even though the androids “denounce Mercerism...as a hoax and a fraud,” the majority of humans doggedly continue to practice it (78). Buster Friendly exposes the fact that “Wilbur Mercer is not suffering at all,” thus destroying the foundation of Mercerism (Dick 207). The main—if not only—religious ceremony associated with Mercerism involves struggling up a mountain as rocks are thrown by unseen enemies, which allows humans to share with Mercer in his suffering. However, after it is revealed that “Mercerism is a swindle” because Mercer is actually just “some bit player marching across a sound stage,” the very first thing Isidore does is use his empathy box (209, 207). Clearly, the fact that everything about Mercerism is a deception makes no difference to Isidore—and to many other humans as well. Although most of the humans on Earth were watching Buster Friendly’s show when Mercer was declared to be a phony, the androids are forced to admit that “Mercerism will not disappear, despite the proof that Mercer is a fake” (Kucukalic 82). This is perhaps Dick’s strongest argument against the institution of religion: By making his characters continue to follow all the tenets of Mercerism after it is proven to be a fraud, he is making the statement that followers of institutionalized religion mindlessly practice their religion regardless of whether or not they actually have faith in it.

In addition to the way he portrays religion in his novels, Dick's own religious background makes a strong statement about his stance on organized religion. While Dick was quite religious personally, he refused to commit himself to any specific religious institution. Lawrence Sutin, one of Dick's most well-known biographers, noted that Dick "adhered to no single faith" (Sutin qtd. in Vest 112). This statement could not be more accurate. Although Dick was baptized as an Episcopalian, he began to practice Judaism and Quakerism later in life. He began to seriously study Christianity in the 1970s, and he regularly read Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Gnostic texts. As Tim Powers describes, Dick would often "shift his creeds—one day deciding that the real truth was to be found in Orthodox Judaism, the next day that the Gnostic Essenes had found all the secrets" (3-4).

Dick eventually came to believe that all organized religions were essentially the same, and that it did not really matter which religion a person officially practiced. When discussing religion, for example, Dick noted that the idea of light is important in "almost all the religions—it doesn't really matter which one it is: it can be Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, it can be Sufism, it can be Judaism, it can be Christianity" (Dick qtd. in Lee and Sauter 88). In time, his view of formalized religion became even more disillusioned, and he eventually concluded that having a personal relationship with God and privately practicing a religion were much more important and effective than going to church to practice organized religion. He declared, "I believe that establishment churches have lost the keys to the kingdom. They don't even know what the Kingdom of God is" (Dick qtd. in Vitale). Therefore, he preferred personal spiritual study, rather than relying on any institution for religious knowledge; he had several Bibles in his house, and he read from them frequently. However, he soon came to believe that even the Bible was too influenced by religious institutions, and he began "learning Greek in order to read the Bible"

in its original form because he believed that each translator added “a little more polish” while translating it (Dick qtd. in Lee and Sauter 155). Dick so mistrusted organized religion that he did not want to read a Bible endorsed by any particular institution or translator.

Dick’s low opinion of using organized religion to attain spirituality is mirrored by Rick Deckard’s low opinion of using the empathy boxes to have a religious experience. While recounting his earlier days in church, Dick said, “I used to get bored in church during the sermon, so I read [the Bible]. I found the Bible much more interesting than his [the preacher’s] babbling, and I’m still that way. I have no use for churches whatsoever. I don’t even want to be in one” (Dick qtd. in Lee and Sauter 191-192). Dick was reluctant to go to church because he felt that he benefitted much more from reading the Bible by himself than from going to church and listening to the preacher. Similarly, Rick is reluctant to use the empathy box, even though his wife repeatedly urges him to do so. And after he finally gives in to Iran’s insistence that he try it, he tells her that he “didn’t get anything from holding onto those handles” because “[Mercer] doesn’t know any more than [he does]” (Dick 179). Just as Dick did not benefit from church because he felt that the preacher did not know much more than he did, Rick does not benefit from the empathy box because he realizes that Mercer does not know more than he does. And Dick’s belief that personal meditation is the most valuable way to gain spirituality is demonstrated through the fact that when Rick sees Mercer, and then later merges with him by climbing a hill, he is by himself, not using an empathy box (220-221, 231).

By contemplating Dick’s position on organized religion and then comparing it to the way Mercerism is portrayed in *Androids*, it is possible for readers to deduce how Dick views Mercerism as a void-filler. In Dick’s experience, the institution of religion was a fraud because people were better off engaging in personal worship than listening to a preacher ‘babbling,’ as

Dick phrased it. Similarly, in *Androids*, religion is literally a fraud because Mercer is really just an actor walking across a stage. Thus, people are better off engaging in personal meditation, like Rick does in the barren desert, than using the empathy boxes. Because of this, Mercerism and the empathy boxes are pointless void-fillers. Many of the characters, especially Iran and Isidore, use the empathy boxes to fill the empty spaces in their lives. But just like kipple, which takes up space while remaining completely useless, Mercerism takes up much of the characters' time, even though it is an utterly worthless fraud.

Another void-filling venue is the purchase of animals. Possessing a real animal is perhaps the most widespread void-filler in the novel; animals are extremely valuable, and having a real one increases a person's feelings of self-worth. However, Dick uses this void-filler to criticize consumerism. A real animal is much more than a mere possession; it is a highly recognized status symbol. Rick and the other characters are "constantly appraising the cost and value of animals." In fact, Rick always carries the *Sidney's* catalogue with him (Dick qtd. in Lee and Sauter 36). Dick uses this strong desire to own an animal—a desire that permeates the entire culture of the novel's society—to criticize consumerism and the power it holds over people.

Since real animals serve as a status symbol, society puts immense pressure on citizens to own one. Rick's "relationship [with his neighbor] is based on a comparison of what they own, with Rick's artificial sheep indicating relative poverty" (Butler 110). Because of this, Rick laments that owning an electric sheep rather than a real one "ha[s] a way of gradually demoralizing him" (Dick 9). Consumerism is such an integral part of society that Rick feels worthless and unimportant because he does not own a live animal.

The ideals of consumerism put such strong pressure on Rick that he is willing to do anything to be able to buy a real animal. Kerman is correct when she states that Rick is

“motivated, in almost everything [he does], by [his] socially-induced need to buy a real animal, especially a large animal, and by [his] shame at only having an electric sheep” (70). He is even willing to engage in an extremely dangerous activity – hunting six state-of-the-art Nexus-6 androids that have already incapacitated the city’s best bounty hunter. Rick is trying to figure out how he would be able to afford a real animal when he realizes that “the bounty from retiring five andys would do it” (Dick 14). From this moment on, Rick’s hunt for the androids is primarily driven by the incentive of earning the bounty money that will enable him to buy an animal. For instance, immediately after killing Polokov, he focuses, not on the fact that he killed a creature that was almost human, nor on the fact that he was almost killed himself, but rather on the fact that he had “made [him]self a thousand dollars” (93). He is willing to repeatedly put his life in danger just so he can earn enough money to buy an animal.

The immense pressures of consumerism also cause Rick to make unwise financial decisions. According to Kerman, one major theme in the novel is “Rick’s living beyond his means...in order to keep up appearances” (71). This theme is demonstrated when Rick finally goes to buy a live animal—a goat. As Rick contemplates his new purchase, “the expense, the contractual indebtedness, appall[s] him” (Dick 170). In buying the goat, Rick goes far beyond his means; he will be in debt for the next three years, and he and Iran discuss extending the contract to four years in an attempt to make it more affordable (175). However, even though the goat is “such an economic burden,” Rick needs it because he feels so demoralized without a genuine animal that he would be unable to perform his job if he did not own the goat (175). But Rick’s living beyond his means does not end with the goat. He plans to buy a real sheep once he retires the last three androids even though he is already heavily in debt from buying the goat

(177). Clearly, the vast pressure that consumerism places on society drives Rick to make very unwise and impractical decisions.

By showing how the characters' obsession with buying animals has negative effects, Dick criticizes consumerism. Consumerism has such power over humans that they feel worthless and demoralized unless they have a live animal, and those who do not have one, like Rick, are pressured to go to dangerous and extreme measures in order to buy one. Rick also puts himself into an undesirable financial position just to buy a goat. In this way, Dick "emphasizes how...market capitalism restrict[s] human freedom" (Vest 161). Rick, and presumably other people as well, are not free to live their lives as they please; the pressure of consumerism drives them to slave for enough money to afford an animal, and, like Rick, figuratively shackle themselves to a four-year contract.

Furthermore, Dick demonstrates that using consumerism as a void-filler does not have lasting results. Rick spends the entire novel trying to obtain a live animal, but, in the end, he never truly succeeds. Every time he gets his hopes up, he is met with crushing disappointment. The ostrich he looks at is far too expensive, and the owl he sees at the Rosen Association turns out to be artificial. He does buy a goat, but he goes deep into debt in order to do so, and then Rachael kills the goat. Finally, he finds a toad in the desert, but this, too, turns out to be artificial. All of this proves that consumerism is a temporary void-filler with no real or lasting satisfaction. Like the kipple, consumerism is useless, but it completely consumes Rick, motivating all that he does, just as kipple consumes the abandoned apartments.

By considering how Dick portrays the figurative void-fillers in *Androids*, readers can see that he disapproves of those things just as much as he disapproves of the literal void-filler—kipple, the useless matter that spreads epidemically and chokes everything else out. Mood

organs, which, as mind-altering devices, represent drugs, give people the illusion of happiness and contentment while really taking away their control over their lives, emotions, and actions, just as Dick's drug use caused him to lose control over many aspects of his life. Mercerism and empathy boxes, which represent religion, appear to differentiate humans from androids, but this alleged distinction is doubtful, since humans feel their strongest emotions via machines. And since Mercerism turns out to be a fraud, Rick realizes that he can have the most powerful religious experiences by meditating by himself, rather than by participating in the organized religion of Mercerism—just as Dick discovered that he benefitted more from reading the Bible and studying other religious texts by himself, rather than going to an established church, since he believed that most religious institutions were frauds. Finally, consumerism seems to give people a purpose in life by giving them a goal to work toward, but as Rick discovers, the goal of owning a real animal provides no lasting satisfaction. Being a slave to the pressure of consumerism only leads to disappointment.

In addition to criticizing drugs, religion, and consumerism by presenting them as useless void-fillers, Dick further emphasizes his point by linking all these things to kipple. Since Dick's novels and life experiences prove that he views the figurative void-fillers just as negatively as he portrays kipple in *Androids*, it is reasonable to conclude that kipple represents those figurative void-fillers. Kipple, the literal void-filler that is a waste of space, is the physical embodiment of the figurative void-fillers, which are wastes of time. Just like kipple, these things—drugs, the institution of religion, and consumerism—are “useless objects.” They appear to be fixing the problems and filling the voids in people's lives, but on closer inspection, they are really just valueless wastes of time and energy that crowd out more worthwhile things.

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