

[The Open Critic](#)

Literate Discourse of Literary Works

Philip K Dick, A Critical Appreciation, Part One

Prescient, Discomforting - Philbin Takes on the Master

[Philip K Dick](#) deserves more than he gets. Are his books great literature? Some folks say so. Some say not. Are they prescient? Absolutely. Disturbing? Often. Discomforting. Fuck yeah ...

Kinda' like The Velvet Underground or maybe The Stooges ... not great music really, but really really great nonetheless ... way ahead of its time, thematically grounded in the biggest issues and a complete outlier way beyond the edge of what was. It was / is speculative fiction that sold squat in its day, but influenced everything that has come since.



Mike Philbin, a writer of speculative fiction himself, has reviewed a number of [Philip K Dick](#)'s novels for a number of venues and has been kind enough to let The Open Critic re-post the reviews here, in one place.

In *Part One* of his essay, Philbin reviews three diverse works: [The Crack in Space](#) / [Cantata-140](#), [The Game Players of Titan](#), [Time Out of Joint](#); and in *Part Two*, [Solar Lottery](#), [A Maze of Death](#), and [Eye in the Sky](#) will be reviewed.

Interested readers may also want to read Philbin's eponymous reviews of [Philip K Dick](#)'s: [A Scanner Darkly](#), [Flow My Tears](#), [The Policeman Said](#), [The Cosmic Puppets](#), and [Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep](#).

Philbin approaches [Philip K Dick](#) with an obvious affection and certain amount of awe. That said, he doesn't let Dick get away with any shit ...

[Cantata-140](#) or [The Crack in Space](#), [Philip K Dick](#)

In [The Crack in Space](#) (published in the UK as [Cantata-140](#)), a repairman discovers that a hole that leads to a parallel world. Jim Briskin, campaigning to be the first black president of the United States, thinks alter-Earth is the solution to the chronic overpopulation that has seventy million people cryogenically frozen; Tito Cravelli, a shadowy private detective, wants to know why Dr Lurton Sands is hiding his mistress on the planet; billionaire mutant George Walt wants to make the empty world all his own. When the other earth turns out to be inhabited, much changes.

Book Review by Mike Philbin

Looking over the list of Dick novels on the inside cover, I see that [Cantata-140](#) was written the year of my birth, 1966. I realise also that I have actually read (and enjoyed) a lot of this prolific author's output - but I am always left with a slightly sour taste in my mouth. I suspected it was the strange names Dick insists on using for his main characters that gives the whole book a surreal, otherworldly quality, a pseudo-culture-shock if you will...

But tonight I discovered the true cause of this distaste - dialogue.

Remember that Stanley Kubrick film about the rebellious ape, *2001*? Well, reading [Cantata-140](#), I can hear that slightly metallic voice of HAL 9000 carved through every creaking line of Dick dialogue, "I don't think you want to do that, Dave..." it says in comforting but naive tones. The dialogue in Dick books reads like it would if multiple HAL 9000 machines discoursed. It's not as harsh a dialogue as that between those metal mouthed Cadbury's Smash aliens from the 1970s' TV adverts but there is still a cold sensation given off from the staccato lines of speech.



[The Crack in Space](#), Synopsis

Here's the simplistic version of the narrative from the back of the Gollancz version reviewed:

It's the year 2080, and Earth's seemingly insurmountable overpopulation problem has been alleviated temporarily by placing millions of people in voluntary deep freeze. But in the election year, the pressure is on to find a solution which will enable them to resume their lives. For Jim Briskin, presidential candidate, it seems an insoluble problem - until the flaw in the new instantaneous travel system opens up the possibility of finding whole new worlds to colonise.

[Philip K Dick](#) is a novelist of ideas, certainly not character or dialogue. His ideas glow with a brilliant light a simple précis like this does no justice to. To fully understand [Cantata-140](#) we need to go back and fully explore the odd mix of science, race and religious issue that form the central core of all Dick's great works.

But that can never tell the whole story of [Cantata-140](#), and without wanting to give the game away, let me expand upon things a little. The novel is split into two distinct halves: the first half is a close, personal study of human interaction in the work area. The second half projects those human subjects into a larger narrative of parallel worlds and alien discoveries, two of Dick's favourite topics.

Okay, it's a book about a presidential election and it's a book about racism. An odd linear extrapolation of 2080 but you have to do the best you can in the climate the novel was written in. There is a prophetic nod (as there usually is in every Dick novel) this time to the prevalence of porn in today's society, (barring the simplistic jet-hopping to and from) the Golden Door Moments of Bliss satellite. The real lovely touch, and Dick is sometimes wonderfully perverse, is the owner of the naked-woman-shaped entertainment satellite George Walt, the Siamese twins conjoined at the base of their shared skull.

The true innovation though, and the focal point of the whole narrative, is a faulty piece of machinery called a Scuttler that rips a hole in the fabric of spacetime and offers the potential to explore the universe. But as always in [Philip K Dick](#)'s work, it's neither that simple nor that clear cut.

[Cantata-140](#), [The Crack in Space](#), The Open Critic Verdict

Buy it. Enjoy it. Read in wonderment.

[The Game Players of Titan](#), Philip K. Dick

Poor Pete Garden has just lost Berkeley. He's also lost his wife, but he'll get a new one as soon as he rolls a three. It's all part of the rules of Bluff, the game that's become a blinding obsession for the last inhabitants of the planet Earth. But the rules are about to change - drastically and terminally - because Pete Garden will be playing his next game against an opponent who isn't even human, for stakes that are a lot higher than Berkeley.

Reviewed by Mike Philbin

In the future there's nothing more important the board game 'Bluff'. A great war with the Vugs, an alien race from the planet Titan, has seriously decimated the human race. Mankind finds a way to win a decisive victory against the Vugs, but at the cost of infertility throughout the majority of those few humans who survive the conflict. There really are no more than a few thousand Americans left on the planet. They spend most of their time playing Bluff, those that have no psi-ability - psis are banned from playing Bluff for obvious reasons. If the Vug-Human police alliance finds any psi'c playing Bluff, they're banned for life. But that's not the basis for the story.

The political backdrop is the truly alien part of the book. The Vugs haven't really lost; they've just allowed mankind to continue on. They are the true rulers of the planet. They control the space around planet Earth. They control what makes the remaining populace tick. Bluff is the drug they use to control mankind.

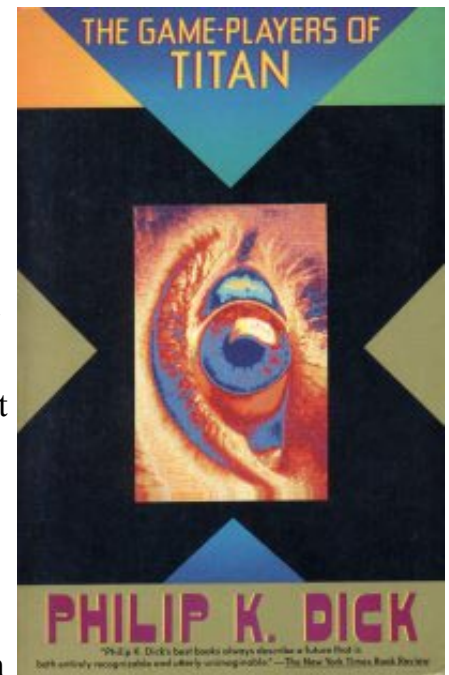
[Philip K Dick](#) was a true innovator and seer of the future. He foresaw how control of a basically-addictive

populace could be achieved in a number of ways; in his book [A Scanner Darkly](#), it's substance D; in [Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?](#), it's Mercerism; here it's a simple board game.

But why ban the psychics from the game? Isn't it obvious? The game's a Monopoly / poker hybrid. Very simple rule set. Try to cheat, that's the best way to victory. Bluff by name. Bluff by nature. In common-or-garden Monopoly you roll your dice, you move your piece. Bluff's poker-like overlay ensures that your opponent never knows whether the move you've made is a true move or a fake move to increase your score. Call your opponent's bluff at your peril - they could be leading you down a debt-painted garden path.

The Game Players of Titan, Philip K Dick, The Open Critic Verdict

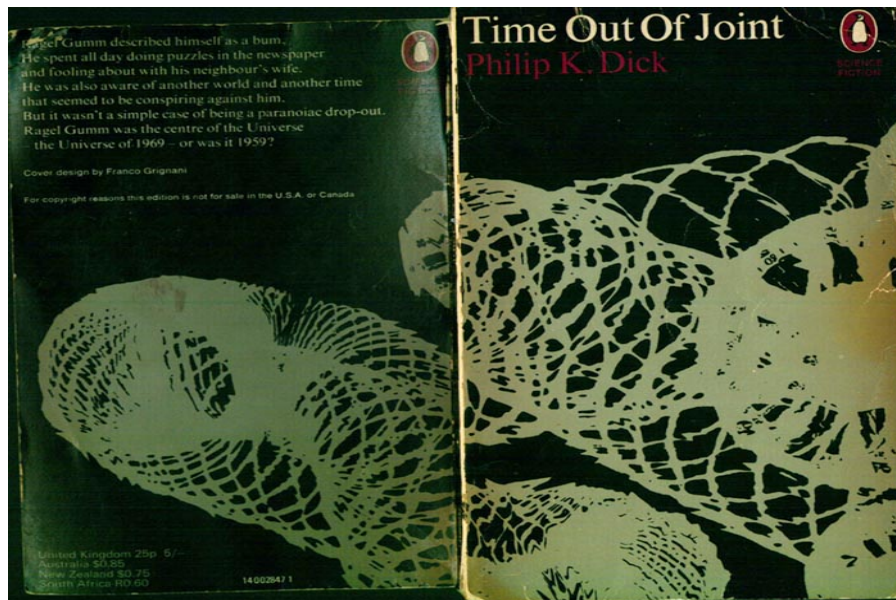
In true [Philip K Dick](#) fashion, the world is treated like a parallel world. Written in 1963, the book harkens back to a time not unlike the end of the Second World War. Or maybe that's just the particular twist my mind put on it whilst reading. It felt like the 1950s. Of course all domestic appliances have Rushmore effects that allow you to communicate with them, of course the cars fly; of course they have heat-needles (lasers). It felt like a place of hope. If only we could see the 'big picture'. But Dick only shows us that late in the novel, though hints at the true intentions of the Vugs are there for the astute PKD fan to at least guess at early on.



Time Out of Joint, Philip K. Dick

Book Review by Mike Philbin

[Time Out of Joint](#) comes from that golden era of Dick output that contained such 'classics' as [Eye in the Sky](#), [The Man Who Japed](#) and, (my favourite) [Solar Lottery](#). These early works, stripped of the drug abuse elements of the author's final books and copyrighted from the late 1950s onwards, remind one of more innocent times after the second world war. Tinged with Cold War paranoia - there's a real touch of the early shorts of Kurt Vonnegut in their structure and use of language and domestic situation.



Here's the skinny: Ragel Gumm earns a living playing the Where Will The Little Green Man Be Next contest in the national newspaper. He plays every day, deciphering the cryptic clue and honing his pattern finding skills to a fine art. He has won every day for the last two years. As you can imagine, he has become something of a celebrity. He starts to suspect that his perfect world where winning is all that keeps the world happy is under threat, he sees things no human should as the very fabric of space and time starts to tatter around the edges giving him glimpses of other past-lives, other universes, other times.

[Philip K Dick](#)'s, Gumm finds artefacts from times no longer about places that never were. With the help of his brother-in-law, Victor Nielson, Ragel Gumm hatches a brilliant plot to find out the truth about his quaint little 1950s' town but what he discovers is beyond his most twisted dreams - a place where sanity itself is stretched to snapping point.

[Time Out of Joint](#), [Philip K Dick](#), The Open Critic Verdict

Reminding one ever so much of *The Truman Show* (and you can imagine there was a whole lot of inspiration from Dick's cold war novel reformatted for family viewing) this is a great page-turner.

External Links

- [Philip K Dick](#), Wikipedia
- [Philip K Dick](#), Fansite
- [Mike Philbin](#), Writer and Reviewer

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Published:

02.12.07 / 10am

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Discussion

- [Mike Philbin](#): Guys, thanks for all your continued comments on this review - glad you all liked it - glad you shared your thoughts. :) Mike
- [Jared](#): I’m 17 years, and never before have I wanted to have the mind of an almost 40-year old as much as I do right now. (Result of reading...
- [Daniel L. Drew](#): I saw the movie first and almost finished the book now. If the book is considered a true account then most of the film is fictional...
- [Don Howard](#): I thought the review rather well-done. I was a professional seaman as a youth(merchant marine) and have met a number of yachtsmen and...
- [hellofromme](#): I really like this book so you ALL should read it!!! Dont be hatin!

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