

# Los Angeles Times

## Philip K. Dick scans the darkness in Disneyland's shadow

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### PART 5: PHILIP K. DICK, THE LAST DECADE

*During the last years of his life, **Philip K. Dick** lived in, of all places, Orange County, a Southern California setting that made the life-battered sci-fi writer something of a stranger in a strange land (to borrow from **Robert Heinlein**). This is the fifth of a six-part series looking at those final years. The series is written by **Scott Timberg**, the L.A. freelance journalist who runs the West Coast culture blog [the Misread City](#). He's also a longtime (albeit sometimes closeted) fan of science fiction.*



Though **Philip K. Dick** was not, on the surface, a writer of place – he was driven more by sweeping ideas than by locations or even local cultures – his time in Southern California had a profound impact on his work, in sometimes complicated ways.

Dick wrote — in a 1973 letter to Polish science-fiction writer [Stanislaw Lem](#) — “there is no culture here in California, only trash. And we who grew up here and live here and write here have nothing else to include as

elements in our work. ... The West Coast has no tradition, no dignity, no ethics – this is where that monster **Richard Nixon** grew up. ... [O]ne must work with the trash, pit it against itself.”

He sometimes found it hard to locate a sense of place in the famously decentralized Southland. “In Southern California,” he wrote in the novel “**A Scanner Darkly**,” “it didn’t make any difference anyhow where you went; there was always the same McDonaldburger place over and over, like a circular strip that turned past you as you pretended to go somewhere.”

Over the course of his career, the detritus of pop culture – aerosol spray bottles, **Barbie** and **Ken** dolls, electronic pets – became icons of near-religious resonance, and the phenomenon amplified when he was living in Fullerton and Santa Ana.

In part because of this, Dick’s SoCal exile is typically described as the period when his religious interest moved to center stage. Lethem sees the Orange County years as producing not a shift in subject matter – he points out that Dick had been interested in religion for a long time – but a change in literary voice.

“The letters, the bull sessions, the monologues he specialized in – those start to merge with the novels,” Lethem says. “He becomes the self-presenting” artist of bull or “philosophical speculator.” This “huckster voice,” as **Jonathan Lethem** calls it, describes even the Orange County novels that weren’t about religion.

Either way, in the shadow of **Disneyland** was the perfect place for a writer obsessed with artificiality and reality. The place allowed Dick to engage with the theme in his books even more fully.

“I think he did his best work here,” says **Robert Guffey**, a Cal State Long Beach professor who teaches Dick’s novels. He especially praises “**VALIS**,” “**The Transmigration of Timothy Archer**” and “**A Scanner Darkly**” — in which Dick likened the subculture of suburban drug casualties he documents to “children playing in the street.”

“It captures the reality of what it’s like to hang out with those people,” says Guffey, “in those settings, with that shared madness. The way life goes from absurd to very dangerous very quickly.” The novel was made into a 2006 film by **Richard Linklater**, in part due to the advocacy of **Keanu Reeves**. Guffey’s students respond to the work, he says, better than most of what he assigns. Some pointed out the similarity between that novel’s main character, a narc who doubles as an addict, to former Orange County Sheriff **Michael Carona**, [jailed for taking bribes, witness tampering and general corruption](#).

To those who dislike it – and to the local punk bands that burst on the scene starting in the late ‘70s — Orange County was the Great American Nowhere. But the presence of Disneyland, extreme religion and a landscape whose citrus groves had been radically transformed by technology and commerce made it a more intellectually



fruitful spot for the author than an obvious and easygoing bohemian capital like, say, Santa Cruz or Portland.

“Dick thrived on adversity,” Guffey says. “I don’t think Phil Dick liked pleasant places. He was not seeking a peaceful existence.”

And his words resonated among O.C.’s counterculture. “In the late ’80s and early ’90s, I was experimenting with psychedelics,” said **Robert Larson**, a veteran of the local punk scene who runs a radio show on Irvine’s **KUCI-FM**, “and had some really weird, mind-blowing, ego-shattering experiences. I just had trouble putting it into any frame of reference, and that sent me even deeper into his work.”

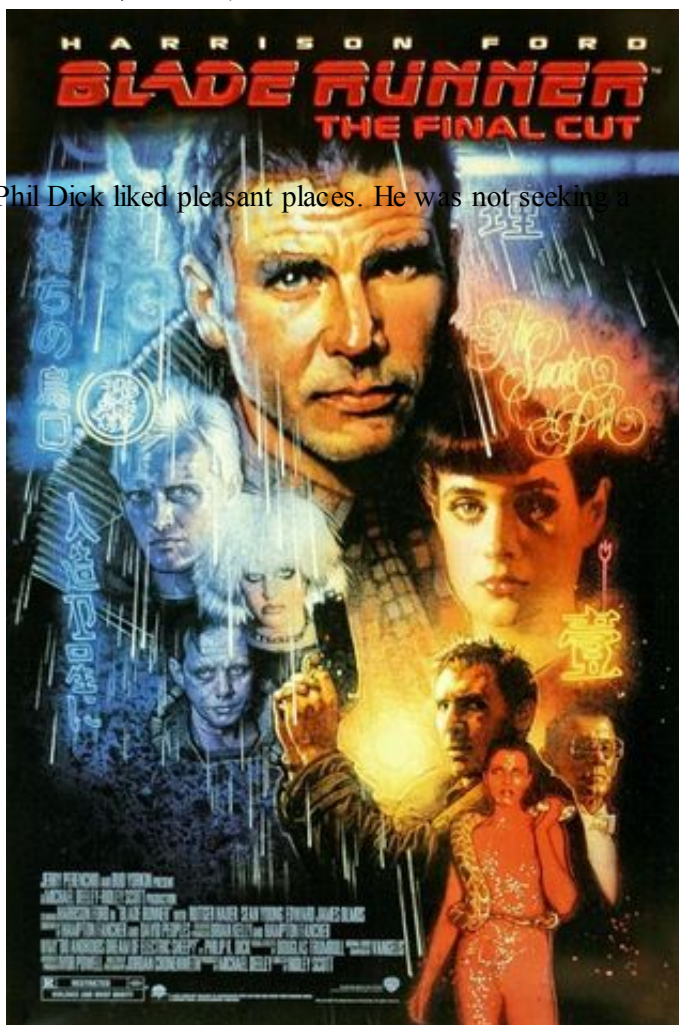
Today, Larson, who informally takes friends to the author’s old haunts, is trying to generate interest in a regular tour of Dick’s Orange County. “There’s not much evidence of him doing psychedelics,” Larson says, “but he had answers to some of that.”

What if Dick had never lived long enough to make it to Orange County and had succeeded in his Vancouver suicide attempt?

“Imagine if his life had cut off there,” said **David Gill**, a San Francisco literature professor who runs an [informative website about the author](#). “I don’t know if we’d be celebrating Phil Dick now. I don’t know if the **Library of America** would have happened, if ‘**Blade Runner**’ would have happened. It’d be a completely different world.”

– Scott Timberg

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*Images, from top: Image from the film “A Scanner Darkly.” Credit: Warner Independent Pictures. Philip K. Dick reads a newspaper article on “Blade Runner” shortly before his death. Credit: the Philip K. Dick Trust. “Blade Runner” poster. And, at bottom, Dick in the 1970s. Credit: Isa Dick-Hackett*

<http://herocomplex.latimes.com/2010/02/04/philip-k-dick-finds-dark-inspiration-in-the-shadow-of-disneyland/> printed on January 1, 2012

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