

Los Angeles Times

Philip K. Dick's legacy emerges from the maze of death [UPDATED]

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PART 6: 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 final installment 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.*



Financial security and widespread acclaim were things **Philip K. Dick** had spent his career waiting for, always on the verge. He compared himself to [the tramps](#) in **Beckett's** “**Waiting for Godot**.”

“If it does come for me, will it matter?” Dick wrote in 1976. “Will it make up for 25 years of shivering with fear as to whether, when I get up in the morning, the electricity will still be turned on?”

During those years, Dick's health problems continued, sometimes coinciding with money woes. After a 1976 heart attack that sent him to the county hospital and left him with a \$2,000 bill, he had only 40 cents to his name. He was only saved from having his utilities turned off by a royalty check from France. “Here I am,” he wrote, “after twenty-five years of professional SF writing, getting notices that they are going to turn off the water and gas and electricity if I don't pay in three days, and I say, What has it all been for?”

His finances would improve significantly by the end of the decade, but not his health or lifestyle.

In the winter of 1982, as “**Blade Runner**” was nearing release, Dick's health began to slip again. In February — after months of predicting his own demise — he was hit with a stroke while alone in his condo. Taken to [Western Medical Center](#) in Santa Ana after being discovered, unconscious, by neighbors, he regained consciousness, but more strokes and a heart attack killed Dick on March 2. He was buried in Colorado next to his sister Jane, who had died as an infant.

Few of Dick's early acquaintances would have imagined he'd live — and die — in Orange County. In short, the author's decade in Southern California had been as widely various, contradictory and extreme as the rest of his life — only more so. And it would continue to be in the aftermath of his death.

Ridley Scott's film opened in June and, despite enormous expectation, bombed, losing out badly to “**Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan**” at the box office and getting clobbered over the summer by the more crowd-pleasing blend of sci-fi in “**E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial**.” Some critics disliked its pace: **Sheila Benson** of the **Los Angeles Times** called it “Blade crawler.” It seemed like the kind of movie destined to be big in Japan.



But like Dick himself, “Blade Runner” died but [then rose again](#). The movie went on to become [an important part of film history](#), whether for its vision of Los Angeles as a post-ethnic, hyper-commercialized, Hong Kong-like urban hell, its melding of science fiction with film noir, its emotional seriousness or a visual aesthetic that's influenced everything from cyberpunk to video games to the acclaimed revival of the “**Battlestar Galactica**” television series. And **Steven Spielberg**, whose “E.T.” was the antithesis to the author's oeuvre, would return to

Dick's work for the 2002 film "**Minority Report**."

("Blade Runner" became a powerful enough point of reference that Google has dubbed its new mobile phone "**Nexus One**," a name derived from the replicant characters in the novel "**Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?**" and the ensuing film. The name has incensed the Dick estate, which may claim infringement of intellectual property and sue.)

Shortly after Dick's death, his novel "**The Transmigration of Timothy Archer**," based loosely on the life of the controversial Episcopalian Bishop **James Pike**, was published. His first novel with no science-fiction elements since the beginning of his career, it was also deemed among his most serious.

Even with the rise of Dick's reputation during the '80s, his work could be hard to find, even in California. "In my world," recalls daughter **Isa Dick Hackett**, "they never had the books in the libraries. Never, ever had the books in the bookstores. Anytime I was anywhere, I'd go to the bookstore and see if they had any of my dad's books. And never! Never! And I'd ask the clerks, hoping for some validation. 'Dick? Who?'"

Going from blank stares from clerks and librarians to seeing her dad become one of the best-regarded writers of his day, admired by Hollywood and the literati, makes Hackett wonder what her father would make of it. The half a dozen or so film projects in the works include "**Flow My Tears**" and "**Ubik**," perhaps his most philosophically realized novel. Dick's early realist novels — writer **Jonathan Lethem** describes then as living somewhere between **Richard Yates** and **Charles Willeford** — are being published after nearly a quarter-century out of print. "**Puttering About in a Small Land**," set in L.A. and Ojai, was just reissued by **Tor**.

"He would either be laughing hysterically or just saying, 'This isn't real,'" Hackett says. "'This is just a figment of my imagination.' And he'd be totally paranoid about it: 'Something is wrong here.' I just shake my head and say, 'Dad, this is so amazing. I wish you could have had a glimpse of this.' He would love to hear that other creative minds were sparked by what he wrote."

— Scott Timberg

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Photos: Top, Ridley Scott, left, and Philip K. Dick. Credit: The Philip K. Dick Trust. Second photo, Sean Young in "Blade Runner." Credit: Warner Home Video. Third, the headstone for Philip K. Dick and his sister. Credit: The Philip K. Dick Trust. Bottom, the author in the 1970s. Credit: The Philip K. Dick Trust.

UPDATE: An earlier version of this post has Steven Spielberg's name misspelled.

<http://herocomplex.latimes.com/2010/02/08/philip-k-dicks-legacy-in-the-maze-of-death/> printed on January 1, 2012

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