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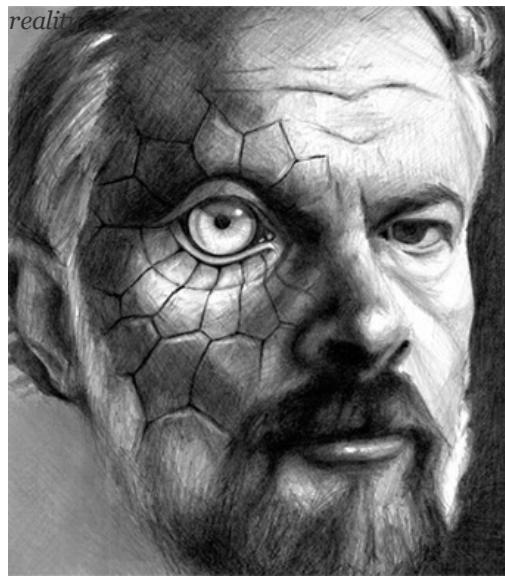
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EVENTS

Searching for reality at the Philip K. Dick festival

Last weekend, hardcore Philip K. Dick fans trekked to the high Rocky Mountains for a festival of Dickian dimensions. There were Dick scholars, biker bars, library lectures, Techgnostic side-trips with Erik Davis, and an epic, weekend-long attempt to define



reality.

Phil Dick's science fiction often features characters alienated by the technology that surrounds them, overwhelmed by the immense absurdity of the Universe as well as the drudgery of their daily lives, but who are ultimately saved through genuine human connection. As our world grows to look more and more like a PKD novel, the adjective Dickian has come to describe the way reality seems frayed at the edges, too strained with irony and weird synchronicities to maintain its apparent stability for long.

Now that Philip K. Dick is widely considered one of the most important science fiction writers of the second half of the 20th

century, and with his canonization in the Library of America series, looks to become one of the most important American writers period, it's easy to forget that as recently as fifteen years ago, his fanbase was considerably smaller, confined mostly to SF nerds and druggies.

The first Philip K. Dick Festival to take place in the United States, held last weekend near Nederland, Colorado (elevation 9100'), served as a great reminder of those times. The smallish turnout consisted of uber-fans and scholars (mostly SF nerds now doing drugs only occasionally) who have been reading, studying, and fanning out on PKD since before he went big, fans loyal enough to drive to the remote location high in the Rocky Mountains for the festival. There was a turnout of about 30 people for the main talks and considerably fewer attending the group meals. Certainly a similarly promoted PKD Festival in any large city would draw more people, but anyone could show up to that. This festival's remote location weeded out all but the most hardcore of fans.

My trip to the festival began with a 20-hour drive in a Budget moving truck from San Francisco, across California, Nevada, Utah, and into some huge mountains in Colorado, with fellow Dick-head and the author of *Techgnosis*, Erik Davis. The drive, which I had been envisioning as a kind of gnostic version of *Thelma & Louise*, carried us across some of the most God-forsaken land in the country, past town after town, each eerily similar to the one before: America's finest fast food chains, a small cadre of gas stations, diners, and strip clubs. I suspect some of those towns were simply cardboard fronts, hastily constructed props. We took one really cool short side-trip to see some crazy rock art at an undisclosed location near the Utah/Colorado border. The paintings depicted strange space-alien looking characters with big eyes, wearing helmets,

BY DAVID GILL

AUG 20, 2010 1:00 PM

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elaborate head gear, and/or antenna; the archaic Native American art was created sometime between two thousand and eight thousand years ago. I guess there were SF druggie nerds even back then.



Friday's festivities took place in a biker bar called [the Last Shot](#). Inside the old wooden building, there was a video game that involved shooting turkeys with a giant orange plastic rifle, one of the largest collections of shot glasses in the world, and an oil painting of Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope of the Insane Clown Posse. There were also engraved wooden tributes to the Blue Man Group. I found it almost as alien as the rock art, but the food was good and the people were nice.

As the small group assembled on a wooden gazebo with panoramic views of the Rocky Mountains even casual conversations would come to a halt as packs of full-throated motorcycles roared past.



The festival was organized by a devoted Dick-head named David Hyde, who goes by the moniker Lord Running Clam (likewise obsessive Dick-heads should know the reference). Hyde has been a staple in the PKD scene for more than a decade and a half, creating the fanzine *For Dickheads Only* after the *Philip K Dick Society Newsletter* ceased publication in 1992. Most recently Hyde self-published the incredibly useful [Pink Beam: A Philip K Dick Companion](#), a must have for any serious fan. The laid-back guy in sunglasses with a cool British accent who took on the onerous task of organizing the festival because, as he told me, 'if I didn't who would?' kept the events moving and fans properly herded with a low-

key grace.

Hyde began the day by giving a brief overview of PKD's life and selected novels. Frank Hollander a self-described 'obsessive PKD collector' spoke next, outlining his endless quest to find obscure PKD publications, the most amazing of which was a 1981 issue of *The Yorba City High Times* which contained Phil Dick's short story "The Alien Mind," a far-cry from PKD's current publishing juggernaut. For the first part of his speech Hollander used a microphone running

through a cheap guitar amplifier. As the crackling amplifier struggled to overpower the motorcycles idling in the parking lot, it struck me as a Dickian moment.

Next, longtime fan Patrick Clark whose fanzines covering PKD and cyberpunk go way back to the golden age of alt-Dick, and who now writes the informative *PKD Otaku* fanzine, gave a great talk about the role of Philip K Dick in his life. As someone who discovered PKD in the early 90s, I was struck by how different it must have been to read Phil Dick's books as they came out in the 60s and 70s.



After a wonderful group dinner, we retired to our rooms at the rustic Sundance Lodge. My confusion, caused by mislabeled hot and cold knobs in the shower, seemed remarkably Dickian.

Saturday's festivities began at the Gilpin Library around noon as professor Sam Umland of the University of Nebraska Kearney gave a great talk on Dick's break-

through novel *The Man in the High Castle*. What better place to discuss the book than in the high Colorado Rockies where much of the novel's action takes place in a demilitarized zone dividing German occupiers on the east coast from the Japanese occupiers on the west coast?

I followed Professor Umland with a short talk on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Basically, I delivered the lecture that I give my classes on the novel at San Francisco State University. But here at least I knew my audience had actually read the book. Erik Davis finished up our discussions at the library with a fascinating talk on the connection between dreaming and writing and the similarities between the life and work of Phil Dick and his Cthulic predecessor, HP Lovecraft.

Late Saturday afternoon, we headed back over to the Last Shot Saloon where John Fairchild presented his research on the heavily anticipated and [newly released volume of PKD's selected letters covering the years 1980-1982](#) which he helped to transcribe. Finally, Lord Running Clam did his damndest to convince us that Dick's writings contain the secrets of the Universe. But, for the most part, we already knew that. Stay tuned to my blog [Total Dick-Head](#) as all of these talks will be available as podcasts in the very near future.

We finished up the night at another local bar, The Stage Stop, where the band [Blu Simon](#) was set to rock out. The band had traveled up from Omaha, Nebraska, determined to play this PKD Festival. When I showed up at the bar a little early, I found myself instantly immersed in an intense conversation with Aaron Shoemaker, the band's guitarist and singer, who had incredibly insightful and cogent comments on the life and work of Philip K Dick and then about his own senior thesis in college which involved developing an extremely original theory of human motivations. I felt like I was in a parallel Universe where even rock musicians understand existentialism. The band rocked the room with its unique brand of Southern boogie rock, many beers were consumed, and their new single "Palmer Eldritch" was performed, twice.



Sunday started off with a wonderful group breakfast overlooking the tree-covered Rockies, which reminded me of *The Shining* (as well as the Kubrick's scenic outtakes from the film used to end the initial theatrical release of *Blade Runner*). At a short official meeting ('official' is a term PKD fans seem to instantly recoil from) we decided that our next Festival would be in the California Bay

Area in 2012. Apparently, I volunteered to organize this. I blame the SF drugs coursing through my veins.

We then retired back to the Last Shot Saloon where we had lunch and talked intently about our favorite writer. But we were also acutely aware, on this last day of the festival, that, sadly, the man most responsible for PKD's literary ascension could not be in attendance. Phil Dick's friend and first literary executer, Paul Williams, has been diagnosed with early-onset dementia, the delayed result of a bicycle accident, and now requires full-time care in a nursing home. Many hardcore fans donated some of their PKD-related treasures to an auction for Paul to be held on Ebay next month. While this generosity evoked Dick's concern with empathy, Williams's steady deterioration reminded us all that PKD's Universes are often unjust and even cruel.

The small festival embodied the best aspects of Philip K Dick's work. As Erik Davis said of the attendees, "We're all a little weird, but we're friendly and accepting." In fact, I dare say every attendee felt deeply connected to one another by the end of the festival. I got to meet people that I had been corresponding with about PKD for over a decade, and it was wonderful to interact with them in the 'real world' instead of online. The lack of usable cell-phone signals, and the dodgy wi-fi connection at the Lodge, forced all of us to unplug and focus on each other rather than our digital lives. Again, it seemed very Dickian to me.

David Gill has studied the life and work of Philip K Dick for fifteen years, writing his Masters Thesis on Dick's novel Time Out of Joint. Aside from maintaining the Dick-centric [Total Dick-Head blog](#), for the last five years, he has been teaching literature and writing at San Francisco State University and regularly assigns Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?. He has written about Philip K Dick for boingboing, io9.com, Article Magazine, and is currently part of a team working to edit Dick's Exegesis, a series of notes made by the author over the last eight years of his life, for publication.

Photos by David Gill. Top image via [The Master Meets The Mugwump](#) (not sure who the artist is - if you know, please speak up so we can credit them).

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harlemite

20 Aug 2010 1:30 PM

The first time I ever bought a Philip K. Dick book, about 8 years ago, I couldn't find it anywhere in the Barnes & Noble at Lincoln Center. Plenty of sci-fi, but no PKD to be found.

Normally, I'd just split, but it didn't make any sense. So, I asked a clerk.

He pointed above the shelves, way out of reach, to a stack of PKD paperbacks, explaining, "He's got a big cult fan base. They're some of the most shoplifted books in the store, which is why keep them out of reach."

In the years since, I've noticed PKD's books are increasingly kept on the shelves with all the less cultish authors.



Gemini2 @harlemite

@harlemite: The smaller book stores carry them. I rather give to the little guy than a corp giant.

 Franklin Harris @harlemite

@harlemite: Now there's a three-volume set of his works published by Library of America. From cult to canon. [www.loa.org]

 lemke @Gemini2

@I-Gemini-I: I'd rather give to online bookstores, to avoid contact with humans.

 phoghat @Gemini2

@I-Gemini-I:

There's a few at Project Gutenberg that I've downloaded including "Do Androids Dream Of Electronic Sheep" and I belong to a SF discussion group where we are discussing the book vs "Bladerunner"

 lemke @Franklin Harris

@Franklin Harris: Cool, I've got this from Amazon a few months ago, but just read a few stories yet from it.

 cjohnston108 @harlemite

@harlemite: The first PKD book I bought was *The Philip K. Dick Reader*, and here's why: I was in B&N, flipped to a random story (The Golden Man), and saw that the protagonist's name was Cris Johnson.

My name is Chris Johnston. 'Nuff said.

 Zebra_without_a_face @cljohnston108

@cljohnston108: I just finished reading that book last month. I really liked the story, "Upon the Dull Earth" and my least favorite was, without a doubt, "War Veteran".

One thing that bugs me is that every other Dick anthology has like 5 of the stories from Reader in it, so I'm either stuck buying a book with a bunch of doubles in it, or not getting any more of his shorties. So in the mean time I have an Asimov currently and a Bradbury coming up next. I wish publishers would publish more anthologies, and not just Hugo winners that I read 8 months ago in a magazine... but I guess nowadays I'm just happy I can still buy a physical book made from paper.

 krismry @cljohnston108

@cljohnston108: You are so lucky he spelled your name wrong! You could have been trapped in some awful alternate reality time loop in which everything that happened to the guy in the book started happening to you too! Do not read PKD books even if you buy them because your almost name is in them. I read them and look how I turned out!



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