

PHILIP K. DICK AND
THE UMBRELLA OF LIGHT



ANGUS TAYLOR

ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. LEE HEALY

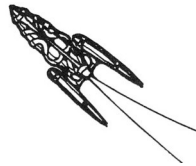
Philip K. Dick and the Umbrella of Light

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Illustrations by Cora Lee Healy



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God Appears & God is Light
To those poor Souls who dwell in Night
But does a Human Form Display
To those who Dwell in Realms of day

William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence"

Introduction

“So you maintain,” Doug Appleford said briskly, “that if a person is killed by a meteor it’s because he hated his grandmother. Some theory.”

(*Counter-Clock World*, ch. 16)

It is only in the last few years that much serious attempt has been made to understand the nature of science fiction as a genre and its place within the context of literature as a whole. The editors and writers of the pulp magazines too often saw science fiction in simplistic terms of prediction or extrapolation, even while their own stories belied their claims. A slightly more sophisticated view holds that the function of science fiction is the mapping out of the realistic possibilities of the future; along this line Robert A. Heinlein can maintain that science-fiction writers are the futurologists of fiction.¹ But what these critics have tended to ignore is the poetic quality of the literature. Science fiction is not first and foremost science; it is first and foremost fiction. It has developed within a historical context that has given to it its unique qualities, but it shares something with all fiction, and with all art: it attempts to transcend its own materials and evoke another reality. Camus has described how the artist works through selection, by isolating the unique in the context of the universal. The artist plucks an instant from passing time and gives it a permanence, but a permanence shaped by the artist’s own vision. C. S. Lewis has likened the series of events that occurs within a story to a net designed to catch an elusive something else. “The real theme may be, and perhaps usually is, something that has no sequence in it, something other than a process and much more like a state or quality.”²

The proper study of science fiction, then, removes it from the technocratic ghetto and confronts the issue of its relation to so-called literature. Recent attempts at defining the genre have tended to crystallize around two perspectives: the sociological, and what may be called the “formal”. According to the sociological perspective, sf differs from mainstream fiction through the greater stress it places upon individuals as social types in variable contexts. Science fiction, Martin Green has written, reflects

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the scientific sensibility, oriented toward the species, toward individuals as specimens exemplifying laws of cause and effect, toward the larger features of whole societies. Conventional literature is oriented toward the individual, toward particular friendships and small group relationships; science fiction, on the other hand, is oriented in its field of concern toward larger social groupings. “It is because of this fundamental orientation of the scientific mind that science fiction, serving readers with scientific training, treats imaginative themes in the ways it does; that it invents new forms of nature, new societies, huge sweeps of space and time, that it moves outward and generalizes, that it concentrates on social machinery and employs characterological cliché.”³ Again, Leon Stover has written: “In realistic fiction, judgment is cast against a quality in the individual that arises from cultivation of the self – man as a creature of ethical culture or its lack. The implications are for private reform: Can I be a better person? In SF, the target of appraisal is man as a creature of custom and shared habits – culture as used in the language of anthropology and sociology. The implications are for public policy: Do the properties of civilization serve human nature adequately?”⁴

The “formal” perspective, on the other hand, concentrates on the way in which sf deliberately deviates from the world-as-experienced in terms of its invented settings – that is, its use of non-mimetic contexts. Critics such as Alexei and Cory Panshin and Peter Nicholls have stressed the methods employed by sf writers in the construction of their fictional worlds, and in so doing have noted sf’s relation to older forms of non-mimetic fiction. Indeed, the Panshins would prefer to abandon the term “science fiction” in favour of “speculative fantasy”.

These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive – quite the contrary. Essentially, they describe form and function, and the critics who stress the one aspect have not totally ignored the other – as evidenced by Green’s statement above. In arguing for a definition of sf as the “literature of cognitive estrangement”, Darko Suvin conjoins both perspectives.⁵ As a writer, reader, or critic, then, one may view a piece of work either on a mimetic/non-mimetic scale or on a particularizing/-generalizing scale: but each scale implies the existence of the other. In mimetic, or realistic, fiction the unique individual is confronted with a given, fixed social context, to which they must adjust in one fashion or another. Those characteristics that differentiate them from fellow human beings and make the individual unique also serve as the source of that individual’s problems in integrating into society. In science fiction the

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social context is subject to change, and in this strategy the unique characteristics of the individual tend to recede from view, for the focus of attention is elsewhere. The individual tends to be related to their landscape – physical and social contexts – as a specimen of their kind. The problems involved with their dialectical relation to their landscape arise not so much from those aspects of their nature that differentiate them from their fellows, as from that essential nature (present or potential) that is shared with them – even if, as is often the case, the individual or others have become estranged from that authentic essence. In alien landscapes the writer of science fiction explores that region where the city of humankind verges on the unassimilated outer universe.

Sf, then, exists as one side of the spectrum of strategies for presenting the human condition in fictional form. Conceived of as speculative fantasy, it has a long and honourable heritage, of which it is a manifestation arising from the increasing impact of technology on human society since the Industrial Revolution. Science fiction is fantasy in its most typical (though not exclusive) modern guise: it is that form of non-mimetic fiction uniquely characteristic of industrial and post-industrial societies, a form of fantasy that outfits itself with the garments of scientific/-technological paradigms in order to explore age-old questions of humanity's relation to the universe-at-large in terms suitable to the modern age.

Thus science fiction embodies the impact of socio-political processes not only at the inter-personal level but at the *intra*-personal level as well: not only in “outer” but also in “inner” space. Indeed, the interchange between these two regions provides the basis for some of the most interesting and fruitful exploration presently being done in the field. Philip K. Dick, J. G. Ballard, Thomas M. Disch, Barry N. Malzberg, and various other writers who deal fairly directly with psychological matters can yet be labelled writers of sf, for they explore the dialectical relationship between the human essence and the changing physical-social landscapes through which the human spirit journeys. Dick's special province has been the estrangement of human beings from their authentic nature under the reign of modern social organization, and the struggle to regain authentic being and establish a viable world-view in the face of new revelations about the world brought about by the radical impingement of the unknown.

What follows is essentially an overview of Dick's fiction, as I see it. I have

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not been concerned to do a detailed story-by-story analysis of this author's voluminous work; nor have I attempted much in the way of assessing literary merit. It has seemed to me that the first necessity in the task of impressing upon a largely uncomprehending public the significance of Dick's work is to discover and lay forth the basic themes and style that unify his writings and reveal his world-view, and thus to dissipate the cloud of ignorance and misconception that at this time prevents a wider appreciation among readers.



PART ONE

Monsters from Outer and Inner Space

Birth, I decided, is not pleasant.
It is worse than death; you can
philosophize about death – and you
probably will: everyone else has. But
birth! There is no philosophizing,
no easing of the condition. And the
prognosis is terrible: all your actions
and deeds and thoughts will only
embroil you in living the more
deeply.

(*We Can Build You*, ch. 7)

Horace Denfeld, once the evolved New Man, his mind now broken by the alien power from the stars, gazes at the conclusion of *Our Friends from Frolix 8* with childlike wonder at a small plastic statuette of God, and affirms his faith that “every living thing will fly or anyhow trudge or run” up and up forever. “All of them will make it eventually, no matter how slow they go. Leaving a lot behind; that has to be done.” (ch. 27) As Horace Denfeld has left a lot behind, now that the fantastic has shattered the familiar realm in which he moved for so long.

Although it is often noted that Philip K. Dick is concerned with “the nature of reality”, the assumption is usually that he is merely playing parlour tricks, that he is a clever sleight-of-hand artist whose entertainments are conjured out of thin air and exhibit little philosophy other than a fashionable nihilism or despair in the face of a universe thought too large and unregulated for comprehension. Yet Dick is far from being the unrelenting pessimist he is often considered. Rather, through his often dark vision he assumes a critical stance against the world-view that informs modern society; beyond this he presents a vision of a brighter world not beyond the reach of those informed of its possibility. But between unexamined reality and affirmed possibility lies an arduous journey: from the destruction of one world of knowledge to the creation of another. Dick’s fiction is the story of this journey.

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Since at least Mary Shelley's time, science fiction has displayed a distinctly ambiguous attitude toward humanity's drive to impose its will on nature. The image of Frankenstein's monster, the creature, born of science, that assumes a life of its own and threatens to destroy its creator, still haunts today's world, where critics like Jacques Ellul can argue that technology has assumed a life and logic of its own that puts it beyond effective human control. If the adventurous spirit of Verne seems more suited to the last century than the image of the monster, it is because the ambiguities of technology were at that time less apparent. By the middle of the nineteenth century, with the Industrial Revolution in full explosion, even the great English romantic visionary painter J. M. W. Turner could celebrate in *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844) the accelerating union of technology and nature. Soon after this the theories of Darwin and Marx were to lend new credence to the idea of universal change and progress. The evolution of the biological and social realms pointed the way to the millennial state; the inevitability of perfection was a notion well suited to the generally optimistic spirit of the times.

But the subjugation of the environment marked both the triumph and the failure of imagination. By the end of the century the Victorian world had folded in upon itself, near to exhausting its particular possibilities. Perhaps it is too fanciful to see in *The Sleeping Gypsy*, an 1897 painting by French naïve Henri Rousseau, and in the initial appearance of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* that same year a synchronistic significance. Yet both partake of a contemporary mood; in their sombre fusions of inner and outer space they portend the coming of a new, larger, and less certain age.

"God is dead," Nick said. "They found his carcass in 2019. Floating out in space near Alpha."

"They found the remains of an organism advanced several thousand times over what we are," Charley said. "And it evidently could create habitable worlds and populate them with living organisms, derived from itself. But that doesn't prove it was God."

"I think it was God."

(*Our Friends from Frolix* 8, ch. 7)

Wells' *fin de siècle* scientific romances strikingly illustrate a rejection of the dominant order of mind. *The Time Machine*, peopled with decadent Eloi and subterranean Morlocks, and with its final chill vision of the end of the world, stands the old optimism on its head. But it is in *The War of*

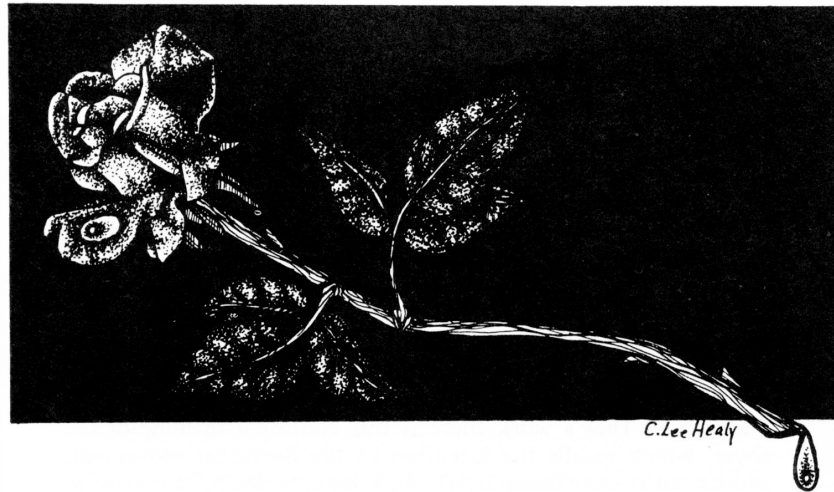
the Worlds that Wells gave the world his most vivid depiction of humankind bombarded by the unknown. The image of Earth invaded by strange beings from another world has embedded itself so deeply in the public psyche as to suggest that some deep subconscious chord has been struck. With all corners of this planet filled to overflowing with the works of the human race, new *terra incognita* must be found: a new void is required. Outer space is that void, and the *alien* is its denizen.

The coming of the alien is not the cause of a loss of innocence, but the awareness of it. The desire and trembling inspired by the being beyond suggests the longing for contact with the divine in a world that has banished the sacred and the mysterious from its consciousness. In fiction, and increasingly in the public mind, the gods and demons of yesterday have become the aliens of today. Aliens are symbols of the intrusion of the unknown into the realm of the human – meteorites of mystery and unease buried in the collective human psyche.⁶ If the image of the alien plays so large a role in the fiction of Philip K. Dick, it is because he deals always with humanity's fallen state; and it is the realization, often sudden and unexpected, of this condition that initiates the frightful but necessary struggle toward a new reality. Dick opposes the mechanization of social relations to being on a higher, more authentic, plane. When the common people of Earth are subjugated to incomprehensible new forms of political and technocratic tyranny in *Our Friends from Frolix 8*, Thors Provoni seeks salvation in the sky. But the quest is fraught with fear and danger. Often the alien from outer space is the stern and all-knowing father-figure come to save or punish errant humanity. Though, of course, who is to be saved and who punished depends on one's point of view. As Jane Gaskell's narrator puts it in *A Sweet Sweet Summer*: "The As is all things to all men . . . and an excuse to all of us every last one."

The ambiguous role of aliens in science fiction is to be understood in terms of the self's relation to the *other*: the unintegrated, whether opposed to the individual or the collectivity. The alien Provoni contacts informs him: "Your race is xenophobic. And I am the ultimate foreigner." (ch. 17) This is the other side of the coin from that described in James Tiptree's short story "And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill's Side". In *Now Wait for Last Year*, as in *The Lathe of Heaven* by Ursula K. Le Guin, the non-humanoid aliens, contrary to human expectations, prove to be friendly, helpful, and wise. The alien tends to speak in proverbs and platitudes, not because of its own inherent limitations, but because of the inherent limitations of inter-species

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communication. The alien partakes of the very essence of a divinity that lies beyond the merely human. Even when on familiar terms with humans, aliens are infused with an aura of *otherness* and are associated with powers normally denied humans. Lord Running Clam, a telepathic slime mould from Ganymede – who is incidentally an accomplished businessman and a passionate collector of postage stamps (including early U.S., with special emphasis on mint blocks of four of the Columbus set) – lays down its life for the human hero of *Clans of the Alphane Moon*, only to resurrect from its own spores.



But not all aliens are so friendly toward humans; some may act in opposition to them, like the “vugs” who come into conflict with humans in *The Game-Players of Titan*. In this story the inhabitants of Earth, even when on speaking terms with these creatures, keep “vug sticks” in their apartments, with which to poke at unwelcome extraterrestrial visitors. The vug stick is a construct at once ludicrous and appropriate in terms of Dick’s fiction, and suggests a double aspect to the symbolism of the alien. For aliens may be seen on occasion not only as representatives of a higher order, but also as projections of the human psyche, reifications of unconscious fears or imaginings. Carl Jung has described flying-saucer sightings in terms of unconscious archetypes projected into the void, and has even interpreted Fred Hoyle’s *The Black Cloud* as depicting a symbolic encounter with the unconscious.⁷ In *The Emotional Significance*

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of *Imaginary Beings* Robert Plank has written: “The mental process of creating imaginary beings is in essence a duplication of a relationship of crucial emotional significance in life, a relationship that the person who does the imagining has experienced, or believes he has experienced, or wishes or fears to experience. Forces in his emotional economy push the resources of his imagination in this direction. Whatever has remained unfulfilled and unresolved clamors to be lived over in fantasy, in a heightened, mended form – a better, grander father to him, to still the longing that he has never perceived reality to satisfy – or in a worse form, to banish the terrors that a real relationship, as he perceived it, has left lurking in the shadows of his soul.”⁸ The split in the modern psyche, the divorce from any conception of an integrated universe or an integrated and authentic personal life, plays a central role in Dick’s fiction, and it is as an aspect of this theme that the alien assumes significance.

In his study, Plank contrasts the attitudes of Pascal and Kant toward the realm beyond Earth, noting how the contemplation of an empty universe inspires fear, while the thought of an inhabited one serves to overcome fear. More specifically, as Le Guin imagines nicely in “Vaster than Empires and More Slow”, it is the *unintegrated* other that troubles the self. “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me,” wrote Pascal, and it is interesting to find this cry echoed at one point by Michael Moorcock’s protagonist in *The Black Corridor*, a tale of xenophobia and hallucination on an interstellar voyage. Pascal’s cry, as Plank notes, is an example of existential anxiety, radiated out into a universe that remains silent.

Provoni raged and roamed the outskirts of the galaxy,
searching, in his wrath, for something vague, something
even metaphysical. An answer, to so speak. A response.
Thors Provoni yelled into the emptiness, dinning out his
noise in hope of a response.

God help us, Weiss thought, if he ever finds it.

(*Our Friends from Frolix 8*, ch. 1)

J. G. Ballard reveals the discovery of a cosmological response on the part of the universe in “The Voices of Time”, a response that brings a strange peace to a dying man. Similarly, Plank notes the peace and pleasure Kant found in the “starry sky”, which he peopled with planetary beings which the immortal souls of earthly persons might meet in future wanderings. In Dick’s “What the Dead Men Say” the connection is actually made between interstellar space and the realm of afterlife, when what seems to be the voice of a recently deceased tycoon is picked up coming from

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beyond the solar system by radio telescope. Typical of Dick is the fact that messages from *beyond* should announce themselves through scientific instruments, and other technological devices like radios and television. (Typical also of Dick is the fact that in this particular story a character should wonder irritably if this metaphysical interference with normal communications channels violates government regulations.)

Beyond the well-charted territory of normal human experience, then, is the undiscovered country that puzzles the will. If the alien presence is often the manifestation of a higher order, then the higher order, that reality lying beyond satisfactory human comprehension, is not necessarily hospitable to the human traveller.

"Fragile Earthmen, venturing out here, go back to your own system! Go back to your little orderly universe, your strict civilization. Stay away from the regions you do not know! Stay away from darkness and monsters!"

(Solar Lottery, ch. 9)

This concept, which plays a prominent role in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, is made even more explicit and dramatically concise in "Faith of Our Fathers", where God is portrayed as evil, or at least utterly inhuman, and is identified with the forces of destruction. This story, undoubtedly one of Dick's best, is set in a future when Asian communism has triumphed over U.S. imperialism. Yet despite the supposed defeat of the secular forces of evil, the security of the human world is undermined by metaphysical evil, for the Absolute Benefactor of the People turns out to be (literally) an evil deity. In the process of undermining his hero's stable world, Dick uncovers layer upon layer of illusion. Though the public believes the Benefactor to be Asian, he is known by the initiate to be a white man, whose television image is "refined" when he addresses the masses. Thus it is suggested that the forces in the world that have supposedly been defeated – that is, white or imperialist – have in fact triumphed, though their triumph remains invisible to most. And even the image of the leader as human is maintained only by keeping the populace's drinking water saturated with hallucinogenic drugs, so that the entire structure of normal everyday reality is fictitious. Furthermore, a drug taken to counteract the effect of the hallucinogens reveals not a single "true" image of the Benefactor, but a confusing variety of forms, varying from viewer to viewer. Beyond the whole outward appearance of unquestioned society is a chaos inimical to the human spirit.

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“You founded the Party?” he asked.

“I founded everything. I founded the anti-Party and the Party that isn’t a Party, and those who are for it and those who are against it, those that you call Yankee Imperialists, those in the camp of reaction, and so on endlessly. I founded it all. As if they were blades of grass.”

The fear of being used, of being a pawn under the control of some greater entity, is similarly apparent in the relation of Barney Mayerson and Leo Bulero to Palmer Eldritch, and raises the question of Dick’s preoccupation with forms of schizophrenia. Writing on the subject, R. D. Laing has noted that “if one experiences the other as a free agent, one is open to the possibility of experiencing oneself as an *object* of his experience and thereby of feeling one’s own subjectivity drained away. One is threatened with the possibility of becoming no more than a thing in the world of the other, without any life for oneself, without any being for oneself.” Palmer Eldritch, the higher entity, possessed intrinsically of greater freedom of action, threatens to turn those of lesser possibility into objects in its *scheme of things*. What Dick is doing is carrying the concept of alien-ness beyond the societal level, into the region of personal subjectivity. The concept of the alien, which makes its initial appearance in outer space, is carried to its logical conclusion in inner space, where it reappears as *alienation*. It is Dick’s compelling fusion of inner and outer space that lends his work much of its power.

In *Now Wait for Last Year*, the Prime Minister of the ‘Starmen, the true aliens in the story, induces a sense of anomie in those he confronts:

Facing Freneksy, they became as they were born: isolated and individual, unsupported by the institutions which they were supposed to represent. ...facing Minister Freneksy, the naked, hapless, lonely man reemerged – and was required to stand up to the Minister in this unhappy infinitude. The normal *relativeness* of existence, lived with others in a fluctuating state of more or less adequate security, had vanished.

(ch. 9)

The ‘Starmen also employ the drug JJ-180 to destroy the capacity of human beings to relate usefully to the non-self. Under the influence of JJ-180 the individual experiences the reification of the environment in a manner suggesting schizophrenia:

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Now, in the familiar environment of her office, she experienced a transformation of reality along the lines of an ominous progression: ordinary things, whichever way she looked, seemed to be gaining density. They were no longer susceptible to being moved or changed, affected in any way, by her. ... The objects had lost their heritage of the familiar; by degrees they became cold, remote, and – hostile. Into the vacuum left by the decline in her relatedness to them the things surrounding her achieved their original isolation from the taming forces which normally emanated from the human mind; they became raw, abrupt, with jagged edges capable of cutting, gashing, inflicting fatal wounds.

(ch. 6)

Dr. Bloodmoney, or How We Got Along after the Bomb provides another good example of the fusion of inner and outer space. Scientist Bruno Bluthgeld, whose miscalculations have led to one worldwide nuclear catastrophe, suffers from paranoia and the belief that he possesses the psychic power to release further nuclear blasts against those trying to harm him. And subsequent destruction in the novel does indeed coincide with Bluthgeld's fantasy, though it is not possible to say whether he is supposed "really" to be the cause of it.

What has happened is this, he decided. They were developing their arrangements to injure me but they hadn't counted on my ability, which in me seems to lie partly in the subconscious. I have only a dubious control over it; it emanates from suprapersonal levels, what Jung would call the collective unconscious. ... Are they aware that I am the omphalos, the center, of all this cataclysmic disruption? He watched the passing people, and presently he knew the answer; they were quite aware of him, that he was the source of all this, but they were afraid to attempt any injury in his direction. ... You have learned a hard, bitter lesson. And so have I. I must watch myself more carefully; in the future I must guard my powers with a greater awe, a greater reverence at the trust placed in my hands.

(ch. 6)

Laing writes: "If there is anything the schizoid individual is likely to believe in, it is his own destructiveness. He is unable to believe that he can fill his own emptiness without reducing what is there to nothing. He regards his own love and that of others as being as destructive as hatred. ... He descends into a vortex of non-being in order to avoid being, but also to preserve being from himself."¹⁰ *We Can Build You* provides

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another illustration of this; it is a novel concerned very consciously with the descent into schizophrenia and with love “as destructive as hatred”. Schizophrenia is also a central theme in *Clans of the Alphane Moon*, in which Dick constructs a whole society divided among groups exhibiting various forms of mental illness, in *Martian Time-Slip*, and on a metaphoric level in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

This recurrent use of the schizophrenia theme illustrates Dick’s concern with the mechanistic reduction of human relations to states of being that are unable to maintain themselves against the destructive forces of nature. For Dick, the natural tendency of a universe stripped of creative human meaning is entropic regression toward a state of chaos and anomie, and he sees the tendency everywhere, even in the steady accumulation of “kipple”, or useless objects, like junk mail or empty match folders, in an apartment. In *A Maze of Death* the antagonist is the Form Destroyer; in *Ubik* the breakdown of the rational order of the world occurs in a state of “half-life” after death, where a malevolent entity preys on the life force. The world of Nazi ascendancy in *The Man in the High Castle* is a metaphoric transformation of our own world – a magic-realist mirror in which we may perceive more immediately the partially submerged forces of disintegration on this side of the glass. Dick recognizes in Nazism a collective death-wish, a longing for the ultimate destruction and universal chaos foretold by Germanic mythology. Of the Nazi rulers in this novel it is said:

It is their sense of space and time. They see through the here, the now, into the vast black deep beyond, the unchanging. And that is fatal to life. Because eventually there will be no life; there was once only the dust particles in space, the hot hydrogen gases, nothing more, and it will come again. This is an interval, *ein Augenblick*. The cosmic process is hurrying on, crushing life back into the granite and methane; the wheel turns for all life. It is all temporary. And these – these madmen – respond to the granite, the dust, the longing of the inanimate; they want to aid *Natur*.

(ch. 3)

Jason Taverner, famous television personality in *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*, awakes one morning to find that no one else remembers who he is, that he has no secure legal status in society, and must live by his wits from moment to moment. The bottom has dropped out of the world he always accepted as reality and took for granted. Into his life has

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come the unknown, the unexplained, the primal chaos and isolation that underlies the *Augenblick* of stability that humans have imposed on nature. Throughout Dick's work there is this continual opening of the abyss, which recalls the intention of the Surrealist movement, announced in its "Declaration of 27 January 1925", to prove to human beings "how fragile their thoughts are, and on what unstable foundations, over what cellars they have erected their unsteady houses."¹¹

The presence of the abyss reveals Dick's position as fundamentally existential. Sartre's dictum that the individual is "condemned to be free" neatly sums up Dick's view of our place in the universe. This is the position from which Dick begins, the starting point for his fictional explorations. The social order is not predetermined, fixed, or constant; the elemental, impersonal forces of the cosmos itself militate against the maintenance of any secure human reality. All roads in his fiction lead to this apocalyptic revelation (though they do not end there). When "objective" social reality breaks down, the individual is starkly confronted with the problem of dealing anew with the outside world, of coming to terms with the non-self. The individual divided from their social and physical surroundings is likely to become increasingly alienated. Alienation implies a lack of integration with an environment perceived as unrelated to oneself and beyond control. "It is a splitting apart of the two worlds, inner and outer, so that neither registers on the other." (*Martian Time-Slip*, ch. 11) More specifically, this lack of interaction is at the level of personal experience or the animate; the exchange between inner and outer space has been reduced to the simply mechanical.

He did not feel any hostility from the forces overhead. They were not vengeful or motivated; they were empty, hollow, completely cold. It was as if his car had run over him; it was real but meaningless. It was not policy, it was breakdown and failure, chance. ... The impersonal, Doctor Stockstill thought, has attacked us. That is what it is; attacked us from inside and out. The end of the co-operation, where we applied ourselves together. Now it's atoms only. Discrete, without any windows. Colliding but not making any sound, just a general hum.

(*Dr. Bloodmoney*, ch. 5)



PART TWO

The Willing Extension of Disbelief

A small man, wearing a stylish but somewhat gaudy Ionian purple snakeskin jacket with illuminated kummerbund and curly-toed Brazilian pigbark slippers, Mini looked exactly what he was: a dealer in wholesale dried fruit.

(The Crack in Space, ch. 14)

Unlike many other writers, Philip K. Dick has not hesitated to inject his science fiction with a liberal infection of chaos. The return of alienated Thors Provoni or Palmer Eldritch from the interstellar void shatters the statistical regularities of the familiar solar system; the alien presence announces the intrusion into human affairs of a different order of existence, manifesting itself as fate or divine will. In a literature that has prided itself on rational extrapolation and shunned the chaos implicit in more outright forms of fantasy, such a quantum leap into the unexpected strikes a note very close to heresy. This is not to say that flights of fantasy, manifestations of the divine, auguries of new universes have been absent from science fiction, but that their relevance to the field has tended to be downgraded as technicians have set about carefully graphing themselves into the future or churning out entertaining re-runs of plots signifying little.

Dick is not the first to understand the importance of the improbable as a method of casting light on the possible. Wells understood implicitly that the real purpose of science fiction, apart from its value as entertainment, was to describe the evolving potentials of the social individual, and that technology stood at the nexus between humans and their continually changing relationship with the world around them. But Wells had no use for the juvenile, and ultimately boring, Gernsbackian preoccupation with technology-for-the-sake-of-technology; in his quest to tell humankind more about itself, his fecund mind showered the public with tales of time travel, alien beings, animals transmuted into humans, invasion from outer space, parallel worlds, invisibility, atomic warfare, and just about

every other improbability so dear to later sf writers. If science has been “catching up” with science fiction in the interval, it is only because, or to the extent that, the field has tried too hard to be respectably “scientific”. The wholesale extrapolation of present trends into the future leads nowhere but back to the familiar present. The “objective reality” expounded by respectable technocratic culture rests on a misconception of the nature of science, which exhibits over time the subjectivity of succeeding paradigms.¹²

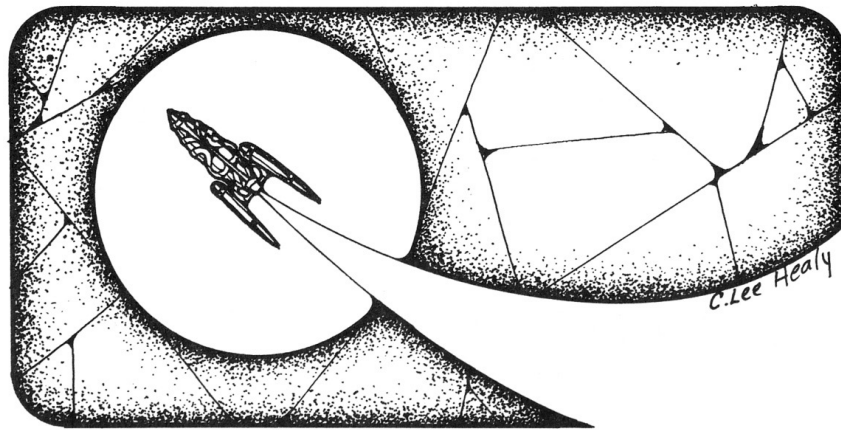
Yet even Wells maintained that the kind of fantasy he wrote should be based on a *single* fantastic premise; apart from this the author should strive to make the details of their story as realistic as possible. It was only by keeping the rest of the story as close to everyday reality as possible that the fantastic aspect gained credibility. Otherwise, the story would inevitably degenerate into senseless contrivance. Science fiction, which has tended to look upon itself as the kind of “realistic” literature referred to by Heinlein, has generally been loath to stray far from the path prescribed by Wells.

Not so Philip Dick. Dick everywhere violates Wells’ prescription of a single fantastic premise. And if there are sf writers not bound by the old principle, few, if any, are willing to go as far as Dick in denying the necessity of anchoring one’s fiction in a reality the reader can believe. In fact, Dick generally goes out of his way to *prevent* the reader from accepting the fictional world before them as “normal”, “ordinary”, or believable in any everyday sense. For Dick, the details of everyday reality are fantastic. Everyday reality does not remain constant, either subjectively or objectively, and therefore it is not the implications of a single trend or occurrence he is investigating, but the implications of complex trends or multiple occurrences. Dick is a pioneer of the “post-Wellsian system” of multiple-premise “fantastic realism” anticipated by Julius Kagarlitski.¹³

Dick’s blending of the objective with the subjective serves to break down the artificial barrier dividing science fiction from more traditional fantasy. Indeed, the “six elements of form necessary to fantasy fiction” delineated by Jane Mobley¹⁴ are not in the least inconsistent with most of Dick’s work, despite the fact that Mobley specifically excludes science fiction from fantasy fiction thus defined. *The Man in the High Castle* is Dick’s one traditionally “rational” science fiction novel, revealing a wonderfully wrought, finely detailed parallel world, in many respects so

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like our own; yet even this story deliberately undermines its own realism, which is suggested to be less than complete. As in “Faith of Our Fathers” we have confusion as to the ultimate nature of reality, and the problem of choosing the correct path of action from among obscure alternatives, these two being reflected in the problem of authenticating human artifacts – in one case, antique art objects and in the other, political examination papers. Again, *We Can Build You*, which is uncharacteristically realistic in tone, concerns mental illness and regression into non-real private worlds.



In the miserably high-number conapt building 492 on the outskirts of Marilyn Monroe, New Jersey, Richard Hnatt ate breakfast indifferently while, with something greater than indifference, he glanced over the morning homeopape’s weather-syndrome readings of the previous day.

The key glacier, Ol’ Skintop, had retreated 4.62 Grables during the last twenty-four-hour period. And the temperature, at noon in New York, had exceeded the previous day’s by 1.46 Wagners. In addition the humidity, as the oceans evaporated, had increased by 16 Selkirks. So things were hotter and wetter; the great procession of nature clanked on, and toward what?

(The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, ch. 1)

Where is the reader to locate such a world? In what context of rationally-explainable, scientifically-extrapolated reality is this world where people keep “Venusian ming birds” as pets, where “truffle skins” are the units of

currency for interplanetary trade, where the social elite undergo treatment by German doctors who stimulate the individual's "Kresy's Gland", which controls the rate of evolution – this world where the morning "homeopape" announces the imminent arrival of a sinister intelligence from another star and the man beside you on the "thermosealed interbuilding commute car" is likely to be wearing "the gray pith helmet, sleeveless shirt, and shorts of bright red popular with the businessman class" (ch. 1)? Surely this world, even before it is transformed by hallucinogenic drugs into something even less commonplace, is already distinctly dreamlike.

This dreamlike quality is accentuated by the interchangeability and mutability of Dick's landscapes. Places are seldom described in detail – or at least not in any characteristic detail that might lend them an air of uniqueness. Zurich, Switzerland, is indistinguishable from Marin County, California, in Dick's techno-dreamworld of the future. Or, to look at it another way, it might be said that the transient mass-production artificial environment of California has swallowed up the entire world in most of his stories. It is a lack of permanence, of rootedness – a lack of *solidity* – that marks the settings of these stories. The material world is almost wholly human-made and is locked in a dialectic with the human consciousness. Here, where fiction exists in a dialectical relationship with reality, the outrageous can be commonplace. In *Counter-Clock World* Dick does not hesitate to conceive a world in which metabolic processes run backward, so that persons greet each other with "good-bye" and bodies rise from the grave, revitalized, to grow younger. The merging of the literal and the symbolic infuses the world with new meaning, so that inner experience is writ large upon the face of outer environment. Dick's work is characterized by what John Brunner has called "an almost hallucinatory sharpness of detail"¹⁵ – but it is a sharpness of detail that extends beyond mere enumerative naturalism to the very quality of objects themselves: a magic realism in which things are seen double, simultaneously familiar and unexpected.

The Theodorus Nitz commercial squeaked, "In the presence of strangers do you feel you *don't quite exist*? Do they seem not to notice you, as if you were invisible? On a bus or spaceship do you sometimes look around you and discover that no one, *absolutely no one*, recognizes you or cares about you and quite possibly may even – "

With his carbon dioxide-powered pellet rifle, Maury Frauentzimmer carefully shot the Nitz commercial as it hung

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pressed against the far wall of his cluttered office. It had squeezed in during the night, had greeted him in the morning with its tinny harangue.

Broken, the commercial dropped to the floor. Maury crushed it with his solid, compacted weight and then returned the pellet rifle to its rack.

(The Simulacra, ch. 9)

It is pointless here to ask which aspect is true and which is false. A radio or television commercial assumes a super-clarity when it is given a three-dimensional mechanical form and the mobility to seek out and harangue audiences far from more conventional communication devices. Such an artifact not only reifies consumer perception of modern mass-media advertising, but also presents a concise vision of advancing technological manipulation of the human environment. Talking doors, suitcases that act as psychiatrists, newspapers that publish themselves, “creditor jet-balloons” with articulation circuits, rats clutching crude weapons – it is a world subjectively anthropomorphized and at the same time not anthropomorphized, but merely displaying its objective dialectical response to the human. If Dick’s stories are filled with objects and machines that mimic life, and life forms that more specifically imitate human forms, this is neither more nor less than the imaginatively logical extension to the world at large of the common robot figure in the literature.

The robot in science fiction is not simply a mechanism, nor is it, simply, a human being in disguise. It is both and neither. In addition to its morphological and functional relatedness to its organic analogues, it assumes a symbolic role in the literature. It speaks in riddles and offers new insights, as Gully Foyle discovered. It puts one in contact with the mysterious. Asimov’s robots are not simply chess-playing computers; the Three Laws are never quite enough to explain the fascination they hold for us all. The telepathic robots and superhuman machines of Clarke’s *The City and the Stars* are part of a larger order of things, a greater design than the inhabitants of Diaspar can, or want to, understand. The robot is a channel to the divine, and yet, unlike the alien, it maintains an essential unity with the human. Willis, the hero’s robot acquaintance in *Galactic Pot-Healer*, has written in his spare time an exhaustive theological pamphlet, which he sells to the human for ten cents. Robots in science fiction may not usually be into theology as heavily as Willis, but they nevertheless often act to reveal, even if ambiguously, hidden knowledge or to dispense bits of wisdom. In *A Maze of Death* a spaceship’s

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computer is transformed into a pseudo-organic oracle, delivering statements reminiscent of the *I Ching*, in a programmed dreamworld shared by the ship's occupants. (Willis's real ambition, by the way, is to become a free-lance writer – a suitable profession, perhaps, for an oracle.) Dick has simply infused his entire panoply of fictional props with intimations of this larger significance. Thus, like the robot, other objects, natural or artificial, may participate with human beings in a single universe.

“Considering you're a robot,” Joe said, “I don't see what you have emotionally involved in this; you have no life.”

The robot said, “No structure, even an artificial one, enjoys the process of entropy. It is the ultimate fate of everything, and everything resists it.”

(*Galactic Pot-Healer*, ch. 10)

Ursula K. Le Guin has noted that because the writer's vision is everything where there is no borrowed reality to fall back on, style is of fundamental importance in fantasy. “There is no comfortable matrix of the commonplace to substitute for the imagination, to provide ready-made emotional response, and to disguise flaws and failures of creation. There is only a construct built in a void, with every joint and seam and nail exposed. To create what Tolkien calls ‘a secondary universe’ is to make a new world. A world where no voice has ever spoken before; where the act of speech is the act of creation. The only voice that speaks there is the creator's voice. And every word counts.”¹⁶ Dick's voice is remarkable in general for its lack of natural scenery. His characters move through intensely *manufactured* landscapes, built primarily upon human interaction, and devoid of solid external furniture. In their fantastic secondary worlds, without matrices of the commonplace, they are constantly blundering, appalled, against the ragged edges of nothingness. Jory's incomplete half-life stage-front world in *Ubik* can be taken as a paradigm of Dick's fictional constructions.

Even social scenery partakes of this quality. Bruce Gillespie notes: “There are no babies born, for instance; almost no sex scenes, although some brilliant scenes of acrimony between husbands and wives; no children except freaks; no sense of teeming life, of the man in the street; not even many deaths other than melodramatic murders – most of Dick's heroes survive by the skin of their teeth and do not die, even when completely tragic conclusions are called for, as in *Ubik*. It's a strange, constricted, claustrophobic life; and the constriction is contained in the language.”¹⁷

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Dick's language, besides being usually quite colloquial, also contains some delightful quirks, such as exhibited when his characters occasionally correct each other's grammar or assist each other in recalling literary quotations.

Lack of scenery promotes detachment from even a fictional "objective" reality and enhances the argument for the subjective. Even the objectivity implied in viewing events consistently from the standpoint of a single character falls by the wayside in many of Dick's stories, as he shifts the focus among his several protagonists – and this is made a deliberate narrative ploy in *A Maze of Death*. (*We Can Build You* is unusual in this respect, being told entirely in the first person.) Style reinforces vision at this point, and what may appear as serious defects in style from one critical vantage become logical moves from another, given this particular writer's will to his particular vision.

In degrading the solidity of his scenery Dick waves a red flag in the reader's face. He undermines the illusion that sf can be entirely divorced from fantasy, that it is futurology, extrapolation, or prediction. He undermines the plot in its superficial aspect by throwing roadblocks in the way of the smooth succession of events, and asks us to divert our attention, to search out and accept the poetic core of the work; he tries to focus our attention on the plot as a "net" for catching something strange and otherworldly. The difficulty many readers have in accepting Dick's fiction may thus spring from their extrapolative bias, and their lack of interest in sf as a form of poetry. Where other authors may clothe their poetic themes in relatively "realistic" or futurological plots – perhaps bowing, however unconsciously, in the direction of the naturalistic standards that have dominated literature until recently – Dick is more unashamedly aware of sf's intimate association with fantasy.

Dick's style is inextricably tied to his world-view, his conception of a universe laced with a good dash of existential absurdity. Asked about criticism of A. E. van Vogt, a writer he regards as a major early influence on his own work, he has remarked: "Damon [Knight] feels that it's bad artistry when you build those funky universes where people fall through the floor. It's like he's viewing a story the way a building inspector would when he's building your house. But reality really is a mess, and yet it's exciting. The basic thing is, how frightened are you of chaos? And how happy are you with order? Van Vogt influenced me so much because he

made me appreciate a mysterious chaotic quality in the universe which is not to be feared.”¹⁸

Indeed, Dick’s works are not unrelated in tone to that group of novels produced by Van Vogt, Alfred Bester, and others and characterized by Brian Aldiss as “Widescreen Baroque”: “Their plots are elaborate and generally preposterous, their inhabitants have short names and short lives. They traffic as readily in the impossible as the possible. They obey a dictionary definition of baroque; which is to say that they have a bold and exuberant rather than a fine style, they are eccentric, and sometimes degenerate into extravagance. They like a wide screen, with space and possibly time travel as props, and at least the whole solar system as their setting.”¹⁹ Dick’s fictions, while they may delight some and baffle others, are characterized by a wonderful inventiveness, unencumbered by convention, and limited only by the demands of internal logic. The range of invention in his stories, his extravagant style, his outrageous humour – all attest to a developed sense of play. Bruce Gillespie has aptly referred to *Dr. Bloodmoney* as one of Dick’s “circuses”²⁰ and it is truly a three-ring atmosphere of marvels that is conjured up in many of his stories.

If the world is worth examining, then it is worth examining with a slightly jaundiced eye. For Dick, a sense of the ridiculous is inseparable from a true vision of the startling, everyday world. Admittedly, there may be a tendency to get carried away sometimes. In *We Can Build You*, for example, it is casually remarked of a minor character: “It was always disappointing to the Rosen family that Chester’s eyes are set beneath his nose, and his mouth is up where his eyes ought to be.” (ch. 2) Such a description might be quite in order in one of the “circuses”, but *We Can Build You* is no such novel, and here, despite reference to radiation-induced birth defects, it seems merely a gratuitous intrusion – an example of the lack of restraint that must tempt the writer who specializes in the bizarre. But in general Dick’s madcap antics work, for he has a deft sense for the absurd amid the commonplace of life. His straight-faced wackiness may seem incongruous in the context of the issues he tackles, but then he has always worked through juxtaposing seemingly incongruous elements and making of them multifaceted wholes.

This approach can be seen in his attitude toward science fiction in general, of which he has said: “Without being art, it does what art does, since as Schopenhauer pointed out, art tends to break free of the reality

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around us and reach a new level of gestalting. The virtue of its approach, too, is that it can reach persons who do not have a developed esthetic sense, which means that it has a higher degree of sheer communicability than great art.”²¹ His own work belies these words only in the sense that his commitment to his own vision of science fiction has demonstrated a considerable artistic potential in the field.



PART THREE

The Umbrella of Light

“You know, doctor, you’re here to find out what’s making Gino sick. I say that’s not the issue. It’s obvious what’s making him sick: the whole darn situation. The real question is: *What’s keeping him alive?* That’s the real mystery. The miracle.”

(*Now Wait for Last Year*, ch. 8)

Though Dick has grown more accomplished and outrageous in his style over the years, thematically his fiction has remained fairly consistent. Even in an early short story like “The Preserving Machine” he is concerned with the ephemeral nature of the human world, with change and adaptation. A Doctor Labyrinth attempts to defeat time by designing a machine to process the musical scores of the great composers into living forms, the better to survive. But once created, the animals begin to change, to follow a course of development their creator is unable to control:

Music would survive as living creatures, but he had forgotten the lesson of the Garden of Eden: that once a thing has been fashioned it begins to exist on its own, and thus ceases to be the property of its creator to mold and direct as he wishes. God, watching man’s development, must have felt the same sadness – and the same humiliation – as Labyrinth, to see His creatures alter and change to meet the needs of survival.

Dick seems fascinated by the concept of the self-stabilizing or self-organizing system; here is evidence for survival in the face of entropy. Homeostatic devices abound in his stories, from mobile vermin traps to talking taxicabs. “Autofac” presents what is almost a textbook picture of the operation of goal-directed self-organizing systems. And when such systems assume human or quasi-human form, as in “Second Variety”, we are plunged into the world of the simulacrum, where illusion and reality begin to masquerade as each other. In Dick’s fantasy-realist landscape we find the merging of the psychical and the physical, human and non-

human, animate and inanimate at a time in history when the technological externalization and universalization of the human nervous system is recreating that “reciprocity of perspectives, in which man and the world mirror each other”²² that existed formerly in lithic times. This technological reintegration of humanity and the universe, apparent to varying degrees in the work of numerous sf writers today, is nowhere confronted in such explicit terms as in the work of Dick, who notes that “our environment, and I mean our man-made world of machines, artificial constructs, computers, electronic systems, interlinking homeostatic components – all this is in fact beginning more and more to possess what the earnest psychologists fear the primitive sees in his environment: animation. In a very real sense our environment is becoming alive, or at least quasi-alive, and in ways specifically and fundamentally analogous to ourselves.”²³

The infusion of the environment with animation is a movement away from natural chaos. Technology is thus seen as the potential instrument of reconciliation between the human and non-human worlds. Though of course this is not to say that such is the inevitable role of technology: both *The Man in the High Castle* and *Dr. Bloodmoney* illustrate the megalomaniacal misuse of technology that leads to death and destruction. For if artificial entities can become more like natural entities, natural entities can in turn become more like artificial ones.

“Doctor,” I said, “I’ll let you in on it. Pris is playing a cruel prank on you. She sent me in here. I’m a simulacrum, like the Stanton. I wasn’t supposed to give the show away, but I can’t go on with it any longer. I’m just a machine, made out of circuits and relay switches. You see how sinister all this is?”

(*We Can Build You*, ch. 5)

The drug JJ-180 in *Now Wait for Last Year* renders the addict “less than human”, like “the lizards of the Jurassic Period.... Creatures with almost no mentalities; just reflex machines acting out the externals of living, going through the motions but not actually there.” (ch. 6) It is this acquisition of mechanical behaviour patterns by human beings that is at the heart of Dick’s metaphor of the android: the artificial person. The android in most sf stories – Robert Silverberg’s *Tower of Glass* being only one of the more recent examples – is clearly an analogue of the oppressed human being, discriminated against because of race (usually) or perhaps economics.²⁴ Here the oppression or alienation – in short, the artificiality

– is external in origin, and is to be rectified by recourse to direct external action of some kind. In discussing the android-human relations of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Stanislaw Lem asks, “...did Dick intend to present a model of discrimination, such as the kind of persecution of the Jews administered under the label of a ‘final solution?’”²⁵ Apparently Lem feels the answer to this question is probably yes, for he proceeds to demolish the novel’s logic on this basis, and concludes by labelling the story “nonsense” and “a counterfeit coin”.

In fact, however, the answer to Lem’s question is *no*. No, Dick does not intend to present a model of discrimination. Dick uses the android in quite a different way. For Dick the android represents the *internally* alienated human being: the schizophrenic or anyone else who lives an artificial life because they are withdrawn, unable to establish contact with the “real” world – the world of human involvement and feeling. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is a wonderfully constructed allegory on this theme, and considered from this new vantage, the flaws and contradictions noted by Lem dissolve away, and it becomes no longer illogical to think that androids can be at once innocent and malicious, on different levels conscious and unconscious of their own natures, and in general beings who are human and yet an insidious threat to human society. Thus the use in the story of the “Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test”. Whatever may be the ultimate causes of the individual’s divorce from reality, whatever the links with external politics, the focus for Dick is on subjective personal experience, the level of “inner space”. Thus at one point in *We Can Build You* the narrator can declare: “It was my own feelings which harried me, not the enemy. *There was no enemy*. There was only my own emotional life, suppressed and denied.” (ch. 5) It appears to me that in this regard Lem fails to notice what he elsewhere so correctly points out: Dick’s ability to transcend the “trashy” clichés of lowbrow science fiction.

In general, then, it can be said that for Dick robots represent machines that are becoming more like humans, while androids represent humans that are becoming more like machines. Garson Poole of “The Electric Ant” is an “organic robot” – flesh and blood on the surface, wires and circuits beneath. His construction suggests he exists in a state half android and half robot, poised between the authentic life and the artificial life. After some inquiries he is informed that “The punched tape roll above your heart mechanism is not a programming turret but is in fact a reality-supply construct.” Poole realizes that by asserting control

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over the tape, which all his life has supplied him with a reality he has taken for granted, he can take control of his own existence:

... if I control that, I control reality. At least as far as I'm concerned. My subjective reality ... but that's all there is. Objective reality is a synthetic construct, dealing with a hypothetical universalization of a multitude of subjective realities. My universe is lying within my fingers, he realized. If I can just figure out how the damn thing works.

Eventually Poole goes so far as to cut the tape, which functions like Aldous Huxley's reducing valve, whereupon he experiences total reality – a confusing welter of impressions, too much for him to cope with. With his death the world of his personal secretary, who is strongly attached to him, becomes more and more insubstantial to her. In Dick's universe the “normal” orderly reality of the human world exists only precariously; this delicately constructed negentropic reality exists only through the systemic configurations of human society. Persons who allow themselves to become separated from the society of their fellows are in that much more danger of having their individual realities undermined.

In the absence of the Batys and Pris he found himself fading out, becoming strangely like the inert television set which he had just unplugged. You have to be with other people, he thought. In order to live at all.

(Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, ch. 18)

The failure of an individual to integrate with reality as defined through learned cultural values results in the breakdown of their perception of that reality.

The reality which the schizophrenic fell away from – or never incorporated in the first place – was the reality of interpersonal living, of life in a given culture with given values; it was not biological life, or any form of inherited life, but life which was learned.

(Martian Time-Slip, ch. 5)

The cultural patterns of separate social systems reveal the codifications of separate views of reality held collectively (“a hypothetical universalization of a multitude of subjective realities”) by their respective members. In *The Game-Players of Titan*, radically different world-views generate conflict between humans and aliens, each species seeing the other in a negative light, each able to perceive only a partial truth about the other.

On the inter-personal or inter-societal level, the dis-integration of relationships means the dissolution of culturally-conditioned reality and the emergence of more “primitive” modes of perception, often characterized by visionary or extrasensory experience.

Berger and Luckmann note: “Man’s self-production is always, and of necessity, a social enterprise. Men *together* produce a human environment, with the totality of its socio-cultural and psychological formations. None of these formations may be understood as products of man’s biological constitution, which ... provides only the outer limits for human productive activity. Just as it is impossible for man to develop as man in isolation, so it is impossible for man in isolation to produce a human environment. Solitary human being is being on the animal level (which, of course, man shares with other animals). As soon as one observes phenomena that are specifically human, one enters the realm of the social. Man’s specific humanity and his sociality are inextricably intertwined. *Homo sapiens* is always, and in the same measure, *homo socius*.”²⁶ Human perception of the world is a function of social interaction. And here we approach the heart of Dick’s work; in his fiction he presents an unsystematic series of explorations into the sociology of knowledge.

The need of humans for the company of their fellows is not only perceptual, but spiritual as well. The detachment and introversion of the schizophrenic reduces their ability to experience the presence of others in a meaningful way. The authentic human experience – “man’s specific humanity” – is identified by Dick with the capacity for *empathy*. Thus human society is seen not only as the basis of secure reality, but also as the vehicle for the expression of authentic human nature.

“The measure of a man is not his intelligence. It is not how high he rises in the freak establishment. The measure of a man is this: how swiftly can he react to another person’s need? And how much of himself can he give?”

(*Our Friends from Frolix* 8, ch. 7)

Thus writes Eric Cordon, theoretician of the underground movement fighting the strangely evolved ruling classes in *Our Friends from Frolix* 8. The psychic powers of the Unusuals and the advanced logical systems of the New Men do not make them better human beings; they are shown still subject to all the old failures to deal properly with others or with their own emotions; they are not better equipped thereby to change their

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personal lives and moralities. It is only after they are stripped of their powers and reduced, outwardly, to a more childlike level by Provoni's alien being that New Men like Amos Ild and Horace Denfeld, for example, begin to understand the true path in life. The New Men have been building the Great Ear, an electronic device to monitor telepathically the thoughts of the masses, but instead it is the alien who monitors human thought and takes action against the rulers. Charley, Nick Appleton's young girlfriend, sacrifices her life for him, and thus helps him realize the importance of life and of giving to others.

“Is that important?” Nick asked. “Is that what it's all about, instead of invasions by aliens, the destruction of ten million superlative brains, the transfer of political power – all power – by an elite group – ”

“I don't understand those things,” Amos Ild said. “I just know how it's wonderful, someone loving you that much. And if someone loved you that much, you must be worth loving, so pretty soon someone else will love you that way, too, and you'll love them the same way. Do you see?”

(ch. 27)

The jolt provided by the intervention of the unexpected can radically alter an existing structure, may in fact be required for such alteration. This is a concept common to many of Dick's stories, and one that can be seen in as early a piece as “The Variable Man”. The character around whom this story centres is “A man from two centuries ago. ... And with a radically different Weltanschauung. No connection with our present society. Not integrated along our lines at all.” The variable man is one about whom no predictions can be made, and his presence “knocks everything else out of phase.” He is the addition that forces the transformation of a society, opening up new possibilities. As representatives of the unpredictable or the absurd in human affairs, aliens can fulfill a similar role. Thus they may manifest themselves to humans as creatures of bizarre appearance, and often act without discernible motives. As alien ships invade the solar system, the protagonist of “Top Stand-By Job” muses that “you never can tell about unhuman life forms – they're unreliable.” The aliens temporarily knock out Unicephalon 40-D, a “homeostatic problem-solving system” that has been installed as U.S. President, thus unexpectedly catapulting its redundant human stand-by into the position. The man later realizes that making decisions gave a meaning to his life that is otherwise missing, and he plans to get rid of the computer. “I mean, let's face it; the aliens

showed us how.” It is the coming of the unknown, the unexpected, the unforeseen that undermines existing order and confronts humans with the need to adapt or perish.

Gino Molinari’s solution to the threat posed by the alien ‘Starmen in *Now Wait for Last Year* is to suffer acute illness in empathy with his fellow human beings, and continually to “produce himself” existentially in a most literal manner: by employing the drug JJ-180, in conjunction with its antidote, to pluck healthy versions of himself from alternative time-streams. “*His whole psychology, his point of orientation, is to dabble with death and yet somehow surmount it.*” (ch. 12) Similarly, Eric Sweetscent, the doctor sent to cure Molinari’s illnesses, must instead face a crisis of his own, for he has been addicted to JJ-180 by his wife, Kathy. Thus the breakdown of his marriage, which destroys the secure foundations of his life, is reflected by the effect of the drug, which casts him adrift in time. With his objective continuum destroyed, he must save himself in the subjectivity of alternative time-streams. While gaining the antidote to JJ-180 he, like Molinari, literally rescues himself from the grip of the ‘Starmen. The antidote to JJ-180 represents the power to survive existentially; by being able to see beyond the structures of everyday social life and yet remain in control of one’s being, the individual overcomes the threat of anomie. But there is a price to be paid for taking the drug:

Nothing within him remained untouched; it had all been disfigured and even the antidote had not stopped this. As long as he lived he would never regain the purity of the original organism.

(ch. 11)

The person who has been confronted with chaos cannot return to the old unexamined life. He is trapped between anomic disintegration and artificial organization, and the only solution is to create a new human order based on authentic relations.²⁷ In relating to others empathetically we at least temporarily transcend the existential predicament in which we otherwise find ourselves. At the end of *Now Wait for Last Year*, Eric Sweetscent, on the verge of suicide, his wife irretrievably ill, rediscovers, in the actions of two crudely-built automated carts battling for survival in a dirty alley in Tijuana, his own will to survive, and to find joy in the struggle for survival. Boarding an autonomic cab, he describes his wife’s condition to the machine and seeks its advice on whether to stay with her.

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"I can see what you mean, sir," the cab broke in. "It would mean no other life for you beyond caring for her."

"That's right," Eric said.

"I'd stay with her," the cab decided.

"Why?"

"Because," the cab said, "life is composed of reality configurations so constituted. To abandon her would be to say, I can't endure reality as such. I have to have uniquely special easier conditions."

"I think I agree," Eric said after a time. "I think I will stay with her."

"God bless you, sir," the cab said. "I can see that you're a good man."

(ch. 14)

Women are unusually prominent in Dick's stories – unusually prominent by the standards of the vast body of science fiction, at least. Not only are they numerous, but they are more than matchstick characters; not a few are talented or powerful, many are highly intelligent, and almost all are fiercely independent. In light of this situation, relations between men and women are never to be taken for granted – indeed, are often difficult, even desperate. *We Can Build You* is the outstanding example here: a tale of frustrated love and the need for authentic relations, it contains some of Dick's most poignant and effective writing.

Whatever the roles of particular women, however, the concept of *woman* fulfills a larger role in the scheme of Dick's fiction: in this context woman symbolizes the source of human life and the potential for an authentic community of being. To quote Dick: "As Spinoza pointed out so clearly, each finite thing, each individual man, eventually perishes ... and his only true consolation, as he perishes, as each society in fact perishes, is this return to the mother, the woman, the Earth."²⁸ "I am life," Charlotte tells Nick Appleton in *Our Friends from Frolix* 8. "I'm life and when you're with me, some of it rubs off on you." (ch. 7) *The Cosmic Puppets*, an early story, and a fairly straightforward allegory of the struggle between good and evil, form and chaos, quite clearly makes this connection between woman and the earth, or life.

The struggle between form and chaos rages through all of Dick's work. Life is a function of organization; the vital, creative force is negentropic, in opposition to the entropic tendencies of the universe at large. Glimmung, the great superhuman, yet mortal, creature struggling to raise a sunken cathedral from beneath the sea in *Galactic Pot-Healer*, is

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suggested by a couple of non-humans to be in some respects like Goethe's Faust, himself struggling against a flood:

“The flood is a symbol for everything that eats away structures which living creatures have erected. The water which has covered Heldscalla; the flood won out many centuries ago, but now Glimmung is going to push it back.”
(ch. 9)

Glimmung's eventual triumph, even if it cannot be permanent, reveals to the creatures it has brought to aid it the value of struggle. As it says to the hero when it recruits him on Earth: “You have never been, Joe Fernwright. You merely exist. To be is to do.” (ch. 5) And though the struggle is never over in this world, there are always glimmerings of new worlds waiting, and prophets like Wilbur Mercer of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to point the way, however ambiguously – if not in the direction of salvation, then at least toward a kind of self-acceptance and the hope of a new start, in this life or the next. For though corruption touches all the works of humankind, and the body itself must disintegrate, perhaps the *idea* underlying the outward form is permanent, and we can all be reborn:

Christ, I hope so. Because in that case we all can meet again. In, as in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, another part of the forest, where a boy and his bear will always be playing . . . a category, he thought, imperishable. Like all of us. We will all wind up with Pooh, in a clearer, more durable new place.
(*Ubik*, ch. 10)

The setting for *Ubik* is a world after death, a world of “half-life”, where the entropic process manifests itself as a regression in time of material constructs into earlier, less organized forms – i.e., a decrease in the negentropy laboriously built up over time in human society. With characteristic inventiveness Dick describes the devolution of Platonic idea-objects, with everyday objects regressing, not into earlier, newer versions of their particular selves or constituent materials, but into previous versions of the universal archetypes of whole classes of objects – so that, for example, a television set may turn into an old radio playing a pre-World-War-Two soap opera. Joe Chip finds his whole world devolving in this manner, reverting from 1992 to 1939.

This half-life world can, like the Nazi-dominated world of *The Man in the High Castle*, be seen as a metaphorically transformed version of our

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own world. But whereas the alternative world envisaged with the aid of the *I Ching* by Hawthorne Abendsen, novelist-within-a-novel, *is not in fact the world we know*, but a slightly different one, brighter and more comprehensible, the alternative world in *Ubik* – that in which Glen Runciter is supposedly alive, and our world in imagined future form – proves eventually to be also a world of half-life. In both cases the reader's world is suggested to be less than complete. The ideal world in *Ubik* is symbolized by the substance of the same name; in a television commercial a housewife says, "I came over to Ubik after trying weak, out-of-date reality supports. ..."

"Yes," Runciter's dark voice resumed, "by making use of the most advanced techniques of present-day science, the reversion of matter to earlier forms *can* be reversed, and at a price any conapt owner can afford. Ubik is sold by leading home-art stores throughout Earth. Do not take internally. Keep away from open flame. Do not deviate from printed procedural approaches as expressed on label. So look for it, Joe. Don't just sit there; go out and buy a can of Ubik and spray it all around you night and day."

(ch. 10)

Runciter, who imagines himself to inhabit the "real" world, is forced to admit that he does not know what Ubik is or where it comes from. But it is significant that despite its obvious divine quality, Ubik is ultimately revealed to have been invented by Ella Runciter and other threatened half-lifers "working together a long, long time. And there still isn't very much of it available, as yet." (ch. 16) Ubik represents negentropy and points toward a world of Platonic form, beyond time; yet it is a human construct. Conversely, the dissociation of Glen Runciter's world and Joe Chip's world is symptomatic of their divorce from reality, from the mutually-reinforcing bonds of human association – as in the schizophrenic's retreat into a private world.

... no wonder he's autistic; no wonder he can't communicate with us. A view of the universe that partial – it isn't even a complete view of time. Because time also brings new things into existence; it's also the process of maturation and growth. And evidently Manfred does not perceive time in that aspect.

(*Martian Time-Slip*, ch. 9)

Explicit reference to a Platonic realm is also made in *Counter-Clock World*, after resurrection of the Anarch Thomas Peak, leader of a major

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religious sect. Peak is said to have discovered that death and time are illusions, and that absolute reality is to be equated with God.

“Evil is simply a lesser reality, a ring farther from Him. It’s the lack of absolute reality, not the presence of an evil deity. ... Eidos is form. Like Plato’s category – the absolute reality. It exists; Plato was right. Eidos is imprinted on passive matter; matter isn’t evil, it’s just inert, like clay. There’s an anti-eidos, too; a form-*destroying* factor. This is what people experience as evil, the decay of form. But the anti-eidos is an eidolon, a delusion; once impressed, the form is eternal – it’s just that it undergoes a constant evolution, so that we can’t perceive the form. ... The problem is one of perception; our perception is limited because we have only partial views.”
(ch. 20)

Dick does not always hesitate to postulate the possible existence of an evil deity, but his correlation of form, or *organization* (with its connotations of system and harmony), with good, and formlessness or chaos with evil, is consistent. Although gods, in the sense of deities or super-beings, appear in many forms in Dick’s work, it is as Light, Form, and Beauty in the Platonic sense that the concept of God dominates or suffuses these stories. In Plato’s allegory of the cave the realm of real objects (eternal forms) exists outside, but it is only shadows, cast by an unseen source of light onto the cave wall, that prisoners inside can see. Plato’s two realms are not mutually exclusive, but fit together: our world is like a mirror image or shadow cast by the ideal world, since our world is one of change and transience, in contrast to the fixed, eternal world. And it is through Love that the transitory, imperfect human world can aspire to this realm of eternal Good. The divinity of Lord Running Clan of Ganymede is, after all, it seems, not irrevocably beyond human nature, but only beyond human nature as presently manifested.

“Ganymedeans possess what St. Paul called *caritas* ... and remember, Paul said *caritas* was the greatest of all the virtues.” She added, “The modern word for it would be empathy, I guess.”

(*Clans of the Alaphane Moon*, ch. 4)



Empathy or love, the ability of human beings to interact in a meaningful manner, is the foundation on which the ideal world can be constructed. “The word isn’t print – the word is *build*,” says one of the characters in “Pay for the Printer”. Here people have abdicated their positions as productive members of human culture in favour of relying for goods on creatures that produce, or “print”, copies of existing objects. But society is breaking down as entropy and reduplication steadily reduce the world to formlessness. The assertion that it is possible for humans to fashion cups, knives, and clothing *themselves* is regarded with incredulity: ““You made this knife?” Fergesson asked, dazed. ‘I can’t believe it. *Where do you start?* You have to have tools to make this. It’s a paradox!’ His voice rose with hysteria. ‘It isn’t *possible!*’”

Dawes arranged three objects on the ash. The exquisite Steuben glassware, his own crude wooden drinking cup and the blob, the botched print the dying Biltong had attempted.

“This is the way it was,” he said, indicating the Steuben cup. “Someday it’ll be that way again ... but we’re going up the right way – the hard way – step by step, until we get back up there.” He carefully replaced the glassware back in its metal box. “We’ll keep it – not to copy, but as a model, as a goal. You can’t grasp the difference now, but you will.”

The three cups represent, respectively, the ideal state that is to be aspired to, the imperfect but improvable world of human initiative, and the forces of decay that dominate when humans abandon their creative

abilities. These three contrasting modes of being manifest themselves throughout Dick's work.

It should be noted, then, that the ideal, or Platonic, realm in Dick's sense is not given in the meaning of having been imposed from on high; rather, it exists as a goal consciously set by humankind for itself. Out of the ground of human association arise over time new cultural configurations, and today Dick sees us on the verge of another transformation: "And now, perhaps, what the Medieval pietas looked forward to: in the arms of the Earth Mother, who still lives, the dead solar deity, her son, lies in a once again silent return to the womb from which he came. ...what lies ahead is new. ...the realization, the fulfillment, of the Medieval pieta, as a living reality, our total environment, a *living* external environment as animate as ourselves...."²⁹ The world uninformed with a vision of divine animation is reduced to the level of the "merely" mechanical, but, when informed, exhibits life and meaning at all levels, the mechanical included.

The concept of God is not to be confused with that of a transcendental deity; it denotes instead the realization of the human potential through the creation of a better world – a dialectical movement whereby humanity remakes itself and its environment in the process of becoming reconciled to that environment. Dick's position remains fundamentally existential, but not despairing: "Reality, to me, is not so much something that you perceive, but something you make. You create it more rapidly than it creates you. Man is the reality God created out of dust; God is the reality man creates continually out of his own passions, his own determination."³⁰ And so the symbolism of rebirth is everywhere in Dick's fiction, sometimes muted, sometimes calling attention to itself as at the conclusion of *Counter-Clock World*:

And then, as he sat, he heard voices. He heard them from many graves; he detected the growing into life of those below – some very close to it, some indistinct and far off. But all moving in that direction. He heard them coming closer; the voices became a babble.

(ch. 21)

Dick is concerned both with the individual's relation to others and with their relation to the universe. Human beings find themselves part of a social reality that they construct among themselves, and a physical reality that they confront as elements of the given physical universe. Human perception of each of these realities is conditioned by the existence of the

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other; but it is the power to act and interact that, though arising initially out of the given relation to the universe, ultimately determines the perception of the universe. For human beings reality is constructed socially, and modified through social interaction or lack of it. The illusion of a rigid world, into which humans are simply thrust, contributing nothing by unique creation, must be penetrated before it is possible to aspire to a better world. In *The Unteleported Man* a world that presents itself through its propaganda to an unquestioning Earth populace as a utopia is eventually unmasked as a fascist state, which must be defeated in a long struggle before a truly better society can be established. At the end we are shown one of the newly awakened common people dreaming of the future, “But his awareness of the reality remained and ran parallel to the dream; he saw both at once and he put his arm around his wife and hugged her and was silent” – while the taxi carrying them “knew its way, too. It, also, knew its task.” (ch. 9)

The quest for the new world, following as it does upon the destruction of the old, taken-for-granted one, places Dick firmly within the apocalyptic science fiction tradition,³¹ though his vision tends to emphasize the metaphysics of inner experience to an unusual degree. Theology and metaphysics infuse all areas of life in his stories, and his characters discuss theological and metaphysical questions with a casualness and intensity generally reserved by people for last weekend’s football games. So it should not surprise us to be presented in a prologue to *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* with a concise summation of Dick’s philosophy in the form of an interoffice audio-memo, which pronounces:

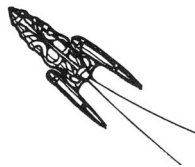
I mean, after all; you have to consider we’re only made out of dust. That’s admittedly not much to go on and we shouldn’t forget that. But even considering, I mean it’s a sort of bad beginning, we’re not doing too bad. So I personally have faith that even in this lousy situation we’re faced with we can make it. You get me?

As might be inferred from the tone of these stories, Dick gives us few larger-than-life heroes. He says: “To me the great joy in writing a book is showing some small person, some ordinary person doing something in a moment of great valor, for which he would get nothing and which would be unsung in the real world. The book, then, is the song about his valor. You know, people think that the author wants to be immortal, to be remembered through his work. No. I want Mr. Tagomi from *The Man in the High Castle* always to be remembered. My characters are composites

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of what I've actually seen people do, and the only way for them to be remembered is through my books."³² His heroes are relatively ordinary folk, regardless of whether they can divine the future or possess telepathic ability. The characters that populate Dick's fantasies are everyday men and women, together, adrift in an uncommon universe. How they survive, and what they make of their lives, depends to a very large degree on how they relate to each other.

"The world of the future, to me, is not a place, but an event. A construct ... in which there is no author and no readers but a great many characters in search of a plot. Well, there is no plot. There is only themselves and what they do and say to each other, what they build to sustain all of them individually and collectively, like a huge umbrella that lets in light and shuts out the darkness at the same instant. When the characters die, the novel ends. And the book falls back into dust. Out of which it came. Or back, like the dead Christ, into the arms of his warm, tender, grieving, comprehending, loving mother. And a new cycle begins; from her he is reborn, and the story, or another story, perhaps different, even better, starts up. A story told by the characters to one another."³³



Notes

¹ See Heinlein's guest editorial in *Analog*, January 1974.

² C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p. 18.

³ Martin Green, *Science and the Shabby Curate of Poetry* (London: Longmans, 1964), p. 127.

⁴ Willis E. McNelly and Leon E. Stover, eds., *Above the Human Landscape* (Pacific Palisades, Calif.: Goodyear, 1972), pp. 357–358.

⁵ See Darko Suvin, "Cognition and Estrangement: An Approach to SF Poetics", *Foundation*, No. 2, June 1972.

⁶ A brilliant fictional exploration of the ramifications of the relation between human and alien is to be found in Stanislaw Lem's novel *Solaris*.

⁷ See C. G. Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959).

⁸ Robert Plank, *The Emotional Significance of Imaginary Beings* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1968), p. 46.

⁹ R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹¹ Quoted in Sarane Alexandrian, *Surrealist Art* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 50.

¹² Thomas S. Kuhn describes the formation and dissolution of scientific world-views in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, while a provocative analysis of the limitations of technocratic thinking can be found in *Where the Wasteland Ends*, by Theodore Roszak.

¹³ See Julius Kagarlitski, "Realism and Fantasy", in Thomas D. Clareson, ed., *SF: The Other Side of Realism* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971).

¹⁴ The six elements are: poetic quality, creation of secondary magical worlds, multidimensionality, essential extravagance, spirit of carnival, mythic dimension. See Jane Mobley, "Toward a Definition of Fantasy Fiction", *Extrapolation*, Vol. 15, No. 2, May 1974.

¹⁵ John Brunner, "The Work of Philip K. Dick", *New Worlds*, No. 166, September 1966, p. 143.

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- ¹⁶ Ursula K. Le Guin, *From Elfland to Poughkeepsie* (Portland, Oregon: Pendragon Press, 1973), p. 27.
- ¹⁷ Personal correspondence.
- ¹⁸ *Vertex Magazine*, February 1974, p. 36.
- ¹⁹ Brian W. Aldiss, introduction to Charles L. Harness, *The Paradox Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp. v–vi.
- ²⁰ *SF Commentary*, No. 1, January 1969, p. 48.
- ²¹ Quoted in “Profiles”, *New Worlds*, No. 89, December 1959.
- ²² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 222.
- ²³ Quoted from “The Android and the Human”, a speech delivered by Dick at the University of British Columbia and at the Vancouver Science Fiction Convention in February 1972, and published in *SF Commentary*, No. 31, December 1972, and in *Vector*, No. 64, March–April 1973. This speech is of considerable value to anyone interested in Dick’s views on life.
- ²⁴ In Silverberg’s story androids are given bright-red skin to mark them off clearly from normal humans. In Clifford D. Simak’s *Time and Again* each android has its serial number tattooed on its forehead (a dehumanizing gesture if ever there was one), while in J. T. McIntosh’s “Made in U.S.A.”, amusingly enough, androids have this slogan stamped inside their decorative navels.
- ²⁵ Stanislaw Lem, “Science Fiction: A Hopeless Case – with Exceptions”, *SF Commentary*, No. 35/36/37, July–Aug.–Sept. 1973, p. 26.
- ²⁶ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 51.
- ²⁷ Steven Lukes writes: “Marx begins from the position that the independent or ‘reified’ and determining character of social relationships and norms is precisely what characterizes human ‘pre-history’ and will be abolished by the revolutionary transition to a ‘truly-human’ society, whereas Durkheim assumes the ‘normality’ of social regulation, the lack of which leads to the morbid, self-destructive state of ‘non-social’ or Hobbesian anarchy evident in unregulated capitalism. Social constraint is for Marx a denial and for Durkheim a condition of human freedom and self-realization.” See “Alienation and Anomie” in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman, eds., *Philosophy, Politics and Society: Third Series* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), p. 142. While Dick places a great deal of emphasis on the individual’s need for a secure social context, it seems clear that he also maintains that such a context can only be one that is “truly human” and therefore can only be achieved with considerable struggle.
- ²⁸ Vancouver speech.

²⁹ Vancouver speech.

³⁰ Vancouver speech.

³¹ David Ketterer writes: "The apocalyptic imagination may finally be defined in terms of its philosophical preoccupation with that moment of juxtaposition and consequent transformation or transfiguration when an old world of mind discovers a believable new world of mind, which either nullifies and destroys the old system entirely or, less likely, makes it part of a larger design." See *New Worlds for Old* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1974), p. 13. Dick, however, severely taxes Ketterer's facile separation of the "believable" worlds of apocalyptic literature from the "incredible" or "escapist" worlds of fantastic literature.

³² *Vertex Magazine*, February 1974, p. 37.

³³ Vancouver speech.