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## **The Dynamic Dissensus of the Other Which Cannot Be Reached: The “Total Recall” Embodied in the Works of Philip K. Dick**

Philip Kindred Dick authored over 40 novels, most of them science fiction which, similar to other science fiction, were out of print soon after they were published. His early works explored the themes he covered throughout his professional career—themes such as alienation, distortion, mania, and mutation. The science fiction press publishing industry was by the 1960s tiring of his constant quest for what is real. Dick cites this growing dissatisfaction for his change in work habit which undoubtedly had profound effects on his post-1970 production. Therefore, relatively late in his career Dick began to write multiple drafts (Apel and Biggs 1). Many fans questioned why his later work included so many shifts, less technology, and so much more of what some called overt philosophizing. Other fans, however, welcomed these new explorations.

Twenty-some years after his start as a science fiction writer Philip K. Dick began to craft his novels, writing (for example) eleven separate drafts for *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*, a novel which took him three years to complete. Dick admits that his earlier works lacked the craft of his later; however, the reader who is familiar with the earlier work recognizes the threads tying together all his

literature. The limited availability of Dick's complete works hinders close analysis of his process. In recent years (aided by his posthumous rediscovery by the late 1980's San Francisco alternative magazine circuit and the consequent Vintage republication of many of his novels) Dick has been discovered by critics who seldom saw his work when first released, the notable exception being Frederic Jameson whose 1975 analysis of *Dr. Bloodmoney* was perhaps the first by a mainstream critic.

Individual works by Dick guide us to reinterpret other of his works. For example, two seemingly unconnected novels *Dr. Bloodmoney* (1965) and *Deus Irae* (1976) represent different interpretations of a post-apocalyptic earth; each stands by itself. However, the later novel allows the reader to return to *Dr. Bloodmoney* and to extend the interpretation established from it. In the "Valis" (Vast Active Living Intelligent System) series this cross interpretation is most evident. Dick wrote three novels in the series that he published as a trilogy. The novel *Valis* was published the same year as *Divine Invasion* in 1981, one year previous to Dick's death. The third book of the trilogy *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* was published the year he died. One other version of the trilogy exists in a complete form as the posthumously published novel *Radio Free Albemuth*. There is evidence that the posthumous novel, which Dick gave in typescript to a friend, is the first version of the "Valis" trilogy.

In striking ways this posthumous novel is a major departure from the trilogy as Dick finally drafted it.<sup>1</sup> For example, through the lens of *Radio Free Albemuth* we may read the “Valis” trilogy and begin to see the hallmark of Dick’s writing—his ability to view the world as though through *A Scanner Darkly*. Within *Valis* a movie plays a prominent role. The main characters happen upon the movie and are amazed at the way its plot mirrors the experiences they have been having.

In *Radio Free Albemuth* the plot is itself the movie from *Valis*. *Valis* creates the illusion that it is a chronicle of actual events by overt allusions (even footnotes) to earlier novels by Dick. The effect of reading all four books of the trilogy is profound disorientation. The theme of one novel attempts to negate the horizon of the other (cf. Iser 96-103). However, Dick has created a Dodgsonesque world in which he can mean what he says without necessarily saying what he means. It is not that one novel negates the other. Rather that each novel must coexist in worlds of equal probability. The gestalt that the ideal reader attempts to create out of the

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewers seem unclear about the chronology of publication. Ian Mathers argues that the text is a final revision of the “Valis” series. However, since Dick gave the typescript to a friend somewhat before his death, and the other three novels were published in 1981 and 1982 (the year he died), it is difficult to believe that he “rework[ed] his greatest novel years later.” Evidence from the typescript of the novel that originally became *Radio Free Albemuth* indicates that it was written in 1976.

works is not easily sustainable; furthermore, because the narrator of both novels is fictionalized as the author, because the author/narrator admits to a palpable level of disquietude about the events he narrates, and because he refers to actual events in his life in the way we know they occurred (see Dick *Valis* 150), questions about the extent of narrative reliability (Booth 159 ff.) are difficult to resolve.

If the narrator is reliable in one novel, why is he not in the other? Dick never truly retracts his divine vision. *Radio Free Albemuth* is not exactly a palinode to *Valis* in the sense Socrates' second Eros speech in the *Phaedrus* is (Gadamer 44), although many literal-minded science-fiction readers would have it so. Our various reader personae cannot reach consensus on valid interpretations of this series. Our views must either be kept in a constant dynamic dissensus, or we must reject one or the other of the two most problematic novels. I contend that allowing this dynamic dissensus to continue leads to a richer (and post-contemporary) reading of the "Valis" four-part trilogy.

Many of Dick's strictly science fiction fans find *Albemuth* flawed because it lacks the final polish of his later works. But they find the *Valis* novel, and to a lesser extent the *Divine Invasion*, difficult because the distortion of time and circumstance is plausibly explained by psychosis and drug use. Readers are left with ambiguities that are not often the hallmarks of the science fiction experience. The *Divine Invasion* has also managed to attract a certain number of charismatic Christian readers who are drawn by the idea of its plot but who find themselves repulsed by its Gnostic and Cabalist vocabulary. The novel's plot is written such

that we cannot be certain whether the action is occurring in some shared reality or whether it is a dream of a character suspended in cryonic sleep. Certainly any reader familiar with Dick's *A Maze of Death* would recognize this potential ambiguity. If (as Dick once wondered) the dream world is the world of the I-Thou communion and the "real" world of the human spirit, then even Herb Asher in cryonic suspension may be this reality's demiourgos.

Perhaps Jameson's analysis of earlier novels by Dick is apropos for the *Divine Invasion*:

In general, the effect of these passages, in which the narrative line comes unstuck from its referent and begins to enjoy the bewildering autonomy of a kind of temporal Moebius strip, is to efface the boundary between real and hallucinatory altogether, and to discredit the reader's otherwise inevitable question as to which of the events witnessed is to be considered "true." (1)

Many of Dick's works hinge on distortions of time and events or "the interpolated story that functions as a reversal of the main action" (Iser 130). Like the Moebius strip there is neither a definite up nor a definite down. The originally published "Valis" series creates a world in which it appears that the characters are trapped in a cycle of time where the Roman Empire is still in power, a time locked in 35 C.E. Dick wrote about his concepts of time years prior to the publication of *Valis*:

As we move up the manifold—i.e. progress forwards in lineal time, or somehow stand still and lineal time progresses forwards, whichever model is more correct—we as many entelechies are continually signaled, given information, and most of all, disinhibited by firings from the universe around us; in this fashion harmony among all parts of the universe is maintained.

There is no more grand scheme than this: to be aware that I, as a representative entelechy, must unfold only as these preset signals reach me, and that control as to the when—the locus in time—that each signal will come is entirely in the hands of the universe... this is a thrilling comprehension, and makes me aware of the unbreakable tie between me and my environment. (Dick “Man, Android” 8)

In Dick’s work we are often confronted with the façades of worlds which appear certainly mundane—after all Dick is known for his setting science fiction in the daily world of the used-car salesman rather than the more usual realm of space opera action figure (Watson 16). Unlike the original Gnostics who taught that the way to salvation was through esoteric magic and secret instruction that set the adept apart, Dick’s view was that ordinary people were chosen by extraordinary (and external) forces. A not-so-subtle irony arises from the fact that science fiction readers find it more plausible for space jockeys to travel to distant galaxies faster than the speed of light than they do the story of a simple disc jockey who finds himself called to facilitate the salvation of humankind. His fans, through their agent Terry Carr, the science fiction anthologizer and long-time editor for ACE

books, asked that he finally answer the question of “what is real?” (Apel and Biggs 1). Dick answered that “[r]eality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away” (Dick “How to” 2). It may not go away, but it can be reoriented or become specific to individual characters (Dick “Shifting Realities” 6).

In some of his universe-building pieces (such as *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*) the created universes are either not shared (i.e. only one character believes them to be), or they are pure constructs that permeate the work (i.e. the implied reader sees them as universes contrary to the “real” time line). In the “Valis” series the created universe emanates from sources within the characters. The *Divine Invasion* and the other “Valis” texts describe a commonality in which the characters share a universal Pattern Language with its own shared, albeit arcane, logic and vocabulary. Through this shared language they are able to build worlds in much the same way as the hologram can be reconstructed from its smallest parts. Dick says of his universe building

[W]hat if there exists a plurality of universes arranged along a sort of lateral axis, which is to say at right angles to the flow of linear time? I must admit that upon thinking this I found I had conjured up a terrific absurdity: ten thousand bodies of God arranged like so many suits hanging in some enormous closet, with God either wearing them all at once or going selectively back and forth among them, saying to himself, “I think today I’ll wear the one in which Germany and Japan won World War II” and then adding, half to himself, “And tomorrow I’ll wear that nice one in which

Napoleon defeated the British; that's one of my best." (Dick "Shifting Realities" 6)

The Pattern Language that Dick relies on in the "Valis" series is (to use the architect Christopher Alexander's phrase) "The Timeless Way of Building." And similar to Alexander's concept that a Pattern Language represents humanity's shared (perhaps forgotten) knowledge of relationships and design, Dick's way of creating universes grows out of his sense that humans share an understanding of time and space reminiscent of the ancient Sumerian "Seas of Knowledge" (Dick "Man, Android" 8). Dick interprets his writing, or at least his plot making, not so much as creating new universes as finding existing ones through an omnidimensional perception channeled through his inner "Thou" and mediated by his rational mind (noös) (Dick "Man, Android" 9). Dick situates his inner dialogue in the bicameral mind (an emerging concept at the time he was writing many of his essays): "I would imagine that it is merely my right and left hemispheres conferring in a Martin Buber I-and-Thou dialogue" (Dick "Man, Android" 9).

A reader of Dick's earlier novels (the first, *Solar Lottery*, in 1955) would also notice his interest in alternate worlds. His scenarios rely less on star ships and particle-beam weapons and more on psychological trauma than do most science fiction plots. Unlike much science fiction, Dick rarely devotes pages to a character explaining the intricate workings of some amazing gizmo (cf. Laidlaw 107). His characters seldom find themselves in laser-pistol battles where one of them has to expound for multiple paragraphs about why the electron flow in the MK-47X is

more efficient than that in the HU-56J. “Dick’s alterations of ordinary reality, his tomb worlds and time-loops, never seem like conjuring tricks because he is able to establish the tangibility and the immediacy of the worlds that he disrupts” (Star 40).

Perhaps Dick accomplishes the plausible alteration of standard reality because, earlier in his career, he relied on his dreams to develop plots. His late-career interest in pre-Socratic and Gnostic Christian philosophies grew out of a numinous event he experienced in 1974. “I suddenly experienced what I later learned is called anamnesis” (Dick “How to” 7). “Total Recall” or anamnesis (loss of forgetfulness) rent the veil that had obscured his vision. From then on worlds he created showed similarity to the world fashioned by Plato’s demiourgos—more discovered than invented. A discovered plot must pre-exist. In that way discoveries are more probably true than are inventions. For Dick, an important element of creating plots was that they be true:

And, more important, if [authors] did intend to state [a particular concept], is it actually true? That is the issue: not, Does the author or producer believe it, but—Is it true? Because, quite by accident, in the pursuit of a good yarn, a science fiction author or producer or scriptwriter might stumble onto the truth... and only later on realize it. (Dick “How to” 4)

One problem we see with much science fiction is the author’s apparent belief that verisimilitude—achieved by detailed discursions and inclusion of technical information—is sufficient to establish the veridical essence of the novel.

Dick's later work moves further from the typical science fiction genre. We still see flying cars and the occasional zap gun. And characters may carry cell phones, but we find characters closer to home and plots revolving even more around the themes of alienation, distortion, and mania. As Dick's reputation and abilities developed, he also began to slow his production (which averaged throughout his career over one and one-half novels per year plus numerous short stories and essays). That slower production, perhaps coupled with an increasing personal sense of alienation and paranoia, resulted in his later novels incorporating ideas not only from his dream world but from his study of the pre-Socratics and the pre-Christian Essenes. Even the novels Dick wrote in the early 1970s are what Jameson calls "his most striking novels, *Ubik* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*" (1). Later reviewers place his last three novels published before his death at the top of the short list of his best work. All three of these works rely on his understanding of divine revelation and his already well-honed ability to create "that bewildering and kaleidoscopic plot structure we associate with Dick's mature production" (Jameson 1).

Throughout his thirty-year career Philip K. Dick influenced other science fiction writers and (especially later) popular culture. He preceded even John Brunner in anticipating the vast connective network that William Gibson later coined (and claimed) as cyberspace. As early as 1970 with the novel *A Maze of Death* he described people interacting in computer-mediated virtual reality machines. In 1956 his novel *The Man Who Japed* described a world in which

advertising and a global media network kept all consumers happy in their miniscule Buckminster Fuller sized compact apartments. In 1964 his novel the *Simulacra* anticipated a world of “plastic boots and plastic hats” full of “plastic people” “all watched over by machines of loving grace.” In 1968 his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* explored what it means to be human in a world of “mutants and sports.” This novel served as the basis for the movie *Blade Runner*. In 1972 he revisited some of the themes in *Simulacra* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* with the novel *We Can Build You* a novel that explored the question of how we would know if the machines we create were alive. It also allowed Dick to indulge his fascination with Disneyland as the main simulacrum was a replica of Lincoln.

The movie the *Matrix* easily could have been based on the *Divine Invasion*. The details of correspondence are numerous. The movies *Screamers*, *Impostor*, *Total Recall*, *Minority Report*, and *Paycheck* were all based directly on short stories Dick published between 1952-1966. His name appears in the credits of these five films and *Blade Runner* which is based on his novel.

Throughout his career, whether he could afford it or not, he donated sizeable portions of his income to the American Friends Service Committee, Covenant House, and the Southern Poverty Law Center. He lived simply and typed his stories and novels on an old manual (1964 vintage) Olympia typewriter (Dick “Letter to NBC” 1).

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