

FOUR LEVELS OF REALITY IN PHILIP K. DICK'S *TIME OUT OF JOINT*

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In 1958, Philip K. Dick struggled to publish a strange novel that is today a landmark in the evolution of literature: *Time Out of Joint*.¹

Very often this novel is read as the exploration of the following theme: the paranoiac has the proper vision of the world; the world of the central character, Ragle Gumm, is illusory, and habitually psychotic states are actually real. Gumm's seemingly futile daily actions are in fact necessary for the survival of millions of human beings, and he is indeed at the center of the world. The story, understood in this manner, depicts a quest for the one and only reality, a reality reassuring by its unity, beyond illusions and lies, as *Eye in the Sky* had presented it three years before.²

Such an interpretation is debatable, and leaves many points in the dark. First, it is impossible to understand how such a reading would allow entire patches of reality to disintegrate into language, as when the famous soft-drink stand dissolves into nothingness, leaving behind only a little slip of paper. By the same token the reader would miss a more subtle interpretation of Ragle's first escape attempt. Secondly, there is not just one reality at the end of the novel, and the link between the illusory world of 1959 and the tyranny of the future is more complex than it seems at first. Is Philip K. Dick merely criticizing the United States of his time, restricting himself to expressing his dissatisfaction at how his society fails to appreciate science fiction? We will see that the political philosophy set out in 1958 goes much further, as does his questioning of a more general reality.

I will show how four distinct levels of reality are clearly articulated around the character Ragle Gumm, who intersects all four of them via the relationship he holds with childhood. This article is in response to Umberto Rossi's article "Just a Bunch of Words" published in *Extrapolations* (37:3 [1996]). I cordially and sincerely dedicate this to him.

I – FIRST REALITY LEVEL : THE LOGOS

The scene of the drink-stand's dissolution is a key moment in the novel. The reader obviously wonders how such an occurrence is possible, how such an alteration of reality is conceivable. A tangible, material object disappears, leaving in its place only a little label: SOFT-DRINK STAND. It even raises the following question: does this scene constitute a decisive moment in Ragle Gumm's life? Will this event alone convince him to try and escape? Is it at this moment that he becomes aware of the lie that purposefully surrounds him? One could also ask the question in the following manner: is there a relationship between the soft-drink stand's disappearance and the instant when he hears the control tower pronounce his name on the radio,

at the very moment a plane flies over him?

In order to answer these questions, let us examine what Ragle Gumm does immediately following the soft-drink stand's disappearance. He places this slip in a little box filled with others. And what is written on those slips? We learn that not only have several innocuous objects undergone the same transformation, to Ragle's astonishment, but also entire portions of landscape, such as factory buildings or even a highway. Therefore Ragle has already had problems with words--and even with reality--for a long time. Reality dissolves under his eyes. This could be interpreted from a pathological point of view, as a symptom of mental illness, for example. Ragle *is* mentally ill. If we read the end of the novel, we find that he has taken refuge in a withdrawal that allows him to regress to the imaginary America of his childhood. It is for this reason that the army builds him an entire world in which to house his fantasy, so that he can continue to find the next targets against the warring lunar colony's missiles. Prisoner of this withdrawal syndrome, Ragle often sees reality dissolve. This is a theme that Philip K. Dick explicitly follows in several subsequent novels: What reality does the psychotic deal with? Could it be said that a psychotic can intuitively yet truly sense something we can call *real*?

Ragle's little slips of paper correspond to Dick's definition, several years later, of reality: "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away" ("How to Build" 261). The disappearance of the soft-drink stand is unbelievable, much more so than the illusion of the Old Town. The piece of paper continues to exist as a real object, kept in a box. What is the relationship between Ragle Gumm's psychosis and reality? A few elements from another, barely later novel, *Martian Time-Slip*, can provide us with some useful material for reflection.

In that novel, a former schizophrenic, Jack Bohlen, is forced to be the caretaker for an autistic child, Manfred Steiner; Dick presents autism as an early form of schizophrenia. The child's mind progressively invades Jack's and breaks down his perception of time and reality. But of what reality? Of reality itself, or of a common cultural universe maintained by education, the pretended seat of civilization? Even Jack wonders, as he goes to repair the simulacra that function as teaching machines at the Public School of Lewistown, capital of the Martian colony. His thoughts on the relationship between mental illness and reality bring him to a troubling conclusion: schizophrenia "meant, simply, a person who could not live out the drives implanted in him by his society. The reality which the schizophrenic fell away from—or never incorporated in the first place—as the reality of interpersonal living, of life in a given culture with given values" (64). This is of course Ragle's situation--but Dick does not stop here.

Psychoanalysis itself, as a theory of neurosis, is "a vainglorious foolishness" (81), because it dares to pretend to give meaning to the difficult and painful exploration of the nonsense in things. The schizophrenic is incapable of sustaining a common world, a cultural universe, just as Ragle triply flees his own: he takes refuge in the universe of his childhood, the newspaper competition, and the changed world at the end of the novel. For the child who cannot bear the education imposed upon him, autism remains the only refuge.

Manfred Steiner has a completely different intuition about reality than does Jack Bohlen. The latter sees, at the root of objects, simulacra, copies: the personnel manager, on earth (70), the Martian community psychoanalyst. The schizophrenic side of his personality shows him the cultural lie, and the depth of his intuition: "Doc, I can see you under the aspect of Eternity, and you're dead" (96). But Jack Bohlen is still linked to the common world. That is not the case for Manfred Steiner, who only perceives base reality, *sub speciae aeternitati*.³ A parallel situation occurs in *Time Out of Joint*: it runs from the soft-drink stand's disappearance (as perceived by Ragle from the depths of his mental illness, and thus bringing him towards the essence of things)

to the episode of the missing light cord experienced by his brother-in-law Vic Nielson. This is basically the same experience as when Vic sees the bus riders dissolve into nothingness, leaving behind inert puppets shaken about by the moving bus.

Ragle gets to the bottom of reality, but Vic only perceives the lacunae and the cracks of his cultural conditioning. In *Martian Time-Slip*, Ragle Gumm represents autism or schizophrenia, and Vic Nielson represents neurosis. Ragle continuously changes realities, while as Vic Nielson lucidly accepts illusion: "I'm going back," he basically says at the end of the novel. But let us not jump ahead. What exactly is this "bottom of things" that Ragle perceives himself as forced to explore, to his great displeasure? Ragle finds a slip of paper, language, instead of appearances.

The soft-drink stand's disappearance has an obvious ontological weight. Right before that event Ragle wonders if in the beginning there was first the Deed, or the Word. Should Faust or St. John be right? That evening he develops a theory linked to the Berkeley doctrine, that Rossi quite pertinently calls the nominalism of Ragle Gumm. Indeed, how could one not perceive nominalism in these sentences: "Word doesn't represent reality. Word *is* reality. For us, anyhow. Maybe God gets to objects. Not us, though" (60).

This sentence is problematic. If we wish to retain a sense of coherence among Dick's novels, we might wish to say that the substratum of reality is God *as* language, or more exactly as Word. However this nominalism by default apparently keeps us from doing that since Ragle supposes there is perhaps a God for whom the real is perceived in the absolute, outside the mediation of the word. Moreover there exists a world between that "simple" slip of paper and the entropic horror making up Manfred Steiner's world in *Martian Time-Slip*. Many arguments allow us to remove that difficulty.

First of all, let us consider the other slips of paper Ragle finds through his nephew Sammy Nielson. Sammy finds two types of things in the ruins: the old magazines and the phone book, which will be spoken of later, as well as other slips of paper similar to Ragle's. Sammy only brings the soggy papers back; Ragle will venture into the night himself to unearth the magazines. But these ruins are timeless: as ruins, they are obviously from the past, but *only in relation to the true present*, 1998! Therefore, they are ruins of a universe that doesn't exist yet from the Old Town's inhabitants' illusory point of view. And they are ruins in which one finds interesting objects as one digs towards the bottom of things. Their description is that of the effects of entropy: "empty lots," "the shape of broken concrete, pits half-filled with spring rain, heaps of boards and plaster," "a tangle of rusted wire," "a desolate place," "houses near the lots seemed dark, uninhabited," "the sidewalk was cracked, littered with debris" (64-65). The chapter closes with the mention of "the Ruins," the point of reference. Therefore the quest for reality goes through a "disjointing of time," or a "sliding of time," that reveals a stage of degradation, of putrefaction, of entropic alteration of reality.⁵ This theme is marginal in the book, but it is present. The ruins are an exemplary justification for the title *Time Out of Joint*.⁶

However, Ragle's interpretation gives rise to a nominalism, it is true, but it is that of Ragle himself. Is the novel inherently nominalist? Can we not say that language is something other than the limit to our access to the real, a limit not imposed on God? In chapter 11, just before Ragle leaves accompanied by Vic, we once again encounter the slips of paper. Ragle shares his experience with Vic in terms of an incomprehension of his deepest meaning: he shows the slips of paper to his brother-in-law, as if to get rid of his psychosis. Handing him the labels, Ragle says: "I give you the real" (188). Then Ragle explains: "The word. Maybe it's the word of God. The logos. 'In the beginning was the Word.' I can't figure it out. All I know is what I see

and what happens to me. I think we're living in some other world than what we see, and I think for a while I knew exactly what that other world is. But I've lost it since then. Since that night. The future, maybe" (188-89).

Ragle is blending two levels of reality. Dick makes him leave the fundamental ontological level, since he is becoming normal: he loses access to the level of logos that is indeed at the root of things, since his withdrawal symptoms, his metal illness, are fading. In another way he shares his madness with the one who will be his partner in escape, without whom he could not succeed. This is not to say that this is not a poisoned gift. Language controls all access-points to other levels of reality: the slips of paper, ultimate essence; the magazines discovered in the ruins, first element of doubt about the level of the common illusory world; magazines that come back to the Kesselmann house, where Ragle discovers he is the 1996 Man of the Year. The videotape where Ragle sees himself on the TV of people he doesn't know is insufficient proof: it is in language that he finds truth. But still, the true passage from illusion to the present world, the totalitarian State, is done through language: the "One Happy World" sticker that goes on the back of the truck is at the same time a declaration about the nature of reality. One must also remember the magazine that "present[s] him with the world of reality" in Mrs. Keitelbein's shop at the beginning of chapter 14 (231). Finally, the most intriguing strangeness of the future universe is the disjointed language of the teens at the bar.

Language is the metaphor for the Word, of Logos. This theme is not the principal subject of *Time Out of Joint*, which is why it is difficult to find a solid doctrine of the relationship between logos and reality in it. We can find it in another novel, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, which presents the exact opposite of the disappearance of the soft-drink stand: the creation of reality. In a famous passage, Leo Bulero confronts Palmer Eldritch in an imaginary universe. Eldritch urges him: "You could shape something. Go ahead--project a fraction of your essence; it'll take material form on its own. What you supply is the logos. Remember that?" 'I remember,' Leo said" (103-4). Leo concentrates, and in a short while an object appears. The problem is knowing who is to provide the logos. When Leo creates a Bible to fight against Eldritch, the latter immediately makes it disappear. The answer is therefore clear, albeit disquieting. It is alienation. But *The Three Stigmata of Eldritch Palmer* is not what is under scrutiny here. Let us note, however, that the logos is for Dick the underpinnings of reality, at the level of the essence. Later in his work this takes on an explicit religious importance that is less visible in *Time Out of Joint*. Biographical data can explain this, such as Dick's conversion and Christian baptism at the beginning of the 60s. But already in 1958 the essence is thought of not in terms of matter, but of logos. The world that is visible, experiential, has an ontological thickness, or translates a hidden essence sometimes unveiled by the gaze of the mentally retarded, the marginalized, those beings society considers as delirious, enclosed in a solipsist universe. This vision--which neither Ragle nor Jack Bohlen asks for--surges forth unexpectedly, overwhelms the consciousness when least expected, and is, quite frankly, a disagreeable experience. God appears to us by surprise, through objects and the most day-to-day situations, like a beer can under the wheels of a car, as Horselover Fat will say. Horselover Fat hadn't asked anybody anything either, and his fate will be much less enviable than Ragle's, who at least is provided with an exit.⁶

Finally, the level of reality is quite autonomous in relationship to others. We can see this at the end of chapter 4. Ragle, Vic, and Margo are looking at pictures of an unknown actress, Marilyn Monroe, in the magazines found in the ruins. Following that afternoon's experience, the disappearance of the soft-drink stand, Ragle has decided to leave, to get some rest and study

philosophy. At one point Margo intimates that they are being duped. At this instant, for Ragle, “it rang a bell deep inside him. On some sub-verbal level. ‘Maybe I won’t go away,’ he said” (73). He becomes aware of another level of reality than that of the essence with which his mental illness has made contact, so he no longer has any solid reason for leaving. Let us note, moreover, that if the signal goes off inside of him in a non-verbal fashion, this in no way indicates an objection to the idea that the logos constitutes the deepest level of reality: the logos has never been human speech. There is therefore a heterogeneity between the disappearance of the soft-drink stand and the moment when Ragle hears the control tower pronounce his name through the headphones of Sammy’s crystal set. These experiences put Ragle in contact with two distinct levels of reality from within the illusory universe of Old Town.

II – THE GAPS INSIDE DAILY REALITY

The major portion of the novel takes place in the reader’s daily universe: 1959 U.S.A., in a town that remains nameless because it cannot bear its ontological responsibilities alone. The town is the paradigm for the United States of plastic. It is slightly paradoxical to have a science fiction novel be set in our everyday reality. Perhaps at that time the traditional universe was more commonly tilted into a science fictional universe. Van Vogt did it marvelously. But still! Only the last sixty pages of the novel, out of 250, are about a science fiction universe, which--as we will find out--isn’t one anyway. Let us remember that Dick ran into many problems trying to get this novel published and that he was finally paid less for it than the others because of the mainstream elements in it. The typical science fiction reader is confounded by it, for obvious reasons. We could say the same of the two novels framing this one, *Eye in the Sky* and *The Man in the High Castle*. What is Dick doing during this period, before he comes back to a more classical and identifiable framework in *Martian Time-Slip*?

Let us sketch the structure of human relationships that also--or perhaps mostly, in Philip K. Dick’s work--makes up what is real. This is a typical American family without any distinguishing characteristics to differentiate it from that era’s happy middle classes. A couple, with one child, plus the brother-in-law of the man who is the breadwinner. To this can be added the annoying childless neighbors, as well as a woman dedicated to civil defense who lives alone with her son. All the novel’s levels of reality are represented by the different characters and their relationships, as Rossi shows in his analysis of the family ties between the characters.

The most important level is that of childhood, or more exactly, that of youth: maladjustment, in one way or another, to the adult world and its values. Sammy Nielson, Ragle’s nephew, is the most at ease here. He guides Ragle in his quest for reality: he finds the magazines and the slips of paper in the ruins, and it is through Sammy’s radio that Ragle hears the control tower tell the fighter pilot that he is flying over *the* Ragle Gumm. Sammy knows reality, much more deeply than the adults believe. If they had all believed or listened to him, things would have happened differently. Let us look at page 86: “They’ve got their dupe-guns trained on us dead center.” It is true! Sammy’s last appearance gives the same impression: he calls for his mother while his father and uncle still haven’t come back from town. His mother explains nothing to him. Sammy tells her: “Wow! . . . Maybe they stole something . . . left town” (243).

Which is absolutely true.

Next is Junie Black, who is also on the side of childhood, or adolescence—in any case, on the side of maladjustment to the adult world. Everybody sees her like this, not only Ragle, but Margo and Vic as well: “she looked very cute and childlike” (116). It is with her that Ragle sinks further into mental illness: she confirms his own refusal of the adult world, the basis for his withdrawal symptoms. Ragle kisses Junie on the lawn of the town pool: he is then ready, from the depths of his mental illness, to re-experience the psychosis of the logos on the basis of a shameful desire.

Walter Keitelbein, finally, is Ragle’s last guide towards reality, towards the mastery of his destiny. He feels an admiration for Ragle as a veteran of World War II, that is to say for something else beyond a winner of the newspaper contest. With him Ragle is within the Real. Lifting a large wooden desk and breaking into a sweat because of its weight: now that is reality.⁸ It is with the Keitelbeins that Ragle does something real, having a clear and defined importance, or more exactly, that he realizes the total inanity of his newspaper contest. It is Walter again who awakens Ragle’s memories by showing him the models he has of Ragle’s factories. He will be his guide for the trip to the Moon. If there is an alternative to the fake family of the Nielson’s, it is in the quasi-paternal relationship between Ragle and Walter. We see Ragle put Walter and Sammy on the same level, both children, and “Kids are all about the same. . . . But he liked both of them” (104). I will discuss childhood, and Walter Keitelbein’s role, in much more detail further on.

The second level of human relationships is that of the adults. At this level the illusion is much deeper. Here we find Vic and Margo Nielson, as well as Bill Black. All human relationships are faked, here, and this family has no existence outside of the organized lie that makes up this false America of the fifties, as Vic Nielson says: “It’s a sunny universe. Kids romping, cows mooing, dogs wagging. Men clipping lawns on Sunday afternoon, while listening to the ball game on TV. We could have gone on forever. Noticed nothing” (108).

Dick engages in an unforgiving satire of his times through his portrait of Liz, the checkout girl in Vic’s grocery store. She looks like a woman one could see in an ad for pineapple juice (105), and has become a Republican since she left her native Texas to come live in a Republican state (9). (And it is curious to read of Texas as a bastion of democracy.) Entirely devoid of substance and personality, it matters little to wonder whether she is or is not a simulacra just like the bus passengers or the people standing in line at the bus station. A pure product of her times, Liz is comfortably installed in what one could call the adult world. The landlady, at whose place Ragle and Vic will begin to perceive the truth when they escape, is Liz all over again, with an extra forty years added on. Mrs. McFee shows the same conformity, the same unthinking submission to the dominant cultural models, including the typical way of criticizing the government without putting any personal thought into the matter: Liz doesn’t believe in the economic crisis; Mrs. McFee doesn’t believe in Ragle Gumm. This criticism is not simply about Dick’s era, the *America Felix*, as Rossi calls it. We meet thousands of characters like Liz and Mrs. McFee, like Margo Nielson, like Vic Nielson in our daily lives. They are our colleagues at work, our neighbors, our local grocery store managers, etc. Dick shows us how illusory and alienating this daily life is. Only the children stand out: with them alone does Ragle find some measure of complicity or interest. This America is totally impersonal: the town has no name, the newspaper organizing the contest is simply called the *Gazette*, and even the Nielson family has a name that reverts to nothing: as Rossi suggests, the sons of *nihil*.⁸ This impersonality accentuates the paradigmatic aspect of Old Town, and its universality.

If this second level is that of illusion, the following level of human relations is that of the carefully managed lie. Here we find Lowery, supposed representative of the *Gazette*. Lowery is perfectly aware of the true nature of the newspaper's contest, and eventually lies to Ragle about the results. Indeed, Ragle has found "Where . . . the Little Green Man [Will] Be Next" much less often than he is made to believe (236). Bill Black undoubtedly is found on both levels of reality at once: he is even the biggest liar in the novel, as someone who shares the Nielson's daily family life for three years. Ragle judges Black's appearance and his social standing, and rejects his type and the values for which he stands. His portrait is yet another ferocious social commentary: "The odd thing in this world is that an eager-beaver type, with no original ideas, who mimes those in authority above him right to the last twist of necktie and scrape of chin, always gets noticed. . . . *Everything but sending their wives over to the administration building as bait. . .*" (20, emphasis mine). Submitting to authority, one of the fundamental characteristics of Black's personality, leads him to do much worse than that: let us recall that Margo Nielson is really his true wife. Even if Major Black is a brilliant man, even if Ragle likes him (20), he must be seen as Liz's corollary: no longer the one who accepts ready-made cultural frameworks, but the person who creates them so that others can submit to them. We can find others like him among the various administrators of the United Nations in *Martian Time-Slip*, those who have instituted the educational system Jack Bohlen finds so horrifying. The criminal simulacra programmers of *The Penultimate Truth*, in their submission to the power of a monstrous autocrat, are also close cousins of his, as well as Barnes, the police chief in *Our Friends from Frolix 8*.

What place can Ragle find in this world? That of a contest winner, a simple local curiosity whose existence has never held any weight or value. Ragle has neither his own home, nor wife, nor real work, nor car. He lives a simulacra of a social life, a little like other numerous characters of various novels by Dick, perhaps the most famous of which is Jack Isidore from *Confessions of a Crap Artist*. It is for these reasons that one could place Ragle among the children and adolescents. But I will show rather that he crosses all levels of reality, and does not merely stay at the level of childhood.

The only activity having real importance in Old Town is Ragle's newspaper contest, "Where Will the Little Green Man Be Next." A study of this contest will show that it articulates the novel's various levels of reality in a rather curious fashion. What does Ragle do when he opens his notebooks in the morning and goes to get the newspaper on the doorstep, then plunges into eight or ten hours of relentless work? At which level of reality is he, and how does he have access to it?

One must note the exhausting nature of his work. The first portrait the reader has of him is startling: "But his face showed such weariness that at once she [Margo] forgot about leaving. His eyes, red-rimmed and swollen, fastened on her compellingly; he had taken off his tie, rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and as he drank his beer his arm trembled. Spread out everywhere in the living room the papers and notes for his work formed a circle of which he was the center. He could not even get out; he was surrounded" (12). What could the nature of the work of such a strange character be?

To understand Ragle's personality a little better, let us examine his methods. They are not irrational: Ragle doesn't *guess*. The terms used to describe his method are revealing: he "do[es] intricate math and drink[s] warm beer" in impressive quantities (15). It is a rational and mathematical work, even if it is extremely repetitive, like having to fill out one's tax forms over and over again. His work method is rigorous: we see him take rapid notes and make personal

comments (118). He has a “strong innate sense of order” (147). But Lowery points out to Ragle that he has an aesthetic, not a rational, approach to the problem, which gives a non-transmissible characteristic to his *art* (41<n>42). Similarly, Mrs. Keitelbein evokes this quite exceptional gift: “‘So you sense the pattern, you and your talent. Women’s hats. . . . Occult.’ ‘Yes . . . or artistic,’” responds Ragle (236).

The one who is preoccupied by little green men can be a metaphor for the science fiction writer. But it seems to me that this novel is not simply the expression of Dick’s bitterness as he spends exhausting days producing what is socially perceived to be sub-literature for late-blooming adolescents. Ragle’s methods and undertakings are of an aesthetic and intuitive nature, even if they integrate rationality. He might have completely forgotten about it, but it is through art that Ragle maintains a link with reality, that he can predict where the lunar colony’s missiles will fall. Ragle’s newspaper contest is indeed a link with the real, even if Ragle sees it as alienation and guilt. Through the character of Ragle Gumm, Dick not only enhances his own condition, but also that of all who engage in socially undervalued activities and are accused of being useless, those who continue to maintain extremely tight ties with childhood: artists.

How is the America of 1959 going to shatter? How will the deception be discovered? If we look at the definition “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away” again, we notice that to stop believing in something is also to doubt. And doubt is another disjunction, perhaps an even more apparent one, of reality levels in *Time Out of Joint*.

Doubt will progressively overcome the 1959 America. Very quickly, right from the first pages of the novel, we notice that Vic Nielson has never heard of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This is a counterfactual situation. Something is not right. This world is not the one the reader knows: there are no radios in this town, Nixon is the director of the FBI, Marilyn Monroe is unknown. It is from the moment that this intuition becomes clear and obvious that we enter into the science fiction Dick is subverting. The perspective is very different in the novel *Cosmic Puppets*, with which the links are only apparent. In that novel we see a character come back to his hometown for the first time in years. Everything has been profoundly changed. He even discovers in the archives of the local newspaper that he himself died very young, a long time ago. It is only through the intermediary of the character that the reader is led to doubt. Here the characters don’t notice at first that their reality is paradoxical, since they inhabit a world which is not our own. It is *only for the reader* that the counterfactual situation can make sense. This procedure will be used much more systematically in *The Man in the High Castle*, of course, but the principle is the same: to play with the reader’s mind while making him doubt. At this time, this is for Dick the essence of science fiction, and as such *Time Out of Joint* is a “Dickian” novel right from the first pages.

Philip K. Dick one night looked for a light cord in his bathroom, even though one had never been there.⁹ How can one write a science fiction novel about that? The same thing happens to Vic Nielson, and it is the first introduction of doubt into the narrative framework of the novel. It is likely that in the apartment where Vic Nielson used to live before his conditioning, there had been a light cord. Such a doubt is much more easily explained than the disappearance of a soft-drink stand.

How is Vic Nielson going to cope with such a trifling situation? The world’s reality suddenly falters, and this gives rise to a deep malaise. The light cord demonstrates that without a doubt, intuitively, through a habit welded into the flesh that no conditioning could erase, that there is another reality of which no conscious memory remains. Something is not right, and that is the essence of doubt. The text links the question of the self and of the world: Vic does not

doubt the light cord experience. It corresponds to an unavailable, inaccessible reality, and therefore the surrounding world and--inseparably--the "I" become doubtful as well.

One is inevitably drawn to think of the Cartesian *cogito* and one of its corollaries: if I am a thinking being, it can be that if one day I cease thinking, I will also cease existing. There may be no direct reference to Descartes, but it is implicit in reference to Vic Nielson, who, as we follow his path, can only doubt more. He uses a technique of meditation or concentration that abolishes, for a moment, the conditioning through which Old Town takes its reality; he realizes only then, as does Jack Bohlen with his boss, that he is in fact alone on the bus, accompanied by simulacra. However, Vic does not understand his experience, just as he does not understand the behavior of his employees during the test he makes them undergo. We could suppose that if they all behaved in the same fashion, it is because they, too, are simulacra.

His wife is the person who gives us an astounding description of reality: « *A sense of the finiteness of the world around her. The streets and houses and shops and cars and people. Sixteen hundred people, standing in the center of a stage. Surrounded by props, by furniture to sit in, kitchens to cook in, cars to drive, food to fix. And then, behind the props, the flat, painted scenery. Painted houses set farther back. Painted people. Painted streets. Sounds from speakers set in the wall. Sammy sitting alone in a classroom, the only pupil. And even the teacher not real. Only a series of tapes being played for him.* (238) »

There is a trick, a lie. The America of 1959 does not exist: our daily life is only a theater prop.

During the tale's course, Vic's experience has a definite importance: it allows us to understand a great number of details of Ragle's path through another level of reality, that of the border zone of Old Town, his exploration behind the scenes.

III – THE BORDER ZONE

One of the most poignant passages of *Time Out of Joint* is Ragle's first escape attempt: it is a pathetic, utter failure. It is useless to try and count the number of times Ragle trips, or even literally falls on his face. He even finally has a car accident. Why could this escape attempt only be a failure? What reality does Dick paint for us as he continues his subversion of classic science fiction?

Ragle could only fail in this attempt because he leaves alone, and for the wrong reasons. There are three attempts at escape in the novel, each one of them corresponding to a distinctive level of reality. The first time Ragle only has a vague plan for leaving, after the soft-drink stand dissolves. As soon as a signal goes off inside of him when Margo postulates that they are being used, Ragle gives up his plan. The last attempt is successful, when Ragle steals a truck with Vic's help. The second attempt is that of a psychotic Ragle Gumm having visions: he cannot trust he is at the center of the world, that everything turns around him. When he hears the control tower saying to the pilot "you're looking down at Ragle Gumm himself" (120), he cannot believe his ears. He cannot accept as real anything which continues to have unbelievable aspects to it, and adopts a panicked flight reaction. He can no longer trust anyone, not even his own perceptions, so he flees alone. During his escape attempt, from the first to the final instant ("When the heavens open and God speaks to me by name . . . that's when the psychosis takes over" [121].),

he encloses himself in a true paranoid crisis, as exemplified by his pathological lies to the Kesselmanns. This pathological solitary flight is accompanied by a state of panicked terror: "Is this the last stage of my mental difficulty? Suspicions of people. . . of groups and human activity, color and life and noise. I shun them, he thought. Perversely. Seeking the dark" (140).

Ragle discovers the strings behind the plot, behind the scenes, but not what is beyond the scenes, his deepest reasons for existence. Because he does not understand what he discovers, Ragle is still mentally ill. Since he is aware of a universal lie, then everybody is going to lie to him.

Because Ragle leaves alone, everything he might see cannot be guaranteed in its objectivity, in its reality, by another witness. One passage from *Confessions of a Crap Artist* goes in the same direction. Charley Hume, on his hospital bed, wonders if his wife is so monstrous that she is actually trying to get rid of him, or if he is being paranoid. At that moment his wife's lover comes to visit him. Nat Anteil doesn't know that his mistress's husband knows about their relationship, but Charley Hume goes beyond all jealousy. As he explains his wife's personality to Anteil, Hume realizes that what he feels, another feels as well. So, *what he feels is therefore real*: "for the first time, I realize this fully. I know she is like this, I didn't invent it. She's really the worst kind of slut, because I can read it on this boy's face and he can read it on mine, and we both know it" (219). As long as Ragle leaves alone, he will only be able to enclose himself in a paranoid fantasy because no one will be able to share his perceptions. There might be something--places, people, voices on the radio--but any estimate of their significance is worthless because there is no basis for reality as provided by any human relationship.

If one retains "strangeness" as the basis of science fiction, there is no lack of it in these pages, as we shall see. But such a criterion is very debatable, since it sends us back to the fantastic. If, furthermore, science fiction depends on the presence of unknown technological objects that are undoubtedly futuristic, we will be disappointed. These pages only furnish us with an absolutely unknown type of drill bit, as well as videorecorders.¹⁰ If ultimately it is necessary that the action take place in the future, then the story will satisfy--but this future is merely indicated by the date on one of the magazines, and it is known that the magazines are faked; this one is no exception.

On the other hand, if good science fiction is defined as the *mise en scène* of an idea, such that the mind of the reader awakens and begins to create when confronted with the idea of a possibility, then this second escape attempt is indeed science fiction.¹¹ Ragle seems to move through limbo, a strange place where very ordinary objects spring out almost surreally. The night is black, without any stars (on the other hand, Vic and Ragle see the stars during their truck ride). The bus station appears thus: "A blue neon glow hung in the center of a limitless flat field" (123). The decor is purely geometric, reduced to its simplest abstract expression: vague shapes of factories and warehouses. The gas station and the bar have the same completely unreal aspect of cardboard boxes placed here and there, simply separated by nothingness. We are at the edges of the world, as in the wings of a theater. A play is being staged, but no one knows who is directing: it's not even Bill Black, since he receives a telegram informing him that the interception has failed. This interception is still at the level of *mise en scène*: we see a man learn how to ride a motorcycle by watching a videocassette.

One very powerful element of unreality is the line in the bus station: how is it that it absolutely does not move? Vic Nielson's experience gives us the answer: Ragle is still a prisoner of his conditioning,¹³ and so therefore cannot realize that in reality, he is alone in the waiting room with the two soldiers, as he is later in the bar that nonetheless appears to be full of people.

Ragle asks himself, another crack in reality: “Not enough cars in the lot to explain so many people” (140). The bar, like Vic’s bus, like the waiting room, is full of simulacra, the same simulacra whose nature Jack Bohlen will discover in *Martian Time-Slip*.

There is no opening onto the real world in the border zone, and especially not in the Kesselmanns’ house. They lie nonstop to Ragle. They are government agents and recognize him right away, and play with him to even better betray his confidence. Even the objects he finds in their house lie: the mention of the controversy surrounding the Venusian ore deposits (165) is a great joke for the government of One Happy World! The mention of Venus in no way reminds him of his trip to that planet, even though the novel’s ending shows that trip to have been decisive. Ragle sees on a magazine cover that he was Man of the Year in 1996, but in fact, he is only reading government propaganda: he spent 1996 (this year’s date being 1998) in Old Town, and not in a little Peruvian village (228). It is noteworthy that the memory Walter’s model unleashes, two days later, is only indirectly linked to the magazine. The picture of the factory in the magazine at the Kesselmanns’ does not remind Ragle that he often entered there and that he knows its most hidden corners. However, the photo of his factory is his last sight before he recognizes those who come to get him, the city maintenance men from Old Town.

This voyage into limbo will only leave Ragle the most tenuous memory. He will need something else before he attempts another escape towards reality. It will take a child to open his eyes, and a man to lend him help.

IV – ONE HAPPY WORLD BRINGS BLESSINGS OF JOY TO ALL MANKIND

Ragle finally finds true and solid reasons to flee during the Civil Defense session at the Keitelbeins. It is the ultimate logical ending for the missing light cord episode. Both the night he eats too much lasagna (and searches for the light cord) and after undertaking some original meditation techniques in the bus, Vic Nielson is only vaguely aware that another entirely inaccessible reality exists. Ragle must experience such an event himself, since he has failed to get beyond the border zone.

The civil defense session certainly plays a role: he understands the radical inanity of his newspaper contest and finds himself in a very peculiar emotional state that prepares him for seeing Walter’s model. “*This is reality*. And, he thought, I am in it” (184). This reality has nothing of the happy 1959 America: it is the reality of the cold war in which, like it or not, we are all engaged. Here is the true face of America. Instead of noticing a crack in reality that refers back to an unavailable world, as with the light cord, Ragle is shown an element of reality to awaken his memories, as if Vic Nielson were placed in front of a photograph of the bathroom containing the famous light cord. The border zone is not completely waterproof, and the picture of the factory is the first thing of which the model reminds Ragle. Then he begins to remember, intuitively, without thinking: the factory could produce aluminum ingots, which is almost correct. Then comes the memory of the flesh, the bodily habits that drove Vic to look for his light cord: “I know every inch of that. Every building and hall. Every office. I’ve been inside that, he said to himself. Many times” (181). The matter of his departure isn’t even relevant any

more. Is Ragle remembering a line of Mrs. Kesslemann's: "You have to take a chance with someone. . . . Or you can't live" (159)? In any case, he needs Vic's help.

One could believe that the world of 1998 is a science fiction world, finally discovered after so many meanders. But things are not that simple. *Classic* science fiction is the great absence of this novel. What are the science fiction elements in the world Vic and Ragle discover after having crossed the real border? A substance covering the highway they've never seen before, granted. A sticker to be glued onto the back of the truck, or even a linguistic procedure as key to access this new reality. What futurism! The possibility of a war or a militaristic dictatorship--in fact, both of these. The 1998 world appears to the reader as one that is not his own, but one in which futuristic elements or a profusion of consumer goods do not abound: the city where they arrive is cold, deserted, dark. All the houses are alike: low to the ground, sad. The prodigies of technology are astounding by their absence: it is impossible to find a gas station to fill up with the kerosene their car requires. Money is different, plastic: logical in a world of penury such as this one! Besides the youth (I will return to them, of course) everybody speaks normally. And the inside of the homes is boringly normal: Mrs. McFee's house is from the thirties, with its sheet music on the piano and the cane rocking chair.

As I shall show, for internal reasons having to do with the meaning of the novel itself, this cannot be otherwise. The linking of the illusory world of the fifties and the military dictatorship of the future is essential, because those two levels of reality are interdependent: what newness can exist in a world completely governed by the most entrenched cultural conformity, one that refuses novelty in order to fold back on itself in the safe warmth of daily, adult life? How could the 1998 dictatorship have transformed the world, when the universe of the future is carried by the perspectives of childhood, when people never listen, people never believe, and against which people fight as soon as this dictatorship attacks the educational shackles? For the person who accepts opening his or her mind to the richness of possibility, how could such a universe be seductive? There is a very deep fear anchored in humanity that is aroused when confronted with newness: "Why are you so set against Lunar exploration? Smell of the alien? Contamination? The unfamiliar seeping in through the chinks in the walls . . . ?" (233) Ragle asks Vic, his false brother-in-law, who doesn't answer.

Of course Vic isn't a lunatic, that is to say, one of those who has chosen humanity's expansion beyond its world of origin. He has *voluntarily* accepted the army's conditioning that makes him believe, for three years, that Old Town is real (252). Political differences, therefore, immediately explode between Ragle and Vic, as well as the latter's absence of personal judgment. His choice, even in the last lines of the novel, deserves closer attention: he knows it is an illusion, but he asks to go back: "Any way to get out of here?" (254). This moment is very powerful. Vic's attitude can only be understood if one remembers how closely the two worlds, Old Town and the *fin de siècle* military dictatorship, are interdependent. An invisible tyranny lies at the bottom of our daily lives, especially when we are so limited by the power of a conditioning become invisible because it is so omnipresent. It is a single world: 1959 and 1998 are interdependent. Philip K. Dick speaks to us of our daily lives, the very subtle forms of tyranny, comparing all totalitarianisms. His political thought already surpasses the simple criticism of his times. It attains the universal, and must manage to crack our day-to-day existence. Sometimes we may realize how press-ganged we are by a power that is capable of masking how profoundly underground we are shut in, working without respite for results and interests we cannot even suspect. Faced with this situation, many will still find such a lie acceptable, rather than taking their own life into their hands and being responsible for the future

and the possibilities that lie in their own depths--if they have not in the meantime undergone Manfred Steiner's fate.

V – THE CHILD AND THE STARS

There is a striking element of strangeness in the future world Vic and Ragle discover: the teens at the bar, their strange tunics, their topknots and their filed teeth. Once again, their first real contact and the most marking peculiarity of the world of 1998 is its incomprehensible *language*. Yet another decoy! Vic and Ragle completely misunderstand their intentions: the two youths are making fun of them, just as Sammy would make fun of bizarre people who are uncomfortable in their surroundings. They help out the strangers by making the waitress believe that money from 1959 is still acceptable. One suspects, of course, that language--ust as fashion--has not completely transformed itself in forty years, since the waitress speaks quite normally. These children will be the two adults' guides in the "real" world. Of course it works out well for them, since they ask for money, but on the other hand they never pull guns out or menace the strangers in any way. Ragle and Vic are even well treated at their house, where the youth's practices will be revealed as even stranger than first thought: a drug Ragle knows, a surprising vestimentary inversion--the girls have shaved their heads and wear suits and ties--and an astonishing musical instrument, a nose-flute. Teens have innovated a lot more than the majority of the inhabitants of the One Happy World have in forty years.

These teens save Vic and Ragle once again by telling their acrimonious landlady--probably one of the girls' mother--that the two strange-looking men want to rent a room. This is the most intelligent answer the teens could have given.

Rossi's reading of the novel is that it expresses the triumph of a science fiction world over daily reality, just as it reveals P. K. Dick's personal sense of revenge at being an ill-paid SF writer whose literary works sell badly or aren't even recognized once they go beyond science fiction. I believe that it is possible to open the problematic even further, beyond all biographical considerations, even if the former reading does present undeniable justification.

Indeed, Ragle Gumm is not simply Philip K. Dick's alter ego. Dick in fact does all he can to prevent this: they are not the same age, they do not have the same job (who would think to compare Dick to a stylist?), Dick hated the beer that Ragle spends his days drinking, etc. But most of all, as I have said, Ragle's methods have an artistic aspect that goes beyond the writing of science fiction novels. But what does an artist do, besides create new realities? In this novel, where is the science fiction? Certainly not in the military tyranny of 1998, on Earth, even if there are videorecorders and a new kind of road surfacing. The end of the novel evokes the most classic science fiction element of all: a rocket take-off. Once again it is a child who guides Ragle, the real Walter Keitelbein, all doubts about his identity having disappeared. That is to say that the conclusion of the novel shows us a science fiction universe yet to be built, a completely new and open reality, just like the end of almost all of Dick's novels.

This opening coincides with childhood, another opening onto life in general and the richness of the potentiality of the human being who is not yet strangled by the weighty

conformity of civilization and its history. For a child the world is new, and reality boils with possible meanings, or rather, there is no completed reality: reality is to be seized and built upon. Here is the loony's portrait: "The lunatics, for the most part, consisted of discontented people, unestablished young couples, ambitious young men and their wives, few with children, none with property or responsibility" (243). They are human beings who still have one foot in childhood, maladapted people, or not yet adapted; in any case they are badly integrated into the adult world and its ordinary responsibilities. *People who refuse to burden themselves with a family*, who don't have to raise children and therefore continue the stranglehold of civilization and its process of indoctrination called education. These people conserve their capacity to dream, to imagine, to build reality. Of course they show a similarity to science fiction. The future is in childhood and freedom. Thus *Time Out of Joint* is a vibrant plea for the freedom to build a new reality against the tyranny hidden under our daily comfort and the reassuring universe of the TV set, that tyranny so well hidden we never see it even as it blinds us, the tyranny that treats its subversives as paranoiacs.

Science fiction is subversive, and space travel opens the doors of reality. "Now, as his ship left Earth, he passed from that experience to another, the experience of pure freedom" (244); we read a bit earlier that the climate on Venus had played a decisive role against cancer and mental illnesses, which are indeed civilized illnesses. Thus the Moon and Venus represent *another reality* as well, more than a simple political alternative. The Moon and the Earth are two antagonistic political realities, this is true, but the Moon is not made for adults like Vic Nielson, who is incapable of personal opinions.¹³ Is this to say that Ragle is still a child who cannot face his responsibilities? Ragle Gumm crosses all levels of reality, but he is certainly on the side of childhood. Is he a great child? He follows the fundamental instinct of mankind: the need for discovery, exploration, creation. Humanity has always behaved like this. Thus does Ragle take his life and destiny in charge, just as he does his responsibilities. The hallucinatory flashbacks to childhood at the end of the story show how difficult it is to come out of withdrawal, but he climbs in the rocket and leaves a dead reality behind. His gesture defies civilization since no one will be there to predict where the little missile will be the next time, and the Earth will be forced to surrender. This is no longer the action of a child refusing to grow up. This is, on the contrary, the action of an adult who accepts his childhood and its dreams not strangled by tyranny, and who recognizes that from these childhood dreams springs the ultimate leap that constitutes mankind's greatness. In the dreams of the child, the adult finds the keys of a freedom that is no longer an illusion.

NOTES

1. See Sutin's *Divine Invasions*. Here he mentions that this novel was the first to be published in hardcover format (94). It was only revised, not originally written, after Dick's marriage to Anne in 1959.
2. Sutin indicates that this novel was written in 1955 (*Divine Invasions* 90).
3. Manfred makes no distinction between dream and reality:
« *It rained gubbish, now; all was gubbish, wherever he looked. A group of those who didn't like him appeared at the end of the bridge and held up a loop of shark teeth. He was emperor. They crowned him with the loop, and he tried to thank them. But they forced the loop down past his head to his neck, and they began to strangle him. They knotted the loop and the shark teeth cut his head off. Once more he sat in the dark, damp basement with the powdery rot around him, listening to the tidal water lap-lapping everywhere. A world where gubbish ruled, and he had no voice; the shark teeth had cut his voice out. I am Manfred, he said.* » (152)
4. The phrase "the whole cosmic process, from the inception to final entropy" is found on page 119, when Ragle listens to the crystal set in Sammy's cabin.
5. Even if this is not the title Dick originally gave his novel (It was to be *Biography in Time*, as Sutin points out [*Divine Invasions* 94], but was rebaptized as such by the editor, Lippincott.), the expression "time out of joint" appears in a conversation between Vic and Ragle (62).
6. Horselover Fat is one of the main characters of *Valis*. See Star.
7. We are reminded of when Leo Bulero faces Barney Meyerson's ghost, and bangs his desk with his hands, saying: "The sound reality makes" (228).
8. Can one even dream of a more abstract nuclear family? Ragle and Margo's parents are never mentioned, even though they are brother and sister. It is a closed cell functioning as a vacuum in the United States of plastic that Dick one day calls Disneyland ("How to Build" 280), and that does indeed correspond to a sociological reality.
9. See Sutin, *Divine Invasions* 95.
10. The videorecorder was perfected in 1956 and immediately spread throughout American industry. The videotapes are therefore *not* a speculative element in *Time Out of Joint*, but simply an extrapolation.
11. This is indeed how Dick defines science fiction in a letter written in 1981 ("My Definition" 99-100).
12. On page 252 we learn that Ragle has undergone a certain conditioning to enhance his withdrawal symptoms. This is a different treatment than that reserved for the inhabitants of Old Town, but it is still a treatment.
13. The same may not be said of space travel and planetary colonization in subsequent novels. Mars as described in *Martian Time-Slip* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* is an absolutely atrocious universe, the scene of alienation itself. The theme of liberation through space conquest still anchors *Time Out of Joint* in the fifties.

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