The periods of the work

of

Philip K Dick (1928-1982)

Philip K. Dick's work as a professional writer extends from 1951, when he published his first short story, to the beginning of our century: many unpublished texts and excerpts from his correspondence have been published since his death. His extremely voluminous and private *Exegesis* was published in the 2010s.

The current fascination with this work, its relevance long after his death with so many screen adaptations, can be ambiguous. Is there a multiplication of interchangeable realities and worlds, parallel universes and gateways to improbable elsewhere? Can we say that Phil Dick presents us with a multitude of worlds through which his characters travel? We would like to demonstrate with this study the opposite, how the constant quest for a single, often elusive reality, beyond a multitude of alienating masks, animates the writer's entire approach. PKD is not at all the theoretician of virtual or hallucinatory universes as real as what is the world for us.

His work includes more than 130 short stories, around forty novels, most of them science fiction, "theoretical" texts, non-narrative, mostly written during the seventies, as well as a certain number of interviews. Let us propose a chronological analysis of these writings, looking for the clearest periods. We will endeavor to highlight the role of sometimes little-known novels, rather than proceeding with the classic summary of what every amateur has already read. The publication dates of the novels are retained as much as those of their writing, because they are more reliable, but also because the diffusion of a work among the public contributes to defining it.

I - The short story writer of the 50s and the first novels

After taking some courses in philosophy and German at the University of Berkeley, and then working as a record salesman, Dick chose to devote himself to writing professionally in the early 1950s. He has always written, from a very young age. Science fiction was then in the ghetto of airport novels. Has it fully emerged from it today, despite major works of world literature? In 6 years, from 1952 to 1958, his first period, there are 90 texts published under the name Philip K Dick, including 7 novels. The short stories are published in magazines such as *Planet Stories, If, worlds of science fiction, Astounding science fiction*, etc. What are the key themes of this first period?

1 – Many short stories, many movies

If we know Dick's taste for strange titles and the subversion of classic SF themes, we will be surprised by certain titles: *The Cosmic Poachers, Martians come in Clouds, Project: Earth, The Crystal Crypt*, etc. In fact, we can hardly deny the vernacular side of

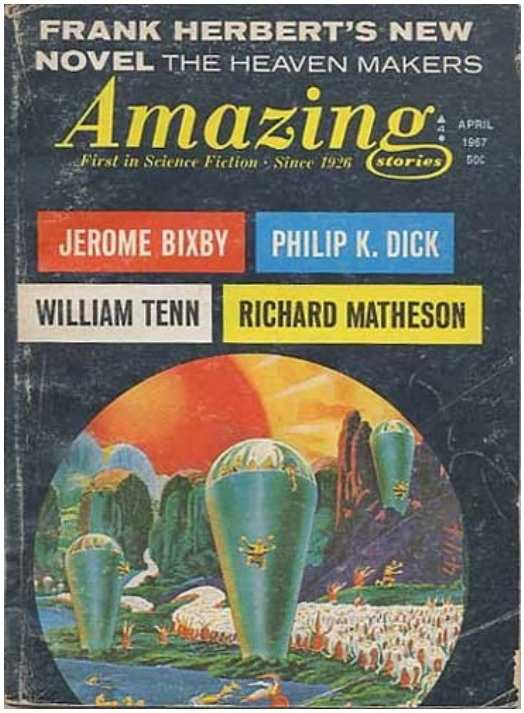
many of the short stories from this period. However, many published texts will be drafts of future novels, sometimes very important ones. For example, we are familiar with *The Penultimate Truth,* published at the beginning of the sixties. We will be surprised to find the first draft of this novel in one of the first short stories, *The Defenders*, published in 1953, which develops a parallel theme. Chapter 18 of the novel is also a reprise, sometimes word for word, of the short story *The Unreconstructed M* published in 1957. What is the common theme of these two stories? A reflection on the machine, capable of lying, of dissimulation, capable also of turning against the ends assigned to it by its builders. This must be seen as the origins of one of the central themes of the entire work, perhaps THE only theme Dick ever spoke of: simulacra. This simulacrum is first and foremost a device, a technical object, whose function is to maintain lies or illusions, particularly for political purposes.

An exemplary illustration of this theme is found in the short story "*Second Variety",* which inspired the film *Screamers* (1995). All of Dick's early days are found there. The setting of this short story is a world of destruction; the text insists in an extremely repetitive manner on the description of a world destroyed by war, where only ashes and ruins remain. Technology accentuates this predatory character of man to his own environment, but also in relation to himself.

In *Second Variety,* the new war invention consists of this little marvel called claws, an extremely deadly miniaturized destructive robot. Its sole purpose is to kill every human being. There are hundreds of them released into nature - or what remains of a nature - to eliminate the Russians who were able to survive the atomic attacks. The factories manufacturing the claws are entirely automated, underground build and forbidden to humans. These factories have started to build claws of a completely different kind: counterfeits of humans, in the most moving aspect of a victim of war: a wounded soldier, leaning on a crutch, and a child carrying a teddy bear, a miraculous survivor. The purpose of these simulacra is to enter entrenched bases, including allied ones, to eliminate all life there, by playing by their appearance on this universal feeling of pity towards a victim of war. Already, man defines himself by his empathy, as opposed to what is a machine in a very broad sense.

The dramatic argument of the novella is based on the fact that the characters know that there is another variety of simulacra that they have never seen. Everyone will begin to doubt the humanity of the other. It will of course be the one in which the main character has placed all his trust that will turn out to be the second variety of simulacra. The one to which he will grant access to the lunar base, humanity's last entrenched camp against its own creations: the only woman in the novella, the one who embodies the desire and hope for the survival of the species in this universe of death.

Let's measure the distance between the meaning of the film and that of the short story...



From this period on, Dick showed a contempt for psychoanalysis that he would never abandon. In the short story *The Chromium Fence*, the psychoanalyst is a government robot available in every housing block, responsible for maintaining the cultural and social norms imposed by a totalitarian power. We can already sense the radical theses of *Martian Time Slip*. But the irony towards psychoanalysis can take on a very subtle face, as in the famous short story *The Father-Thing*.

Published in December 1954, this short story contributed greatly to making Dick known in France. Published immediately in the french periodical *Fiction*, it quickly appeared in many collections, sometimes horror ones. There is no technological speculation in this short story, no dark or post-nuclear future as in many other texts. It is about a little boy who discovers that an invader has killed his father and taken his place; he therefore undertakes to fight him, only to finally commit the murder of the father - rigged, certainly, but a father anyways. If the fantastic side of this short story gives it a "passe partout" side which can explain its wide diffusion, if the processes of horror and suspense are remarkably used, we must above all not neglect the deliberate humor with which Dick treats one of his favorite themes of supermarket psychoanalysis!

The majority of movie adaptations, almost all after the year 2000, are those of short stories from this period: for example the *Electric Dreams* (2017) series which often deviates from the plot of the original short stories, the very well-known *Minority Report* (2002) *,* or even *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011)*, Impostor* (2001)... It's really a pity that the great novels of the 60s have had so few adaptations.

2 – The first novels

This first period of Philip K Dick's work can be divided into two, thematically if not chronologically. Very early on, around 1954, Dick began a career as a novelist. It was in this broader, freer framework that his creativity would construct the outline of central themes that would take on their full dimension in the 1960s. From the many short stories of the 1950s, an undeniable impression of professionalism emerges, but also a very deep belonging to his time, an absence of radical thematic specificity. If we can find there today the roots of *The Penultimate Truth*, *The Simulacra,* or even *Our Friends from Frolix 8*, the reason is because we possess the keys to a whole work whose importance is known. Let us beware of retrospective illusion! But it is only in a novelistic framework that Dickian themes will reach maturity, sometimes not without difficulty as we will see with regard to *Time out of Joint.* Dick will often publish ideas, starting

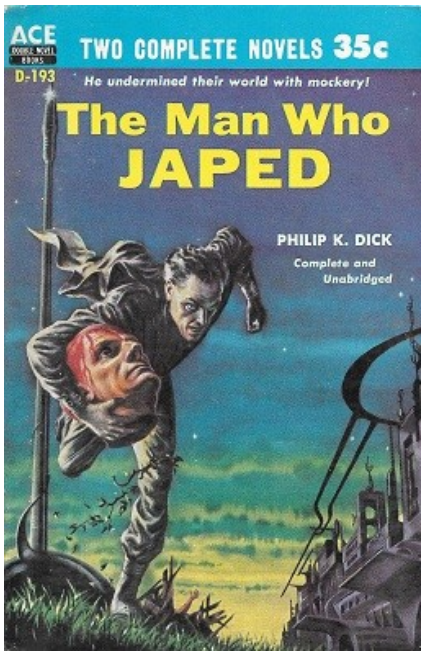
points, even unfinished drafts (*Stand-by*), but his major works will almost always be novels, except perhaps in the great period of 1963/64 [1].

Dick then began writing several novels, some of which remained in his armored filing cabinet until his burglary in 1971. In 1956, he wrote the curious *Broken Bubble*, which describes an absolutely ordinary America, without any science fiction elements. Although Dick always sought recognition in the field of mainstream literature, he only managed to bring science fiction out of the ghetto of airport novels (some would say that's not so bad...). Only one of these mainstream novels would be published during his lifetime (*Confessions of a crap artist).* Although this *Broken Bubble* is not Dick's greatest novel, it is curious to note a style very different from his science fiction texts, which sometimes comes curiously close to... Marguerite Duras! Jim Briskin's favorite character also appears for the first time, as does the very particular talent for psychological intrigues and characters who seem so close to us, so real, so human, that we will find in all his works. The character of the Dickian novel takes his consistency in his humanity, in his subjectivity, never is he a pretext for the exploration of an imaginary universe, as SF gives us many examples.

The first published novel is called *Solar Lottery,* it is a science fiction text. Everything has been said about the influence of Van Vogt on it, which already presents a simulacrum that submits humanity. We are perhaps less interested in the following novels, maybe minor, and yet... The great themes of the sixties are already outlined there. For example, the morbid intuition of the machine and the alienation of man to it is very clear in *Vulcan's Hammers*. The government of the planet is ensured by the tyranny of a gigantic computer, and the man in charge is only one of its minions, who experiences in a very painful way the contact with this foreign, cold and terrifying intelligence. But above all the enterprise of liberating humanity is itself organized by another computer. The leader of the resistance is a classic Dickian character, present in almost all the novels: a genius tinkerer, a repairer of machines, who derives his livelihood from his submission to them, from his status as a man alienated from their productions. We find such a character at the center of the short novel *The Variable Man*, a title that could also be understood as "the role of the human variable in a universe totally entrusted to machines."

[1]See in particular the masterpiece *The Days of Perky Pat,* as well as the later *The Faith of Our Fathers.*

A specifically dickian effect is found in his second published novel, *The Man who Japed.* Here we encounter Dick's own political concerns, the importance of which will only increase. Totalitarianism begins in the very structure of the city and of housing. The characters in this novel live in gigantic collective housing complexes and are subject to block meetings where their morality and behavior can be called into question, and where they can be subjected to extremely serious and shameful sanctions (this is where the origin of the urban planning of *The Simulacra* must be seen.). A system allows each co-resident to accuse or defend the one placed under this modern pillory without their voice being recognized. This must be seen as the ultimate achievement of the Christian confession, as the most complete alienation of privacy and freedom in the name of a bigoted and narrow moralism. And what flats! A simple, cramped room, where everything folds and unfolds at will in the most complete discomfort.



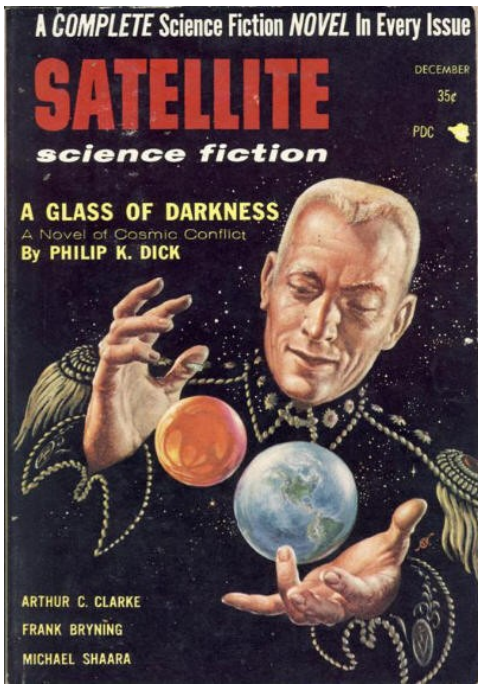
But Allan Purcell, the main character, suddenly finds himself, without knowing how, in a universe he doesn't know, married to a woman who isn't his but whom he secretly desires in his "normal" universe, living in a gigantic mansion very different from his shabby hutch. And this universe begins to disintegrate, the walls gradually become transparent and voices invade his mind, making him understand that he is under anesthesia in a psychiatric testing room. What he perceives is a hallucinatory universe from

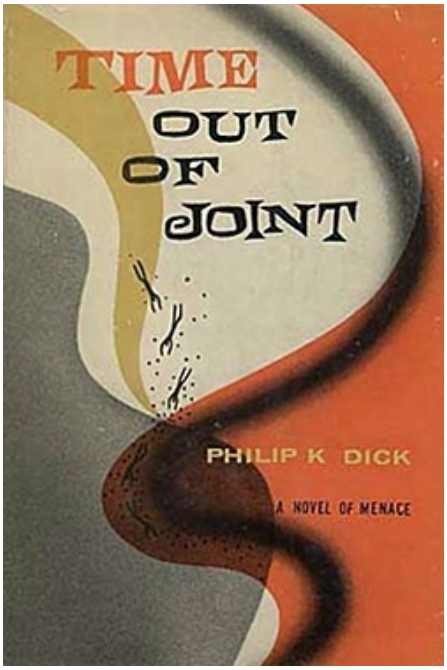
which he is not about to emerge. Readers of *Lies, Inc* or *Ubik* would think they recognize something; one can only be very surprised in retrospect to see Purcell discover a set of machines hidden in the walls, designed to make him believe that he is in an illusory universe, when in reality he is on another planet where he has been transported, unconscious. There is indeed a single world, a single reality and not a plurality of subjective universes all more or less rigged. *The Eye in the Sky*, a well-known masterpiece of this first period, will function in a similar way, by affirming *the unity of reality beyond subjective universes* which are only illusory. It is with *The Eye in the Sky* that we hear some cracks, but the break with Van Vogt is not complete.

The real text of rupture towards the second period, the first two thirds of the sixties, is an unjustly unknown, atypical novel. *The Cosmic Puppets*, the first version of which was published in 1956 (A *Glass of Darkness)*, but which was probably written much earlier, presents itself as a fantasy tale taking place entirely in our time, without any element of classic SF. It is very curious to see ghosts in a Dick's novel! The conclusion brings in (already!) Zoroastrian divinities whose confrontation constitutes the stake of the plot, Ormuzd and Ahriman. It is striking to note this impotence of the good principle, this domination of evil over the world, the extreme danger that the good principle represents for the mental balance of the one who contemplates its nature, and above all this impossibility of knowing from the outset which side each protagonist is on.

The break is the following intuition: " *something is wrong!"* Ted Barton takes advantage of a few days of vacation to return to his hometown, but he immediately notices that his town has completely changed: there are no street names left, nor any shops, and he even discovers in the archives of the local newspaper that he himself died in infancy... So Ted Barton *doubts*. His world, in its most everyday aspects, and even his identity, are threatened, or have already disappeared. Where is this vanished reality, or rather am I not myself in possession of false memories? How can it be that I died in infancy? This is what the world tells me. Is this world real, or is it then I who am unreal?

This is what worries Ted Barton, the ancestor of Ragle Gumm.





II - The shifting realities of the psychedelic era

1 – The first great novels

The first work of this second period is also one of the best known: *Time out of Joint*[1], published in 1959 after a year of near silence. The reader of *The Cosmic Puppets* will find many common points with this intuition that something is wrong, that the universe is rigged, that something abnormal has happened and that there is most certainly someone around us who is lying to us, because he knows the key to the enigma. A form of adaptation of this novel to the cinema was made under the title *The Truman Show*.

In many ways, these two novels represent a search for new modes of expression in science fiction, even a subversion of the genre. It is no longer a question of improbable futures, shiny or deadly technologies, or of post-nuclear universes of death: it is a question of building a world that will gradually disintegrate, but that the reader knows well since it is America in 1959! How to make science fiction in the present? The characters are no longer transparent vectors for the reader's wonder, or superhuman heroes con-

[1]See a full review of this novel: https://www.jazzcomputer.org/phlip-k-dicks-time-out-of-joint/

fronted with extraterrestrial customs and traditions. The main character, Ragle Gumm, has a certain psychological depth, and cultivates doubt and self-accusation to himself as well as his work. He is only the winner of a newspaper competition, *Where Will the Little Green Man Be Next ?* He even manages to make a living from it! A useless job if ever there was one, to take care of little green men. That is to say, if we read Dick between the lines as always, writing science fiction.

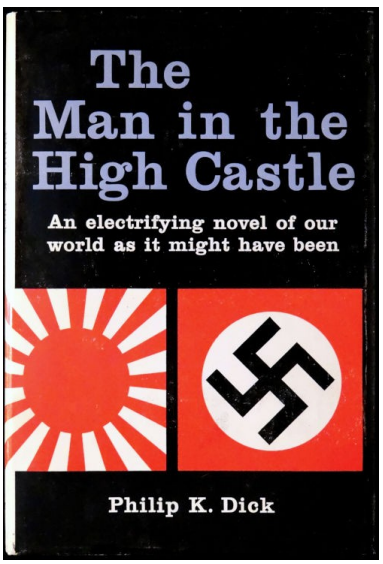
This novel is often presented as a challenge to the notion of mental illness, particularly paranoia. The end of the novel certainly allows for such an interpretation, as Ragle Gumm will discover that the entire world around him is in reality a vast deception constructed around him, one that holds vital significance for millions of human beings. In fact, the madman is right; what the "madman" intuits is, in a sense that remains to be explored, *real. Martian Time-slip* will take care of this.

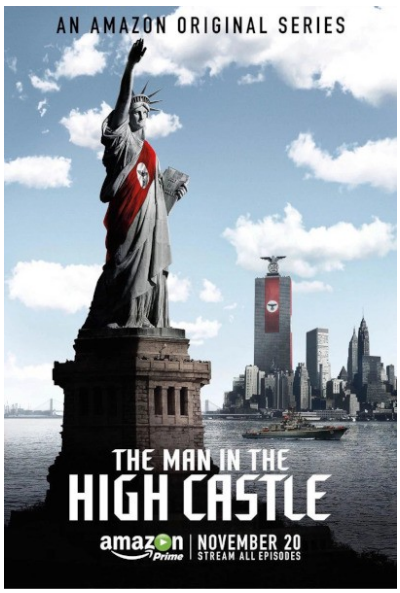
But a careful reading of the text shows that the last part of the novel (from the moment Ragle and his brother-in-law steal a delivery truck to get out of the Old Town) is very different from what precedes it. A central point of the novel is not explained, and is certainly not explicable, in terms of a lie knowingly organized by the political powers. This is the famous passage where a public garden refreshment stand disappears in front of an increasingly worried Ragle. A tangible, visible, used object dissolves into the atmosphere and in its place remains only a small label: "SOFT DRINK STAND," which Ragle hastens to put away in a small box with other labels, traces of similar experiences. No conspiracy can account for this, especially since the context of this experience is situated in an explicitly philosophical context. A few lines earlier, Ragle has just wondered whether in the beginning lies the act, as Goethe's Faust thinks, or the Word of the Fourth Gospel. It seems that at the bottom of reality is language, in a sense that remains quite mysterious. This is what Ragle will say when giving his labels to his brother-in-law: "I give you words, I offer you reality."

This idealistic point of view (Dick also alludes to Berkeley) also evokes *The Cosmic Puppets*, in this passage where the main character and an old tramp, who remembers the world before the great manipulation, succeed by their will in bringing back to reality objects that have been altered, or have disappeared. They begin with small, insignificant things, then manage to transform a group of slums into a public garden, the true public

garden that occupied its rightful place before a strange fate fell upon this city. Reality, the sensible presence of things, is doubtful, and malleable by the mind. How can we become aware of this? This is where *Time out of Joint* makes a break: at the bottom of things lies language, if not the Word. But who holds this word? Surely not man, perhaps that very old intelligence named I Ching.

What is the I Ching? It has two aspects. First, it is a rather particular instrument of divination since it does not predict the future but analyzes the present and what we can expect from it. Second, it is a very ancient intelligent being of Chinese origin with whom we communicate by means of coins or chopsticks, and the book called I Ching or "Book of Transformations". In this aspect, the I Ching began a remarkable literary career in 1962 for its two novels, one real and the other ideal. The "ideal" novel (by which we can understand "non-existent") is called " *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy"*, the I Ching used Hawthorne Abendsen to write it concretely. It is a work on the index in the world where it was written. The "real" novel, the one you can buy in bookstores, is called " *The Man in the High Castle"* and the I Ching won the Hugo Award in 1962 for this little masterpiece. A television series adaptation was broadcasted from 2015 (it departs considerably from the novel by deepening it over its 4 seasons and extending the plot in a rather captivating way).





Even though we know that Dick was fascinated by the history of the Second World War and that he did a lot of historical research to write this novel, we cannot reduce its meaning to "what would have happened if the Axis had won the war?". Firstly because the turning point in history does not take place during the war, but at the time of Roosevelt's assassination, which succeeded, instead of failing as in our world. Secondly because Dick's point of view is also a political reflection on the Japanese defeat, and therefore implicitly on the use of the Bomb. Dick reports that he tries in this novel to think like a Japanese student of the fifties. This is a first mirror effect.

But above all, the undermining of classic science fiction, begun in *Time out of Joint,* continues. Phil Dick here founds a new literary genre, which will later be called uchronia, lately considered as a form of sci-fi. Thus, the action of a science fiction novel takes place in the immediate past, at the beginning of the fifties. Then, the narration is completely fragmented, since several stories unfold which do not connect, remain divergent, and maintain only indirect relations between them. Within the same place, we see characters evolve who only meet fortuitously, pursuing goals that are not opposed, but different (Childan, Mr. Tagomi, Frink). If Mr. Tagomi's experience does have a connection with Juliana Frink's quest, it is up to the reader to construct such a connection, which is not self-evident. More generally, everything in the narration of this novel is to be taken at a second degree.

Finally, it is still very unorthodox to write a novel by consulting an oracle at every crucial point in the plot. This is exactly what Dick did: he wrote *The Man in the High Castle* using the I Ching, as do the characters he portrays, and as does the writer he features, Hawthorne Abendsen, whose book *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* was in fact written by the I Ching. However, the world described by the I Ching is indeed a world where the Allies won the war, but it is not ours... There are three books, three divergent realities, or even more, and it is impossible to know where reality lies, where illusion begins, and what is a sham. The I Ching may well be the biggest liar in the whole affair...

The presence of simulacra and doubt about reality are constant. Many characters have assumed identities and pursue obscure and hidden goals. Baynes is Wegener, Yatabe is General Tedecki, Joe is not an Italian truck driver but an assassin in pursuit of Abendsen, who himself lives not in a castle bristling with weapons but in a normal

house. Frank Frink's real name is Fink, he lives in the Japanese zone (the United States of the Pacific) hiding his Jewish origins. His work consists of producing fake historical objects that the Japanese lovingly collect, and fakes are so abundant that only their certificate of authenticity constitutes a guarantee: it is still language that attests to a reality powerless to do so by itself. The turning point in Frink's life occurs when he decides to produce real handcrafted objects, which are not copies of anything; he thus gains access to real work, not a sham work. He escapes the condition of Jack Isidore, whom we will discuss. It is by contemplating one of the authentically American artisanal productions that Mr. Tagomi will pass for a few moments into our world, the one that the I Ching did *not* describe in his novel.

It is thus clear that the goal is not the multiplication of alternative realities for the sake of their spectacle, but rather the quest for what is real beyond illusion. To this extent, Dick has long since separated himself from Van Vogt's themes since, as we have just seen, the whole point is to escape the multiplication of illusions.

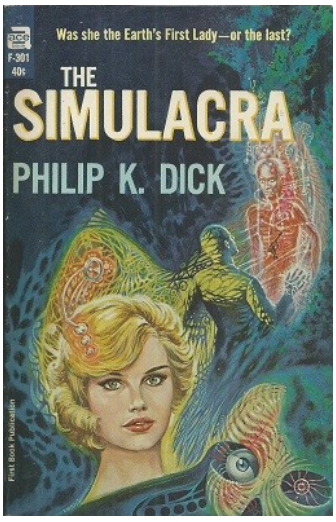
However, if the lie is permanent, if reality is always doubtful, condemning us to the alienation of a simulacrum of work and to the despair of our dereliction, the following question remains: who has built such a mendacious world? Who produces these multifaceted simulacra? There are three possible answers to this question: first, a political one, which will develop the notion of tyranny on this basis of illusion and lies. Then, a psychological answer, in which the author will explore the infinite subtleties of the feminine soul. Finally, a much more disturbing answer, consisting of searching for the Big Liar in hallucinations, drugs, or psychosis, an answer which discerns a more or less transcendent being capable of manipulating reality. In what is often considered as Philip K. Dick's greatest period, the years 1962/64, all these answers coexist.

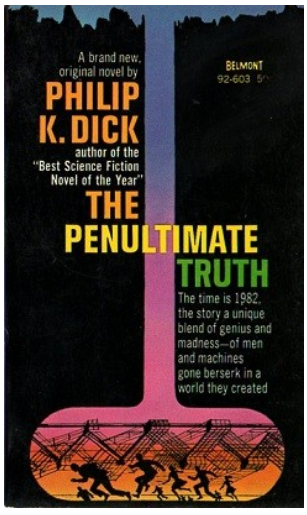
2 - Tyranny structuring the world

Lest's begin with political power as a means of manipulating reality. We are dealing with two very well-known texts: *The Penultimate Truth* and *The Simulacra.* This theme is omnipresent in Dick's thinking, runs through quite all writings, through all eras, and gives a directly political scope to all of his work. Many novels are specifically devoted to this, and our two novels are still symmetrical, like twins. If we understand politics as "that which concerns the organization of life in common," urban planning, the way in which people live together, and therefore their housing, is directly political. These two novels imagine a radical solution, and in fact similar despite appearances, to the problem of overpopulation. In *The Penultimate Truth,* all of humanity is confined underground, in immense, cramped complexes where promiscuity and compartmentalization are dehumanizing: it is yet another figure of alienation. A radical solution if ever there was one, which allows for a division of society into two castes that is much more effective, from the point of view of narrative coherence, than that retained in *The Simulacra*. The habitat in this novel corresponds to a classic Dickian theme: the gigantic and sprawling residential complex of *conapts*, already mentioned in connection with *The Man who Japed.* The lower the number of the complex, the higher the social prestige achieved (in *The Three Stigmata*, Barney Feyerson will agree to sacrifice his marriage to a more favorable residence number). This even evokes a point of passage between our two novels since it mentions the inauguration by Jim Briskin of the first entirely underground residential complex. Height of alienation to gigantism, summit of dehumanization through the ideological valorization of totally illusory qualities, the *conapt* is the figure of the city simulacrum, of the illusion of a free and personal living space. "He abhorred gigantism in itself; because this gigantism had destroyed the American system of free enterprise. "

If we understand the word "politics" in a more restricted sense, as the organization of power and the methods of its preservation, here is the decisive question: how is the illegitimacy of power, tyranny, maintained in place by the most odious lies? Society is divided in two: first, those who know, a very small minority of privileged people living in insolent luxury (the tyrant is first of all the one who eats the sweets of which he has de-

prived the majority, reduced to simulacra of food, synthetic meat, etc., since *Solar Lottery*). Then a large majority of dehumanized victims of lies, knowing and accepting for false reasons their situation of being dominated. Who carries the knowingly maintained lie that keeps humanity in its servitude? The simulacrum, no longer as a political system, but as a technical object. Let us note the reversal of perspective between the "rough draft" of *The Penultimate Truth*, the short story *The Defenders*, which dates from the 1950s, and the 1964 novel. If humanity hides underground in both cases because the surface is presumed to be too radioactive, just good enough for machines that continue the war, the later version is much darker. The machines no longer demonstrate a wisdom superior to ours: they are no longer anything but the servile instruments of man, or rather of those who choose to reserve the entire planet for themselves, leaving the majority of humanity to languish underground. It is therefore a matter of lying, and of constructing a simulacrum of a supreme leader, a machine that must be programmed in a sufficiently clever way so that its messages are believed. Behind the leader who appears on the screens is a set of cogs, cables, wires, and above all a small army of wealthy people whose main occupation consists of programming the monster, maintaining the media lie. They are ultimately just as alienated from the simulacrum as the victims of this totalitarian propaganda, these Jack Isidore figures, but their professional occupation takes on a criminal character of a completely different magnitude. At the top of the hierarchy is another monster, who is only human in appearance: a tyrant whose body has become artificial through organ transplants, over which he ensures a monopoly.





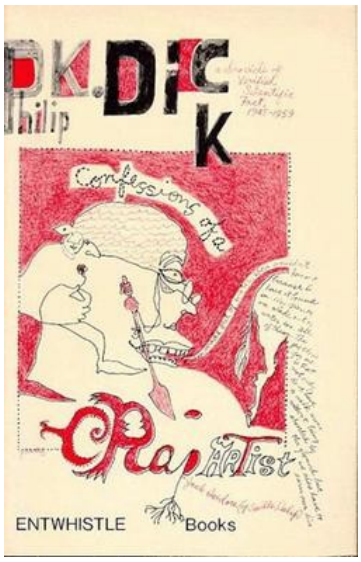
3 - The woman, source of life and worries

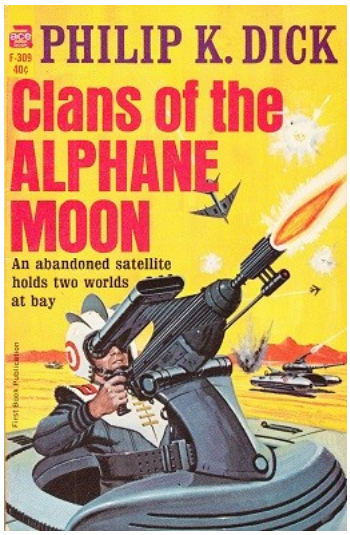
Women are, for Dick as for others, a problem. We will confine ourselves to the strictly literary study of this question, whatever the biographical significances elsewhere widely described, in particular here the relationship with PKD's third wife, Anne. Two novels from this period are particularly significant, even if this theme is encountered elsewhere: *Clans of the Alphane Moon* and *Confessions of a Crap Artist.* These novels explore the link between femininity, reality and vitality. In the *Confessions (...)*, poor Charley Hume literally has his life and existence drunk by his wife, whom he will not even manage to kill. This woman, Fay, is a true monster, image of the Nietzschean will to power: she absorbs everything that comes within her reach, her victims no longer draw their reality except from the one who vampirizes them. Charley only works to build a world, a family universe, according to the classic and conformist desires of his wife, who is the first manipulator of reality. Later texts will show this, for example *We can build you*. But a certain Charlotte also says "I am life"! She who forces man to work and to build a world whose standards and contents she has set, it is she who poses this very concrete problem: how to provide for the needs of a family, it is finally she who gives life, as a mother. Considerations may be trivial, but which the characters in Dick's novels systematically have a bitter experience of.

In *Clans of the Alpha Moon*, our second novel, the main character is divorcing his aggressive and domineering wife, who harasses him and explains that she will always cost him more than he can pay. Poor Chuck Rittersdorf will have to use an alien drug to stop sleeping and to be able to hold two different jobs, to never stop working. If the woman shapes reality, she is still a source of alienation: she dispossesses the man of himself.

But things are not that simple. Alongside these ever-so-seductive vixens are other, much more sympathetic creatures, such as Joan Trieste in this same novel, who helps Chuck, and whose job is also to bring life back through paranormal powers. The wife of Nat Anteil, Fay Hume's lover in *Confessions*, also seems to have a "normal" personality.

We meet yet another central Dickian character with Jack Isidore, the nutcase who writes his *Confessions* and describes his sister Fay's deadly relationship with her husband, Charley. His job? He resculpts worn tires to make them look new, for the benefit of a boss who is understandably not very honest. One of his distant descendants is still active in *Our Friends fromFrolix 8,* while we have already met a simulacra maker in *The Man in the High Castle.* Nick Appelton says that his job is a family tradition at the beginning of *The Galactic Pot Healer*. In *Alphane Moon,* Chuck Rittersdorf has no other occupation: he is a simulacra programmer for the government. He will virtually accompany his wife on an expedition to this distant moon populated by psychotics abandoned to their own devices, piloting a government simulacra from Earth. Incognito, he hopes to kill her. He assumes normal social relationships and even manages to impose himself on his wife in this artificial form, something he is incapable of doing in the flesh. Let us recall that Mary Rittersdorf is a psychiatrist and marriage counselor…





All these characters have a certain psychological depth; it is more their problems and the confrontation of their personalities that give meaning to these novels than the exploration of futuristic universes. Dick presents a definition of the human as being endowed with empathy, or Pauline compassion. It is the capacity to be moved by the successes and failures, the joys as well as the sufferings of another human or, more broadly, another living being. This definition runs through all his work; it is fundamental.

PKD depicts extraterrestrial races with great humor, a theme quite rare for him. The character of Lord Running Clam, a large, shapeless Ganymedean fungus sprawled on a nightclub couch, is memorable. These Ganymedean fungi are not lacking in empathy, even to excess... It is also a factor of communication, of establishing a common reality through an agreement of minds. It takes the individual out of his solitude, but this is so rare, so difficult to establish! Dick gives us a poignant example in this scene from *Confessions* where Fay Hume's lover comes to visit the deceived husband in his hospital room where he is painfully recovering from a heart attack, probably due to the overly demanding sexual activity imposed on him by his wife. Charley describes Fay's true personality to his rival, and Nat Anteil can only silently agree. Thus in this agreement is established an authentic communication, the foundation of truth and reality beyond any paranoid delusions, in a real human relationship. But it is so brief, so fleeting…

4 - Alienation, despair, and doubtful reality

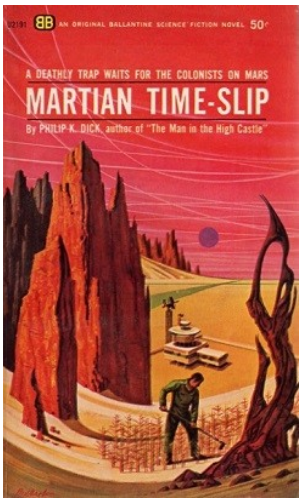
Another paradox of the *Clans of the Alphane Moon*: the relationship between mental illness and reality, how to define mental health, if this notion has any meaning. If the society of the Moon is organized into castes corresponding to pathologies that psychiatry defines, we must recognize that our own society functions little better than theirs. If science fiction is often defined as a metaphor for the present, here it is its direct image. The novel ends with the psychiatrist (Chuck's wife, obviously) finding himself mad! This novel presents a close interweaving between women, political power, and the relationship between psychosis and reality. The fundamental question (what reality does the psychotic reach?) is, however, only indirectly addressed. It will be dealt with in what is for us the masterpiece of this period, one of Dick's greatest novels: *Martian Time-Slip*.

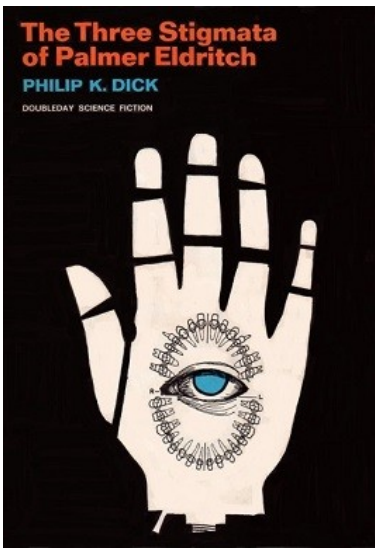
This novel is often considered minor, compared to the masterpiece *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch's*. The french critic Marcel Thaon even goes so far as to consider that his conclusion is only a prefiguration of the K-Priss experiments of Leo Bulero and Meyerson. However...

The two novels actually share the same theme. Can-D plays the same role as neurosis in *Martian Time-Slip*, since both serve to maintain the fiction of a vanished cultural universe. The Martian colonists in the *Three Stigmata* take this drug to virtually return to a bygone Earth, unable to bear a meaningless existence on a hostile and alien planet Mars. Their alienation is threefold: the drug and its illusory universe, Mars, and the dying Earth from which they are permanently cut off. However, neurosis in *Time-Slip* is just as illusory; it is also a cultural fiction, designed to maintain a historical coherence, a "common world" (*Koinos Kosmos*) which has only arbitrary and artificial relationships with reality. Jack Bohlen, the main character, discovers, while meditating on his psychotic past and the nature of what is taught at the Public School, *that there is no psychosis*, or that the psychiatric or psychoanalytic view is completely devoid of any connection to reality. The constitution of a pathology called "neurosis" is completely illusory. Two key moments in the novel express this very clearly: Heliogabalus, the moving and mysterious Martian, declares that "all psychoanalysis is nothing but pretentious imbecility". Then, Jack Bohlen has a hallucination of a schizophrenic nature which shows

him the psychoanalyst of the novel in the form of "a cold thing composed of metal wires and buttons, totally inhuman, without the slightest flesh". Bohlen arrives at a clearly metaphysical vision of the *absolute reality* of the psychiatrist Milton Glaub, a vision *sub speciae aeternitati*. It is the ultimate expression of the dangerous ridicule, opportunistic careerism, and consummate incompetence of the psychoanalyst.

The second parallel between *Martian Time-Slip.* and *The Three Stigmata* lies in the link between mental illness (autism or schizophrenia, not neurosis) and Chew-Z. Reality is not to be explored through comfortable illusions; on the contrary, it is an extremely dangerous journey that dissociates reality from the subject himself, and first of all in what constitutes the very texture of his being: time. Chew-Z dislocates time, since any intake of Chew-Z ends up in the future, or rather in one of the probable futures (except during K-Priss's first experiment where Teyerson is thrown back into the past). The prescience granted by this dangerous drug results in the nothingness of the soul: Leo Bulero, like Keyerson, becomes ghosts; one passes one's hand through it. In the same way, the autism of the little Manfred Steiner in *Martian Time-Slip* leads him to perceive reality only as his ultimate future, that is, a vegetative existence as a bedridden old man artificially kept alive. If Chew-Z is the means by which Eldritch manipulates the reality of the one who indulges in it, Manfred will insinuate himself into the mind of Jack Bohlen, the former schizophrenic. He will completely tear apart his reality by sending him several times into divergent futures more and more contaminated by the essence of reality, entropy, rot, universal degradation, *gnawing*. The two novels are twins, one deals with drugs, the other with mental illness, keys to access reality and to the one who manipulates it.





Martian Time-Slip is a peak in many ways, even if we do not want to diminish the importance of *The Three Stigmata*. We know that Dick would have liked *Ubik* adapted as a movie. He wished the degradation of objects and the staging of increasing entropy in the novel to be relayed in the making of the film itself by the use of increasingly obsolete cinematic techniques [1]. He applied this very strange consideration to his own novels: *Martian Time-Slip* is without a doubt the stylistic peak of the narrative dislocation, insofar as this dislocation expresses that of the characters themselves [2]! Dick achieves in chapters 10 and following of Martian *Time-Slip* a masterful correspondence between what he describes and the way in which he says it. The reader no longer knows at all *when* the scene he is reading takes place. In 56 pages (chapters 10, 11 and 12), the narrator or point of view changes sixteen times, the back and forth between present and future is constant. The same scene begins four times, or rather Jack Bohlen has the involuntary premonition of it three times because of Manfred, and we do not witness the "real" unfolding of the evening because of another psychotic interlude from Jack! The result? A complete invasion of the reader's mind, who should then feel a very deep impression of unease, also called intuition of reality. *The very structure of the text has an ontological scope*. In no other novel is this so clear, and one could almost say that all the other novels of this period do nothing but revolve around these pages.

5 – The electric sheep

Dick's concerns in 1964 are, as we see, "relatively" dark. In the end, everything is a simulacra, and we are doomed to that cursed triad of "alienation, despair, and dubious reality" which are the true stigmata of Palmer Eldritch.

---

[1]Alexander Star, *The God in the Trash*, New Republic, December 6, 1993, p.40

[2]By narrative dislocation, we mean the process, constant in this period, of juxtaposing the points of view of different characters, of superimposing several plots which do not all meet (The *Man in the High Castle* represents the first use of this process). Such a process can give artificial results, and Dick will encounter its limits in *The Crack in Space.* In this novel, the juxtaposition of the various points of view still reintroduces a chronological narrative framework. Dick does not achieve the juxtaposition of simultaneous events or the dislocation of time as in *The Man in the High Castle* or *Martian Time-slip*. This effect is characteristic only of this period, and may even contribute to delimiting it.

Doctor Bloodmoney, Now Wait for Last Year, and *Counter-Clock World* are three other relatively important novels from those years, but they pose the question of reality in a less radical manner than the preceding texts. The culmination of this period will again concern the theme of simulacrum, much to Rick Deckard's dismay.

The novel in question is today better known as *Blade Runner,* it is the only truly fundamental novel that has been adapted for the screen [1]. If Dick moderately approved Ridley Scott's project [2], the fact remains that the movie will completely depart from the indications that Dick himself wrote in 1968 [3]. It constitutes a clear and constant contradiction of the novel, and to be appreciated, it must be considered as an autonomous work, which has only in common with the novel to feature a killer of fugitive androids. Main absentees: Jack Isidore (him again!), Rachel Rosen's double, artificial animals, and especially Mercerism. Main contradiction: the profound nature of Rachel Rosen's schemes around Rick Deckard. Narrative divergence: the nature of suspense, classic and easy in the film, endowed with a certain philosophical depth in the novel, whose great protagonist is Doubt. Let's look at all these elements in detail, leaving aside any controversy with the movie, and we will understand why this novel is an unknown masterpiece.

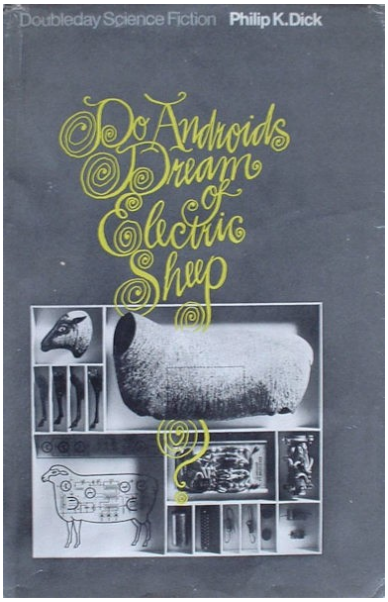
Whether we reread the text about silence, the description of Edward Munch's painting, *The Scream*, or the final triumph of entropy, we will notice the immense literary evolution undertaken since the first stories. These pages are among the most beautiful and moving ever written by Dick; we will have to wait for the best pages of *A Scanner Darly*, in a completely different style, to find such in-depth work on language. These three passages concern the intuition of what Jack Isidore calls *kipple* , what Manfred Steiner called *gubble* , and what we "normal" humans call entropy. The struggle against degradation, dereliction, solitude and meaninglessness, did Dick ever speak of anything else? The figure of Mercer is itself a struggle against entropy. Mercer climbs a barren, solitary slope, wounded by stones thrown by the invisible hands of a hostile universe condemning us to the putrefaction into which he will inevitably fall, to restart again and again. His Sisyphean dimension is clear; do we think of the eternity of Christ's suffering?

[1]Except maybe *Confessions of a Crap Artist.*
[2]Lawrence Sutin, *Divine Invasions,* op. cit., p.430
[3]Cf. Lawrence Sutin, *The Shifting realities of Philip K Dick,* p.155 ff.

However, Mercer is human, deeply human, himself consumed by alcohol, illness, and old age; he himself has the appearance of a simulacrum. There is a lie, of course, behind this strange television program that features him and through which every human can enter into communion with all of humanity through Mercer's suffering: all one has to do is grab a small black box, called an "empathy box". Because even when the forces of death and destruction that are the androids reveal the deception, Jack Isidore will still feel Mercer's presence. The presence of humanity capable, like any living species, of fighting against the final blow with compassion. This is lacking in the androids that Rick Deckard hunts; it serves as a criterion, a boundary between man and android, between the living and the inanimate, between presence and solitude. Indeed, the encounter with the simulacrum is an experience of loneliness : already that of Jack Bohlen (in *Martian TIme-Slip)*, also that of Jack Isidore confronted with absolute evil at the end of the novel, when the true nature of his companions capable of torturing an animal, an innocent spider, is revealed. This loneliness explains the solitude of Mercer, a man suffering in the face of the universe, like that of Deckard having triumphed for such a brief instant over lies at the end of the novel, becoming aware of and assuming the solitude of humanity in the face of entropy in what must be called a mystical experience. But how many doubts and reversals to get there!

Dick is constantly playing with his reader as the novel is trapped from start to finish. When you think you have an interpretation, it quickly collapses. Throughout the novel, Deckard doubts. Of everything.

Professionally, Deckard doubts that he is dealing with a human being, since his job is to kill androids. But he will be led to wonder if, ultimately, they are not at least as human as he is, for example in that they are capable of sensitivity, and even artistic creativity. He himself will begin to feel compassion for those he is charged with "reforming," and he will even doubt his own humanity. Not that he will be led to believe that he is a simulacrum (which will also happen in a *false* change of reality). He will come to doubt his task itself, considering it inhuman, and himself inferior to the androids.



Dick's reader may not be a professional doubter. This explains the vertigo caused by the ultimate plot twist in chapter 17. While we believe that humanity can reconcile with androids, that the villainous Deckard (isn't he a dubious character, a cop?) finally comes to terms with the fact that they are alive and capable of love, including in the carnal sense of the term, everything is reversed: Rachel Rosen only slept with Deckard to prevent him from eliminating the remaining androids. All of this introduces such a psychological upheaval in the reader's mind that once again we see that the form, the narrative, has a metaphysical scope: we experience the same doubt as Deckard, the same reversal of perspective.

III - First Lights

Establishing a third period in Dick's work, which would cover the end of the sixties until the great silence extending from 1972 to 1977, may seem debatable. Where should we place the limit between the two periods? On what basis? We can only resort to somewhat artificial arguments, but it will seem to any attentive reader that from 1969 onwards [1], we enter a corpus of texts that form a unity. Perhaps a distinct period, more certainly a form of conclusion to the whole of an approach begun at the end of the fifties.

[1]We are still considering release dates.

Even if they are still very close to the novels of the beginning of the decade, the texts of this period present strong points of convergence. Stylistically, Dick renounced the fragmented narrative of the years 1963 / 65. Moreover, after having slowed down considerably his production from 1966 to 1968 (only four novels, and some short stories, we have seen that these novels were not all masterpieces), Dick published in 1969 and 70 texts that are sometimes considered as the most accomplished. These are *Galactic Pot Healer, We can build you*, *A Maze of Death*, *Our Friends from Frolix 8*, *Ubik* , of course, and finally *Flow My Tears, the Policeman said*, this latter constituing a hinge towards the last period.

Let's start with *Our Friends from Frolix 8*, perhaps too hastily classified among the minor novels. As a political text, it has its place in this period. Let's look at the themes: *Ubik* deals with money and the commercial relationship in general, *Galactic Pot Healer* with work, the relationship with the employer, and the alienation that is correlative to it. *A Maze of Death* develops the articulation between humanity and reality, emphasizing the degradation of human relationships as reality becomes unbearable. The women theme run through all the texts, as usual, and are omnipresent as simulacra are. We are missing the political theme, found in all the other periods: it is dealt with in *Our Friends from Frolix 8.*

If PKD has given up on completely fragmented narratives, he does not abandon the multiplicity of perspectives that various characters have on the same plot (is it really the same one, anyway?). This is how *Do Androids...*is constructed, this is how the staging of Willis Gram, the tyrant of *Frolix 8* , and Nick Appelton, the last known descendant of Jack Isidore in the year of grace 2135, is built. Gram is a tyrant in that he considers public affairs as an extension of his personal interests. The exercise of his power is reduced to resolving the problems of his divorce, or to finally admitting his complete incompetence in view of the scale of the problems he is facing. We are dealing with a dictator who governs from his bed, his special guard being in charge of putting his pillows in place, the director of his police asked to bring him his breakfast. Which police chief complies with good grace: he is only there to serve his master, a totalitarian state, and he is not lacking in competence for that. He is a zealous, efficient civil servant, with a sense

of reason of state, the perfect meticulous cop that Dick abhors (the fate of this kind of character will be dealt with in *Flow, My Tears...*, and for him too there will be salvation).

Nick Appelton is the exact opposite of Gram: an anonymous individual, a new figure of Jack Isidore, whose profession he practices, whose existence will lose all individual meaning and dissolve into the collective. He accidentally enters the resistance against the totalitarian system in place, for a very legitimate cause: the exams that were supposed to ensure his son's social advancement were clearly rigged. Without wanting to, he will find himself involved in events whose scope is completely beyond him; even his identity will be called into question: he is no longer Nick Appelton, but 3XX24J, the name of the apartment where he went to buy subversive literature like one buys drugs. Appelton will have to fight fiercely to maintain a minimum of individuality in the face of a political system designed to crush him, and in the face of an individual (Gram) who seeks to destroy his desire.

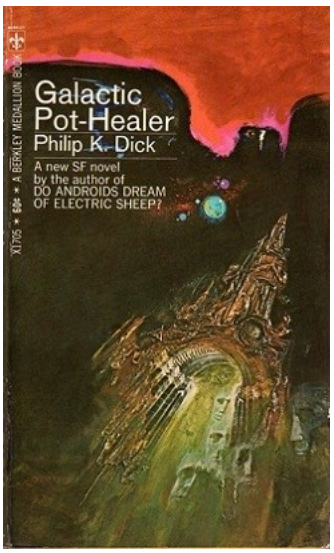
Three other novels of this period can be considered as the great masterpieces. A more complete study will be devoted to them; here we will simply highlight a few links which provide continuity to the whole PKD's work.

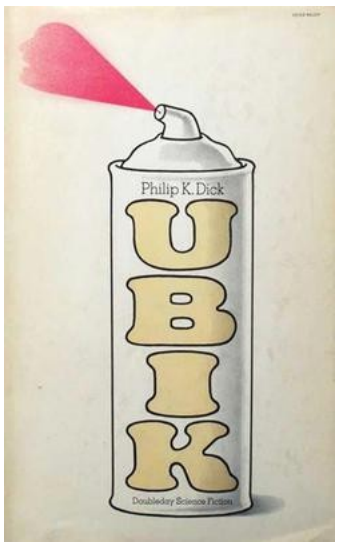
If we focus on *Ubik*'s theme, we find something in it that constitutes a radical break with the exploration of the universes of death, dereliction, and entropy that are climaxed *in The Three Stigmata* (Dick himself calls this text an essay on absolute evil). Ubik is salvific, while it is difficult to see what salvation can be expected from Palmer Eldritch. The end of the *Androids...* is so dark that it is difficult to see how humanity could not be doomed to simulacra and solitude in the face of a tenderly pampered mechanical toad... Yet, from the depths of a universe of death, decrepitude, and rot, Ubik and Glen Runciter's messages bring a hope of salvation. If despair, alienation, and doubtful reality constitute the stigmata with which we are afflicted, we can nevertheless be freed from them.

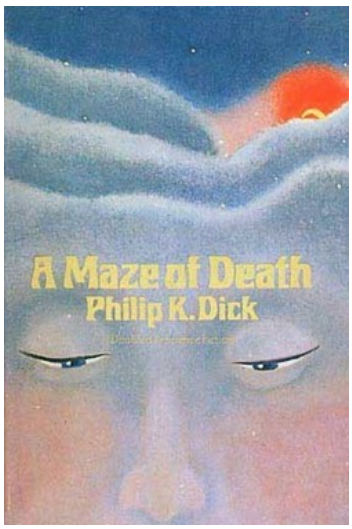
Let us note that a powerful link unites *The Galactic Pot Healer* to *Ubik*, to the point of making it a sequel. There is no shortage of allusions, firstly because of the proximity of the themes of the commercial relationship and work, and secondly because of direct allusions that cannot be fortuitous: for example, the description of Fernwright's

hotel, which goes so far as to evoke the famous elevator cabin with a lift attendant that so terrorized Joe Chip.

Joe Fernwright (main character of "*The Galactic Pot Healer")* has the opportunity to pursue a real job, to escape his daily totalitarian universe and his loneliness. It is once again a transcendent entity that will give him this opportunity, this Faustian Glimmung offering to heal a cathedral of entropy, *which is reversible.* Of course, he will not succeed. The novel ends in a particularly dark manner. But the novel at least presents us with a call; salvation exists. Similarly, Seth Morley ("*A Maze of Death*") ends up being freed from the stigmata of dubious reality by an intervention of a completely unexpected transcendence. His salvation is a response to the curse of Barney Beyerson in The *Three Stigmata.* He, too, had asked to be nothing more than a stone, or a bronze plaque on a wall, during the millennia of atonement that awaited him. Palmer Eldritch refused him even that. It is clear that the salvation granted to Seth Morley responds directly to this, since the strange Gods of this *Maze of Death* will grant him the right to be a cactus on a hot world, sleeping while being aware of its existence. Finally, the tyranny of the world of *Our Friends from Frolix 8* will fall, under the intervention of an extraterrestrial intelligence with dubious intentions, certainly, but so powerful that it seems transcendent. Symmetrically, the fate of the wealthy and tyrants can be reversed, even the most inhuman police officer of a totalitarian state can be brought to cry, thus to recover his humanity.







There is therefore a constant quest for unity, for reality beyond the many forms of illusion. We sometimes imagine Phil Dick as the champion of alternative realities and the multiplication of interchangeable worlds, but this is not at all the case. Let's give the floor to Palmer Eldritch himself: "I've visited a million of these so-called 'translation' worlds. I've seen them all. And you know what they are? Nothing at all. It's like a captive white rat that occasionally throws stimuli at this or that area of its cortex... It's sickening" Is this a metaphor for ourselves, for our present, for our forgetfulness of reality? We can escape into as many alternative worlds as we wish, the sumptuous natural environments of video games as well as those of cinema or series. And forget the ecological disaster we are the cause of, thus fleeing the real world that we have destroyed for its image. We can also immerse ourselves in completely illusory human relationships where each person constructs an image of himself that ultimately empties them of their own substance, their personality, and continue to live buried in these underground spaces that we have built for ourselves, until we forget their unreality. Like Seth Morley in this *Maze of Death.*

What Phil Dick delivers to us immerses us in a real metaphor of what we are, and have become, he himself having never ceased to seek what is real and to escape illusion.

This invasion of the mind that makes many of Philip K Dick's novels so powerful is often encountered in his open endings that make the story continue for the person who, putting the book down and reading the last lines, realizes that it is not over, that the world into which he has been plunged continues...

We then enter a period of long silence: the reworking of *We can Build You* in 1972, two short stories in 1974 [1], and the laborious *Deus Irae* in 1976, which announces the return of a writer profoundly transformed on many levels.

[1] *The Pre-Persons* and *A Little Something for Us Tempunauts !*

IV - Gnostic ruptures and continuities

It is impossible to account for the changes that occurred in the work, nor for this long silence, without biographical references. They are amply detailed in Lawrence Sutin's remarkable essay, *Divine Invasions*. Dick himself develops these aspects of his life in many of the novels of this last period, *Valis* in particular. In this modest article, we cannot enter into biographical explanations; at most, we can look for clues.

It should be noted above all that explanation distances one from understanding, determining causes prevents grasping meaning. If everything were reducible to a known mental illness, called temporal lobe epilepsy, why publish this monumental *Exegesis* thirty years after the author's death? Is it not because the work makes sense to the reader, leads them to think beyond what a medical explanation will reduce in its meaning? Why read George Sand's correspondence, still published for the general public? Out of morbid curiosity about her private life or because these letters are true works of art? What matters? Delving into psychiatric analyses that Dick despised, or seeking to understand why these last novels are so fascinating and speak to us, mean something that matter? The themes of Phil Dick's last work make sense, concern the reader and reach the universal, including in the writings he did not intend for publication. He remains a great writer and thinker, and it is his work that matters, beyond the real voyeurism for cheap psychoanalysis of which one finds numerous examples online.

1 – Theoretical and theological background

Three novel of this last period are usually grouped together under the name "the divine trilogy." These are *Valis*, *The Divine Invasion*, and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*. Do they form a unit? Also noteworthy are *A Scanner Darkly, Radio Free Albemuth* (posthumous publication), and the short story *Chains of Air, Web of Ether*. In this divine trilogy, Dick gives a large place to theological and gnostic speculations, which come to constitute a body of doctrine in which one can be tempted to seek a coherence if not a system. After having explored the various figures of simulacra, alienation

and multiplied the anxious questions, comes the time for *answers*. It proves however impossible to find a thought that makes a system, not for lack of coherence, but because it is constantly being renewed and questioned. PKD is THE great specialist of the disposable theory, for single use, tried simply out of curiosity. To this extent, the last Dick cannot absolutely be considered as high priest of a religion whose so-called divine trilogy would constitute the revealed Bible. The difficulty of the later novels, and the apparent about-face made by their author in relation to the texts of the 1960s, led many readers to reject this collection as no longer science fiction, as a betrayal of what came before, or even as the pure and simple expression of a mental pathology. This is the judgment of the french critic and translator Marcel Thaon. It is a consequence of the very bad impression left by the conference given at the science fiction convention in Metz, France, in 1977.

In this conference, Dick sets out the theory of orthogonal time, a major constant in his later writings. What does it consist of?

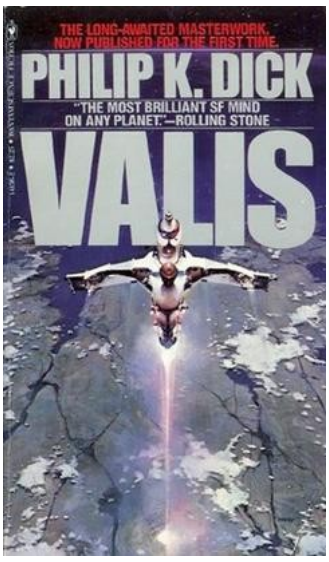
Our world is governed by the laws of causality, a mechanical and blind determinism. We cannot rationally attribute any purpose or meaning to this determinism. Phenomena unfold according to immutable laws and present us with an image of absurdity, which takes the form of suffering and death, alienation and tyranny. The irrational is the non-finalized. Where can we find absolute meaning, a justification for our existence and our suffering? Not in the ordinary course of time, which we can imagine as this Black Iron Prison as large as the universe. On the other hand, Divine eternity is frozen: it is fullness and absolute in action, but nothing can take place there since nothing happens. How could this Divine eternity ensure our salvation by the collapse of this prison of ours, which we call blind and irrational causality? In response to this question, Dick introduces the idea of a time *orthogonal* to our linear time, a time which is that of the actualization of possibilities [1].

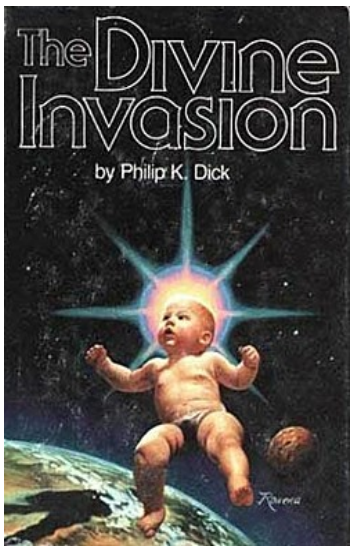
In the chess game that God is playing against the Prince of this world, we are in fact progressing towards a better state of things. But this progress does not take place on the timeline that we know; the course of things and reality is changing without our

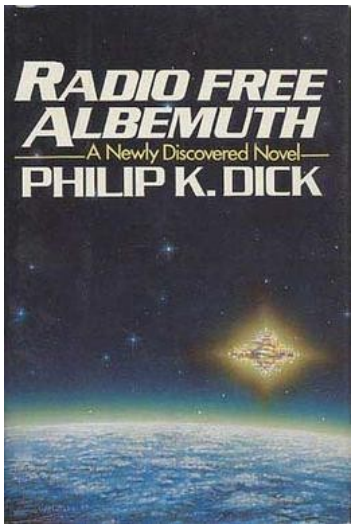
[1] The representation of the world as being based on a malignant essence, and the introduction of the possibility of change into transcendence, a divine story of sorts, are profoundly Gnostic elements of thought.

knowledge, through the invalidation of possible presents that we will not experience but of which our brains will be able to retain memories - *memories of parallel presents*. We live in an ascending scale of time, through which God moves freely, and he makes our present one of continuous improvement. Somewhere at the lowest level of invalidated possibles lies a tyranny far worse than that of Richard Nixon. His overthrow in August 1974 must be seen as the invalidation of a present that continues forever, but with no other ontological substratum than that of possibility invalidated by God who has actualized a better world. Memory traces may remain within us, similar to impressions of déjà vu, but which make no reference to any past experience. It is a Christ-like image, again: the cross should not be seen as horizontal, but its elevation symbolizes access to this orthogonal time, above our three dimensions governed by blind determinism. What proves such a theory, presented first as plausible, then as verifiable in the Metz conference [1]? The mystical experiences lived by Dick himself!

It was from this moment that panic began to set in in the conference room, when Dick began to expound on the events of February/March 74, which are also reported in *Radio Free Albemuth* and in *Valis*. Far be it from us to take a position on these facts and on the interpretation that Dick tried to construct about them, year after year, in his *Exegesis*. We simply believe that it is impossible to understand the "divine trilogy" without this theory of orthogonal time, which is mentioned in *Valis* without ever being expounded as clearly as in the Metz conference.







[1] See the essay, transcription of the conference: *" If you find this world bad, you should try some others"*

2 – Valis and the divine tetralogy

Dick long asked himself the following question, which explains the very late writing of *Valis* and the *Divine Invasion*: how to write a science fiction novel with a lived mystical experience? How to make it a novel, already, and not a pure and simple autobiography that will pass for the expression of a manifestly disturbed mind? *Radio Free Albemuth* constitutes a first attempt, not published during the author's lifetime (its title was to be *VALISystem A*). PKD puts himself in the scene, like the writer we know whose novels are mentioned, but the extraordinary events concern another person, Nicholas Brady. The significance of the plot is largely political, in the context of the rise in the USA of a tyrannical regime which echoes the context of the resignation of Richard Nixon in 1974. *Valis* will take up and mention this novel, making it appear as a movie [1].

The tour de force is to invent a psychosis by staging not another character, but an alternative version of oneself suffering from an imaginary mental illness. The main character of *Valis* is Phil, a science fiction author, who suffers from a split personality foreign to the life of the real author of the novel. It is clear that the narrator of *Valis* is not the writer, or at least that he quickly ceases to be, even if the biographical elements will be numerous. This narrator is called Phil, fine, and he tells us in the first chapter: "Horselover Fat is me, and I write all this in the third person in order to acquire an objectivity that was sorely needed." This Fat will gain substance and reality in the narrative framework of *Valis*, by stripping Phil of his own: "not only am I single, but I have never been married" he ends up saying. They find themselves together in a bar for a drink, and to laugh sadly until tears following the death of a friend with cancer, to become aware of their unity from the depths of their pathological duality: "if you die, I will die too" [2]. This passage is the summit of the Phil / Fat duality, we see how two imaginary characters have taken body and substance in the flesh of the narrative framework *beyond the biography*. In this sense we are indeed in the middle of the novel, including and especially when we see Phil and Fat developing different theories explaining the mystical experiences lived by Philip K Dick, the one who writes all this, and attributed to Horselover

[1] There is also a movie adaptation of this novel, with the same title, by John Alan Simon, released in 2010.
[2] It should be noted that the character who served as a model for Sherri the cancer patient (Doris) is not *dead* . See for example Larry Sutin, *Divine Invasions.*

Fat. The inattentive reader will forget that Phil and Fat are one and the same person. There is only one person in this bar. Is the meaning of *Valis* biographical? The main issue is that of the mental health of Phil *the narrator*, that is to say the existence of Fat itself as a pathology. Phil's salvation is liberation from this curse called Horselover Fat. This is purely fictional, entirely romantic, and constitutes the main issue: salvation *in this world*.

The overall construction expresses this imperceptible shift, to better play with the reader's mind, between biographical elements and narrative "reality". The first part is a form of autobiography of the author, which relates events and features characters inspired by "real" life [1]. The long interior monologues of chapters 7 and 8, then, show the height of Fat's madness (or lucidity): we are indeed in the romantic, the "unreal", concerning Sherri's death and the completion of a fictitious psychosis. Finally, we slide masterfully from the theological-psychological to the narrative itself from chapter 9, where the *narrative reality* conforms to Fat's presumed madness. What is real in a novel, if not what is recounted, pushes us to believe it and gives substance to the world that is depicted to us? Jorge Luis Borges grasps this very closely in his *Conversations*. The reality of the characters in the plot of *Valis* is very strong. If Fat's speculations and illuminations correspond to something in the real world, the magic of literature takes effect, the world becomes an image of Fat's madness. The most impossible, the most irrational being has come in the flesh: a new Messiah, a new incarnation of the Word in the form of a two-year-old girl who will annihilate Fat as soon as she sees him. Sophia *saves* Phil by freeing him from mental illness. We think back to the heart of Ragle Gumm's psychosis, in *Time out of Joint*, which gives him the means to escape from the illusory city and thus reach the real world. This is not, however, the end of *Valis,* a fully captivating, poignant and moving literary experience, which makes sense in itself and gives us plenty to think about.

Can the same thing really be said of *Divine Invasions*? The *answers* PKD gives to all the questions he raised during his writing career take on an almost doctrinal form here, leading Lawrence Sutin to consider this text the worst of all. Symmetrically, one

[1] Kevin Jeter will expose the stylized, somewhat fictional character of the novel's protagonists. See Larry Sutin, op. cit. p.460

can read Nietzsche's Zarathustra like a novel, and pay almost no attention to its philosophical meaning. Is the reader of PKD expecting a theological treatise hidden under a story, even certainly well constructed and written? What seems certain is that this same reader, you and I, will undoubtedly have a hard time *not* reading *Divine Invasions* after having already read so many things so much loved which certainly have left a mark on him. The very moving human meaning of the short story *Chains of Air, Networks of Ether,* which is taken up at the beginning, will undoubtedly help to enter this work truly unlike any other, part of a divine trilogy so disconcerting.

3 – The unity of the last PKD

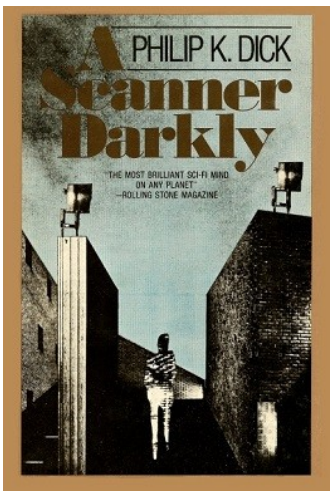
Is there really a divine trilogy, anyway? Shouldn't we rather speak of a tetralogy, to give *Radio Free Albemuth* its rightful place, even if it is posthumous? And can we legitimately include *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*? The speculative subject of this final publication concerns the Essene manuscripts, mainly, and the difficulty of continuing to believe after having read them. With the question of whether Christ could have consumed or spread hallucinogenic mushrooms.... Fine. But these are the words of Bishop Archer! Dick here takes up the theories of his friend Bishop James Pike, who died in 1969 in the Negev desert while pursuing this type of research, *Transmigration* pays homage to him. But the stakes of the book are still multiple, Dick still centers around the question of humanity, love and the suffering of Angel Archer, one of the most moving characters he created. Just because Dick talks about God does not mean he does it as in *Valis*, assuming that the fundamental subject of *Valis* is theological, not human. Rather, it seems that the *entire last part of the work* forms a unity, including *A Scanner Darkly*, for which it will be difficult to find a place if one reasons exclusively in terms of theological exposition.

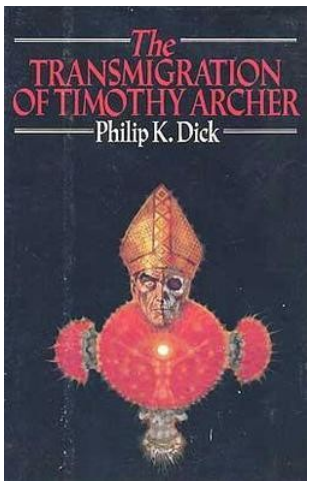
A Scanner Darkly recounts and presents a series of real events, of self-destruction through drugs, which have a certain biographical significance. It is again a matter of constructing science fiction from a lived experience, of bearing witness to and going beyond this often poignant testimony.

In the not-so-distant future, the main character is a cop who forgets that he is watching himself (the scramble suit that masks his identity is yet another expression of Dick's phosphenic experience in February/March 74). One could even draw a parallel with this other biographical element according to which PKD suspected himself of the burglary that so disturbed him in his last years.

Where else do we find a character forgetting that his double is himself? In *Valis*, of course, except that *A Scanner Darkly* doesn't present us with hope or salvation. We are not in a theological or speculative context, indeed, but there are undeniably constants that bring the works considerably closer together, thus allowing us to go beyond this somewhat artificial divine trilogy that masks the unity of the last PKD.

Is it not in the unity of his writing style that we find a profound unity between these last texts? As Ragle Gumm said in *Time out of joint*, "I give you the words, I offer you reality." Is this not the meaning of the writer's profession?





The last Phil Dick abandoned the fragmentation of the narrative and the juxtaposition of the different characters' perspectives; one of the last expressions of this process is found in *Maze of Death*. We still find, however, a distortion of time in the last novels, but it is much more due to the narrator's long interior monologue: for example, the coming and going between the different memories and the present of Angel Archer. Phil, the narrator of *Valis*, undertakes a similar monologue. If he tells us about the mystical illuminations of his friend Fat, it is only in chapter 7 that we learn what these mystical experiences consist of exactly, a third of the way through the novel! And above all, the pro-

cesses of altering time in *A Scanner Darkly* are linked to the dislocation of the subject himself, the story becoming as if timeless, in the continuity of self-destruction by drugs. It is likely that such a novel, written in the sixties, would have given rise to a completely different treatment. Donna would inevitably have appeared as a recurring narrator, as would Jerry Fabin. The diversity of narrators at the end of the novel, where we actually see Donna speak, no longer has the same meaning as in the novels of the sixties. In a sense, Dick returns, at the end of his career, to more classical ways of treating narration, even if he cannot help playing with time, which is for him the root of reality, and for every novelist the substance of his story. What humor in this last period! What derision and what tragedy!

Conclusion

Dick's return to more classical forms of writing is also reflected in his move away from science fiction. *Transmigration* is often considered (or rather, disregarded) as a novel of general literature, perhaps forgetting that *A Scanner Darkly* has little in common with sci fi in its meaning. It is also said that *Valis* is not science fiction, it is not even a novel. Let us emphasize that PKD finds in his last writings a form that is all his own. It is no longer science fiction, in the classical sense of the word. Nor is it general literature.

On the other hand, the reader unfamiliar with science fiction, and even less with Phil Dick, will find that *Transmigration* has a novelistic form that is much less accomplished, from a narrative point of view, than, for example, *Confessions.* Indeed, does a novel remain what it should be when it becomes a pretext for long philosophical and theological quarrels? This is why we speak somewhat naively of a divine trilogy. This is also why we can say that the texts of the last Dick constitute the culmination of a fruitful literary career: they express a style of their own, autonomous, of a completed, totally original form, which belongs to Dick alone and to no one else. This final form is the triumphant overcoming of the duality of science fiction and general literature with philosophical meaning that haunted him throughout his career. As proof, the definition he

gives of good science fiction in a letter from 1981: it consists of the invasion of the reader's mind by the idea of a possibility, in such a way that the reader, like the author, begins to create through contact with this idea. Isn't this defining good literature?

Yves Potin - jazzcomputer.org

November 1996 –March 2025