



SELECTED LETTERS OF PHILIP K. DICK: 1981

[To RICHARD GEIS]

February 20, 1981

I'm gazing at a recent letter to me from Michael Bishop. Michael likes my new novel VALIS, but learned that Ursula LeGuin has been tremendously upset by it, "not only for its examination of perhaps unresolved metaphysical matters (into which she seems to fear you are plunging at the risk of never returning again) but for its treatment of female characters -- every one of which, she argued, was at bottom (I cannot remember her exact phrase) a hateful and not-to-be-trusted death figure...that evening, after her talk at Emory University, while questions were being asked, she responded that her reading of science fiction these days is rather selective but that she has the utmost admiration for the work of Philip K. Dick, who has been shamefully ignored critically in this country and who appears to be spirally into himself and slowly going crazy in Santa Ana, California". Her dismay, Michael says, "Results not solely from anger but from a genuine human concern about your intellectual and emotional well-being".

It is probably self-defeating for me to assert timidly that, "Don't worry, Ursula, I'm not slowly going crazy in Santa Ana, California", but I will make a feeble attempt to confront this outpouring of genuine human concern. Ursula, VALIS is a picaresque novel (the first-person viewpoint, the wandering about of the protagonist, the very name he has: Horselover Fat, which is on the order of Smollett's Peregrine Pickle, the fact that the protagonist is decidedly an outsider, the style of the novel, which is vernacular English, not formal -- but I digress). The female characters in VALIS like the male characters are picaroons and that is that. This is a type of novel that goes back centuries; it has been revived recently as a protest against the more formal bourgeois novel. It is, in fact, a protest on my part against what I regard as official art, official culture, especially that connected with or written to please the academic community. I deliberately made my protagonist a madman, the narrative style that of the street...but as to your concern for my sanity (God, it is weird sitting here defending my sanity to a person who has never met me!), especially in regard to the fact that I am examining unresolvable metaphysical matters -- well, have we got a standard by which we determine the presence of dangerous ideas?

This is what I hear you saying: Phil Dick is involving himself in dangerous ideas that may undermine his sanity. That they are "unresolvable" has yet to be determined. And even if they are in fact unresolvable, perhaps they are still worthy of being investigated. I have never drawn the line between ideas that could and could not -- should and should not -- be looked into. That, to me, is a dangerous idea: that some ideas are better left alone, for the good and sanity of all concerned.

VALIS is, by and large, a work of fiction. It centers around a fictitious movie (called VALIS) and it ends with the protagonist going off to France, Luxembourg, Germany, Turkey, Japan and, finally, Micronesia (in the tradition of the picaresque novel). I've myself been to France and Luxembourg, but none of the other places. Horselover Fat is not a science fiction writer. IN VALIS Phil Dick is the science fiction writer, and this is explicitly clear within the novel itself. Although on page three I say "I am Horselover Fat, and I am writing in the third person to gain much-needed objectivity" it is clear from internal evidence in the novel that Phil Dick and Horselover Fat are two people. Ursula, you have fallen victim to a fictional device by which I establish at the beginning of VALIS that this is a picaresque novel. The fault is largely mine; I chose the device; I chose to blur the distinction between myself and Horselover Fat -- this is the penalty an author pays for writing in the first person.

Henry Miller discussed this problem years ago. "Who is this I?" readers ask. Miller's answer was, "Me. Henry Miller." I am greatly influenced by Henry Miller, but my purpose was to achieve a new kind of prose, a new kind of blending of the ancient picaresque form with certain modern elements associated with Hunter S. Thompson and Williams Burroughs, as well as my own 1977 novel A SCANNER DARKLY, based on my experience with the drug subculture. Now, in A SCANNER DARKLY, the protagonist is an undercover narcotics agent. I'm sorry, Ursula, I wasn't that either. It would have saved me a lot of trouble and anxiety if I had been. But I am, after all, a writer of fiction. However I will concede that VALIS is autobiographical (so was SCANNER; so was CONFESSIONS OF A CRAP ARTIST; so was FLOW MY TEARS, THE POLICEMAN SAID -- so are many, many novels). The fact that my protagonist, Horselover Fat, is a madman does not prove that I, the author, am a madman even if I say "I am Horselover Fat", because this is the way you write certain kinds of books. There are scenes of violent arguments between Phil Dick and Horselover Fat in the novel.

One other point that Michael Bishop brings up. He says of you, "She was also concerned that nowhere in your self-characterization is there any discussion of what it means to be an artist, of the redemptive force that art itself may have." My answer: My novel is my justification, not anything that I arrogate to myself as a person, as a novelist. The justification is the work; the work must stand on its own merits. I hold no special brief for the transcendent value of the artist, only for the art per se. I am no better than the merest person who plies the merest craft -- as a person. I do not hold the mystique of the Great Artist loftily gazing down on puny mortals. As Kevin, a character in VALIS, says to Phil Dick, a character in VALIS, "Call Jamison and tell him --whatever. You're full of it", meaning of course, that I can sling the shit which is to say, verbally articulate (God how I hate formal English.) This talent, which is almost in a sense a defect -- it certainly has gotten me into a lot of trouble in my life -- does not make me superior to people who repair shoes or drive buses. This was, by the way, an element about Stanislaw Lem that distressed me: his inflated notion of the role of the critic, the artist, the Great Thinker and Creative Genius. I'm sorry, but I am not part of that world. I

live in a humble town (Santa Ana) in what Charles Platt correctly called "a plain, modest apartment, with two cats, some slightly run-down contemporary furniture, heaps of reference books" and what excess money I earn I send to an organization in New York that works with street kids, runaways in trouble. This is my life.

The characters in my novels are picaroons (rogues, in other words) because (1) most of the people I've known and loved have been rogues and (2) I am one myself. Let me finish by saying, "Never trust what a rogue tells you", which is to say, "There is a built-in self-canceling paradox at the heart of VALIS; it's a tale about a madman told by a madman, a puzzle within a puzzle. Ursula has not solved it. But many many readers will...and from the mail I am receiving, some already have."

[To DAVID HARTWELL]

May 21, 1981

Dear David,

I'd like to express my pleasure at the cover of THE DIVINE INVASION and at the enormously high quality of the book qua book. It is frankly the highest quality book I've ever had published (that is, my novel turned into book). Thank you. As I'm sure you are aware, THE DIVINE INVASION got an excellent review in PW [*Publishers Weekly*]. Should help to sell copies.

While I'm writing to you it occurs to me to let you know that I have turned over the BISHOP TIMOTHY ARCHER manuscript to my agent (and I am tremendously excited by how it came out, especially in respect to the viewpoint character Angel Archer: for me she is totally real, more so than any other person I have written about!). I think I am already turning my attention to the s-f novel that I will be doing for you. While I as yet don't have a formal outline, I can herewith give you a little idea of what it will be about. Consider this a very informal statement.

It will be based somewhat (as I have discussed with you and Russell Galen) on Dante's COMMEDIA -- and also on Goethe's FAUST Part One. In the future a scientist who is very old supervises the construction of an amusement park (something like the "lands" at Disneyland) of Berkeley, California circa 1949-1952 with all the various groups and subcultures of that time and

place represented. In order to impose coherency on the Park he involves one of the planet's leading computers in the operation of it, turning this high-level computer into the mind behind the Park. The computer resents this, since it prefers to solve abstract, theoretical problems of the highest order. The computer pays the scientist back by trapping him in the Park and making him subject to his mind (that is, the computer's mind); the scientist is given the physical body of a high school boy; and he is deprived of his memories of his true identity (you can see the influence of Van Vogt on me, here, and also that of a number of my earlier novels). Now the scientist, trapped in his own amusement Park and subject to the mind of the misused computer (misused and knowing it and keenly resenting it) must solve the maze that the Park represents and find his way out by solving problems propounded by the computer and presented to him in sequence. When he fails to solve a problem -- they are by and large ethical choice problems -- he experiences a dreary transformation of the Park (which to him is world, not Park) into Inferno. He finds this highly perplexing, inasmuch as he does not remember his true identity, nor does he now comprehend that he is in an amusement Park or maze controlled by an artificial intelligence. Needless to say, when he solves a problem correctly, he ascends to Paradisio. Now, this is a high school boy, no longer an aged scientist, but he is very smart; his memories are gone but his intellect remains; he figures out he is up against some kind of vast mind that is presenting him with subtle problems, and, as a result of his solving -- or failing to solve -- these sequential problems he is either rewarded or punished. Thus he spends a lot of time trying to figure out the situation (shades of TIME OUT OF JOINT!). Now, this problem-solving is along what I call a vertical axis; it is one of rising and falling within three co-axial realms, resembling alternate presents (this is the theory he decides on, and it is of course incorrect). He is aided by a mysterious female who shows up in plural guises and gives him cryptic hints: this is his own daughter who is outside the Park trying to communicate with him and help him (being a high school boy in the Park he is, ironically, younger than his daughter now). Also, the computer manifests itself as various people he encounters, and in these polyforms propounds the problems that the boy must solve. In addition to the vertical axis, he moves along an

ostensible horizontal axis, and this is the one of normal growth and development from high school boy to first job to marriage: the normal axis we all move along. This is the only axis he is consciously aware of; the vertical axis is latent and obscured: it can be known only inferentially, and no one else seems aware of it.

The subcultures that he is involved with include: the Bay Area homosexual community of that period; the artistic-intellectual community (which overlaps the first); political people; the store he goes to work at and the fellow employees and the boss; an enigmatic venerable figure based on Tony Boucher who encourages the boy to become an s-f writer. The ultimate level of problems presented him are manifested in this Tony Boucher figure, who is (since he speaks for the computer) a genuinely supernatural personage. While I do not intend to deal overtly with religion, there are spiritual overtones to the higher level of problems, and the solutions must in fact be what we would call spiritual ones, something beyond mere reasoning and logic (this is a very advanced computer -- which is why it so resents being tied into an amusement Park). The boy's career is carried into his marriage, in which he meets a woman who (it turns out) is an incarnation of his own actual daughter. She, too, is supernatural; the computer baffles him and misleads him and poses problems for him to solve, and rewards and punishes him; the female figure is his psychopomp, as Dante had in his COMMEDIA; she instructs and informs him. Thus the computer bewilders him with deliberate misinformation; the female figure clears up his mind, although she is laconic and cryptic; she is veiled, so to speak; neither entity discloses its true nature to him.

If he is able to problem-solve all the way to what is called "the Eighth Level" he will be sprung from the Park; he will not just be rewarded by Paradisio -- he will remember his true identity and return to the real world. So more is at stake than simple reward and punishment: liberation is the goal and the journey's end, liberation and recollection and return to reality -- and an escape from the tyranny of the servant become the master (a favorite concept of mine, deriving from German mythology).

In the three realms (Based on the COMMEDIA) the same people and situations occur, but each realm has its own typical "color," as it were. These are the three realms of European existential

psychology: the Eigenwelt (where the mode is soaring); the Mitwelt (where the mode is interaction with other people, which is to say, walking instead of flying); and the Umwelt (which is subhuman and a prison: the mode is ossification, stagnation, a ceasing of the ability to move at all; at its worst it is the Tomb World. Once in it, there are grave barriers to escape; probably he would not be able to escape were it not for the intervention of his daughter, who assumes the role and power of Christ to empty hell, specifically him; that is, she enters from outside as a clear-cut savior, his defender and Advocate; whereas the computer, who really hates him, utilizes its cunning to pose problems for him to solve that become ever increasingly more difficult).

There are two elements of this that resemble the Faust story. (1) In the Park he becomes a youth again, whereas outside the Park he is extremely old. But he pays a high price for this youthfulness: he is enslaved by the mind of the Park, which is an analog or Satan's mind and power. (2) His rising along the vertical axis to final escape is a Faustian movement, not comprehended by the others living in the Park. My final resolution (as I conceive it at this early point) is that when he finally solves the last problem and is now free to leave the Park, he turns back voluntarily in order to aid others in the Park who are stilled trapped; he has become, then, a bodhisattva, and when he makes this decision the computer thereupon capitulates: he has beaten it at the spiritual level on which it operates; he has in essence posed a paradox, an ultimate one, to it: he poses the problem; it has to problem-solve: he reveals himself as morally superior to the computer, and as a result it agrees to go on acting as the mind of the Park, but without the revenge motive that it displayed toward him. The computer now views the Park as a world in which people can (by itself, the computer) be taught spiritual enlightenment: this is syntonetic to the computer, which now understands the protagonist as something more than a debased person who has debased it, the computer, in a commercial cause.

Cordially,
Philip K. Dick
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[To RICHARD GEIS]

August 9, 1981

Wrong. A lot of young people believe in both God and Christ. More's the pity. You must distinguish the formal religious establishment from the authentic wellsprings of personal devotion. There was a period in the Middle Ages when Christianity had been pushed back to an area smaller than modern Europe; all the signs of literal total death of the faith were there. Only in comparatively modern times has Christianity become a world religion. Of course, it hinges on what you mean by the term "being a Christian". I was a Christian for years without knowing it ... I guess it's like being a homosexual; you can be one and not face it or realize it or even want to be. The great Christian mystic Jan Van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) wrote:

"...if you are ravished in ecstasy as highly as St. Peter or St. Paul or as anyone you like, and if you hear that a sick man is in need of hot soup, I counsel you to wake up from your ecstasy and warm the soup for him. Leave God to serve God: Find Him and Serve Him in His members; you will lose nothing by the change."

A religion that teaches this can't be all bad. There is a term much used by the Reformers: The invisible church. It is distinct from -- but overlaps -- the formal, visible church. It is made up of those whom God has chosen, not those who have chosen God. Geis, my dear friend, you might be a member of that invisible church and not know it. Sorry if this comes as a shock.

[To CATHY MEYER]

October 1, 1981

Dear Cathy,

I was so glad to hear from you! You have to realize that I see that painting you sent me every day of my life (no, you didn't send it to me every day of my life; I see it every day -- this is what is wrong with me: I'm burned out as a writer. I got a contract from Simon & Schuster to do a literary novel, and at the same time I got an offer from the BLADE RUNNER people in Hollywood to do a novelization based on the screenplay, and this would, my agent figured, earn me about four

hundred thousand dollars. BLADE RUNNER is based on my novel DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP? And stars Harrison Ford; it cost 22 million to make and will cost 10 million to advertize and distribute. So which way should I go? I asked myself. A literary novel for \$7,500 or an el cheapo popular novelization -- which also involved the suppression of SHEEP for five years -- that would earn me enough money to last me, literally, the rest of my life, as my agent pointed out. Well, Cathy, wise ol' Phil picked the literary novel, turned down BLADE RUNNER -- which infuriated them -- and I signed the Simon & Schuster contract and then sat down at the typewriter to do THE TRANSMIGRATION OF TIMOTHY ARCHER, a mainstream contemporary literary novel...and found I couldn't do it! Jesus! I got 3 pages done and then just shorted out.

Well, I finally completed the novel, and was so ill physically that I really was in serious trouble. I sent the manuscript off, and my agent, upon receiving it, phoned me to say he couldn't get through it; "This has never happened to me before," he said, "That I couldn't get through a novel. And I've read everything." However, Simon & Schuster liked it fine, and the book is already in production; it will be released next May (oddly, the same month BLADE RUNNER comes out). So I guess everything is okay, except that I can't get over the physical damage and exhaustion of the writing of the book, the turning down the four hundred thousand, the suspense, and all this time Hollywood has been twisting the screws trying to get me to change my mind. The pressure on me has been awful, and I have frankly buckled under it. This is why I haven't written to anybody; I am wasted, burned out, shorted out, messed up. The most I can type now is two page a day, whereas when I was writing the Timothy Archer novel I was doing 45 pages a day of final copy. But I shouldn't complain. My two cats are fine; I've got money in the bank; and I get nice letters from such people as yourself...and your letter was a joy to read. By the way, I can read music, so there. I really enjoyed your letter, Cathy. What an amazing life you lead. I have a feeling that you should be living somewhere else entirely, but I have no idea where, certainly not here in Orange County, California where I live; god forbid. Maybe New York? Ah; San Francisco. Go there; you'd love it. Cathy, it was so wonderful to hear from you. You're the one, are you not? Who called

me the strangest cookie in the cookie jar; right? I love it. I love to view myself as wild and flipped out something like a New Yorker cartoon of a symphony conductor; you know, hair all disordered, arms waving, face contorted. I guess I yearn to be Horselover Fat; he is not just my alter ego; he is my idealized self.

Now as to other news. VALIS has sold wonderfully (my but I have a conventional vocabulary); the original 85,000 copy printing sold within the first couple of weeks, and now it's in its third printing, far over 100,000 copies; it was #-2 on the Locus poll of best sellers for February, the month it came out. And of course now the sequel is out, THE DIVINE INVASION, but this one sells for 13 dollars; however it showed up two months in a row as #-4 on the Locus poll of best-selling hardcovers. VALIS got a fullpage review in the Washington Post and an extensive review in the New York Village Voice. Last night the music reviewer for the Voice and his wife spent a few hours with me before they flew back to New York...we had a great time, and he and I talked about strange music of all sorts; he gave me an extraordinary album that has to be unique: "Music On a Long Thin Wire" by Alvin Lucier. I thought it was a joke title, but no: it's an 80-foot wire into which an oscillator feeds one single unmodulated tone, and all the music is produced by the wire itself; once the signal is fed in, the wire is left alone to do its own thing. Cathy, the music is so beautiful that it moved me to tears (the album runs four sides). Gregory Sandow, the reviewer, has read VALIS, and he gave me a lot of information about experiences similar to mine that he had read about (he reads a lot; besides being a reviewer he is a composer; he and Tom Disch write operas together). After they left I felt lonely, but, on the other hand, well, we had a terrific lightening storm the like of which Los Angeles had never before seen...my two cats were terrified. I read to them from the bible, all about the Last Days; you know, Revelation and the Book of Daniel. They were suitably impressed.

All in all, except for burning myself out writing a goddamn literary novel things are just great for me. Gregory and his wife sort of healed me by getting me out of the apartment and to a bar, and down to the University of California at Irvine to see some of her sculpting, which is impressive. They drive a turbo Porsche; wow. It goes up to 140mph. Did

you see my story in the December Playboy? I won an award for it, a trophy and a thousand dollars. IN February there will be an old-fashion Hollywood gala premier showing of BLADE RUNNER; my agent is flying out to attend, along with me, since I am terrified of the power brokers there in Tinsel Town. Ridley Scott is the director; he directed ALIEN; Douglas Trumbell did the special effects; he did the effects for 2001 and CLOSE ENCOUNTERS. Look, Cathy; keep writing to me and some day fly out here and I'll buy you dinner and show you Hollywood. Or whatever; maybe Disneyland. I'll end this letter with a quote that will appear in my Bishop Timothy Archer book; it is heavy and very moving, I think:

He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep, pain that we cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us, the awful grace of God. (Aeschylus)

Love,
Phil

P.S. Again, thank you for the painting; it shows up as backdrop for several photos taken of me. Everyone comments on it, too.

The letters to Richard Geis appeared in *Science Fiction Review* Summer 1981, pp. 31-32 and Winter 1981, p. 51. No salutation or close appeared and they may be otherwise edited as well. The letter to David G. Hartwell originally appeared in *Forced Exposure* #13 (Winter 1988) p. 118. The letter to Cathy Meyer is a photocopy.

Book Reviews

Vulcan's Hammer

[unsigned] ***Amazing***, February 1961, p. 133

Vulcan's Hammer is another of Philip Dick's steady stream of action filled stories, and if it does not generate as much excitement as some of its predecessors, still it has enough to keep the reader's interest. Put the lag down to the fact that the subject matter isn't quite so unusual as it might be. The novel does boast a shocker of an opening, however, on a chaotic note, with no real hint who are the "good" guys and who, the "bad."

After the First Atomic War, the nations gathered at Lisbon and formally agreed that the computer machines developed by the U.S., the U.S.S.R., and Great Britain would be given absolute power over national governments in determining top-level policy. Men felt this was the only way to free a supranational body from hate, bias and suspicion that had divided men for so long. The conflict comes when disagreement arises between the computer, Vulcan 3, the Directors who are supposed to administer Vulcan's policies, and a grass roots movement opposed to both called the Healers. The struggle is made readable through Mr. Dick's competence, but one cannot get too enthusiastic about any of the alternatives offered. They weaken the ending and pose grave doubts about the stability of the future as it is described.

P. Schuyler Miller: *Analog* November 1961, p. 164

Philip K. Dick has done so much better than this tired-formula story, that "Vulcan's Hammer" is more of a let down, than, perhaps, it should be. Earth of the future is a sectioned-up oligarchy dominated by a hidden super-computer, Vulcan III. Vulcan II is still functioning, under a canopy of dust and cobwebs. Vulcan I we never meet. But things are going wrong with the smooth operation of the government. The usual underground is functioning in the usual efficient way. Various venal varlets in high places are plotting among and against each other. And – it eventually appears – Vulcan III has grown impatient and started building himself a law-enforcement squad of flying hammers.

It turns out just as you'd suppose.

Martian Time-Slip

Ron Goulart: *Fantasy & Science Fiction* December 1964, pp. 70-71

Philip K. Dick has put together many *excellent* science fiction novels. He is particularly good at satire and at subtly unsettling scenes. This book has the usual Philip K. Dick cross-cutting plot. It combines the everyday problems of settlers on Mars, the dreams of glory of a Martian labor union and the teetering on the edge of a schizophrenic. There is also a fine sympathetic presentation of disturbed children. There is some fuzziness around

the conclusion. But Dick is sure to disturb you with the increasingly out of kilter world he has set up on Mars.

The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldrich

Judith Merril: *Fantasy & Science Fiction* June 1965, pp. 74-75

Philip K. Dick did it better three years ago in the *MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE*.

I don't mean, this time, that his new book is similar in theme or treatment. Rather, that I wish it were more so, at least in characterization and structure.

Phil Dick is, one might say, the best writer s-f has produced, on every third Tuesday. In between times, he ranges wildly from unforgivable carelessness to craftsmanlike high competence. In the case of *PALMER ELDRICH*, I would guess he did his thinking on those odd Tuesdays, or rather on *one* of them, and the actual writing in every possible minute before another Good Tuesday came on him.

Here is a riotous profusion of ideas, enough for a dozen novels, or one really good one; but the stuff is unsorted, frequently incompleated, seldom even clearly stated. The style is alternately dream-slow-surreal and fast-action pulp. Thematically, he at least approaches, and sometimes stops to consider, virtually every current crucial issue: drug addition, sexual mores, over-population, the economic structure of society, the nature of religious experience, parapsychology, the evolution of man -- you name it, you'll find it.

The book, with all this, is inevitably colorful, provocative and (frustratingly) readable. I wish I thought it possible that Dick might sometime go back to this one, publication notwithstanding, and finish writing it.

We Can Build You

Theodore Sturgeon: *Galaxy* January 1973, pp. 173-74

...*We Can Build You* proves for all time that: 1) Philip K. Dick is overwhelmingly competent and capable and might -- probably will -- produce a major novel and that: 2) this isn't it. I base the first

on his handling of his characters, who are consistently and warmly recognizable even in their stubborn irrationalities, on the boldness and provocation of his themes and his side remarks, on the richness of his auctorial background and the sparkles of laughter finger-flicked all over his work. I base the second on his willingness to pursue some collateral and fascinating line at the expense -- and even the abandonment -- of his central theme, which was (or so in the book he told me) the manufacture of exact simulacra of any human being and the impact of this development on humanity. The pursuit, in and out of the fringes of insanity, of an obsessive love affair had me laughing and crying, but Dick and I were both conned, weakwilled as dieter gobbling hot fudge sundaes, into this delight instead of going about our business.

The Divine Invasion

Tom Easton: *Analog* December 7, 1981, pp. 96-97

In the end, Philip K. Dick's ***The Divine Invasion*** affirms the role of free will in a universe dictated by God. But on the way to that end! Dick repeats many of the themes of his last book, *Valis*, even to the knowledgeable beam of pink light, as he tells us of a God who, exiled, must return to Earth doubly enwombed, woman-borne, spaceship borne, to fight the devil who has ruled our planet for two millennia.

"There was a rupturing of the Godhead. A primordial schism. That's the basis of it all, the trouble, these conditions here, Belial and the rest of it. A crisis that caused part of the Godhead to fall; the Godhead split and some remained transcendent and some ...became abased. Fell with creation, fell with the world. *The Godhead has lost touch with a part of itself.*" (italics Dick's)

A brain-damaged, imperfect God Who must learn compassion. The Torah as heroine. Humanity as battleground. The primordial nature of the split personality. Dick is vitally concerned with making sense of the human condition. In this he resembles the greats of classical literature. Like them, he uses metaphor and personifications to turn abstractions into highly readable and provocative stories. But like them again, he borrows his points -

- he says nothing we cannot recognize in the weaker or more academic arguments of predecessors and contemporaries, and we do wish for more philosophical originality.

Or perhaps we can say that Dick's philosophical originality lies in his contrast to the depressing stories I mentioned before. He is optimistic. He has faith in a future worth living. And where other SF writers play their games in the head -- even Ellison does this, really --- he plays in the soul, the heart of hearts. He must be horribly shocking to True believers, though I doubt they read him.

When it came to concocting fevered visions of the future as a way of illuminating the present, Jules Verne got some things right in his time, Aldous Huxley got others, and George Orwell got still others. In our time -- in this terror-haunted interlude (we hope) of background-hum dread and well-founded paranoia -- no literary divinator gets it righter than the sci-fi pulp master Philip K. Dick, author of "Clans of the Alphane Moon" and dozens of other books, and inspirer of some of Hollywood's spookiest dystopias, including "Blade Runner," "Total Recall," and "Minority Report." And this is odd, given that he has been dead for twenty years. Too bad he's still not around. It would be interesting to get his take on the Information Awareness Office of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency of the Department of Defense.

...It will take years for total information awareness to get beyond the prototype stage. But if a working system ever does get up and running, you won't have to be Philip K. Dick to imagine the possibilities for mischief, especially if carelessness, to say nothing of malevolence, enters the picture.

...Maybe the Administration needs to catch up on its sci-fi reading. Philip K. meant his dark visions as warnings, not bureaucratic charters for George W. Unfortunately, Bush doesn't know Dick.

Hendrik Hertzberg, "To Much Information."
The New Yorker, Dec. 9, 2002: pp. 45-46.

LETTERS OF COMMENT

This LOC is in response to Mr. Lord RC's "late night reflections from a weary sf reader on the eve of the World Cup final," which appeared in **PKD Otaku** #6, September 2002.

Aside from the suspicious similarities between the titles *Late Night Reflections* and *Late Night Thoughts* (which latter has also appeared in **PKD Otaku** -- perhaps a ruse that telepathic Ganymedian slime moulds are wont to perpetrate on us humans!), I was intrigued by the refracting reflections his Lordship found in Phil Dick's 1981 novel *VALIS*. They are indeed insightful, incisive and informative. Did I mention impeccable?

If anything, they aptly point out how in his novel PKD mischievously "ties us up with equivocation, literally has us dithering between reality and madness..." Great phrase, your Lordship: dithering between reality and madness!

But I'm not so sure Dick does so because he's a "reformed nihilist." I would urge a careful rereading of the "definition" for *VALIS* you quote -- and argue that it's really Phil Dick defining what his writing is about, with tongue firmly in cheek.

Being one of those born-again-agnostics, I don't at all go for the mystical pink-beam (bean?) postmodernist justifications frequently given for the "importance" of *VALIS*. I find it to be a prime example of Dick's penchant for "black humor" -- for Swiftian type satire that tweaks the noses of those who would read into *VALIS* their assumptions and preconceptions about what Phil Dick is really searching for.

It's simple, really. In *VALIS* -- and many other of his novels and short stories -- satire/black humor is used as one "intellectual tool" amongst others (in particular Philosophy!) to try and answer Dick's two major questions: What is reality? What is "human-ness"?

And the various "answers" that *VALIS*, etc. metaphorically represents are indeed perturbations characterized by amillary coherence. Think about it, your Lordship. What other American black humorist writer, whose *Zeitgeist* is post WWII, would use words like perturbation and armillary? Would a nihilist, reformed or otherwise, use such words?

Yours in kipple,
Frank Bertrand

Re: Frank Bertrand's article on *Do Androids Dream...* "In the novel they are part of a Munch exhibit in a museum down the street from the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, circa January 2021."

One very small footnote to this -- the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was literally next door to the Opera House when Phil was alive. There are only two buildings on the block where the Opera House is. The other building is a multi-purpose building and housed SFMOMA for many years. It's almost a certainty that Phil would have been there at least once. So almost assuredly Phil was thinking of this museum, and its close proximity, when he wrote the book.

Keep up the good work.

John Fairchild

"Philip K. Dick: A Man Ahead of His Time"
by James Verniere
Boston Herald June 16, 2002

Philip K. Dick may have imagined the future so well he made it come true. Dick, whose zeitgeist defining science fiction has served as the basis of several noteworthy films, including "Blade Runner," "Total Recall," this year's "Impostor" and Friday's "Minority Report," now arguably ranks alongside such luminaries as James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler and Elmore Leonard as one of film's most influential modern authors. Even Big Kahuna Steven Spielberg has gotten into the act. Since completing "A.I.: Artificial Intelligence," the science-fiction film the late Stanley Kubrick was slated to direct, Spielberg has brought another Dickian vision to life with a screen version of his 1955 novelette "The Minority Report."

In addition, Dick's work has served as the basis of the low-budget sci-fi thriller "Screamers" (1995) and the oddball French farce "Bargo" (1993). Miramax's Dimension division reportedly has bought the rights to Dick's story "The Short Happy Life of the Brown Oxford," the tale of a scientist who invents a machine that brings inanimate objects to life, for Italian actor-director Roberto Benigni ("Life Is Beautiful"). Writer-director Richard Linklater ("Dazed and Confused") is developing a script based on Dick's novel "A Scanner Darkly."

Why does a troubled visionary author most productive in the '50s and '60s strike such a responsive chord with audiences today? Perhaps, to paraphrase "The X-Files," a pop culture phenomenon that also owed a huge debt to Dick, he believed "the truth was out there" and his deeply unsettling, apocalyptic, paranoid visions seem even more apt in post-Sept. 11 America.

Futuristic fictions often quickly lose their luster. But Dick's fictional concerns - the nature of existence and the interpenetration of illusion and reality - don't. Dick even turned the idea of futuristic fiction on its head in "The Man in the High Castle" (1962), a Hugo Award-winning novel set in an alternate world in which the Axis forces have won World War II and America is an occupied, subjugated nation.

In subsequent novels "Martian Time-Slip" (1964), the "Dr. Strangelove"-inspired "Dr. Bloodmoney, or How We Got Along After the Bomb" (1965) and "The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch" (1964), Dick expands upon favorite themes: collective psychosis, mass hysteria and drug-induced delusions.

Spawned in the poisoned greenhouse of the Cold War and cultivated in the blood-soaked ground of Dallas, Dick's writing laid the groundwork for the "X-Files"-ization of America. His distressed futures were extrapolations of America's distressed psyche. His obsession with the illusoriness of identity and the frequency with which his imaginary worlds make sudden, mind-bending shifts of time and space suggest that alienation, estrangement, dislocation and schizophrenia were more than his favorite themes or personal demons: They were Dick's aesthetic.

Compared to this paranoid visionary, Oliver Stone is an amateur. Writing in the New Republic, Ursula Le Guin describes Dick as "our own homegrown Borges." *L.A. Weekly* dubbed him "one of our genuine visionaries." But these descriptions don't really go far enough. Dick combines Franz Kafka's pervasive sense of existential dread with George Orwell's cautionary vision of the future. He imagined worlds in which corporations employ psychics to predict trends, worlds where "replicants" and implanted memories are for sale and where religion, "the opium of the masses," literally comes in drug form.

Although he wrote about aliens and often set stories on Mars, Dick's favorite location was in our

heads. His Everyman protagonists, including the henpecked, middle-class husband of "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale" (1966), the basis of "Total Recall," and the repairman-hero of "Martian Time-Slip," are ordinary people whose worlds turn inside out because of sudden, startling revelations, often involving identity.

In the story and screen version of "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale," the protagonist patronizes a company offering artificially "implanted" memories of dream vacations to ordinary workers who can't afford the real thing. Instead of getting what he bargained for, the hero learns he once led a rebellion on Mars against a corporation holding its workers in cruel bondage, but that his "real" memory had been erased.

The 1953 short story "Imposter" is set on an Earth involved in a long-term war against an alien race. The story's protagonist is a married, mid-level defense worker (Gary Sinise in the film) accused by co-workers of being a robot planted on Earth, a robot merely programmed to believe he is human. In other words, it's possible he doesn't know . . . himself.

"The Minority Report," a kind of futuristic twist on "The Fugitive," is set in a world where crime prevention has taken a novel step forward. The story's Orwellian, decidedly "Catch-22"-ish premise is that murderers are arrested before they commit their crimes based on the predictions of artificially spawned "precogs," physically handicapped mutants with the power to predict the future. The film's protagonist (Tom Cruise in the film), is a high-level police officer who finds himself accused of murder and must somehow prove his innocence. But how can you be guilty of something you haven't even done yet?

Dick's 1968 novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" the basis of "Blade Runner," is set in a played-out, postnuclear Earth where business is booming for manufacturers of artificial animals because real ones are virtually extinct and costly status symbols. Constant fallout has caused the best and brightest to migrate to outer space. Many who remained behind have been brain-damaged by radiation becoming "chickenheads" and "antheads." Director Ridley Scott and screenwriters Hampton Fancher and David Peoples added the film noir, hard-boiled detective elements. But the central theme - how do you distinguish the "replicants" from the humans? - is pure Dick.

"Second Variety" the 1953 novelette that became the uninspired, sci-fi thriller "Screamers," contains an indelible image: killer robots in the form of sad, lost, little boys nicknamed "Davids" who roam nuked-out battlefields clutching teddy bears hoping to infiltrate the bunkers of kind, unwary, exhausted soldiers. After reading "Second Variety," with its killer robots capable of producing new and improved versions of themselves, one cannot help but wonder if the images and ideas didn't lodge in the mind of an impressionable young reader named James Cameron and emerge later as "The Terminator" (1984). Similarly, Andy and Larry Wachowski, writer-directors of the hit "The Matrix" (1999), owe as much to Dick's dystopian visions as to cyberpunk fiction and Hong Kong action films.

Philip Kindred Dick (1928-1982) spent most of his professional life in California, and if his fiction is any indication, spent most of it staring into the abyss. At its core, his vision is pitch black, and his body of work - complete with its implanted memories, predestined killers, replicants, false prophets, time-slips and entropic "tomb worlds" - is a lifelong drumbeat of atavistic paranoia and morbid obsessions.

Some may reject Dick's world view as extremist. But perhaps not after the Martian time-slip we experienced on Sept. 11, 2001. What's the difference between the prospect of someone stealing and selling your DNA code to an insurance company or getting arrested for a murder you have not yet committed? In "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale," Dick alters the Miranda warning by one word and presto-chango coins a perfect expression of the paranoid's worst fear, a line that sums up his blackly comical vision so well it might have served as personal motto and mantra: "Anything you think can be held against you."

Review by Salvator Proietti

Francesca Rispoli. *Universi che cadono a pezzi: La fantascienza di Philip K. Dick*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2001. pp. 196. Lire 22000.

Philip K. Dick has finally made it into the Italian big time.¹ Or so is suggested by the steady flurry of reviews throughout Italian dailies and magazines accompanying the projected publication of PKD's complete novels under Carlo Pagetti's

general editorship for Rome's Fanucci.² There was once a genre cult, with criticism monopolized by fan writing (sometimes of remarkable acuity and rigor, as in the case of Vittorio Curtoni), and by Carlo Pagetti's indefatigable work. Then a 1989 collection promoted by Pagetti³ was a pioneering venture in Dick scholarship that was not followed by consistent contributions until the recent onset of a veritable Dick revival, which has produced books by Gabriele Frasca, Carlo Formenti, and Fabrizio Chiappetti,⁴ wholly or partly devoted to Dick, as well as a number of essays by Umberto Rossi and others, plus the forthcoming volume collecting the contributions to the Macerata conference (cf. Rossi's note in SFS # 83).

Italy's first significant book-length study of Dick, published by an established *editore di cultura*, sets a remarkable standard. What matters the most is Rispoli's insistence on Dick as writer. The semi-canonized "postmodern" Dick seems to have gotten well beyond what István Csicsery-Ronay has called "diffusion", becoming a prophet, a theorist, a philosopher, with a cult of personality bordering on the hagiographic in Emmanuel Carrère's 1993 popular biography, *Je suis vivant and vous êtes morts*, immediately and successfully translated into Italian. In the best examples, we have an attempt at "respectable" legitimation through his insertion in highbrow filiations (for Frasca, Beckett and Pynchon): science-fictionality remains something to be transcended, and a very high price is paid for the privilege of (to use Bourdieu's term) "distinction." Only the SF writer Valerio Evangelisti keeps arguing for his rootedness in the genre, pulps included.⁵ Everywhere, the point is the reconstruction of Dick as spokesman and/or anticipator of postmodernity, with his "speculative" fragments made to recreate a systematic thinker; and if Formenti meritoriously implies that *Valis* is not the "Exegesis" (that the prophecy was not spoken by the prophet), Chiappetti gives us a montage of some characters' "metaphysical" musings and attributes them wholesale to the author/philosopher. Some theorists of the contemporary condition definitely feel the need for heroes.

Rispoli's book is a readers' guide, aimed at a non-specialized (non-academic and non-fan) readership, but—unlike earlier English-language efforts by Douglas A. Mackey, Hazel Pierce, and Patricia S. Warrick—acknowledges the existence of

theory (Baudrillard, Debord, Harvey, Jameson), SF theory (Suvin, Jameson), and of a body of criticism on Dick. In this sense, this is the best volume-length study of Dick since Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick* (1984). Relatively unburdened by plot summary (but not much is still too much), the book—reassuringly for the Italian reviewer—assumes an audience familiar with the main debates in contemporary cultural theory, and (I wouldn't want to put a "but" in here) succeeds in giving a very readable introduction to Dick's overall preoccupations.

The study limits biographical narration to the opening pages, and focuses on the SF novels, with a much-too-brief final coda on "Dick at the movies" (including a praise for the largely unseen French version of *Confessions of a Crap Artists*, Jérôme Boivin's 1992 *Confessions d'un Barjo*), and an appendix consisting in a letter from filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin reminiscing that the original 1974 script received from Dick for the projected filming of *Ubik* was different from what was later published as *Ubik: The Screenplay* (1985). For Rispoli, Dick's central theme is the one presented in the title, "universes falling apart", developed in the book's chapters, which are organized in roughly chronological order: crises in power systems, in perception, and in the subject itself, all of which are literalized in the general collapse of universes.

As I would paraphrase it, her general argument is that the reality breakdown—albeit sometimes a catastrophe—is a strategy of liberation against a totalizing Narcissism trying to assimilate everything and everyone into the *res extensa* of a world in its own image and the resistance revolves around Sisyphus figures. Dick's (anti-)hero is, Rispoli writes, someone "who feels the need to make some meaning out of the universe, but who fails; or better, lets failure occur, if the only remaining option consists in self-enclosure within an illusion of reality, or in the imposition of this reality onto others" (22). In Dick, the postmodern rejection of grand narratives is a radical skepticism involving all attempts at theorizing a unifying *Zeitgeist* for the present state of affairs. This skepticism nevertheless escapes the trap of hopelessness. The one exception is *A Maze of Death* (1970), which Rispoli rightly characterizes as his bleakest work (90). The resisting self is always a self fighting to defend a principle of relation and "empathy" (let's say, Tagomi is to Frink

as Huck is to Jim, choosing to go to hell for a friend's sake) against the predatory, all-controlling forces incarnating an Emersonian, Ahab-like principle of asocial self-sufficiency.

Rispoli's readings span over all of Dick's career as SF novelist (including his final triptych but not his non-SF posthumous works), but her crucial texts are *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and *Ubik* (1969), in which I would have stressed the role of *lieux de memoire* (which Alessandro Portelli insisted on during discussion at the Macerata conference) such as the Americana artifacts of the former and the devolving machinery of the latter. And her analysis of *Ubik* would have benefited had she noted that the regression from 1992 New York to 1939 Des Moines is *not* the result of Jory's malignant agency but rather, as I argued in my Macerata presentation, the sign of his fallibility *vis-à-vis* the enduring presence of resisting others. Against the absolute self-assurance of monistic determinism (what Dick's characters call the primacy of "the abstract" over "the real" as Baynes puts it in *High Castle*, or that of "the impersonal" over the community as Dr. Stockstill says in *Dr. Bloodmoney* [1965], as well as the takeover of the concrete *Frauenzimmer* Pris by the eternal "Pristine Womankind" in *We Can Build You* [1972]), history is always the result of *conflicts* among world-views and partial perspectives; there is always a deadly catch, a power fantasy at work, when someone announces their coming end.

The reviewer's usual nitpicking: the Palermo conference on "SF and Criticism" was held in 1978, not in 1980;⁶ in the reference to Rosnak's "Dickian" film *The Thirteenth Floor*, mention could have been made of its source, Daniel F. Galouye's *Simulacron 3* (1964), and of Rainer Werner Fassbinder 1972 TV version of the same novel, *Welt am Draht*. As for the bibliographical apparatus: the disappearance of the "et al." from the entry on the SFS collection *On PKD*, whose editorship is attributed solely to R. D. Mullen; *Dr. Futurity's* magazine version is "Time Pawn," not "Time Spawn"; the Italian translation of "Fawn, Look Back" (posthumously published in *SF Eye*) is missing; among Pagetti's essays, at least his introduction to *La svastica sul sole* deserved a separate entry; and even though completeness would have made even an Italian-only biblio too fat, Rispoli seems unaware of a number of essays published in nonspecialistic

contexts (by Alessandro Portelli, Umberto Rossi, Anna Scacchi).

Regarding Dick's critical revival in Italy, Rispoli's book might be just the beginning—a very promising one indeed.

NOTES:

¹ A very different version of this review has been published in Italian in the online journal *Iperstoria*: <<http://www.univr.it/iperstoria/scaffali.htm>>.

² So far, five novels have been included in the series: *The Gameplayers of Titan*, *Do Android Dreams of Electric Sheep?*, *Mary and the Giant*, *Counterclock World*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *The World Jones Made*, some (but not all) of which in new translations.

³ *Il sogno dei simulacri: La fantascienza di Philip K. Dick*, ed. Gianfranco Viviani & Carlo Pagetti (Milan: Nord, 1989).

⁴ Gabriele Frasca, *La scimmia di Dio: L'emozione nella guerra medievale* (Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 1996); Carlo Formenti, *Incantati dalla rete: Immaginari, utopie e conflitti nell'epoca di Internet* (Milan: Cortina, 2000), 80-88; Fabrizio Chiappetti, *Visioni del futuro: Il caso di Philip K. Dick* (Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara, 2000).

⁵ Valerio Evangelisti, *Alla periferia di Alphaville* (Naples: L'ancora del Mediterraneo, 2000), 63-68.

⁶ Thanks to Ernesto Vegetti for spotting this one. Select proceedings of the conference were published in *La fantascienza e la critica*, ed. Luigi Russo (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980), featuring contributions by Baudrillard, Pagetti, Jameson, Suvin, et al.

"Since his death in 1982, Dick has become one of Hollywood's shrewdest, most powerful players. This year alone, the sci-fi writer had two movies based on his books (*Minority Report* and *Imposter*), buttressing his previous posthumous output (*Bladerunner*, *Total Recall*, *Screamers*), with plenty more on the way, no doubt. If you want to make a film about a privacy-deprived, media-obsessed, paranoid future, visit John Ascroft's Web site or get to know your Dick."

Source: Eva Cassidy, "The Best and the Brightest Dead People." *Esquire*; December 2002, p. 198.

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Return

by Marc "Zito" Oberst

The glass on his chest moves up and down when he breathes. The surface of the fluid still trembles a little bit though his hand clasps it firmly. By his hand is another one, the hand of a woman. He looks along her arm and his glance reaches her body, which stands out in contours beneath the creases of the white sheet. It's a wonderful body. It's quiet and he can hear her shallow breath. A soothing noise. Slowly he eludes her embrace to fill up the glass again. But his fingers can't grasp the

bottle on the bedside table. With a short swing he stands upright. The room is shining through with the gold of the rising sun and the venetian blinds cast thin stripes on the opposite wall.

On the way into the kitchen he steps on the missing bottle. Below its neck a brown blot has spread and the bottle is empty. He doesn't remember when he filled his glass the last time and when this happened, but that doesn't matter now. It's already early morning and to open a new bottle is senseless, therefore he's going to the bathroom. For a little moment the room darkens and because of a slight whirring he's raising his head and looking out of the big window. Between the houses of the city the morning sun shines and is reflected on the windows of the other buildings. From time to time the hover cars of the commuters, who are living outside in the satellite towns, pass the window between him and the sun. But the shadow stays only a short moment and the glaring light, which smarts in his eyes afterwards, boosts his decision to leave the room.

Entering the bathroom he turns on the shower and keeps his head under it. Slowly the water flows over his face and dispels the shadows of the alcohol. It should be an animating feeling, but not today. The towel is more itching than drying his body so he lays it aside and lets the drops flow down on his neck and his chest. A little breakfast would fortify him, at least enough to be able to do his work again. He turns off the tap and goes to the kitchen with inclined head. His glance touches the table and the accumulation of dusty dishes on it. She could be a better housewife. He turns away and opens the fridge. Maybe a sandwich would be the best now, but there's nothing, only some apples and a carton of milk. He sits down before the empty glass drawers and drinks some milk. Out of the fridge a pleasant coolness blows over his shoulders and dispels the weariness. He loses his thoughts as a sigh from the bedroom and the sound of her motions on the sheet reminds him of last night. He stands up and closes the fridge without eating anything and goes to her. His clothes and hers are scattered about the whole room and he looks for his and begins to dress. When he is dressed, save for the left sock he can't find anywhere, he goes to the bed again and takes a seat on the edge. Her dark hair, which she puts up usually, lies on the bed around her head like the corona of a sun, which slowly expands to a supernova. His fingertips slide carefully over her back and he detects the touch of a smile on her face. He stands the glass besides the bed, kisses her cheek and stands up to go.

His coat lies somewhere in the floor, where the sun hasn't advanced yet. He gropes his way through the twilight and stumbles over a pair of shoes. They are his ones and he puts them on. Probably he would have missed them if he hadn't found them by chance. He opens the door of the suite and looks down the hallway. At this time of the morning there is no movement to see.

He hears her behind him as she turns around once again and tries to imagine the position of her body by the sound. He is not eager to leave.

He closes the door behind him and goes into the hallway. He stops in front of the elevator and waits for its doors to open. On the journey to the ground he decides to look into a pet shop before he goes to his job and to buy a cat for his wife. A tomcat perhaps. Then she won't be alone at home the whole day, when he isn't there. The elevator doors open and he enters the lobby. The night doorman nods and returns to watching his TV. On the screen you can see Buster Friendly at the moment. The former film composer F.H. Rönper is this morning's guest and like Buster he is smiling unremittingly. Behind him the doors of the elevator are closing so he goes to the entryway and with a step down stands on the street.

A cold wind blows old newspapers over the sidewalk and he does up his coat to keep warm. The drizzle, which once seemed to drop down to earth for years, has disappeared. He wonders how and when it happened. Probably the scientists were wrong with their forecasts of the thousand years of rain or maybe he is going mad. He takes a cigarette out of his coat pocket, lights it and inhales the smoke deeply. It's because of his job. He really should take a holiday as Bryant has repeatedly said to him. While he waits, the sun rises higher and the lower line of windows of the opposite buildings are shining now. The streets still are empty and it's very silent, only a siren hoots in the distance. He waits for a taxi, which normally picks him up. He didn't order one today but one should pass by. They always do.

(translation by Dirk Neubauer)