

# And Philip K. Dick Wept

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Many people have seen Philip K. Dick as a unique figure in science fiction. I would argue that some of the themes in his writing anticipated the particular science fiction movement that so many people now call "cyberpunk". Not surprisingly, he is often not included in the canons of this genre, but if his writing were closely examined, there are many reasons why he should have been. Clearly, Dick frequently dealt with the theme "what is human ?" by introducing characters that dealt with precisely that dilemma - the replicants of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* - by beginning to question the difference between man and machine. If in the cyberpunk novel humans are beginning to cross the man/machine boundary by replacing more and more of their "meat" with cybernetic implants, then often Dick's characters - like Commander Data on *Star Trek* - are frequently seeking to become more human.

Philip K. Dick eventually answered this question (it was more easy for him than "what is real ?") by suggesting that the hallmark of humanity was kindness. Palmer Eldritch did not lose his humanity by his artificial implants ("stigmata") or even by becoming consumed by an intelligent Fungus from the Prox system. Instead, Philip K. Dick hints his humanity was lost when his compassion finally was also, which is why Leo Bulero triumphs over him. Philip K. Dick never denied the possibility that machines might know kindness, and Deckard himself comes to this conclusion in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. All kinds of beings and races inhabit Philip K. Dick's bizarre universe, from the insane inhabitants of the Alphane moon to the stunted survivors of a post-nuclear holocaust. Philip K. Dick suggested that wherever compassion might still be found, humanity could be discovered. Machines became evil (like the Deus Irae) only when their creators failed to implant a sense of compassion within them.

A frequent theme in cyberpunk fiction is also what Baudrillard calls hyperreality - how technology has left humans floating about in virtual worlds and "consensual hallucinations", cut off from the real. Virtual reality plays an important role in many cyberpunk novels as the theatre of action - but it is also recognized as an important escape from increasingly dystopian worlds. Philip K. Dick anticipates the idea of virtual reality in novels like *Eye in the Sky*, where the Bevatron forces the various protagonists to caroom through virtual worlds of their own making. In his novels, the characters are always struggling to find the real, which "peeks" through always in the most unusual and innocuous of places. Unlike postmodern philosophers, who often try to conflate surface image with deep truth, Philip K. Dick's characters are always seeking to unravel the virtual worlds in which they find themselves... they do not simply move about in their agreed "consensual hallucination", but instead search for ways out.

Philip K. Dick's novels are also about drugs and neuropolitics, a theme of deep concern in most cyberpunk writing. While many of his novels, especially *Through a Scanner Darkly*, point to the folly of his drugs, Philip K. Dick in his own life frequently believed that neurochemicals made him more productive, although he denied using hallucinogens to come up with any of his stories. Interestingly, even before nootropics ("smart drugs") were hot stuff, Philip K. Dick tried to take a "cocktail" of water-soluble vitamins to get his two brain hemispheres working in perfect synchrony. Philip K. Dick in the end started pointing to some sort of drug as the answer for mankind's problems - not something escapist or mood-altering, like Can-D, but something of an altogether different kind. The anokhi mushroom - the drug that will open the mind to communion with the Divine - is a prototype of what Phil was looking for. Something that would "cleanse the doors of perception" as Blake, and Jim Morrison, would have it. In the final analysis, Philip K. Dick saw drugs as mere instruments -

the problem with many of his characters is that they began being used by the drugs themselves. This is not very far from the cyberpunk depiction of drugs in their stories.

But perhaps the best proto-cyberpunk novel of Philip K. Dick's is his most underappreciated - *Radio Free Albemuth*. It is full of metaphors and concepts derived from electronics, communication, and information theory, some of which Phil probably picked up from his stint in a record store. Philip K. Dick conceived of the idea of a universal Matrix - something which Gibson was only beginning to hint at at the end of his first book, *Neuromancer* - an information "web" spanning entire galaxies and linking them in rational harmony. The problem was that this "Network's" links were broken and therefore the pure signal of the cosmos was being distorted on this planet by the noise of the smothering Black Iron Prison. The Firebrights previously travelled openly between their world and ours, descending on select humans; now the lines of communication had been cut off. Since the B.I.P arrives in 70 CE, it is clear that Philip K. Dick considered the main "communication receiver" on this planet to be the Temple of Solomon. The three-eyed race of Albemuth took it upon themselves to heal the Matrix and to restore the Net through VALIS. Clearly, when one node in this cosmic Matrix is cut off from the rest, they are apparently all disturbed by it.

"Nicholas Brady" (an alter ego of Philip K. Dick) and Silvio Sadassa overcome the Empire and its tyrant "Ferris Fremont" through a clever manipulation of signal and noise. The noise of Fremont's lies will be cut into by the subliminal signal that they will put into musical recordings telling the American people he is really a Communist puppet. Similarly, a signal is sent out at the end of the novel VALIS : a juxtaposition of TV commercials for Food King and Felix the Cat gives the world the great words : "KING FELIX", the joyous king. The suggestion is that Zebra/VALIS is constantly projecting a small, subliminal signal in unsuspecting areas to penetrate the overwhelming noise of the Empire. Perhaps this "still small voice" can even be found in the din and confusion of a genre of trash writing known as "science fiction"... or the great provider of trash called TV. Philip K. Dick often heard voices through his radio insulting him and telling him to die. Many schizophrenics experience the sensation of being "talked" to by electronic devices or being controlled by electronic beams. But what validated Philip K. Dick's VALIS experience for him was the feeling that he was receiving pure, undistorted, rational information; not irrational urgings or unintelligible voices. He could not help but feel he was seeing the "invasion" of rationality and a pure signal into an increasingly cacophonous and dissonant world.

To some extent, the role of these ideas in *Radio Free Albemuth* and the novel VALIS cannot really be appreciated without a consideration of Philip K. Dick's VALIS experiences. Though he often contradicted himself about the voice of VALIS, later calling it feminine or attributing it to various persons (Jim Pike, his sister Jane, a medieval Rabbi, Sophia, or a 1st century Christian named Thomas), Philip K. Dick first identified it as an "AI voice" which communicated through a "pink laser beam". Was Philip K. Dick being jacked into the universal Matrix broadcast from *Radio Free Albemuth* ? He at first felt instinctively that this entity, the Vast Active Living Intelligence System, was a machine - at least it had to be, because its mind seemed so beyond human worries and concerns, so full of pure unimpeded rationality, that it must have been a computer. In both *Radio Free Albemuth* and the novel VALIS, Philip K. Dick goes to great pains to identify VALIS as an extraterrestrial satellite, perhaps constructed by the three-eyed beings of Sirius. But it is more than a mechanism, because it has compassion - kindness enough to prevent Phil's son dying from a fatal disease. It does not provide just cold facts, but instead living information.

The "Great Soviet Dictionary" defines it thusly :

"A perturbation in the reality field in which a spontaneous self-monitoring negentropic vortex is formed, tending progressively to subsume and incorporate its environment into arrangements of information. Characterized by quasi-consciousness, purpose, intelligence, growth, and an armillary

coherence."

Philip K. Dick stressed that too much information could rapidly overload the system; the little girl Sophia/Mini is overwhelmed because her parents try and directly implant information into her through a laser (much like VALIS was doing to Phil). But in his definition he has stumbled onto one of the great discoveries of 20th century information theory : the link between information, energy, and entropy. Maxwell's Demon can reverse entropy (dispersal) by being given the information of the state of molecules in his little box; the problem is that every time information is acquired, the overall entropy of the system increases. Unless that information comes from outside the closed system. The negentropic vortex that Philip K. Dick speaks of maybe similar to the "strange attractors" of chaos theory or the punctuated equilibria of thermodynamics - a whirlpool of order in the midst of increasing chaos.

Working in a music store, Philip K. Dick inevitably encountered the problems of distortion and bias - for music lovers, this refers to the crackling "white noise" that cuts into music enjoyment. The source of distortion is not the musical recording itself, but instead the speakers or equipment it passes through. A good electrical engineer tries to reduce the bias of equipment. He also was probably aware of the problems of feedback, when minor sonic perturbations are amplified to where they overwhelm the music itself. Communication theorists have noted that the signal/noise ratio is fundamental to intelligibility, so their goal is also to try and eliminate distortion as well - linguistic distortion; "doublespeak" of politicians and tyrants, if you will. Cybernetic theorists like Norbert Wiener, in examining self-correcting electronic systems, also point out that one of the problems is that "bottlenecks" in the system arise, where the control mechanism becomes "frozen". Philip K. Dick might have had some familiarity with cybernetics as well, especially its central importance in music amplification.

It isn't known how much familiarity Philip K. Dick had with computers. The PC revolution really followed shortly after his death. But the idea of binary information is an important theme in his work - so much so that he moves from analog to digital in the end, pointing to "Ditheon", the dual principle, as being of key importance to the whole universe. He clearly was convinced of the mathematical and rational foundations of aesthetics, becoming obsessed with the Golden Section as a harmonic function fundamental to the whole cosmos. And he continued to express the theory that the universe was a hologram in the Exegesis - echoing Pribram's theory that the brain stores information holographically, so that each sub-part contains the whole. Computers do not play a large role in Philip K. Dick's work, but clearly important ideas from early communication and information theory, which he was probably exposed to during his stint in the music business, found their way into his work.

The idea of the plasmate as living information and the homeoplasmate as such a being bonded to a human being is not altogether far from the so-called loa of Gibson's Matrix in the novel *Count Zero*. In that book, Gibson's Matrix has fractured (like Philip K. Dick's cosmic Matrix) into several subprograms and AIs which "possess" people like his character Angie by entering through neural interfaces. Gibson and Dick are really dealing with the same thing - the vanishing trace of spirit in the Age of the Machine. And Gibson's characters live in a dystopian world where multinational corporations control all matters of governance and guard the flow of information with deadly defense programs - "ice" - a future not wholly dissimilar from the dystopias that Phil created in his novels. But Gibson's characters - the "console cowboys" - thrive in this environment; they exploit it, they take it as a given and do what they can to survive. Philip K. Dick's characters never accept their reality; they are always searching for another underlying one, over which their bleak present has been superimposed.

In the Exegesis, Phil became more theological, and insistent on identifying VALIS with the Divine Presence. In some ways, a vision he had in 1980 convinced him of the folly of his actions. A confrontation he had with God in this vision led him to a series of infinite stacks of punched cards being generated each time he attempted to rationalize the vision. The only thing that could save him from this infinite information regress was not to

rationalize it. Like Aquinas, Philip K. Dick came to the conclusion (despairingly) that all his attempts to rationalize his experiences were useless. Fortunately, unlike Aquinas, he did not burn his theological writings after his mystical vision. Philip K. Dick was not the first science fiction writer to envision the possibility that the Divine might be a machine - this same notion appears in a story by the late Isaac Asimov (*The Final Question*) in which a series of increasingly powerful computers are asked how to reverse the entropic heat death of the universe. Each answers with the same complaint : "insufficient data". After the final heat death of the universe, the final computer - Cosmic AI - in hyperspace arrives at the answer after untold aeons, and it is "Let there be Light !"