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## Politics and Metaphysics in Three Novels of Philip K. Dick

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ERRATA

FOR

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p.20	6th column lines 14/15	(early fifties fifties)	(early fifties)
p.20	6th column line 16	space race	space race (late fifties)
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p.41	line 21	nineteenth	nineteenth
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p.72	line 5	<u>innocence</u>	<u>experience</u>
p.93	line 24	ROBINSON	Robinson
p.93	line 26	Robinson	ROBINSON
p.93	line 27	as deliberate	as a deliberate
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p.115	line 27	cookedly	crookedly
p.151	line 32	why this is	why is this
p.151	line 33	Because it'll	Because (....) it'll
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p.225	line 13	crete	create
p.232	line 27	Massachusetts, 1960.	Massachusetts, M. I. T. Press, 1960.

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## ABSTRACT

The science-fiction novels of Philip K. Dick (1928-1982) are characterized by a structural dichotomy in which a single narrative context gives rise to both political criticism and metaphysical speculation. In Dick's novels the narrated events are doubly functional, working as politico-economic metaphors on one narrative level, and, on another semantic dimension, as metaphors for ontological problems. Dick's technique of a double-layered narrative structure is surveyed in this thesis in the context of his novels Martian time-slip (1964), The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch (1965) and Ubik (1969), which are representative of an evolution in Dick's work away from science-fictional orthodoxy and toward growing generic unconformity.

Philip K. Dick's work is best understood in connection with the science fiction genre; therefore, we situate his writing in the contexture of this literary form and give an account of some of the main questions connected with criticism of science fiction. Next, we deal with the development of Dick's fiction from 1952, when he started writing science fiction, to 1981-82, when his last three novels were published. Lastly, the critical literature on Philip K. Dick is surveyed, which is done in the context of seven representative appreciations of Dick's writing.

The novels themselves are discussed separately, and the resulting three readings are confronted and compared in a concluding chapter. Here, we aim at attaining an overall view of how Dick performs his combination of social criticism and

metaphysical investigation, existential anguish and economic satire, as a method of representation of the complex contingencies of the human situation.

## RESUMO

Os romances de ficção científica de Philip K. Dick (1928-1982) caracterizam-se por uma dicotomia estrutural em que um único contexto narrativo dá origem tanto a uma crítica política como a especulações de natureza metafísica. Nos romances de Dick os acontecimentos narrados são duplamente funcionais, servindo em um plano narrativo como metáforas político-econômicas e, em uma dimensão semântica adicional, como metáforas para problemas ontológicos. A narrativa duplamente estruturada característica da obra de Dick é analisada na tese no contexto de seus romances Martian time-slip (1964), The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch (1965) e Ubik (1969), os quais são representativos de uma crescente heterodoxia genérica na ficção de Dick.

A obra de Philip K. Dick deve ser compreendida em conexão com a ficção científica; por esta razão, nós situamos seus romances no contexto deste gênero literário e discutimos algumas das principais questões relacionadas com a crítica de ficção científica. Em seguida, descrevemos o desenvolvimento da ficção de Dick de 1952, quando ele começou a escrever ficção científica, até 1981-82, quando foram publicados seus três últimos romances. Finalmente, examinamos a literatura crítica sobre Philip K. Dick, o que é feito no contexto de sete apreciações representativas sobre a sua obra.

Os romances propriamente ditos são discutidos separadamente, e as três leituras resultantes são comparadas e confrontadas em um capítulo final. Neste, nós procuramos obter

uma visão geral de como Dick realiza sua combinação de crítica social e investigação metafísica, angústia existencial e sátira econômica, como um método de representação das condições complexas da experiência humana.

## INTRODUCTION

In the science-fiction novels of Philip K. Dick a structural tension is established between a metaphysical vision of the absurdity of life and a critique of social and political conventions. The coexistence of political and metaphysical concerns in Dick's work is present in embryonic form in his early novels, and in his latter works this dichotomy develops into an identification of politics and religion into a single function. In the novels of the middle period of his career, between 1964 and 1974, Dick's association of a public (collective, political) and a private (individual, metaphysical) narrative dimension is fully developed, and the play of internal relationships between the two dimensions is at its ripest, most fruitful stage.

This study proposes to show how the novels of Dick's middle phase operate on two narrative levels, so that each of the elements in a Dick novel has two antithetical uses which can be exercised simultaneously, the one corresponding to a socio-political, the other to an ontologico-metaphysical reading of the novel. This system of double markings in Philip K. Dick's work shall be analyzed in the context of three of his major novels, Martian time-slip (1964), The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch (1965), and Ubik (1969). As is typical of Dick's work in this phase, the three novels deal on the collective level with the oppressive conditions in the characters' politico-economic situation and on the individual



level with existential questions connected with a crisis of emotional values and the search for a metaphysical interpretation of reality.

The double-structuring of Philip K. Dick's novels has been acknowledged in critical appreciations of his writing, but it has never been inquired into in detail. Hence, there is a need for an examination of just how the two conflicting but complementary trends --- subjective and objective, cosmic and mundane --- coexist in the actual Dick texts. To carry out such an examination shall be our aim in this study, in which we undertake a full political and a full metaphysical reading of each of the three works under consideration, attempting to demonstrate how both readings are wholly supported by the material in the novels.

Before we go into the analysis of the novels, however, we shall situate Dick's work in the context of the science fiction genre, a minor literary form which because of its relative narrative and thematic freedom constitutes a privileged medium for the representation of the anxieties of contemporary culture as well as of deeper, transcultural concerns.

Philip K. Dick's science-fiction writing career started in October 1951, when he sold his first story to Anthony Boucher's influential Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction. In 1982, the year he died, Dick had written thirty-six science-fiction novels and over one hundred short stories. Dick's entire body of fiction, in which masterpieces alternate with lesser works, is rated among the finest achievements of American science fiction, and it has contributed to the

development of academic interest in science fiction as a literary genre.

In spite of its many breaks with traditional generic conventions Dick's narrative line is always and unmistakably within science fiction, and the chances that his work be admitted to the more prestigious world of mainstream fiction --- as has been the case with writers like Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut --- are little. Dick's fiction is, by its innermost nature, science fiction.

Therefore, his work should be viewed against the background of the science fiction genre as a whole. In the first chapter we trace a brief outline of the history of science fiction in order to place Philip K. Dick in the overall diachrony of the genre. Next, with Dick's work as our main frame of reference, we discuss topics such as the generic specificity of science fiction and the critical objection, on the grounds of preservation of generic purity, to breaks with the science-fictional convention of narrative plausibility. This is done with a view to establishing our posture regarding Dick's generic unorthodoxy and providing a theoretical basis for our examination of critical appreciations of Dick's writing as well as for our own reading of Dick.

A line of internal coherence underlies the development of Dick's work from the satyric dystopias of the 1950s to the mystico-political allegories of the early 1980s. The different stages in this process of thematic transition, Dick's characteristic narrative method and major narrative motifs are surveyed in the second chapter along with some biographical

information. The critical responses to topics like Dick's deviation from science-fictional conventions, his lack of narrative reliability, and the uniqueness of his work in the science-fiction context are examined in the same chapter in connection with the critical commentaries of Brian W. Aldiss, Stanislaw Lem, Carlo Pagetti, Fredric Jameson, Peter Fitting, Darko Suvin and Kim Stanley Robinson.

After discussing Dick's novels in the third chapter we compare in the conclusion the different perspectives according to which political unconformity and metaphysical disquiet are combined in the three works to make up an ambivalent whole in each of them.

## I THE SCIENCE-FICTION BACKGROUND

### I.1 A HISTORICAL SURVEY: THE PLACE OF DICK'S WORK IN THE SCIENCE-FICTION CONTEXT

As a reflection of the critical controversy about the specificity of the science fiction genre, to which we will return in the next section, the problem of the origins of science fiction constitutes a matter of debate among the different studies of it. Eighteenth-century texts like Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719), Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's travels (1726) and Voltaire's Micromégas (1752) are nearly always mentioned in histories of science fiction as precursors of the genre, along with the nineteenth-century writings of Hawthorne, Melville and Poe.

Some historians, like Darko SUVIN, one of the most influential contemporary theorists of science fiction, trace the genealogy of the genre back to the sixteenth century and even to Greek and Latin antiquity. In his Metamorphoses of science fiction SUVIN makes a case not only for Thomas More's Utopia (1516) and Rabelais's Pantagruel (1532) and Gargantua (1535) as part of "the subversive tradition of SF" but also for Plato's Republic (fourth century BC) and Lucian's True history (second century AD) as "older SF" and "SF texts."<sup>1</sup>

Other critics have sought a more recent progenitor of the genre, as is the case with Brian ALDISS and Robert SCHOLLES and Eric S. RABKIN, who elected Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818) as the first real science-fiction novel. Both ALDISS

(in Billion year spree) and SCHOLLES and RABKIN (in Science fiction; history, science, vision) argue that Frankenstein is extrapolation of a potential scientific ability of the author's own historical time, which, as opposed to arbitrary fantasy, is usually considered definitive of science fiction.

The notion of past works like the ones cited above as some form of early science fiction is adopted by some theorists and discarded by others. Mark ROSE remarks in his critical survey Alien encounters that from a strictly historical point of view such early texts are not true precursors of science fiction, but that our familiarity with the present science fiction genre, with its particular themes and strategies, modifies our reading of them. "It may be misleading," ROSE observes,

to speak of even such relatively recent figures as Shelley, Hawthorne and Poe as science-fiction writers. They were clearly important in the formation of the genre (....) but we should understand that in labeling, say, Frankenstein as science fiction we are retroactively recomposing that text under the influence of a generic idea that did not come into being until well after it was written."

In any case, in spite of the debate about the beginnings of a science fiction tradition there seems to be no doubt about the latter third of the nineteenth century, with the appearance of Jules Verne (1828-1905) and Herbert George Wells (1866-1946), as being the period in which science fiction proper began to emerge as a distinct and self-conscious narrative mode. Together Verne and H.G. Wells

pioneered the new genre, which Wells named the "scientific romance," founding a generic set of expectations to which later writers could refer and with which they could identify themselves.

However, there is a substantial intellectual difference between the science fiction of Verne and that of Wells, one concerning basically the authors' respective political and philosophical viewpoints. Jules Verne's stories of romantic adventure featuring his prediction of a series of scientific devices and developments (television, the submarine, space travel) center exclusively on a physical dimension of the world, glorifying the notion of material progress. As Robert SCHOLLES and Eric S. RABKIN remark, Verne's characters are "busy busy busy with material things, in a world that is very solid."<sup>3</sup>

Wells's work, on the other hand, is characterized by its speculative nature, by an emphasis on sociological rather than technological prophecy. Verne's novels derive their materialist character from the positivism of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and the impact of the technological developments of the nineteenth century, whereas the premises of H.G. Wells's fiction of social criticism and speculation about the human nature are Darwinism and evolutionary socialism. Both Verne's and Wells's premises stem from nineteenth-century historic circumstances, but the cultural contexts they are related with are radically different from one another.

This dichotomy opposing Comte and the steam locomotive on the one side to Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and the Fabian Society on the other is not restricted to the two founding

fathers of modern science fiction. The opposition between technological fantasy and social fantasy, the material and the abstract, the probable and the improbable,<sup>4</sup> extends into the succeeding generations of science-fiction writers. In the same manner that individual thinkers and collective movements in the history of Western philosophy have been classed as being either Aristotelian or Platonic so science-fiction authors and periods in the history of science fiction tend to fall into either the Verneian category of "hard," unspeculative fiction or the more imaginative, socially committed mode of Wells.

In the years following the end of the "scientific romance" phase of Verne and Wells in the first decade of the twentieth century science fiction started developing in the U.S.A. and has since then been largely regarded as an American genre. Although some of the genre's greatest novels have been written by European authors the systematic production of science-fiction texts by writers devoted exclusively to science fiction is traditionally an American phenomenon.

The growth of science fiction in the U.S.A. is associated with the founding by Hugo Gernsback (1884-1967) in 1926 of Amazing Stories, the first of a series of pulp magazines specialized in science-fiction stories. In Amazing Stories Gernsback, who coined the portmanteau word "scientifiction," published action-packed stories of intergalactic adventure by writers such as Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950) and E.E. "Doc" Smith (1890-1965). Doc Smith's cosmic epic of large-scale spaceship battles, astonishing bug-eyed monsters and one-dimensional characters

typifies this first, "space opera" cycle of pulp science fiction.

When in 1937 John W. Campbell, Jr. (1910-1971) took over the editorship of Astounding Stories (founded in 1930) a new age began, one which is conventionally called the "Golden Age" of American science fiction, although whether this was truly a culmination point is a matter of dispute.

As an editor the technology minded Campbell, himself a prominent author in the space opera "superscience" line, was far more demanding than Gernsback. Campbell's strict editorial standards stressed above anything else the need for scientific plausibility in a science-fiction story and banned satiric implications and the questioning of values (like the belief in an American scientific and political meritocracy) that Campbell himself held as true. Since Campbell published only the stories of those writers --- A.E. Van Vogt (b. 1912), Isaac Asimov (b. 1920), Arthur C. Clarke (b. 1917), Robert A. Heinlein (b. 1907) --- who shared his views and since the influence of Astounding in the 1940s was greater than that of any other science-fiction magazine the Campbell standard established an ideological homogeneity in the genre and set up what to this day is thought of as the "traditional conventions" of science fiction.

In any case, in the Campbell age the naive and hard-core, graphic narrative strategies of the Gernsback mode gave way to a greater sophistication of characterization and plot construction. The celebration of purely physical power was rejected, as in Asimov's Foundation trilogy, in favor of more abstract values like intelligence and independence of mind.



Campbell's Astounding dominated the science fiction scene alone until the end of the decade, when two new, prestigious magazines entered the field: The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (1949), edited by Anthony Boucher, and Galaxy (1950), whose editor was Horace Gold. Between the two of them the two competing magazines set about the task of subverting the Golden Age rigid set of conventions.

Anthony Boucher (1911-1968) had no restrictions against stories with no scientific justification for fantastic events, but he did object to stylistic carelessness, which contributed to the increasing intellectual sophistication of the genre. Horace Gold favored science fiction which featured social satire, and under his guidance The space merchants, Frederick Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth's biting satire of contemporary values, was published in serialized form as "Gravy Planet" (1952). The liberal editorial line of the two magazines attracted writers like Alfred Bester (The demolished man, 1953) and Kurt Vonnegut (Player piano, 1952), whose innovative conception of science fiction pumped new life into the genre.

Gold and Boucher's opening of the field to wider social and psychological issues and consequent broadening of the genre's appeal was parallel to a great boom in the popularity of science fiction. In the mid-fifties there were about thirty science-fiction magazines in existence in the U.S.A., with Fantasy and Science Fiction, Galaxy and the old Astounding competing for the leadership. Moreover, the 1950s saw the start of paperback editions of works which had first appeared in serialized form in the specialty magazines; the term

"science fiction," which in the 40s was attached to pulp fiction, began to be applied to the paperback novels.

The shift in the 50s from the Golden Age love of technicalities and self-improving, uncritical ideology to a more skeptical, Wellsian posture shows in the very titles of the new publications. In contrast with the editorializing titles of the previous generations of pulps (Amazing Stories, Astounding Stories, Stirring Science Stories) Galaxy is suggestive but concise and self-contained, while Fantasy and Science Fiction is merely descriptive, and no longer interpretive, of the kind of writing published in the magazine.

When Philip K. Dick entered the scene in 1952 science fiction was then just in the process of changing from a Verneian, utopian narrative line to a dystopian, more critical mode. Encouraged by Anthony Boucher to write science fiction, Dick, who was turning twenty-three at the time, immediately made a reputation for himself among authors such as Robert Sheckley (Untouched by human hands, 1953) and Damon Knight (In search of wonder, 1956) as one of the most important of the writers who challenged the Golden Age standard. Dick became a specialist in the science fiction of dystopian satire, and he entered the European science-fiction market as soon as 1954, when his short story "Foster, You're Dead" was translated into Russian.

The 1950s were a period of intense productivity in Dick's professional life. Eight novels of his were published in the period between 1955 and 1959, all of them containing critical political analyses stemming from his depiction of a

dystopian society and the struggle of some people to overthrow the totalitarian status quo. At the same time Dick wrote several dozens of short stories, in which he practiced his craft and developed narrative techniques. By the turn of the decade, however, science fiction underwent yet another considerable change at both the formal and the ideological level, and so did Philip K. Dick's fiction.

The genre's trend toward a greater literary self-awareness was intensified in the 1960s as a period of stylistic and thematic experimentation known as the "New Wave" began to develop. The emergence of the New Wave as an organized literary movement is connected with Michael Moorcock's editorship, starting in 1964, of the English New Worlds magazine. The rupture with the past promoted by Moorcock (b. 1939), whose own science fiction is paradoxically in the conventional "Sword and Sorcery" line, was more radical than any of the previous ones in the history of the genre.

The speculative, anti-scientific science fiction of James Graham Ballard (b. 1930) was given a leading role in the New Worlds reinterpretation of the genre, along with the avant-garde (for science-fiction standards), James Joyce-like experiments of Brian Aldiss (b. 1925). Brian Aldiss's Barefoot in the head (1969) and J.G. Ballard's The atrocity exhibition (published in the U.S.A. in 1972 as Love and napalm, with a preface by William Burroughs) are so deviant from the traditional science-fiction make as to have raised the question whether they are science fiction at all, and they illustrate the New Wave attempt to rescue science fiction from

out of the disreputable territory of popular literature and into the "serious" domain of general fiction.

In the U.S.A, where the New Wave was initially centered around Judith Merrill's annual collection, SF: the year's best, the new movement was represented in the works of a whole generation of young writers. Roger Zelazny (Lord of light, 1967), Samuel R. Delany (Babel-17, 1966), and Philip José Farmer (To your scattered bodies go, 1972) are some of the main American New Wavers, along with Norman Spinrad (The iron dream, 1972), Thomas M. Disch (Camp concentration, 1972) and Joanna Russ (The female man, 1975). In addition to the concern with questions of language and stylistic quality these authors share a typical New Wave interest in social matters (as in Joanna Russ's treatment of feminist issues) and in the inquiry into human values (as in Delany's and Disch's novels). Parodies of the work of Heinlein and Asimov and the other giants of the Golden Age are also characteristic of New Wave science fiction (Spinrad's The iron dream parodies the fascistic component of the Golden Age, of which a representative example is Heinlein's utopia Starship troopers, in which only the military are entitled to the rights of citizenship) as is a sexual straightforwardness (Delany, Farmer, Spinrad) which appears for the first time in the traditionally prudish science fiction field.

However, not all of the authors who were producing high-quality, innovative science fiction in the 1960s and 70s were members of the New Wave movement, even if they shared many of the New Wave concerns. For SCHOLLES and RABKIN this group of revolutionary but non-New Wave authors comprises John

Brunner (Stand on Zanzibar, 1968) and D.G. Compton (Farewell earth's bliss, 1966) in England, Stanislaw Lem (Solaris, 1961; in English 1970) in Poland and Ursula K. Le Guin (The left hand of darkness, 1969) and Philip K. Dick in the U.S.A.<sup>5</sup>

The reasons why Dick was not aligned with the American New Wave seem at first to be difficult to grasp. Dick's critique of American values and reversal of Golden Age conventions which were characteristic of his work from the very beginning in the early fifties were analogous to the revolutionary process the New Wavers were engaged in. Moreover, following the publication in 1962 of his greatly acclaimed novel The man in the high castle, which is largely considered to be one of the first truly great American science fiction novels, Dick's fiction became emblematic of that metaphoric (rather than literal) treatment of generic material<sup>6</sup> that is a typical feature of contemporary science fiction and which characterizes the works of many of the New Wave novelists. Still, Philip K. Dick was never a member of the New Wave coterie, and that for one good reason.

Stanislaw LEM (b. 1921), who is a theorist of science fiction as well as one of the most widely read science-fiction authors in the world, has written that "only a complete lack of theory of SF makes it comprehensible why the New Wave of SF did not pick Dick as their guiding star. The New Wavers knew that they should look for something new but they did not have the slightest idea what it could be."<sup>7</sup>

However, the New Wave neglect of Dick's work cannot be said to have stemmed from the New Wavers' ignorance of

their own objectives, as Lem propounds. Rather it was the consequence of their having intuited that Dick's final aim was never that of making science fiction into a "respectable" form, which was what most of the New Wave effort was all about. In fact, Dick's heterodox science fiction drives at an opposite and far more radical ambition, that of undermining the foundations of respectable, "high" literature itself. The New Wave writers' failure to acknowledge Dick's novels as belonging in their aesthetic programme was not a mistake but a logically consistent attitude.

Science fiction "was born old," as the Brazilian critic Muniz SODRÉ points out.<sup>8</sup> The nascent science fiction of the 1920s and 30s was being produced at the same time that fundamental concepts in literature were being rethought and remodelled in the works of Joyce (1882-1941) and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) in Europe and Faulkner (1897-1962) and Dos Passos (1896-1970) in the U.S.A. Yet the new genre was impervious to the achievements of the literary vanguard of the time, and it stuck anachronously to models of the past. For decades science fiction remained a dated, fossil mode, which contributed to its stigmatization as a foreign enclave within the body of general fiction.

The New Wave movement beginning in the 1960s represented an attempt to make up for the genre's past out-of-dateness by catching up with the tendencies of mainstream literature. In this manner, Spinrad's Bug Jack Baron (1969) echoes the voice of the Beat novels of the mid-fifties, and Aldiss's Barefoot in the head, which was published the same year, takes up Joyce's language in Finnegans Wake (1939) with

a three decade gap in relation to the real thing. In fact, in their effort to assert a claim of seriousness and respectability for science fiction, the New Wave writers did not develop genuinely new or experimental concepts, but rather took over procedures which by the time they were writing had long been sanctioned in the larger context of mainstream literature.

By having bowed to the authority of prestigious literature the New Wave of science fiction reinforced a mechanism of cultural control according to which only that which has received the ratification of the literary establishment is considered legitimate and deserving of being taken into account. From this perspective it may be argued that the recent development of scholarly interest in science fiction is in part a result of the genre's having lately drifted away from a marginal, merely paraliterary sphere toward the higher orbit of authoritative models.

The best criticism of science fiction is that which inspects the genre for its unique potentials rather than for its incorporation of legitimated literary tactics. Still, it is debatable whether the critical intelligentsia would have ever paid serious attention to science fiction if the latest changes wrought in it had not allowed for academic criticism to, as it were, recognize itself in the genre's present use of narrative categories --- Jamesian point of view, command of stream-of-consciousness techniques, Joycean experimentation with language --- that it has consecrated in the past.

In this connection what strikes one as disconcerting

about Philip K. Dick's fiction is the fact that in contrast with the New Wave commitment with stylish, consented strategies Dick's concerns have taken him in directions entirely of his own.

Dick's science fiction is the diametric opposite of the "scientific," unspeculative, stylistically obsolete mode of traditional science fiction, but then it does not belong in the New Wave adherence to an all too sanctioned vanguardism either. Rather, beneath its apparent disregard for stylistic virtuosity the Dickian narrative operates on its own set of technical innovations, which are employed to convey concepts and situations which are again unique. Philip K. Dick's dry, seemingly hack treatment of the disquieting vertical depth of the type of signified with which he deals --- the mass of political, gnoseological and metaphysical implications of his information-packed stories --- may pass for unrefined offhandedness. Actually, there is an essential and genuine modernity about Dick's refusal to ever exalt or glamorize the unquestionable complexity of his novels' aims.

By his revolutionary but understated handling of profuse and extraordinary plots and by his employing of traditional science-fiction material for extremely unorthodox uses Philip K. Dick drives with his novels not only at the unsettling of the conventions of science fiction, but also at those of general fiction as a whole.

All in all, such is Dick's position in the context of the science fiction form. Revolutionary with respect to the genre's own conventions, his work aims from the depths of a peripheral narrative mode at a general unsteady of deep-



seated literary procedures, hinting at new narrative possibilities and the construction of a whole new literary aesthetics.

To conclude, before proceeding to an inquiry into some of the main issues connected with science fiction criticism, we shall attempt to schematize the above survey in a chronological table. The different "schools" in the history of science fiction are set side by side in the table with some exemplary writers, the corresponding date and a few contemporaneous historical events. However, the compartmentalization in the table does not correspond to the complexity of reality, but is intended as a mere aid for the visualization of the development of science fiction as it progressed from the age of "scientific romance" to the present "anti-science fiction" of the New Wave.

In reality, the achievements of the different periods tend to overlap. The most important writers of the Golden Age went on writing well into the 1960s and 70s, and some of their most well-known novels were not produced during the Golden Age proper. In this manner, Arthur C. Clarke's Rendezvous with Rama was published in 1973. Robert Heinlein's The moon is a harsh mistress was issued in 1966, and Stranger in a strange land (1961) became a cult-novel in the late 60s and early 70s after its publication in paperback in 1968.

Also, in the case of Theodore Sturgeon (1918-1985), for instance, the fact that he is classed as a Golden Age author indicates that the fiction he produced in the 1940s used to be characteristic of the Campbell age, but this does not

necessarily mean that Sturgeon's whole work is within Golden Age standards. In point of fact, Sturgeon's mature work, as represented in his novels More than human (1953) and Venus plus X (1960), is marked by social insight and generic innovation. In the same manner, since Dick's and Vonnegut's early works were representative of the general trend of science fiction in the 1950s they are mentioned in the table only in the context of the 50s. Nevertheless, the two authors' most celebrated novels belong to a later period, in which Vonnegut and Dick went each his own way, with Vonnegut moving gradually out of the science fiction field and Dick making a growingly private use of familiar science-fiction motifs.

Furthermore, because they are not particularly representative of any given period several prominent science fiction writers do not appear in the table, as is the case with Ray Bradbury (Martian chronicles, 1950), John Wyndham (The day of the Triffids, 1951), Walter M. Miller (A canticle for Leibowitz, 1959), Frank Herbert (Dune, 1965), Robert Silverberg (A time of changes, 1972), Thomas Pynchon (Gravity's rainbow, 1973), to mention just a few. Likewise, mainstream writers who have occasionally produced science fiction (Orwell, Huxley, Anthony Burgess, Doris Lessing) are not included in the table, and neither are science-fiction writers outside the tradition of anglophone science fiction (Karel Capek, Yevgeny Zamyatin, the Strugatski brothers).

	DATE	REPRESENTATIVE AUTHORS	MAGAZINES	MAIN FEATURES	HISTORICAL EVENTS
EARLY PHASE	1870 1910	Jules Verne H. G. Wells	—	materiality (Verne) speculation (Wells)	Industrial development European colonialism in Africa
SPACE OPERA	20s 30s	E.R. Burroughs E.E. Doc Smith	<u>Amazing Stories</u> Hugo Gernsback 1926	emphasis on physical action narrative crudeness epic dimensions	Stock market crash (1929) Economic depression Outbreak of World War II (1939)
GOLDEN AGE	40s 50s	A.E. Van Vogt I. Asimov A.C. Clarke R.A. Heinlein T. Sturgeon	<u>Astounding Stories</u> John W. Campbell Jr 1937	generic self- consciousness plausibility based on scientific principles greater narrative sophistication	The U.S.A. enter World War II (1941) War ends in Europe (1945) Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
PERIOD OF TRANSITION	50s	F. Pohl C.M. Kornbluth A. Bester K. Vonnegut R. Sheckley P.K. Dick	<u>F &amp; SF</u> <u>Boucher</u> 1949 <u>Galaxy</u> <u>Gold</u> 1950	concern with style broadening of thematic range satire social criticism	Cold war McCarthyism (early fifties) Beginning of space race
NEW WAVE	60s 70s	B.W. Aldiss J.G. Ballard R. Zelazny S.R. Delany P.J. Farmer N. Spinrad T.M. Disch J. Russ	<u>New Worlds</u> <u>Michael</u> Moorcock 1964	experimentation literary self- awareness sexual frankness critique of contemporary values	Escalade of Vietnam War (early sixties) Student movements in France and the U.S.A. (late sixties) Watergate affair (1973) End of Vietnam War (1975)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>SUVIN, Darko. Metamorphoses of science fiction; on the poetics and history of a literary genre. New Haven, Yale University press, 1980. p.87-9.

<sup>2</sup>ROSE, Mark. Alien encounters; anatomy of science fiction. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1981. p.5.

<sup>3</sup>SCHOLES, Robert & RABKIN, Eric S. Science fiction; history, science, vision. New York, Oxford University Press, 1977. p.9.

<sup>4</sup>In his Otras inquisiciones essay on the early Wells Jorge Luis BORGES stressed the improbable nature of Wells's inventions as opposed to the plausibility of those of Verne's: "las ficciones de Verne trafican en cosas probables (un buque submarino, .... el descubrimiento del Polo Sur, la fotografía parlante, la travesía de Africa en globo ....); las de Wells en meras posibilidades (un hombre invisible, una flor que devora a un hombre, un huevo de cristal que refleja a los acontecimientos de Marte), cuando no en cosas imposibles: un hombre que regresa del porvenir con una flor futura, un hombre que regresa de la otra vida con el corazón a la derecha, porque lo han invertido íntegramente, igual que en un espejo." ("El Primer Wells." Otras inquisiciones. Madrid, Alianza, 1981. p.90-1).

<sup>5</sup>SHOLES & RABKIN, p.71.

<sup>6</sup>"Metaphorical" science fiction is Mark ROSE's label for science fiction such as that of Dick, Delany, Aldiss and Le Guin, in which the genre's traditional motifs (time travel, aliens, artificial humans) are put to a philosophical or epistemological use, in contrast with the "metonymic" quality of a work like Verne's Twenty thousand leagues under the sea (p.15-6, p.22). A similar distinction is made by Darko SUVIN (p.27-30), who opposes "analogic" (metaphorical) science fiction to the "extrapolative" (metonymic) science fiction of technological commitment and futuristic anticipation.

<sup>7</sup>LEM, Stanislaw. Science fiction; a hopeless case --- with exceptions. In: GILLESPIE, Bruce. Philip K. Dick; electric shepherd. Melbourne, Norstrilia Press, 1975. Quoted in Kim Stanley ROBINSON, The novels of Philip K. Dick. San Diego, 1982. Dissertation, Ph.D., University of California, San Diego. p.164.

<sup>8</sup>SODRÉ, Muniz. A ficção do tempo; análise da narrativa science fiction. Petrópolis, Vozes, 1973. p.34.

## I.2 SCIENCE FICTION CRITICISM: SOME RELEVANT ISSUES

We shall start this section with a brief survey of the history of science fiction criticism and then proceed to an inquiry into the generic identity of science fiction, which shall be done in connection with definitions of the genre by Hugo Gernsback, H.G. Wells, Robert A. Heinlein, Kingsley Amis, Patrick Parrinder, Michel Butor, Darko Suvin and Muniz Sodré. Next, resorting mainly to the views of Fredric Jameson, Roland Barthes, Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin on the problem of literary realism, we shall attempt to refute the distinction held in some critical commentaries between realistic and unrealistic science fiction as well as disprove the validity of appreciations concerned with the generic purity of science-fiction works.

The earliest theoretical works on science fiction began to appear in the 1950s as the science-fiction magazines themselves started publishing critical essays by professional writers like Judith Merrill, William Atheling, Jr. (James Blish) and Damon Knight. In 1953 the first science-fiction course was taught by Sam Moskowitz at the City College of New York. Michel Butor's precursory essay "La Crise de Croissance de La Science-Fiction," in which he foresaw the oncoming ideologic and stylistic transformation of the science fiction narrative was published the same year.

One of the first popular treatments of science fiction was Kingsley Amis's New maps of hell (1955), which centered on

the transformation of the genre into a vehicle for social criticism. Northrop Frye's Anatomy of criticism, issued in 1957, contained remarks on the genre, and the foundation in 1959 of the journal Extrapolation, edited by Thomas D. Clareson, signified the appearance of a regular body of science-fiction scholars. In the 1960s there appeared several important critical works, such as Marjorie Hope Nicholson's Voyages to the moon (1960) and Mark R. Hillegas' The future as nightmare (1967), on the dystopian novels of Wells, Capek, Zamyatin, Orwell and Huxley.

But the 1970s were the period of greatest expansion of scholarship on science fiction. After the publication in 1972 of Brian Aldiss's science fiction history Billion year spree there followed Robert Scholes' Structural fabulation (1975), on the role of science fiction in the development of general fiction, and Eric S. Rabkin's The fantastic in literature (1976), which uses science fiction as a major example of fantastic fiction. Together Scholes and Rabkin wrote Science fiction; history, science, vision (1977), a comprehensive work on the theory and history of the genre. Samuel R. Delany's critical approaches in Jewel-hinged jaw were also published in 1977, and Darko Suvin's important Metamorphoses of science fiction, on the literary and sociopolitical implications of the genre, came out in 1979.

Critical investigations of science fiction such as the ones mentioned above are typically concerned with the problem of the specificity of the genre itself, and they usually endeavor to determine just what science fiction is in the way of a literary category. As Mark ROSE observes in Alien

encounters,

discussions of science fiction characteristically begin with definitions, and this seems so commonsensical, so natural a procedure, that it requires no explanation. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that discussions of other genres (....) do not so consistently begin with definitions. In those cases readers and writers seem fairly confident of the boundaries of the genre in question.

In fact, as regards other generic modes, both "high" (the pastoral, for instance, or the novel of manners) and minor (the thriller, the western) the question of generic delimitation does not seem to offer great difficulties. In the case of science fiction, though, the critic is confronted with a literary form which systematically eludes attempts at a conclusive demarcation.

As a generic label science fiction is a loose term which has been attached to novels as disparate as Robert Louis Stevenson's Strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), George Orwell's Nineteen eighty-four (1949) and William Golding's The inheritors (1955). Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde features the objectification of an internal moral conflict, Nineteen eighty-four is the indictment of political repression in a totalitarian state, The inheritors deals with Golding's recurrent theme of the inherent depravity of human nature. The inheritors is set in the remotest past, in the days of Neanderthal man, Nineteen eighty-four in a near future (now past), and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in Stevenson's own Victorian present. Of the three, Stevenson's novel is the only

one to contain a "scientific" element. The answer to the question of what common trait or theme makes the three texts into science fiction is naturally tied to the problem of the definition of the genre.

Several different definitions have been coined as authors and theorists alike strived to solve the puzzle of science fiction's generic identity. Hugo Gernsback's 1926 definition of "scientifiction" as "a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision"<sup>2</sup> and H.G. Wells's own interpretation (in the 1933 "Preface" to Scientific romances) of his stories as a "combination of fantasy and realism"<sup>3</sup> were the earliest in a long series of definitions, and they set the context for much of the succeeding discussion on the genre's specific quality.

Northrop FRYE explained science fiction as "a mode of Romance (....) with a strong inherent tendency to myth,"<sup>4</sup> but other commentators and the producers of science fiction themselves were not willing to acknowledge the "romance" label and the escapism, self-indulgence and withdrawal from reality often associated with it. Accordingly, most definitions of the genre tend to minimize the fantastic element of science fiction, at the same time that they lay stress on a presumable rational, realistic aspect of it. Two well-known definitions in this line are Robert A. Heinlein's and Kingsley Amis's.

Science fiction, HEINLEIN writes, is "realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the scientific method."<sup>5</sup> As a



definition of science fiction Heinlein's emphatic statement is far from the truth, but as an expression of the author's world view it is quite effective. The reference to the "scientific method" alone speaks volumes about Heinlein's Golden Age ideology of scientific determinism. SCHOLLES and RABKIN write about the role the popular belief in "the scientific method" has played in traditional science fiction that

there is a general presumption behind much science fiction writing that there exists some single "scientific method" and that it alone is capable of attainment to truth. (....) Science fiction readers should recognize that in real science [this notion] is sometimes contradicted --- and so it is in the most knowledgeable science fiction.<sup>6</sup>

Heinlein's definition uses ambiguous concepts ("realistic speculation," "adequate knowledge," "scientific method") and it rules out most science fiction, including, as Mark ROSE points out, some of Heinlein's own best work.<sup>7</sup> In a similar though ostensibly more objective attempt to distinguish science fiction from mere fantasy Kingsley AMIS (b. 1922) stresses the genre's "respect for fact" as opposed to the illogical, implausible quality of other forms of fantastic fiction.

The British novelist and critic defines science fiction as "that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology (....)."<sup>8</sup>

Like Heinlein, Amis excuses the estranged situations of science fiction on the grounds of their being extrapolation of scientific fact or at least of processes vaguely associated with scientific thought.

In the same manner, the English critic Patrick PARRINDER writes that science fiction is "a branch of writing giving special expression to the scientific and cognitive reaches of the imagination."<sup>9</sup> The problem with such apologetic rather than descriptive assessments of science fiction is that they clash with the intrinsicality of the actual science-fiction texts. A neutral inquiry into the genre reveals that science-fiction plots are not really structured on scientific or even pseudo-scientific principles, but that they rely on myth-like elements (monsters and hybrids, Protean figures, eschatology, millenarianism, concern with the problem of time) as much as they do on a "technological" rhetoric which affects the rigor of scientific rationality for reasons other than that of an alleged regard for scientific plausibility. (We will return in the next pages to the question of the science-fiction rhetoric of rationality).

It can be argued that the science fiction narrative merely plays with a cognitive dimension of discourse, which is not the same as dealing with truly cognitive ingredients. Still, important theorists have claimed the specificity of science fiction to be tied to its rational content. Michel BUTOR writes about a "scientific guarantee" which, no matter how faint, constitutes the central defining quality of the genre. "Cette garantie scientifique," he writes in the essay mentioned above, "peut devenir de plus en plus lâche, mais

c'est elle qui constitue la spécificité de la S. - F. que l'on peut définir: une littérature qui explore le champ du possible, tel que nous permet de l'entrevoir la science. C'est un fantastique encadré dans un réalisme."<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted, however, that Butor's definition dates from 1953, when the shunning of the traditional "scientific" conventions of science fiction was only just beginning to be tolerated, so it lacks the vantage of historical perspective. The untraditional science fiction produced in the 1960s and 70s either entirely omitted scientific matter or then treated it in a parodic manner.

A more contemporary definition of the genre is formulated by Darko Suvin. Suvin sees science fiction as a literary form which has existed from the very origins of Western literature, so his definition has to be flexible enough to accomodate all "science fiction," from Lucian of Samosata to Asimov and Dick through Thomas More, Cyrano de Bergerac, Swift and Wells. Accordingly, SUVIN dismisses science as the diagnostic mark of science fiction in favor of the broader and more neutral concept of cognition which, as he argues, encloses like the German term Wissenschaft the notions of cultural and historical science in addition to that of natural science proper. Just as the element of cognition differentiates science fiction from myth and fantasy, SUVIN propounds, so an intrinsic element of estrangement distinguishes the genre from the realistic literary mainstream. SUVIN writes, "SF is (....) a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and

interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment."<sup>11</sup>

It might be objected that since Suvin uses cognition as a synonym of science and estrangement as an analogue of fiction<sup>12</sup> his definition of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement amounts to a tautology. All told, Suvin's view might be said to be that science fiction is science fiction.

In contrast with the preceding estimates the Brazilian theorist Muniz Sodré locates the distinguishing trait of the science fiction narrative in its marked temporal content. Unlike other narrative modes science fiction gives a particular prominence to the problem of time, which is expressed in the form of alternate histories, previsions of the future and journeys to the past. As SODRÉ proposes, the alteration of temporal relations gives rise to the introduction of situations different from those of normative reality (in science fiction the existence of different sequences of time implies the possibility of different realities), which allows for criticism of the conditions in the reality escaped from. Likewise, according to SODRÉ the reversal of the repression inherent in the concept of historical time makes science fiction into a vehicle for the contemporary anxiety about matters like the non-retrievable quality of the past and the inevitability of death.<sup>13</sup>

Sodré's thesis is remindful of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope" (literally, "time-space") as a distinctive factor of literary genres. In BAKHTIN's view it is

the interaction of spatiotemporal relations (the chronotope) which characterizes a literary form.<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin's notion of time as the leading determinant of a narrative mode confers authority to Sodré's argumentation: in the case of science fiction the chronotope would be distinguished by the jumbling of different chronological sequences, by an emphasis on the idea of time itself.

Indeed, the choice of the time motif as the genre's common denominator can conciliate science-fiction works as different from one another as Hugo Gernsback's archaic Ralph 12C41+: a romance of the year 2660 (1911), Olaf Stapledon's monumental saga Last and first men: a story of the near and far future (1930) and Philip K. Dick's early reality-breakdown novel Time out of joint (1959).

Nevertheless, even if it does apply to most science fiction Sodré's definition of the genre as the fiction of time is not applicable to all of it. The prototypal The time machine (1895), for instance, fits into Sodré's theoretical frame, but then what about Wells's subsequent novels Dr. Moreau's island (1896) and The invisible man (1897), in which the role of time is insignificant? The possibility of the two works not being science fiction is of course out of the question: in point of fact, the gruesome Darwinism of Dr. Moreau's island and the moving tale in The invisible man about science gone astray make the two novels into some of the few science-fiction texts to really contain a scientific component as an essential orienting factor.

On the whole, the generic specificity of science

fiction does not seem to correspond to any single given content --- scientific, or temporal, or critical of the immediate reality. Rather the science fiction genre is characterized by its use of a varied repertoire of stereotypic themes which are handled in different ways by the different science-fiction authors. The heterogeneous themes which signal the presence of science fiction in a literary narrative are well-known: aliens, robots and androids, space travel, time travel, extrasensory phenomena, biological mutation, the atomic apocalypse, post-apocalyptic worlds, utopias and dystopias and, of course, the technological paraphernalia (computers, spaceships, futuristic weaponry) are some of them.

A science-fiction story is usually made up of a combination of several of these stock elements, and the distinct usages that they can be put to range from that of uncommitted wish-fulfilment in the boyish adventures of Doc Smith's Lensman series (1934-47) and Van Vogt's Slan (1940) to the scientific didacticism of Isaac Asimov's novels or the metaphoric, unconventional plots of Bester, Dick or Ursula K. Le Guin. About the latter there is again no uniformity in the treatment of science-fiction stereotypes by untraditional writers. A typical science-fiction element like telepathy, which was used as a mere wish-dream in Van Vogt's Slan, can have political implications in Le Guin's The dispossessed (1974), or raise epistemological questions in Dick's Ubik (1969), or hint of psychoanalytic overtones in Alfred Bester's The demolished man (1953).

In reality, science fiction is not a monolithic,

undifferentiated whole but a multiform complex, and as definitions of the genre tend to focus on specific types of science-fiction writing they fail to detect the basic quality, whatever it may be, which makes all science fiction into science fiction. Besides, rather than inspect the actual speciality of science fiction narratives most definitions take the misleading term "science fiction" itself as their central frame of reference, and they set out to account for the "science" and the "fiction" of science fiction, in what is a pleonastic and not really enlightening process.

Thus, solutions like Suvin's (the "interaction of estrangement and cognition") and Butor's ("un fantastique encadré dans un réalisme") are basically analogous to the explanations furnished by Wells ("a combination of fantasy and realism") and Gernsback ("romance intermingled with scientific fact"), all of these definitions being somewhat tautologous in that they assume a necessary connection between the actual science-fiction texts and the concepts of science ("cognition," "réalisme," "realism," "scientific fact") and fiction ("estrangement," "fantastique," "fantasy," "romance") that make up the name "science fiction."

What does one learn about a narrative mode on being told that this is a blend of fact and fiction? It could be argued that all literature, not only science fiction, consists of just that, an interdependence of factualness (either by direct mimesis or indirectly, by a reversal of the ordinary conditions of life) and arbitrary fabrication. Definitions of science fiction tend to rely on the self-evidence of the notions of fantasy and realism, but these premises really beg

many questions. What is "realistic," what is "fantastic" in literature? These questions are important in the context of science fiction criticism both because the fantastic/realistic opposition is used to distinguish science fiction from other literary genres and because there is a theoretical distinction within the boundaries of the genre between unscientific (fantastic) science fiction and the (realistic) science fiction of scientific plausibility.

In the sphere of general fiction the conflict between fantasy and realism has lessened in the twentieth century inasmuch as most contemporary high literature has been characterized by a disruption of realist narrative techniques. The works of writers like Joyce, Borges (1889-1986), Beckett (b. 1906), the achievements of the French "new novel" and of Latin American "magical realism" have been paralleled by a tendency in contemporary literary criticism to promote the justification of romance and the demystification of the strategies of high realism.

Thus, Robert SCHOLLES argues in Fabulation and metafiction that the disengagement of romance from the conditions in the reader's own society does not necessarily involve futile escapism. Rather the liberated quality of romance literature brings about the sublimation of unconscious anxieties by arranging them into an orderly, meaningful structure.<sup>15</sup> In a like manner, Fredric JAMESON writes about how by transcending the limitations of everyday life and of a related, binding perspective imaginative fiction can lend itself to uses which outrange by far the superficiality and



easy sentimentality usually ascribed to it. "Romance," JAMESON writes, "seems to offer the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms, and of a demonic or Utopian transformation of a real now unshakably set in place."<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, writing about science fiction as a specific mode of romance Gillian BEER remarks that by releasing the reader from the ordinary conditions of life science fiction "obliges us to look back at life, and our assumptions about the possibilities of life, with cold reappraisal."<sup>17</sup> On the whole, views on romance such as the one held by Georg LUKÁCS in The theory of the novel (1920), in which he claimed the fiction of popular forms to be devoid of any meaningful content,<sup>18</sup> are out of place in the context of present-day literary criticism.

In conjunction with this vindictory appraisal of the estranging dimension of fantasy fiction contemporary theorists have exposed the lack of a genuine correspondence between realistic literature and objective reality. Fredric JAMESON opines in The political unconscious that "types of narrative apparatus [which] lay claim to a social and historical 'realism'"<sup>19</sup> do not represent reality any more faithfully than the forms dealing with the openly imaginary. JAMESON's view is that the real --- "this absent cause, which is fundamentally unrepresentable and non-narrative, and detectable only in its effects --- can be disclosed only by Desire itself,"<sup>20</sup> that is, by the disengaging quality of the fantastic (the remaking of the world in the image of desire is, as Gillian BEER points out, one of the functions of romance<sup>21</sup>).

Jameson's critique of the traditional realistic

narrative coincides with the position of Roland BARTHES, who writes in Le degré zéro de l'écriture that no literary text is less true to life than that which aims at a close adherence to the truth of nature ("aucune écriture n'est plus artificielle que celle qui a prétendu dépeindre au plus près la Nature"<sup>22</sup>). BARTHES views the "artistic-realistic" écriture (which he refers to as a "petty-bourgeois écriture"<sup>23</sup>) as incapable of true believability, but restricted to a merely descriptive function ("l'écriture réaliste, elle, ne peut jamais convaincre: elle est condamnée à seulement dépeindre"<sup>24</sup>). In the same way, Fredric JAMESON argues that what distinguishes a paradigm of realistic literature such as the work of Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) is "not Balzac's deeper sense of political and historical realities, but rather his incorrigible fantasy."<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Robert SCHOLLES stresses the radical gap between objective reality and the literary narrative, and he denies the possibility of a truly realistic literary representation of the world. Referring to S/Z (1970), Roland Barthes's analysis of Balzac's short story "Sarrasine" (1830), SCHOLLES observes that

modern critics (...) have shown with devastating irony that even a great "realist" like Balzac did not make his linguistic code correspond with reality in itself, but simply alluded in his language to other codes which themselves inevitably lack genuine ontological status. Language is language and reality is reality and never the twain shall meet.<sup>26</sup>

The unreality of realistic fiction is also discussed in SCHOLLES and RABKIN's study of science fiction, in which the

two critics point out the fallacy of attempts at distinguishing the real from the unreal in a literary context:

most people think of fantasy as the imagination of the non-real. Since science fiction postulates conditions which don't actually exist, it deals in the unreal. Hence, it is fantastic; hence, it gets called fantasy. However, all fiction deals in conditions which don't actually exist, perhaps in tidy endings or in opportune coincidences; certainly in lives of characters who surely have not lived among us. The true quality of the fantastic has nothing to do with what is real.<sup>27</sup>

In this manner, the so-called literary realism is no longer reputed as a privileged mode of representation of reality, but is regarded by contemporary theorists as just one more variety of language treatment in literature. As was noted by the Structuralist scholars of the Prague school the focus of the literary discourse is not on that which it signifies (as would be the case with any non-literary utterance) but rather on the very signifier, that is, on itself. Roman JAKOBSON describes the literary text as being characterized by a predominance of the poetic function (which is directed toward itself, toward the message as such) over the other five linguistic functions (referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual) which he identifies in the act of verbal communication.<sup>28</sup>

Literature is then language, not reality, and since language and reality never do meet, as Robert Scholes observes, critical analyses based on the discrimination between the realistic or fantastic content of literary works

prove to be unavailing in the end. In the degree that all literature deals in the unreal, as Scholes and Rabkin point out, the reader's response to any literary text is of necessity that of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief," regardless of the quality of fantasy or realism of the text in consideration. As Fredric JAMESON writes in The prison-house of language, "knowing that the surface before us is an imaginary representation and the result of someone else's labor, we nonetheless consent to lose ourselves in it as though it were real, a state halfway between hallucination and cold, unamused withdrawal."<sup>29</sup>

The process described by Jameson does not apply only to the fruition of fiction that is admittedly fantastic, but also of that which operates on a rhetoric of verisimilitude. No matter how strange or how plausible the characters and events in a literary work, the reader is aware that they are an "imaginary representation" to which a deliberate act of poetic faith can confer, "for the moment," as Coleridge wrote, a quality of truthfulness. The literary enunciation cannot be said to be truthful or untruthful in the sense that the non-literary discourse can be more or less accurate in its rapport with reality.

Since not in the quality of the context that the literary message refers to but in the message itself is where resides the intrinsicality of the literary text<sup>30</sup> there is no point in discriminating literary writings by the realness of their content. As Alain ROBBE-GRILLET remarks in Pour un nouveau roman the concept of realism should not be viewed as a

tool for drawing distinctions between different narrative modes, but as a single banner uniting all types of fiction.

"Tous les écrivains pensent être réalistes," ROBBE-GRILLET points out, "chacun s'efforce bel et bien de créer du réel."<sup>31</sup>

In fact, inasmuch as they all deal with the fictitious all literary works are in a sense fantastic, and they are all realistic insofar as a will to acknowledge their content as truthful is the only way to approach them. Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary is as much of an imaginary character as Philip K. Dick's Palmer Eldritch, and there are implications of "dramatic truth," to employ Coleridge's expression in Biographia literaria, about Dick's character just as there are about Flaubert's.

Even so, a certain type of science fiction criticism still adheres to an oversimplified view of the concepts of fantasy and realism, which are conceived of in some appreciations as irreconcilable categories forever engaged in contention. Those critics who judge science-fiction works according to standards of realistic believability typically favor the observance of the criteria of rationality and regard for known physical laws associated with the traditional science fiction of the Golden Age school. Stories which fail to provide a semblance of scientific exactness and a rational explanation for the situations narrated are condemned by such critics as a menace to the generic purity of science fiction.

George Turner's and Bruce Gillespie's disapproving estimates of Dick's novels Counter-clock world (1967) and Ubik, which openly flout the generic tradition of verisimilitude based on scientific premises, are illustrative

of this sort of criticism. TURNER finds "the paradoxes" of Ubik unacceptable and deems the novel a failure because, as he argues, "it cannot stand against the weight of reality as we know it."<sup>32</sup> GILLESPIE rejects the logical inconsistencies of Counter-clock world, in which he is joined by Turner, and he attributes them to the author's "sheer laziness."<sup>33</sup>

It could be argued that the fact that certain plot details are illogical or unclear hardly matters in the overall context of those novels, metaphoric aims, but European critics like Carlo PAGETTI (writing on Counter-clock world) and Peter FITTING (on Ubik) further propose, as shall be discussed in II.2, that Dick's break with standards of realistic believability is a deliberate act which serves both an aesthetic function and specific ideological concerns.

The irony of critical demands for realistic attention to fact as a guarantee of the generic authenticity of a fantastic narrative mode is further stressed by the fact that many models of rational, realistic science fiction do not stand a rigorous logical examination, let alone a close scientific scrutiny. However, the lack of genuine scientific accuracy in a science-fiction work is considered unimportant in some assessments as long as the "scientific" material in the story is presented in a properly "cognitive" perspective, that is, with a profusion of hard, technical details. Thus, a story postulating the existence of artificial canals on Mars (a classic science-fiction motif which originated from a misunderstanding and which is of course untrue<sup>34</sup>) is not likely to be criticized for its unscientific content insofar

as its main textual determinants are a "technical" diction and an affectation of that meticulousness associated with the scientific discourse.

As was mentioned before, contemporary metaphoric science fiction is characterized by a rejection of the scientism underlying most traditional science-fiction works, and it tends to use scientific material with a parodic aim, as in this paragraph from Dick's Ubik, in which the jargon of extrapolative science fiction is imitated for comic effect:

A spray can of Ubik (....) is a portable negative ionizer, with a self-contained, high-voltage, low-amp unit powered by a peak-gain helium battery of 25 kv. The negative ions are given a counterclockwise spin by a radically biased acceleration chamber, which creates a centripetal tendency to them so that they cohere rather than dissipate. A negative ion field diminishes the velocity of anti-protophasons normally present in the atmosphere; as soon as their velocity falls they cease to be anti-protophasons and, under the principle of parity, no longer can unite with protophasons radiated from persons frozen in cold-pac; (....) The end result is that the proportion of protophasons increases, which means (....) an increment in the net put-forth field of protophasonic activity (....).<sup>35</sup>

The single "scientific" passage in the novel, the abstruse description of the product Ubik caricatures with its blend of nonsense (the preposterous references to the properties of "anti-protophasons") and genuine scientific concepts the deceitful discourse of "rational" science fiction. Dick himself does not concentrate on the description of the mechanical structures and technological innovations of

his near futures. Scientific data are taken for granted and the effect of scientific progress on man and society is what matters in a Dick plot. As Carlo PAGETTI notes, "the scientific miracle is an integral part of [the image of the future that Dick transmits]; but when the novel begins it has already occurred, it is a discounted and unquestionable event that merits no description whatsoever."<sup>36</sup>

In reality, what writers like Dick and Vonnegut and the New Wave authors perform with their offhand treatment of scientific matter is not the rejection of plausibility or rationality in a science-fiction story. Rather their refusal to invoke the authority of scientific dogma for their visions of reality brings about the disruption of of an illusion, namely the belief in natural science as the only key to the understanding of the world which is fostered in traditional science-fiction writing through the hypnotic effect of the "scientific" buzz words rather than through genuine scientific factuality. The traditional science fiction narrative is distinguished not by an attention to fact unequalled in the context of romance literature but by the materialistic ideology of nineteenth-century positivism which has been its main conceptual frame of reference from the day of Verne's technological utopias.

In the final analysis, what those critics who concentrate on the need for traditional plausibility in science fiction resent is not the lack of science or rationality in a science-fiction work but the lack of a "rational," "scientific" rhetoric. It cannot be required of a



literary text that it be scientific, but it can be required that it sound so, and this is what some science fiction critics really do, even if, like Turner and Gillespie, they structure their critical commentaries on demands for logical consistency and respect for scientific fact.

Parallel to the question of the genre's cognitivity is that of its fantastic dimension. Because they appear against the background of a "realistic" structure the displacements and impossible situations of science fiction are viewed in some discussions of the genre as having little in common with the disengaged inventions of other forms of fantasy.

In this perspective Patrick PARRINDER writes that science fiction performs "the domestication of (....) strange and alien phenomena,"<sup>37</sup> in a process of familiarization of the exotic which would constitute the opposite of that removal of characters and events from ordinary associations that takes place in other fantastic narrative modes. The main objection that one might raise in opposition to Parrinder's view is that this is formulated as if reality contained given "strange and alien" factors, uncanny phenomena that the science-fiction writer could bring to the level of everyday events by placing them in the context of a rational, familiar framework.

In reality, the situations presented by science fiction can hardly be interpreted as arcane matter made familiar. Rather, they are estranged representations of ordinary processes, reflections of forces operative in the here and now. Jorge Luis BORGES writes about Wells's early novels The invisible man and The island of Dr. Moreau that the excellence of those stories is due to the fact that their content is

"symbolic of processes inherent in all human destinies:"

No sólo es ingenioso lo que refieren;  
es también simbólico de procesos que  
de algún modo son inherentes a todos  
los destinos humanos. El acosado  
hombre invisible que tiene que dormir  
como con los ojos abiertos porque sus  
párpados no excluyen la luz es nuestra  
soledad y nuestro terror; el  
conventículo de monstruos sentados que  
gangosean en su noche un credo servil  
es el Vaticano y es Lhasa.

Rather than the domestication of a monstrosity Wells's story of the persecuted invisible man who has to sleep as if with open eyes is the story of every man made unfamiliar. Feelings of terror and isolation known to all men are rendered in the novel from a distanced, unusual perspective, which gives occasion to insights into human nature and the human situation. In the same manner, when Philip K. Dick describes in Clans of the Alphane moon (1964) a small hospital planet entertained by schizophrenics, guarded by manic-depressives and ruled by paranoids he does not bring near a "strange and alien" reality. Far from approximating the strange Dick's story performs the removal of the familiar: what happens in the world of the Alphane moon is of course analogically remindful of the situation in the author's actual world.

The characteristic concern of the science fiction narrative is not the transformation of the unknown into the known but the conversion of the usual into the unusual. The science-fiction tactics of estrangement allows for the regular order of things and the experience of everyday life to be viewed from a new perspective, as Mark ROSE observes apropos

of H.G. Wells's short story "The Star" (1897):

Wells's strategy is to insert the familiar sphere of mundane concerns --- the world of yawning policemen, hurrying workmen, dissipated revelers --- into the larger context of stars, planets, and astronomical events. The effect is to render the familiar strange, to make us grasp the contingency of the ordinary world<sup>39</sup> that we generally take for granted.

Science-fiction stories operate on that dialectic of strangeness and familiarity which has been described in literary theory by the Russian Formalists, who called it ostranenie, estrangement, and Bertolt Brecht, who named this narrative attitude Verfremdungseffekt, effect of defamiliarization. The two concepts, Verfremdungseffekt and ostranenie, are basically analogous, and they refer to the narrative device of presenting a domestic reality in a way that makes it seem strange and distant. When the reader recognizes the narrated object as an element of everyday reality, critical consciousness is restored to automatized habits of world perception. As Fredric JAMESON describes the science fiction process of defamiliarization, "we build images of the future, science fiction narratives, which serve, in the Russian Formalist term, to defamiliarize the present. (....) The purpose of the science fiction project is to lift [the] institutional object out of its familiar context, and to make us stare at it in all its historicity."<sup>40</sup>

The necessary interdependence between the genre's estranged worlds and the world of normative reality is not a peculiarity of science fiction but a property which it shares

with the other forms of the fantastic. "All forms of fantastic literature --- " Mark ROSE remarks, "the gothic, the romance tale, and modern fantasy as well as science fiction --- are concerned with the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary."<sup>41</sup> The everyday world is an implicit reference point for all literature dealing with alternate realities.

Still, theorists concerned with the problem of differentiating science fiction from other narrative modes defend the uniqueness of the genre's "cognitive" treatment of fantastic material as opposed to the arbitrariness of romance at large. Patrick PARRINDER writes that "if the romance writer often takes pride in the sheer arbitrariness of his inventions, SF does its best to hide that arbitrariness with the mask of necessity."<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, science-fiction works which leave fantastic elements unexplained, dispensing with the conventional disguise of necessity, tend to have their science-fictional nature disputed in certain critical estimates.

In this manner, Philip K. Dick novels like The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch (1965) and Now wait for last year (1966), for instance, have been harshly criticized on account of Dick's unwillingness to furnish logical accounts for the events narrated. The earlier work is considered particularly heterodox in that, unlike the bug-eyed monster of space opera or the mindreading robot in some Golden Age story, Dick's ubiquitous Palmer Eldritch does not have his exact nature named and delimited in the novel.

It is not clear from the narrative whether Palmer Eldritch is a man or an alien or a man turned alien (and if

the latter is the case no information is furnished as to how the taking over of the man by the alien being occurred), and this infringement of a generic convention has been utterly rejected by commentators preoccupied with the question of genre delimitation. Scholars as qualified as Kim Stanley Robinson and Darko Suvin complain about the arbitrariness of Palmer Eldritch and the impossibility of explaining the situations in the novel in a way that satisfies the genre's criteria of rationality.

Interestingly enough, theorists demanding rationality in science fiction seem unaware of the element of irrationality implied in the act of providing logical justifications for situations that are basically impossible and at variance with empirical experience and analytic thought. Again, granted that the presence of a rational, cognitive dimension is the main determining factor of the science fiction narrative, it seems arbitrary that this should be located exclusively on the science-fiction author's ability to supply the reader with realistic evidence for fantasied events.

As Darko SUVIN himself argues, science-fictional cognition derives not from the scientific or realistic value of the contents of a science-fiction story but "from the final import or message of the tale,"<sup>43</sup> which message is explained by Suvin as invariably amounting to the establishment of an analogy between the alternate world described in the story and the historical reality in which the story is written. "The cognitive value of all SF," SUVIN writes, "is to be found in

its analogical reference to the author's present."<sup>44</sup> In this perspective, it appears that the lack of cognitive details at the level of plot would not constitute a sufficient condition for the invalidation of the science-fictional ethos of a novel like The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch.

In any case, a too rigid conception of the notion of literary genre seems to underlie the critical preoccupation with the preservation of science fiction's generic purity. As in the French neoclassical criticism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries science fiction criticism dominated by concepts of strict orthodoxy regarding the observance of generic laws and limits tends to disregard other values in favor of an adherence to the narrative strategies of the model works. Criticism of science fiction is thus an exception in the context of twentieth-century literary theory in that it admits of anachronous views about genres as crystallized forms, ideal models with which all individual texts should comply. Patrick PARRINDER epitomizes this critical posture when he writes that "the idea of literature is unthinkable without the conception of genres, or conventional literary forms."<sup>45</sup>

The notion of literature as a collection of genres has long become obsolete in critical theory. Denied as a whole in Benedetto Croce's Aesthetics (1902), the interpretive validity of genre criticism has been largely rejected by contemporary theorists. Critics like Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes have shown that the object of literary theory is to be found in the individuality and variety of the living texts rather than in the regard for the integrity of artificial forms.

Genre criticism has been "thoroughly discredited by modern literary theory and practice," as Fredric JAMESON points out.<sup>46</sup> The notion of genre is conceived in contemporary criticism not as a fixed framework or an instrument of classification, but as "mere scaffolding," as JAMESON puts it: "all generic categories (....) are (....) mere (....) scaffolding. (....) The generic classifications which people have invented for the novel (Bildungsroman, roman d'aventures, historical novel) (....) lose their vitality when (....) they come to be thought of as 'natural' forms."<sup>47</sup>

Regarded as an ideal, transcendent "form" science fiction becomes an abstraction which has little or nothing to do with the concrete science-fiction texts, traditional as well as untraditional. Like all literary genres science fiction is not a Platonic entity, uniform and unchangeable, but a process of textual associations open to outside influences and admitting of innovation, a fluid line of evolutionary continuity. Mark ROSE writes that "the space that [science fiction] inhabits is not a prison, rigid and unyielding, but a flexible and dynamic field of semantic tension. It is this condition," he adds, "that makes a living genre possible."<sup>48</sup>

On the whole, the recent shift of science fiction away from bygone narrative models has apparently not been accompanied by a corresponding renunciation by a given trend in science fiction criticism of a conception of genre placement as the central question of literary theory. The views held in some critical commentaries about what science

fiction should be like do not match with science fiction as it is produced by most contemporary practitioners of the genre. Whatever science fiction is as a literary form, it is more than a "realistic" mode of fantasy, and its significance derives less from a tradition of dissimulation of the implausible than from the political, ethical, and philosophical questions that the reading of science-fiction stories provokes.

To conclude, let us refer to one last definition of science fiction, one that is really an anti-definition. Brian ALDISS, the science fiction critic and leading member of the British New Wave, writes in Billion year spree that "science fiction doesn't exist." Aldiss' statement might be read as signifying that whereas science-fiction texts exist science fiction as an ideal entity does not; there is no "science fiction" but only concrete, living science-fiction works. Or it could be read in the light of the fact that as science fiction drifted toward the mainstream of narrative fiction, the mainstream, as represented in the writings of authors like Barth (b. 1930), Burroughs (b. 1914), Borges and Nabokov (1899-1977), moved away from traditional realism, so that there is a tendency for the boundary between science fiction and general fiction to become less and less distinct. SCHOLLES and RABKIN write,

Brian Aldiss began his compendious history of science fiction with the assertion that 'science fiction doesn't exist.' The point may be debatable now, but if we put it in the proper tense --- the future --- it seems much less debatable. Science fiction will not exist.



But then, as the two critics remark, "the whole shape of literature will have been changed."<sup>49</sup> For the moment, before the tendency for science fiction to dissolve into the mainstream (or for all narrative fiction to turn into science fiction, which amounts to the same thing) is fulfilled, chances are that the genre will continue existing --- not as a lifeless "form," but as an identifiable tradition --- for yet some time.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> ROSE, Mark. Alien encounters; anatomy of science fiction. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1981. p.1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Robert SCHOLLES & Eric S. RABKIN, Science fiction; history, science, vision. New York, Oxford University Press, 1977. p.37.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Patrick PARRINDER, Science fiction; its criticism and teaching. London, Methuen, 1980. p 12.

<sup>4</sup> FRYE, Northrop. Anatomy of criticism. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957. p.49.

<sup>5</sup> HEINLEIN, Robert. Science fiction; its nature, faults and virtues. In: DAVENPORT, Basil. The science fiction novel. Chicago, Advent, 1959. p.22. Quoted in ROSE, p.3-4.

<sup>6</sup> SCHOLLES & RABKIN, p.114.

<sup>7</sup> ROSE, p.4.

<sup>8</sup> AMIS, Kingsley. New maps of hell; a survey of science fiction. New York, Harcourt/Brace, 1960. p.18-22. Quoted in ROSE, p.197.

<sup>9</sup> PARRINDER, p.28.

<sup>10</sup> BUTOR, Michel. Répertoire I. Paris, Minuit, 1960. p.186.

<sup>11</sup> SUVIN, Darko. Metamorphoses of science fiction; on the poetics and history of a literary genre. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979. p.7-8.

<sup>12</sup> SUVIN writes, for instance, "taking the kindred thesaurus concepts of science for cognition, and fiction for estrangement, I believe there is a sound reason for calling this whole new genre Science Fiction" (p.13).

<sup>13</sup> SODRÉ, Muniz. A ficção do tempo; análise da narrativa science fiction. Petrópolis, Vozes, 1973. p.64-76.

<sup>14</sup> BAKHTINE, Mikhaïl. Esthétique et théorie du roman. Paris, Gallimard, 1978. p 237-8.

<sup>15</sup> SCHOLLES, Robert. Fabulation and metafiction. Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1979. p 213.

<sup>16</sup> JAMESON, Fredric. The political unconscious; narrative as a socially symbolic act. London, Methuen, 1981. p.104.

<sup>17</sup> BEER, Gillian. The romance. London, Methuen, 1970. p.79.

<sup>18</sup> LUKÁCS wrote, "le roman est le seul genre qui possède une caricature qui, par tout ce qui n'est pas essentiel dans sa forme, lui ressemble presque à s'y méprendre: la littérature de divertissement, offrant tous les caractères extérieurs du roman mais qui, dans son essence, n'est liée à rien, ne repose sur rien et manque, par conséquent, de toute signification." La théorie du roman. Paris, Gonthier, 1971. p.67.

<sup>19</sup> JAMESON, p.179.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.184.

<sup>21</sup> BEER, loc. cit.

<sup>22</sup> BARTHES, Roland. Le degré zéro de l'écriture. Paris, Seuil, 1972. p.49.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.51.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.50.

<sup>25</sup> JAMESON, p.183.

<sup>26</sup> SCHOLLES, Robert. Structural fabulation. Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975. p.4.

<sup>27</sup> SCHOLLES & RABKIN, p.169.

<sup>28</sup> JAKOBSON's six linguistic functions correspond to the so many constitutive factors he recognizes in the speech event, which takes place when the ADDRESSER sends (by means of a CODE and through a CONTACT channel) a MESSAGE (referred to a CONTEXT) to the ADDRESSEE. Thus, the EMOTIVE function of language is related to the addresser, the METALINGUAL function to the code, the PHATIC function to contact, the REFERENTIAL function to the context, the CONATIVE function to the addressee, and the POETIC function to the message itself. (Closing statement; linguistics and poetics. In: SEBEOK, Thomas D. Style in language. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960. p.350-77).

<sup>29</sup> JAMESON, Fredric. The prison-house of language; a critical account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973. p.81.

<sup>30</sup> The ambiguousness of the literary discourse, whose semantic relevance is only apparently identified with that of its subject matter, is explained in the way of a metaphor in BARTHES's Mythologies: "je suis élève de cinquième dans un lycée français; j'ouvre une grammaire latine, et j'y lis une

phrase (....): quia ego nominor leo. Je m'arrête et je réfléchis: il y a une ambiguïté dans cette proposition. D'une part, les mots y ont bien un sens simple: car moi je m'appelle lion. Et d'autre part, la phrase est là manifestement pour me signifier autre chose: dans la mesure où elle s'adresse à moi, élève de cinquième, elle me dit clairement: je suis un exemple de grammaire destiné à illustrer la règle d'accord de l'attribut." (Mythologies. Paris, Seuil, 1971. p.200-1). The chief thing about the Latin phrase is not its literal meaning, "for my name is lion," but the fact that it is meant to illustrate a grammatical rule; in the same manner, the literary text signifies on one level the kind of material with which it deals but then, and this is what is fundamental about it, it signifies itself qua literary text. "Each literary work (....) signifies Literature in general," as Fredric JAMESON writes in connection with Barthes's quoted exposition: "above and beyond what it actually does mean, it also says: I am literature." (The prison-house of language, p.155). In brief, as BARTHES puts it, "toute la Littérature peut dire: 'Larvatus prodeo,' je m'avance en désignant mon masque du doigt." (Le degré zéro, p.32).

<sup>31</sup> ROBBE-GRILLET, Alain. Pour un nouveau roman. Paris, Gallimard, 1963. p.170.

<sup>32</sup> TURNER, George. Letter of comment. In: GILLESPIE, Bruce. Philip K. Dick; electric shepherd. Melbourne, Norstrilia Press, 1975. p.48. Quoted in Kim Stanley ROBINSON, The novels of Philip K. Dick. San Diego, 1982. Dissertation, Ph.D., University of California, San Diego. p.183.

<sup>33</sup> GILLESPIE, Bruce. Contradictions. Philip K. Dick; electric shepherd. Quoted in ROBINSON, p.171.

<sup>34</sup> SCHOLLES and RABKIN write about how in 1879 "the Italian astronomer G.V. Schiaparelli (1835-1910) reported observing canali on Mars. Canali, which means 'channels,' was translated into English as 'canals.'" (p.118). The misunderstanding motivated an interest for the "canals," presumed builders which was eventually taken over by science fiction.

<sup>35</sup> Ubik. London, Panther Books, 1984. p.187-8.

<sup>36</sup> PAGETTI, Carlo. Dick and meta-SF. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.25-6.

<sup>37</sup> PARRINDER, p.62.

<sup>38</sup> BORGES, Jorge Luis. El primer Wells. Otras inquisiciones. Madrid, Alianza, 1981. p.91.

<sup>39</sup> ROSE, p.26-7.

<sup>40</sup> JAMESON, Fredric. Marxism and science fiction. Unpublished essay, p.19. Quoted in ROBINSON, p.135.

<sup>41</sup>ROSE, p.29.

<sup>42</sup>PARRINDER, p.51.

<sup>43</sup>SUVIN, p.76.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p.78.

<sup>45</sup>PARRINDER, p.1.

<sup>46</sup>JAMESON, The political unconscious, p.105.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p 145.

<sup>48</sup>ROSE, p 49.

<sup>49</sup>SCHOLES & RABKIN, p.99.

## II PHILIP K. DICK, THE PERSONAL BACKGROUND

### II.1 OVERVIEW OF LIFE AND WORK

"Chicago: I was born there, on December 16, 1928. It was a frigid city, and the home of gangsters; it was also a real city and I appreciated that."<sup>1</sup>

Philip Kindred Dick was born in Chicago but he was no midwesterner, as before he was a year old his family moved to California, where except for a four-year period (1934-1938) in Washington, D.C. and a brief stay in Canada in 1972 he was to spend his whole life.

Dick had a twin sister, Jane C. Dick, who died when the two were a month old (on January 26, 1929), a fact that deeply affected him and which is reflected in the image of estranged couples and split pairs of siblings that is a recurrent motif in his work.<sup>2</sup> Dick's parents separated when he was five years old and he stayed with his mother; back from Washington, D.C, where he did not do well at school, (first four grades), they settled in Berkeley, where Dick attended high school until 1945.

When he was twelve Dick read his first science-fiction magazine, Stirring Science Stories; he had been looking for the Popular Science Monthly and came across the other magazine by accident. Stirring Science Stories was edited by Donald Wollheim, who later, in 1955, published Dick's first science-fiction novel, Solar lottery. As he grew up, however, science fiction was discarded as an interest of childhood. Dick's interests in his teens and early twenties were classical

music, a lifelong concern, and the classics of literature. He read the French realistic novelists, Kafka, Joyce, Dostoevski, and ancient literature. "Let us say simply," he writes in his 1968 "Self-Portrait," "that I gained a working knowledge of literature from The Anabasis to Ulysses. I was not educated on sf but on well-recognized serious writing by authors all over the world."<sup>3</sup> The intellectual environment in Berkeley contributed to Dick's interest for "serious writing," as he stated in a 1977 interview:

I'm really lucky; I grew up in Berkeley, where it was absolutely natural to read people like Proust. (....) You really didn't dare go to a party unless you'd read War and Peace (....). Reading Ulysses was superobligatory; reading Finnegans Wake was almost optional, but it was important that you tried to read it, and could say something more about it than, "Man, was he crazy when he wrote that! It's utter gibberish!"<sup>4</sup>

In 1947 eighteen-year-old Philip K. Dick worked as a scriptwriter for a classical music program on KSMO-AM Radio, San Mateo. The program was called "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Haydn," in what was a prefiguration of Dick's later use of musical allusions in science-fictional contexts. In 1949 he married Jeannette Marlin; the marriage broke up the following year. Dick started attending University of California, Berkeley, but dropped out after some time. In 1951 he married Kleo Apostolides. All during this period, from 1948 to 1951, Dick managed a Berkeley record store, where he eventually met Anthony Boucher, the editor of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.

Dick used to listen to Anthony Boucher's radio program on vocal music, and after they met in 1951 he started attending Boucher's classes on writing. "I discovered that a person could be not only mature, but mature and educated, and still enjoy sf," Dick wrote, "Tony Boucher had entered my life, and by doing so, had determined its whole direction."<sup>5</sup> Under Anthony Boucher's guidance Dick started writing science-fiction stories and selling them. The stories sold so well that he quit the job at the record store. His science-fiction career had started and he was soon acknowledged as an important professional in the field.

Dick wrote at an extraordinary speed. He had seventy-three short stories published from 1952 to 1955. His first eight science-fiction novels were written between 1954 and 1958. At the same time, he was writing a series of non-science fiction novels, nine in all, which were not published in his lifetime but for one, Confessions of a crap artist, issued in 1975.

Like Confessions, his other mainstream novels (The man whose teeth were all exactly alike, In Milton Lumky territory, Puttering about in a small land, Mary and the giant, Humpty Dumpty in Oakland, Voices from the street, Gather yourselves together, The broken bubble of Thisbe Holt)<sup>6</sup> feature several Dickian thematic trademarks: ordinary people caught up in extreme situations, disintegration of human relations, the world of small-scale business and its operational minutiae.

The science-fiction novels of the same period (Solar lottery, The world Jones made, The man who japed, Eye in the sky, The cosmic puppets, Time out of joint, Dr. Futurity,



Vulcan's hammer) are dystopias in which Dick satirizes different aspects of contemporary American reality. Solar lottery (1955) depicts a world in which a few big corporations control the whole of society. In The world Jones made (1956) there is the growing repressive control of social life by the police. In The man who japed (1956) power is centralized in the hands of an elite of Puritan moralists. These early novels contain an element of wish fulfilment --- the bleak social realities they depict are usually made more tolerable in the end --- which is replaced in Dick's mature work by a much more pessimistic stance concerning the transformation of socio-political reality.

Dick's characteristic narrative method, in which point of view is divided among several characters, was used from the start. The method was worked up in the mainstream novels of the early 1950s and it was fully developed by the time Dick wrote Solar lottery.

The multifocal narrative which is a distinctive hallmark of Dick's whole work operates on a system of shifting viewpoints which stresses the subjectivity and relativity of the characters' individual worldviews. Dick typically employs the third person limited point of view, in which the reader is made to see the events in the story from the standpoint of a privileged character. But as he uses several narrative focuses rather than stick to a single one the action in a Philip Dick story is narrated from a number of different viewpoints --- as many as fifteen in The simulacra (1964), for instance. Darko SUVIN explicates this technique in his Science-Fiction Studies

article on Dick:

Dick (....) uses a narration which is neither that of the old-fashioned all-knowing (....) narrator, nor a narration in the first person by the central characters. The narration proceeds instead somewhere in between those two extreme possibilities, simultaneously in the third person and from the vantage point of the central or focal character in a given segment. This is always clearly delimited from other segments with other focal characters (....) by means of chapter endings or at least by double spacing within a chapter, and (....) by the focal character being named at the beginning of each such narrative segment, usually after a monotony-avoiding introductory sentence or subordinate clause which sets up the time and<sub>7</sub> place of the new narrative segment.

The ideological implications of such a narrative system are related to central aspects of the Dickian ethics. In the first place, as Darko SUVIN points out, this method permits

the empathizing into (....) all the focal characters, be they villains or heroes in the underlying plot conflict, which is equivalent to saying that Dick has no black or white villains and heroes (....). In the collective, non-individualist world of Dick, everybody, high and low, destroyer and sufferer, is in an existential situation which largely determines his/her actions.

Again, the fact that the focus is divided among a variety of characters promotes the demystification of epistemological certainties. Kim Stanley ROBINSON analyzes the effect of cognitive discontinuity brought on by Dick's technique of reporting the action through a series of clashing

perspectives:

tension is (....) created by the disparity between the different characters' understanding of the events that occur to them, for there is never a final judgement given on the matter by an omniscient narrator. These disparities are of central importance, for much of our interest in these characters is created not by their individual perceptions, but by the disagreements in the various characters' perceptions. Meaning or significance is thus created by differentiation in a system without any absolute or final meanings.

Lastly, Dick's choice of a multifocal narrative pattern has to do with his view, as stated in a 1974 conversation with Paul Williams, that there are no strictly personal problems, but that all human problems are in a way multipersonal. "I have never quite understood the idea of a single protagonist," Dick told Williams. He argued that one's necessarily individual perception of the world was "a form of ignorance." "Only my ignorance makes me think that I am the whole universe and that my sorrows are exclusively mine and have no connection with the rest of the world,"<sup>10</sup> Dick said. His rejection of the "central character," "single protagonist" pattern amounts to a disruption of the individualist illusion of the realistic narrative with its artificial contraposition of major and minor characters. In a Dick novel some characters are given the privileged psychological focus for most of the time, but they are not protagonists in the traditional sense of the term, since the focus can be shifted at any moment and any of the characters can become the protagonist of a given passage.

Another typical feature of the Dickian narrative which is set up in the novels of the 1950s is the cast of characters, which remains virtually unchanged in the mature works of the 1960s and early 70s. The two main character types in Dick's recurrent characterology are the powerless protagonist, usually a craftsman or repairman, and the powerful protagonist, a wealthy businessman or technocrat. Beside the two opposing protagonists (which Kim Stanley ROBINSON calls "little" and "big" according to Dick's own terminology) there are two basic female roles: a weak and clinging woman (typically the little protagonist's wife) and an ambitious young woman, vicious and attractive at the same time (often the big protagonist's mistress).

In addition to these four types Dick's spectrum of characters comprises a third female role, that of a positive, sustaining influence (she is usually an artist, a ceramist); a dystopian political authority; a religious leader; a mentally defective person whose apprehension of reality can be more accurate than that of normal people; an entertainment celebrity; an interplanetary disc jockey; a typically unfeeling android; a psychiatrist who hinders rather than assist his patients; the big protagonist's employees and the little protagonist's family and teammates.

With these and other character types Dick builds a manifold structure of interacting subplots which make up a complex whole in a process that has been extensively analyzed by Robinson and Suvin. ROBINSON writes about Dick's plot generating tactics that

often the characters are ignorant of each other, or at least of each other's motivations, and the effect of this ignorance and of circumstances is invariably ironic. The clashing interests, understandings, and (....) world views of the characters, and the ironic domino-like movement of the subplots against each other, constitute the distinctive quality of Dick's novel construction.

In this manner, the fundamentals of Dick's narrative method were established at quite an early stage, as were many themes --- as the opposition between the creativity of manual labor and the unproductiveness of administrative or bureaucratic work --- which were to be repeatedly reworked in the later novels.

After writing Confessions of a crap artist in 1959 Dick stopped writing for a two-year period. His second marriage had ended in 1957 and in April of 1958 he married Ann Rubenstein, born Williams, with whom he had one child, Laura. Between 1959 and 1961 he worked for his wife in her custom jewelry business. Later Dick wrote about this period in his life, "with Anne I could not fulfill myself because her own creative drive was so strong that she often declared that my creative work 'got in her way.' Even in the jewelry making I merely polished pieces which she designed."<sup>12</sup> In any case, the break in Dick's continuous writing activity was essential for a capital change in the direction of his work.

During the 1959-61 pause Dick reevaluated his activity as a professional who wrote science-fiction novels that were praised and well-received and mainstream novels for which he was unable to find a publisher, and this despite the fact that

his best resources as a novelist went into the mainstream works. As a consequence of this reflection on his work Dick started a science-fiction novel into which he for the first time incorporated the concern for character portrayal and stylistic quality that he usually devoted to his mainstream novels.

The novel, which came out in October 1962, was The man in the high castle. The man in the high castle got the Hugo Award (named after Hugo Gernsback) for best science-fiction novel of the year, and it constituted a turning point not only in the context of Dick's own writing but also in that of science fiction at large. Kim Stanley ROBINSON compares the improvement in the quality of Dick's science-fiction novels represented by The man in the high castle to the shift from The beautiful and damned to The great Gatsby in the work of Francis Scott Fitzgerald. ROBINSON explains the impact of this breakthrough novel on the science fiction scene by adding that "in Dick's case, he was writing in a genre in which the great majority of the works were at the level of The Beautiful and Damned (or below it) so that in this sense he helped draw an entire genre up with him."<sup>13</sup>

Dick's Hugo Award-winning novel is his most discussed work, and its well-known premise is that the Axis won World War II and the U.S.A. and the whole world have been partitioned between Germany and Japan. The story is set in a japanized San Francisco, where a clandestine science-fiction novel circulates in which the Allies won the war. Dick's introduction of an alternate history within an alternate

history and the profound implications raised in the novel about politics and the concept of history have been developed in the critical commentaries of Robinson, Mark Rose, and Scholes and Rabkin.

For Dick, The man in the high castle signified the end of his doubts about science fiction as a valid medium for literary expression. He had written a piece of fine literature in the context of a secondary genre, and from this point on he gave up writing mainstream literature and for the first time committed himself thoroughly to science fiction.

Philip K. Dick was thirty-four years old in 1963 when he set out to write science fiction in earnest, and he did so with an astonishing energy and intensity: sixteen Dick novels were published in the period between 1963 and 1969. Some of these novels, like The game-players of Titan (1963), The crack in space (1966), or The unteleported man (1966), are minor works, hastily written and unrevised. But others (Martian time-slip, The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, Dr. Bloodmoney, or how we got along after the bomb, Do androids dream of electric sheep?, Ubik) are masterpieces which revolutionized the genre.

In the novels of the 1960s Dick's concern with social criticism is associated with an additional dimension, that of metaphysical inquiry. The traditional material of science fiction is used in these stories to depict oppressive power structures which the individual characters cannot alter but in which they must struggle to preserve self-respect and the ability to communicate with and care for each other. At the same time, the conventional science-fictional elements serve

Dick's purpose of metaphysical exploration, which rather than be merely intimated appears in these novels as an explicit concern, what with Dick's many direct references to the Pre-Socratics, Plato, the Neoplatonists, St. Paul, Meister Eckhart, Hume, Kant, or Jung.

In Counter-clock world, for instance, the epigraphs to each chapter are quotations from Scotus Erigena, St. Augustine, Boethius and St. Thomas Aquinas. Dick's readings in psychology are evidenced by his use after 1962 of the vocabulary and concepts of the European Existential psychologists, for example; the concept of being-in-the-world from Ludwig Binswanger's Daseinanalyse or Existential analysis and the notions of umwelt, mitwelt and eigenwelt underlie many of Dick's mature works.

An example of Dick's conversion of a familiar science-fiction motif into a vehicle for ethical and metaphysical searches is his treatment of the theme of androids, mechanical simulacra for human beings, which provokes a series of disquieting questions about what it means to be human. As Kim Stanley ROBINSON remarks about Do androids dream of electric sheep? "the question pondered by the novel is not the one of the title, which asks for a definition of the android, but is rather one concerned with the nature of humanity, of humaneness."<sup>14</sup>

In Do androids dream police killers earn their living by "retiring" androids that land on Earth, where they are banned. However, the difference between the androids and real humans is so subtle that individuals under suspicion have to



be given the complex Voigt-Kampff psychological test which determines if one is a true human or an artificial simulacrum. Moreover, some androids are not even aware that they are androids at all, and as some of the humans in the story have an unfeeling, machine-like quality about them one starts wondering who is really human, and who is just pretending to be. In Dick's view the ability to empathize, the capacity for participation in another's feelings is what defines the human. Unhuman behavior, no matter if it comes from a man or an android, is characterized by a lack emotional involvement, "as in the bureaucratic mind," as Dick stated in an interview, "which processes everything as things."<sup>15</sup>

Another example in the same line is Dick's treatment of the traditional alternate universe motif, which he uses to explore his major theme of the nature of reality. In Dick's novels the experience of the reality breakdown (which can be induced by drugs, time shifts, a psychotic condition, or other factors) causes the normal perception of the world to break down for his characters, so that as they are launched into parallel universes their assumptions about the absolute quality of reality necessarily collapse. As SCHOLLES and RABKIN observe,

the characters in Dick's world often find it impossible to distinguish between what is really happening to them --- and the reader often faces the same problem. Even what "actually" happens can only offer clues to a reality which is enigmatic and elusive. (....) Dick has turned science fiction into an elegant and harrowing mental game, in which traditional ethics and traditional

metaphysics are both called into question. Of any particular act it is often equally hard to say whether it has "really" happened or whether it is good or bad.<sup>16</sup>

On the whole, the 1960s novels are complex works in which Dick focuses on classic philosophical dilemmas at the same time that he proceeds with his inquiry into social, political and economic anxieties, which are very much those of his own time and place.

Commentators of Philip K. Dick are unanimous about the topical, timely quality of his fiction. Carlo PAGETTI stresses the fact that the societies depicted in Dick's stories are "always set in the U.S.A., always American;"<sup>17</sup> Darko SUVIN remarks that Dick "always speaks directly out of and to the American experience of his generation;"<sup>18</sup> Kim Stanley ROBINSON notes that "no matter how severe the estrangements" in Dick's novels there is "no mistaking what society he is talking about."<sup>19</sup> It is the tension established by the interface between the specific concerns of his own culture and the universal problems of ethics and metaphysics that characterizes Dick's novels in this phase.

After 1969 and the publication of Ubik, however, Dick entered a difficult period in his personal life. He had financial problems in spite of his extraordinary literary output, and the strain of having written sixteen novels on a practically non-stop basis finally began to weigh on him. "I was a writing fool" Dick said later, "sixteen novels in five years. Now how long a life-span would you want to give a person that tried to make that a professional working

schedule? I didn't run out of ideas; I just ran out of energy. I was depleting myself."<sup>20</sup>

His rate of production shrank considerably, and personal problems besieged him. In 1971 his home in Marin County was invaded and ransacked, a fact that disturbed him greatly. Dick had divorced his third wife in 1966 and married Nancy Hackett (they had one child, Isolde) the following year, but this marriage, too, broke up, and they separated in 1972. During the 1970-72 period Dick became involved with the drug subculture and he attempted suicide in 1972 when he was in Canada as Guest of Honor at the Vancouver Science Fiction Convention. He joined a drug rehabilitation center in Vancouver but returned to California the same year to oversee the deposit of his manuscript collection at the California State University, Fullerton Library.

In 1973 Dick married Tessa Busby; his son Christopher was born and he resumed writing. Dick had been working on Flow my tears, the policeman said since 1969. He did eleven drafts of the novel<sup>21</sup> before finally completing it and submitting it to Doubleday in 1973; when it came out in 1974 Flow my tears brought him back into the attention of the science fiction community and it won the John W. Campbell, Jr. Award given by academic critics of science fiction for best novel of the year. With its conservative construction and contraposition of public and private concerns Flow my tears is a work that belongs with the major novels of the 1960s rather than with the new, experimental projects that Dick started working on after 1974.

After finishing Deus irae, his nine-year-long collaboration with Roger Zelazny, Dick was for the first time free to write at a more leisurely pace, without the economic pressure to produce quickly which harrassed him throughout twenty years of literary activity. His next novel after Flow my tear was A scanner darkly, which took him two years to write and which is a unique book in that it is unlike the novels of the sixties but then it is not linked thematically with Dick's final trilogy either.

The action in A scanner darkly takes place in 1994 in Orange County, where Dick lived since his return from Canada, and the story is filled with roman à clef allusions to people he knew and events he witnessed in the period when he was in contact with the drug counterculture. Dick's novel is on one level a meditation on self-alienation and loss of psychic unity or identity. On another level the story focuses on the opposition between organized society and the society of drug addicts, which are shown to be analogous rather than antithetic. As in Michel Foucault's theories about the web of power relations in modern society A scanner darkly has a government institution for drug rehabilitation in which the internees are occupied in the cultivation of Substance D, a highly degenerative drug. The authorities secretly promote the production of drug at the same time that they repress drug consumption. The government ban on drug leads dissenters to drug themselves, which makes them into harmless "vegetables" that the government can use for making more drug. The point about the narrative is that there is no way that this vicious circle can be interrupted.

Dick finished Scanner in 1976 and began doing research for his next novel, Valis. His fifth marriage ended the same year and in 1977 Dick went to Metz, France, where he delivered his Guest of Honor speech ("If You Find This World Bad You Should See Some Of The Others") at the Metz Science Fiction Convention. In 1978 Dick finished Valis, a semi-autobiographical work which is the first book in a trilogy that comprises The divine invasion (1981) and The transmigration of Timothy Archer (1982). The three novels, shared reference point has to do with an experience Philip K. Dick had in March of 1974.

Dick considered, or claimed to consider, his mystical vision of March 1974, when he "saw the world under the aspect of the Christian Apocalypse,"<sup>22</sup> as he put it, to be a genuine religious revelation, and he wrote literally thousands of pages on the meaning of his experience. (Characteristically, Dick was aware all the time, as is clear from the detached, self-mocking tone of Valis, of what he called the "minimum hypothesis," that is, the possibility that his vision had really been self-induced<sup>23</sup>). This massive work, which he called the Exegesis and which amounted to two million words at the time of his death, was the material from which Dick extracted his novels Valis (1981) and Valisystem A. Valisystem A was published posthumously, in 1985, as Radio Free Albemuth, and it is the political counterpart of Valis. As Paul WILLIAMS describes the novel,

RADIO FREE ALBEMUTH is about an  
America dominated by the tyrant  
Ferris F. Fremont and by the Friends

of the American People (the FAPers) who are active everywhere digging out subversives and encouraging citizens (by intimidation) to write loyalty reports on their friends and even on themselves. This is all in the name of stamping out the elusive, invisible but allegedly omnipresent<sup>24</sup> Communist organization Aramcheck.

Unlike Radio Free Albemuth the trilogy novels Valis, The divine invasion and The transmigration of Timothy Archer concentrate on religious rather than on political opposition to the dystopian reality. However, it is not as if social criticism were replaced in the trilogy by a defense of religion as a form of private escape. Rather, an invitation to rebellion against authority is as much a central component of these novels as was the case in relation to all of Dick's preceding works, only as political and religious repression are wholly equated now, religious liberation amounts to political liberation in this latter phase.

In The divine invasion, for instance, the Communist Party and the Catholic Church govern the world together with the aid of Big Noodle, a vast artificial intelligence system in which is processed all of Earth's information. The coalision of state, church and the technology of centralized information can be overthrown only by the second coming of the Son of God, a brain-damaged boy who immigrates illegally into Earth. The church and party authorities take measures to destroy the child but he eludes them and is victorious in the end.

Dick's identification of politics and religion is remindful of the same analogy as it appears in the work of

William Blake (1757-1827). Like Dick in the latter novels the poet and visionary mystic did not distinguish between political and religious dissent (incidentally, Dick's Christianity is, like Blake's, of a Gnostic mould): in Songs of innocence (1794) as in Milton (1808) or Jerusalem (1820) state and church are prisons in which people are manipulated to the economic advantage of privileged groups at the same time that they are deprived of spiritual grace. In a similar fashion, in Dick's novels social revolution cannot be achieved by political reform alone; human solidarity and a sense of spiritual dignity are also required.

The content of Dick's three last novels was inspired by a personal experience, but whether this was a genuine mystical event or rather an evidence of exhaustion or psychosis is beside the point, just as the nature of the visions that Blake transformed into poetry is irrelevant from the point of view of literary criticism. As Kim Stanley ROBINSON observes about Valis, that novel is not "some sort of personal testimony" but "a highly-wrought work of fiction."<sup>25</sup> Dick's literary processing of a private experience is what matters; the nature of the experience itself is not important.

Valis and The divine invasion were published in 1981; the same year Do androids dream of electric sheep? was filmed as Blade Runner,<sup>26</sup> which contributed to Dick's financial stability toward the end. Philip K. Dick was fifty-three years old and just beginning to enjoy prosperity and a reputation outside the frontiers of science fiction when he died of a stroke at his home in Santa Ana, California, on March 2nd, 1982. In 1983 the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award was

established to honor the year's best American science-fiction novel published as a paperback original.

Brian ALDISS noted in 1975 that Dick's work was structured like a web in which each novel was related to all of the others: "one of the attractions of Dick's novels is that they all have points at which they inter-relate," ALDISS wrote, "although Dick never introduces characters from previous books. The relationship is more subtle --- more web-like --- than that."<sup>27</sup> In fact, taken as a whole, Dick's entire body of work displays a systematic continuity of theme linking the different novels of a given period and the different periods into which his work is divided.

From the politically-concerned novels of the 1950s Dick's fiction evolved into the double-structuring of the novels of the middle phase, in which politics and metaphysics coexist in a single context; this coexistence, in turn, developed into a total identification of political and spiritual issues, which are presented as synonymous concerns in the novels of the 1980s. This process of thematic evolution starting with Solar lottery and ending in The transmigration of Timothy Archer makes Philip K. Dick's work into a single science-fictional roman fleuve in which the progression of the interdependent parts adds up to a meaningful totality in the end.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In an autobiographical "Self-Portrait" written in 1968 for a Danish magazine and first published in English in The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (2), December 1983. p.1

<sup>2</sup>Dick's own account of his grievance over the loss of his twin sister and his interpretation of Flow my tears, the policeman said and A scanner darkly in the light of this biographical event are contained in Gregg RICKMAN, Philip K. Dick; the last testament. Long Beach, Fragments West/The Valentine Press, 1985. Chapter 17, "To Find My Lost Sister."

<sup>3</sup>"Self-Portrait." The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (2), p.11.

<sup>4</sup>Interview to D. Scott Apel and Kevin Briggs, Part One. The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (5), December 1984. p.6.

<sup>5</sup>"Self-Portrait." The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (2), loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup>Five of Dick's mainstream novels have been published after his death: The man whose teeth were all exactly alike (Mark Ziesing, 1984), Puttering about in a small land (Academy Chicago, 1985), In Milton Lumky territory (Dragon Press, 1985), Humpty Dumpty in Oakland (Gollancz, 1986), and Mary and the giant (Arbor House, 1987). Voices from the street, Gather yourselves together and The broken bubble of Thisbe Holt are still unpublished.

<sup>7</sup>SUVIN, Darko. P.K. Dick's opus; artifice as refuge and world view. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.9.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., loc. cit.

<sup>9</sup>ROBINSON, Kim Stanley. The novels of Philip K. Dick. San Diego, 1982. Dissertation, Ph.D., University of California, San Diego. p.25.

<sup>10</sup>This is not Dick's literal statement but a translation of the passage in Paul WILLIAMS's introduction to Confessions of a crap artist as it appears in the French Laffont edition. The whole passage reads, "A vrai dire, je n'ai jamais très bien compris l'idée d'un protagoniste unique... Pour moi, les problèmes sont multipersonnels, ils nous concernent tous; un problème strictement personnel, ça n'existe pas... C'est seulement une forme d'ignorance, quand je me réveille le matin, que je trébuche contre un fauteuil et me casse le nez, que je suis fauché et que ma femme m'a quitté --- c'est mon ignorance qui me fait penser que je suis l'univers tout entier

et que mes misères me sont propres, et n'affectent en rien le reste du monde." (Portrait de l'artiste en jeune fou. Paris, Laffont, 1982. p.13).

<sup>11</sup>ROBINSON, p.121.

<sup>12</sup>"Self-Portrait." The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (2), p.13.

<sup>13</sup>ROBINSON, p.80.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p.178.

<sup>15</sup>Interview to D. Scott Apel and Kevin Briggs, Part Two. The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (6), April 1985. p.2.

<sup>16</sup>SCHOLES, Robert & RABKIN, Eric S. Science fiction; history, science, vision. New York, Oxford University Press, 1977. p.72.

<sup>17</sup>PAGETTI, Carlo. Dick and meta-SF. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.26.

<sup>18</sup>SUVIN, p.21.

<sup>19</sup>ROBINSON, p.126.

<sup>20</sup>Interview to D. Scott Apel and Kevin Briggs, Part One. The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (5), December 1984. p.5.

<sup>21</sup>RICKMAN, p.204.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p.36.

<sup>23</sup>About Dick's "minimum hypothesis" K.W. Jeter (on whom the character Kevin in Valis is modelled) quotes Dick as saying, "I don't know if what happened was just my brain giving me a puzzle to take my mind off my real problems. I was so upset about being broke, my marriage having collapsed, being alone and friendless in a place I'd never been in, all these strange things like the hit on my house and all that... Maybe it was just a matter of my (....) creative brain saying, 'Look, this guy needs the equivalent of a jigsaw puzzle to work on.' And it gave it to me, my own self." The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (5), December 1984. p.14

<sup>24</sup>In The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (6), April 1985. p.3.

<sup>25</sup>ROBINSON, p.212.

<sup>26</sup>Blade Runner was produced by Michael Deeley and directed by Ridley Scott, and it had Harrison Ford in the role of Rick Deckard, the protagonist, and Rutger Hauer as Roy Baty, the renegade android; Hampton Fancher and David Peoples wrote the screenplay.

<sup>27</sup>ALDISS, Brian W. Dick's maledictory web; about and around Martian time-slip. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.43.

## II.2 SCHOLARSHIP ON DICK: THE MAIN CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Criticism of Dick's work is remarkable for its quantity as well as for its quality. Dick is one of the most discussed science-fiction writers of his generation, and his work is given a distinctive attention in general studies of science fiction such as Brian Aldiss's Billion year spree (1972), Scholes and Rabkin's Science fiction (1977) and Mark Rose's Alien encounters (1981). Several science-fiction authors have written about Dick's fiction, and appreciations by fellow-writers include articles by Stanislaw Lem, Ursula K. Le Guin, John Brunner, Thomas M. Disch, Ian Watson, and Damon Knight. Important volumes of Dick criticism are Angus Taylor's Philip K. Dick and the umbrella of light (1975) and Philip K. Dick; electric shepherd (1975), a collection of essays and reviews edited by Bruce Gillespie with an introduction by Roger Zelazny.

Some of the best criticism of Philip K. Dick is considered to be contained in the fifth issue (1975) of Science-Fiction Studies, the journal edited by R.D. Mullen and Darko Suvin. This issue is entirely devoted to Dick's work, and it contains articles by Carlo Pagetti, Brian Aldiss, Peter Fitting and Stanislaw Lem, all of them European critics, and by such leading American theorists as Fredric Jameson and Darko Suvin himself. Lastly, a more recent and equally important work is Kim Stanley Robinson's doctoral dissertation for the University of California, San Diego, The novels of Philip K. Dick (1982), an inclusive survey of Dick's entire

body of fiction.

In this section we shall briefly survey some of the main questions connected with criticism of Dick's work as they appear in the context of Robinson's dissertation and the Science-Fiction Studies articles by Brian Aldiss, Stanislaw Lem, Carlo Pagetti, Fredric Jameson, Peter Fitting and Darko Suvin.

These appreciations can be classed according to the critics' emphasis on either the "physical" or the metaphysical dimension of Dick's work. Thus, Brian Aldiss and Stanislaw Lem concentrate on Dick's concern with philosophical speculation; Carlo Pagetti and Fredric Jameson select the association in Dick's novels of existential questions and social criticism as the main distinctive mark of his fiction; and Peter Fitting, Darko Suvin, and, to some extent, Kim Stanley Robinson, refer to this duality as a handicap, because in their view the presence of metaphysics hinders the author's purpose of political inquiry, which they regard as the true significant trait of Dick's work.

Brian ALDISS describes in "Dick's maledictory web" the way in which Dick uses certain recurrent themes --- the flimsiness of reality, the ruinous action of entropy, a devolutionary vision of history --- to create a "maledictory" circle or web "within which [ his ] beings move and from which they have to escape." The best that the characters in Dick's novels can do is not try to make things better but prevent things from getting much worse, and they must do so at the risk of being destroyed by the circumstances. "Although almost any change is for the worse," ALDISS writes, "stasis means

death, spiritual if not actual."<sup>1</sup>

Like Suvin, Pagetti and Stanislaw Lem, Brian Aldiss stresses the uniqueness of Dick's use of conventional science fiction materials. About the Martian scenery of Martian time-slip (1964) ALDISS writes that this is "neither the Mars as adventure-playground of Edgar Rice Burroughs nor the Mars as parallel of Pristine America of Ray Bradbury; this is Mars used in elegant and expert fashion as metaphor for spiritual poverty."<sup>2</sup> In the same manner, SUVIN notes that "Dick's Mars is a run-down future (....) where people and things have decayed, 'into rusty bits and useless debris,' (....) in ironic repudiation of Bradbury's nostalgia for the petty-bourgeois past and Clarke's confidence in liberal scientism."<sup>3</sup> Carlo PAGETTI writes about Dick's "ability to adapt the principal themes and conventions of the American SF tradition to his own (....) conception of reality and of American society,"<sup>4</sup> and he defines Dick's lean, unsentimental presentation of the Martian Waste Land as being "at the antipode of Bradbury."<sup>5</sup> Lastly, LEM's interest for the features that discriminate Dick from other science-fiction authors is spread throughout his Science-Fiction Studies essay and extends even to its title, "Philip K. Dick; a visionary among the charlatans."

ALDISS compares Dick's entropic Martian dreamscape to "the semi-allegorical, semi-surrealist locations used by Kafka to heighten his Ghastly Comedy of bafflement."<sup>6</sup> An analogy between Dick's novels and the work of Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is also detected by Stanislaw LEM, who argues that the problems of genre placement raised by Dick's writing are the

same that one encounters in connection with Kafka. LEM's position on the question of Dick's breaks with generic conventions is that "the critics and readers who hold Dick's 'impurity' against him are fossilized traditionalists."<sup>7</sup> The author of Solaris offers an impressive argument against objections to Dick's unorthodox shunning of "rational explanations:" "in relation to Kafka," he writes,

analogous objections would consist in demanding that The Metamorphosis should conclude with an explicit "entomological justification," making plain when and under what circumstances a normal man can turn into a bug, and that The Trial should explain just what Mr. K. is accused of.<sup>8</sup>

The Polish critic and writer argues in defense of Dick's withholding of information that "literature which furnishes the reader with godlike omniscience about all narrated events is today an anachronism which neither the theory of art nor the theory of knowledge will undertake to defend."<sup>9</sup> At the same time, LEM writes that Philip K. Dick makes things difficult for his commentators in the sense that "he does not so much play the part of a guide through his phantasmagoric worlds as he gives the impression of one lost in their labyrinth."<sup>10</sup>

LEM's ambiguousness on this subject is disconcerting, because Dick's narrative non sequiturs are either a deliberate attitude or the consequence of his being, as LEM writes, "so caught up in his vision that he is unconcerned about either its literal plausibility or its non-literal message,"<sup>11</sup> but they cannot possibly be both. Commenting on LEM's appreciation

of Dick, which tends to sound grudging and patronizing by turns, Kim Stanley ROBINSON remarks that "one cannot trust a major writer writing about a major contemporary to be completely open and objective."<sup>12</sup> In any case, most of Lem's observations are essential for the understanding of Dick's work, and his insights touch central aspects of it, as when he notes that "essentially it is always one and the same world which figures" in Dick's novels,

a world of elementally unleashed entropy, of decay which not only, as in our reality, attacks the harmonious arrangement of matter, but which even consumes the order of elapsing time. Dick has thus amplified, rendered monumental and at the same time monstrous certain fundamental properties of the actual world, giving them dramatic acceleration and impetus.<sup>13</sup>

Differently from Lem and Aldiss, Carlo PAGETTI concentrates in "Dick and meta-SF" on the coexistence of social and existential concerns in Dick's work, on the "relationship between the individual world of the psyche and the grotesque concreteness of the society, however bizarre and mystified, that engulfs his heroes."<sup>14</sup> PAGETTI writes, "in Dick, (....) criticism of American society does not presuppose the faith that after all evil can be exorcised. His pessimism is not only social, but concerns itself with all of man's existence. Though always based on an analysis of American reality, it is metaphysical and existential."<sup>15</sup>

Pagetti's idea is that by putting a personal imprint on each science-fictional tradition (Asimov's robots and



Vanvogtian mutants become emblems for human beings, Heinlein-like titans are shown to be as vulnerable as the most helpless of characters) Dick creates science fiction that asks for a reconsideration of the very intrinsicalness of the science fiction narrative. What Dick writes, PAGETTI propounds, is not science fiction but meta-science fiction:

acting within SF, accepting the popular element which has always constituted one of its foundations, Dick is, nonetheless, placing into jeopardy the conception of reality on which all of SF was based. He is challenging the narrative and cultural values of SF not by denying them flatly, but by exploiting them to their extreme formal and ideological consequences.<sup>16</sup> Dick is actually writing SF about SF.

In the sense that, as PAGETTI proposes, Dick conducts "a critical inquiry on the meaning of SF through the narrative devices that SF puts at his disposal,"<sup>17</sup> his novels can be regarded as the science-fictional equivalent of Jorge Luis Borges' ficciones, in which the very essence of fiction is called into question. Emir Rodriguez MONEGAL writes about Borges' work that this is "una empresa literaria que se basa en la 'total' destrucción de la literatura y que a su vez (paradójicamente) instaura una nueva literatura; una 'écriture' que se vuelve sobre sí misma para recrear, de sus propias cenizas, una nueva manera de escribir."<sup>18</sup> In the same manner, the central feature of Dick's "meta"-science fiction is a self-unsettling quality which paradoxically institutes the possibility of a whole new way of reading and writing science fiction. This central quality of Dick's writing is

particularly prominent in Ubik, which is discussed in Peter Fitting's essay on Dick's "deconstruction of bourgeois science fiction."

The Borgian stamp of Dick's work is not restricted to its challenging of the most basic presuppositions of science fiction as a narrative mode but extends to the peculiar combination in his novels of a sense of metaphysical unease and a hallucinatory vision of reality, and in this sense it was detected by Ursula K. LE GUIN, who has called Philip K. Dick the Americans' "own homegrown Borges." LE GUIN writes, "the fact that what Dick is entertaining us about is reality and madness, time and death, sin and salvation --- this has escaped most critics. Nobody notices that we have our own homegrown Borges, and have had him for thirty years."<sup>19</sup>

Like Pagetti, Fredric Jameson highlights the opposition of a subjective (private, existential) and an objective (public, socio-political) dimension in Dick's work. Jameson's purpose in "After Armageddon; character systems in Dr. Bloodmoney" is specifically that of studying the workings underlying the complex relationships between the several characters in Dick's 1965 novel: he makes a structural analysis of the characterological system in the book, showing how this is organized according to an intricate pattern of permutations based on a system of oppositions and contradictions. But in addition to this, Fredric Jameson investigates Dick's simultaneous exploration of the domains of the objective and the subjective. The leading Marxist critic in the U.S.A. writes about how Dick's fiction confronts a dilemma

which in one way or another characterizes all modern literature of any consequence: the intolerable and yet unavoidable choice between a literature of the self and a language of some impersonal exteriority, between the subjectivism of private languages and case histories, or some nostalgia for the objective that leads outside the realm of individual or existential experience into some reassuringly stable place<sup>20</sup> of common sense and statistics.

In Philip K. Dick this contradiction is not resolved by the exclusion of one of the two alternatives, but by the incorporation of the two in a single narrative context. "Dick's force," JAMESON points out, "lies in the effort to retain possession and use of both apparently contradictory, mutually exclusive subjective and objective explanation systems all at once."<sup>21</sup> JAMESON concludes his essay by remarking that Dick's frequent happy endings, the closing promises, fleeting as they may be, of a reestablished concord in a future "beyond the bomb" mark Dick "as an anti-Vonnegut, as the unseasonable spokesman for a historical consciousness distinct from and superior to that limited dystopian and apocalyptic vision so fashionable in Western SF today."<sup>22</sup>

A similar observation is contained in Peter Fitting's article "Ubik; the deconstruction of bourgeois SF." FITTING notes that in spite of the fact that "for Dick there can be no single, final reality, there is little pessimism in the endings of Dick's novels when compared to the facile pessimism of the currently fashionable literature of despair."<sup>23</sup> As FITTING writes, Dick's heterodox fiction is set apart from

accepted narrative models, it conforms neither to the criteria of "high art" (craftsmanship, attention to style), nor to those of traditional science fiction (rationality, plausibility) or to those of contemporary dystopian literature (a stylish, approved sort of pessimism):

Dick's writing is not easily included within traditional academic limits, for his novels are, in appearance, badly and carelessly written, with superficial characterization, confusing plots and similar deviations from "good writing." This apparent inattention to writing, along with an overabundance of traditional SF details and conventions have earned him the neglect of the proponents of both high art and of the New Wave; while his sprawling, chaotic near futures and his total disregard for the traditional SF virtues of rationality and futurological plausibility have caused him to be overlooked by the proponents of the<sup>24</sup> more traditional extrapolative SF.

Fitting's argument is that both the "artistic" bourgeois novel and the traditional science-fiction novel perform the restatement of a pre-existent conception of reality, which reinforces prevailing ideological models and the repression and alienation that go with them. Because Dick's fiction contravenes the formal and aesthetic conventions of classical "representational" literature it constitutes, in FITTING's view, "a subversive form of writing which undermines rather than reconfirms the repressive system in which it has been produced and acts as a critique of the ideological presuppositions of the SF genre and of the traditional novel in general."<sup>25</sup> (Fitting's reading of Ubik as a "deconstructive" text shall be analyzed in more detail in

the context of our discussion of the novel).

Like Fredric Jameson, Peter Fitting interprets Dick from a Marxist viewpoint; unlike Jameson, however, the English scholar stresses the political overtones of Dick's work and plays down its metaphysical implications. FITTING writes about Ubik that although the novel "continuously plays with a metaphysical dimension"<sup>26</sup> "metaphysics is rejected"<sup>27</sup> in it. Teleological concepts like "God" and "the Devil" are desacralized in the novel, and this, Fitting argues, amounts to a rejection of metaphysics. However, it could be argued that the fact that there is no metaphysical solution for the existential impasse postulated in the novel does not rule out metaphysics per se; the problems of epistemology raised in Ubik undermine metaphysical assumptions of Western thought, but then an attitude of metaphysical skepticism is still a metaphysical attitude.

Fitting's minimization of the metaphysical overtones in Ubik coincides with Darko SUVIN's rejection in "P.K. Dick's opus; artifice as refuge and world view" of the "unexplainable ontological puzzles"<sup>28</sup> which he detects in Dick's writing after 1966 and the publication of Dr. Bloodmoney. In SUVIN's view Dick's novels after The man in the high castle, which he considers "Dick's most lucid book,"<sup>29</sup> are marked by an "increasing shift from mostly political to mostly ontological horizons."<sup>30</sup> SUVIN sees this "shift from politics to ontology,"<sup>31</sup> which he deplores as "a falling off,"<sup>32</sup> as culminating in Ubik, about which he writes in terms of "narrative irresponsibility" and "serious loss of narrative

control."<sup>33</sup> "No explanation will explain this novel,"<sup>34</sup> SUVIN affirms, and this is disconcertingly remindful of Bruce Gillespie's complaints about the impossibility of "explaining" Dick's plots: GILLESPIE writes, for instance, "just try to invent a science that will 'explain' all the single elements in Now wait for last year... impossibler and impossibler."<sup>35</sup>

However, whereas Gillespie objects to Dick's narrative ambiguousness on the grounds of generic deviation, Suvin's objection to it is of an ideological nature. In The political unconscious Fredric JAMESON describes "the central model of Marxist aesthetics" as "a narrative discourse which unites the experience of daily life with a properly cognitive (....), 'scientific' perspective."<sup>36</sup> As a Marxist scholar, Suvin finds the introduction in Dick's novels of non-cognitive, existential "puzzles" to be quite disquieting. Confirming Jameson's diagnosis of Marxist thought, SUVIN writes: "in art, at least, (and I would maintain in society too), there is no freedom without order, no liberation without controlled focusing. A morality cut off from cognition becomes arbitrary," he adds, "it becomes in fact impossible."<sup>37</sup>

Now Philip K. Dick's writing aims at a reexamination of just such axiomatic assumptions about "control" and "cognition" underlying one's literary, metaphysical and political certainties. Darko Suvin has no use for the intimations in Dick's work of the relative quality of our cognition claims; accordingly, he overlooks Dick's political and metaphysical skepticism, as in his interpretation of Martian time-slip, which he reads as an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist tale not yet seriously hampered by those

"increasingly private and psychoanalytic problems"<sup>38</sup> which handicap later works. When "Dick's unclear religious speculations"<sup>39</sup> become too noticeable to be bowdlerized, as in Palmer Eldritch or Ubik, SUVIN describes such works as "failures." The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch is "a heroic failure;"<sup>40</sup> Ubik is "the 3SPE experience writ large;"<sup>41</sup> Do androids dream of electric sheep? is an "outright failure."<sup>42</sup>

For Suvin a Dick novel stands or falls by its capacity to indict politico-economic wrong in a suitable "cognitive," non-speculative manner. Of course, no critical interpretation of a literary work is value-free, but an evaluation based on ethical demands for ideological neatness can be too limiting in that it may disregard many of the most important questions raised in the work. In this manner, Darko SUVIN reads The man in the high castle, "the high point of Dick's explicitly political anti-utopianism," as a culmination of Dick's "Germanic-paranoia-turning-fascist theme,"<sup>43</sup> but he never mentions what is largely considered to be the central theme in the novel, namely a disruption of the idea of history as a deterministic, unalterable progression.

As Kim Stanley ROBINSON points out, the alternate history in The man in the high castle reminds us "that history is not inevitable, that it could have turned out differently than it actually did."<sup>44</sup> What ROBINSON observes about Valis, that "the novel has forced us to remember that history is not a set of immutable facts, but a method of interpretation,"<sup>45</sup> is also true of The man in the high castle. Discussing the structuralist position on history, Fredric JAMESON writes in

The prison-house of language that "the problem of the concept of history is essentially a question of models, not of realities,"<sup>46</sup> which corresponds to Dick's denial of history as a tangible, inescapable process. This posture is of course diametrically opposite to the classic Marxist view of history, which JAMESON describes as "an illusion of linear succession, of idealistic continuity, of a series of presences."<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, this important concern of Dick's novel is discarded in Suvin's appreciation, which centers on Dick's analogy between German and American fascism, a much safer topic from the point of view of ideological consistency.

Darko Suvin's claim that novels like Ubik and The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch lack an effective political dimension is again debatable, as this study will attempt to demonstrate. Like Martian time-slip, these novels conciliate "politics" and "ontology," "psychoanalytic problems" and economic "anti-utopianism," and in this sense they draw a more cognitive, realistic picture of the human situation in contemporary society than any narrative dealing solely with political questions would. As Fredric JAMESON observes with characteristic elegance, the ambivalence in Dick's work "is at one with our fragmented existence under capitalism; it dramatizes our simultaneous presence in the separate compartments of private and public worlds, our twin condemnation to both history and psychology in scandalous concurrence."<sup>48</sup>

The doctrinal demands and Marxist distrust of abstractions and questions of subjectivity only partially hinder Suvin's interpretation of Dick, though. The science



fiction critic's discerning analysis of the polyphonic narrative structure and the power relationships between the character types in Dick's novels is definitive and constitutes an indispensable reference for any serious evaluation of Dick's work. Suvin closes his Science-Fiction Studies article with a reference to Dick's feeling for social and political materials, his keen awareness of the collective problems of his generation.

In the same way, Kim Stanley ROBINSON writes about Dick's being "always responsive to the temper of the times,"<sup>50</sup> "always sensitive in the extreme to current events."<sup>51</sup> A writer of science fiction himself, Robinson concentrates in his dissertation The novels of Philip K. Dick on Dick's social and political analyses and his break with science-fictional tradition. In ROBINSON's view Dick's novels of the 1960s are characterized by an eminently political strain, whereas his later works lack the element of political criticism:

through the 1960s Dick's novels both challenged the traditional conventions of the genre, and analyzed contemporary culture (....). His fictional worlds were constructed by taking skeptical political metaphors, and making the metaphorical statements true in the worlds of his fiction; (....). All of his novels tell the story of an opposition to a controlled, technological society. In the novels of the 1970s, these oppositions lose their political quality, and become<sub>52</sub> private or religious escapes.

Robinson discusses thirty-one of Dick's science fiction novels, plus the novels in the mainstream phase, and he gives a special emphasis to The man in the high castle, to which he

devotes an entire chapter of his dissertation. Like Suvin, Kim Stanley Robinson examines the workings of the character systems in Dick's books as well as his multi-focal narrative technique and strategies of plot construction. In addition, he surveys a series of science-fictional motifs, like other planet colonies, alternate histories, the reality breakdown, which are explained in the context of Dick's writing.

Metaphysical and epistemological implications are consistently downplayed and political questions highlighted in Robinson's appreciation of Dick. Robinson lays stress on the problem of Dick's narrative inconsistencies and use of unexplained fantastic elements; he typically inspects a Dick story for logical discontinuities and then sets out to determine whether these can be justified as being part of an overall strategy of deliberate contravention. Unlike George Turner and Bruce Gillespie, Robinson does not condemn such inconsistencies outright, but considers arguments for and against the lack of realistic plausibility in Dick's stories.

In this manner, ROBINSON writes that Turner shows, "quite sensibly," how the premise in Counter-clock world that time has reversed itself is "logically inconsistent even on its own terms,"<sup>53</sup> but then he quotes the views of Carlo Pagetti, for whom Dick's lack of believability is deliberate, and Stanislaw Lem, who declares it to be inessential. ROBINSON concludes that in the context of the European critics' more flexible conception of genre, Counter-clock world "can exist as a metaphor for a world running contrary to its best interests, and though it may not be entirely successful even

in these terms, it has been saved from condemnation for not conforming to a convention it has never intended to conform to."<sup>54</sup>

Discussing Now wait for last year, ROBINSON asks, "Can an aesthetic construction be sound when there are sudden gaps in the floors, rooms with no entrances, staircases that extend out of the walls into space, and there end?"<sup>55</sup> In Now wait for last year the Secretary of the United Nations, Gino Molinari, defends the Earth against the hostile Starmen by keeping himself deathly ill, so that the Starmen cannot negotiate with him what would be a prejudicial arrangement for the Terrans. The problem from the point of view of science-fictional plausibility is that each time that Molinari is about to die he is replaced by a replica of himself from a parallel universe, that takes over the task of obstructing the Starmen's purpose. ROBINSON writes that Bruce Gillespie "rightly points out that the Gino Molinaris drawn from parallel histories would not necessarily be very similar to the original."<sup>56</sup> But then ROBINSON himself explains the "illogicalities" and "irrational elements" in the novel by suggesting that

Molinari's impossible defense against the Starmen is meant to show the very desperate straits that "normal" humans, that is to say, humans dragooned into the war effort against their will, must take to avoid becoming a part of the war machine. Ordinary heroism will not do, because all logical defenses are worthless; one must use up one's resources until near death, and then pull out a fresh source out of a parallel track of history, and continue to struggle again.<sup>57</sup>

Robinson's justification for the generic heterodoxy of Now wait for last year is ingenious but really unnecessary. It is more reasonable to expect that Dick intended the succession of different Molinaris to be read in the context of the novel's own internal coherence rather than as an over-clever metaphor for non-violent heroism. Actually, Robinson's position on the subject of Dick's use of fantastic material is not marked by strict uniformity.

On the one hand, the critic seems to have a positive distrust of Philip K. Dick's "helpless tropism toward the fantastic,"<sup>58</sup> as he writes in relation to Dick's mainstream novels, which are handicapped, in his view, by an "uneasy mix of realism and the fantastic."<sup>59</sup> ROBINSON complains about the way in which Dick uses the "magical" drug Chew-Z in The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch to "manipulate text and reader in an arbitrary way."<sup>60</sup> About the questions of genre placement raised by A scanner darkly ROBINSON writes that "if Dick had not already been placed in the publisher's category of science fiction" the "late, ambiguous shifts" in the novel "toward a kind of absurdist realism"<sup>61</sup> would have dislodged him from that category.

On the other hand, in contrast with remarks which suggest a basic disapproval of narrative "arbitrariness" and a concern with generic purity, ROBINSON reads Ubik in the light of Peter Fitting's essay. In accordance with Fitting's argument, Robinson describes the lack of a rational explanation for the events in the novel as deliberate, calculated attitude on Dick's part:

Dick has made certain that no explanation will cover all of the facts. This deliberate balking of our attempts to explain rationally the events of the text is (....) breaking one of the central conventions of the genre. And the book is qualitatively different from those science fiction texts where the rational explanation is ignored or bungled, as in Van Vogt and countless others; here the convention<sup>62</sup> is not being ignored, but broken.

But on the whole, apart from this conflict concerning Dick's unorthodox use of fantasy, Robinson's appreciation is free of all ambiguity, and it throws light on several obscure aspects of Dick's work, as when Robinson unriddles the problem of Dick's equivocal portrayal of the androids in Do androids dream of electric sheep?, which are presented both as victims and evildoers. Stanislaw LEM writes that if the androids in the novel are meant "to present a model of discrimination, such as the persecution of the Jews administered under the label of a 'final solution,'" then "the androids are innocent victims and should not be depicted as insidious creatures, something that the novel does in places."<sup>63</sup> In Darko SUVIN's view Do androids dream fails because of "its underlying confusion between androids as wronged lower class and as inhuman menace."<sup>64</sup> ROBINSON, however, observes that if Dick's depiction of the androids is contradictory, "there is a symmetrical contradiction in the novel's portrayal of the human characters. Humans are in turn sympathetic and vicious."<sup>65</sup>

Like the human characters, the androids in the story

are presented as capable of both cruelty and humaneness, and this contradiction aims at a redefinition of man, one based not on physical but on ethical standards. ROBINSON notes what other critics have failed to realize, that

the more contradictions there are in the androids, the more the novel has succeeded in unravelling our easy biological definition of humanity, and in replacing it with a difficult spiritual or moral definition. Dick has given us two oppositions, Human/Android and Human/Inhuman. As the novel begins we are to assume that the two oppositions are identical, but the action of the narrative first forces the two apart, and then leads us to conclude that the first one is inessential, the second vitally important.

ROBINSON concludes that "the critical debate over the status of the androids" in Do androids dream "is an indication of Dick's success, for he clearly means to give us contradictory information regarding them, but for a particular purpose."<sup>66</sup>

To conclude, criticism of Philip K. Dick is characterized by a great diversity of approaches. Each of the seven theorists whose appreciations are discussed here centers on a different aspect of Dick's writing, explaining his work from a particular perspective. Kim Stanley ROBINSON stresses the critical tenor of Dick's political metaphors and the historical importance of his novels for the development of science fiction. For Darko SUVIN Dick's novels are at their best visions of reality and at their worst refuges from it. Peter FITTING views Ubik as a work which deconstructs the ideological conventions of society through the deconstruction of the ideological postulates of its fiction. Fredric JAMESON

underlines the basic ambivalence of Dick's imagination, the coexistence in his stories of an objective and a subjective dimension. In Carlo PAGETTI's essay Dick's writing is described as "meta-science fiction," as a reflection on the workings of science fiction as a narrative form. Stanislaw LEM stresses the apocalyptic, pessimistic drift of Dick's chaotic worlds. Lastly, Brian ALDISS interprets Dick's work as a "maledistory web" of metaphysical anguish.

On the whole, Robinson's view of the critical controversy around Do androids dream as an evidence of the success of Dick's purpose can be extended to the whole of Dick's writing. The capacity of his strangely packed, apparently confused novels for provoking contrasting responses and engendering critical dialectic surely attests to the worth of Philip K. Dick's fiction.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>ALDISS, Brian W. Dick's maledictory web; about and around Martian time-slip. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.46.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup>SUVIN, Darko. P.K. Dick's opus; artifice as refuge and world view. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.15.

<sup>4</sup>PAGETTI, Carlo. Dick and meta-SF. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.24.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.27.

<sup>6</sup>ALDISS, loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup>LEM, Stanislaw. Philip K. Dick; a visionary among the charlatans. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.61.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.62.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.57.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.62.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p.64.

<sup>12</sup>ROBINSON, Kim Stanley. The novels of Philip K. Dick. San Diego, 1982. Dissertation, Ph.D., University of California, San Diego. p.238. ROBINSON's dissertation was later revised and made into a book, The novels of Philip K. Dick. Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1984. 156p.

<sup>13</sup>LEM, p.59.

<sup>14</sup>PAGETTI, p.31.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.25.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p.31.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., loc. cit.

<sup>18</sup>MONEGAL, Emir Rodriguez. Borges; hacia una lectura poetica. Madrid, Guadarrama, 1976. p.120.

<sup>19</sup>LE GUIN, Ursula K. Science fiction as prophesy; Philip K. Dick. The New Republic, 30 october 1976. p.33-4.

<sup>20</sup>JAMESON, Fredric. After Armageddon; character systems



in Dr. Bloodmoney. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.33.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., loc. cit.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p.42.

<sup>23</sup>FITTING, Peter. Ubik; the deconstruction of bourgeois SF. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.52. In the same manner, Kim Stanley ROBINSON writes, "despite the continuously dystopian cast of his work, he never capitulates to the easy pessimism fashionable in those writers proclaiming both the exhaustion of literature and the incipient death of our civilization." (p.223). Philip K. Dick himself was aware of this difference between his own work and that of a writer in the fashionable black comedy line like Kurt Vonnegut. An admirer of the early Vonnegut, Dick did not think much of Breakfast of champions (1973), for instance. "I think the bitterness in Player piano," Dick said in 1974, "that kind of ironic bitterness, became a (....) warping, destructive, acid thing that corroded [Vonnegut's] humanism and his humanity (....) until this overbearing depression became an overbearing arrogance." About the difference between the pessimism in his own books and in those of Vonnegut's, Dick said, "I might say, 'Well, it's all hopeless,' but Vonnegut would say, 'It's all hopeless --- so what? What does it matter if it's hopeless?'" (Philip K. Dick in conversation with Paul Williams, October/November 1974. Side One of the cassette issue, n.9/10, January 1986, of The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter.)

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p.47.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., loc. cit.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p.48.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p.49.

<sup>28</sup>SUVIN, p.8.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p.13.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p.9.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p.16.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p.8.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p.19.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., loc. cit.

<sup>35</sup>GILLESPIE, Bruce. Contradictions. In: ----- . Philip K. Dick; electric shepherd. Melbourne, Norstrilia Press, 1975. p.35. Quoted in ROBINSON, p.157.

<sup>36</sup>JAMESON, Fredric. The political unconscious; narrative as a socially symbolic act. London, Methuen, 1981.

p.104.

<sup>37</sup>SUVIN, p.20.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., loc. cit.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p.19.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p.20.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p.19.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p.20.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p.13.

<sup>44</sup>ROBINSON, p.84.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p.214.

<sup>46</sup>JAMESON, Fredric. The prison-house of language; a critical account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1972. p.188.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p.187.

<sup>48</sup>JAMESON, After Armageddon, p.33.

<sup>49</sup>SUVIN, p.21.

<sup>50</sup>ROBINSON, p.159.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p.156.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.vii-viii.

<sup>53</sup>bid., p.172.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p.174.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p.157-8.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p.157.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p.158.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p.15.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p.14.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p.123.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p.210.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p.185.

<sup>63</sup>LEM, Stanislaw. Science fiction; a hopeless case --- with exceptions. In: GILLESPIE, Bruce. Philip K. Dick; electric shepherd. p.85-6. Quoted in ROBINSON, p.177.

<sup>64</sup>SUVIN, p.20.

<sup>65</sup>ROBINSON, p.178.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p.179.

### III POLITICS AND METAPHYSICS

Contemporary literary theory locates the specificity of the literary work in its semantic multivalence. The quality of being semantically multileveled is a structural requirement of literature, and every literary text is made up of a variety of different layers of meaning. The several interpretive approaches current in contemporary criticism --- the Structural, the Marxist, the psychoanalytic, the archetypal or the myth-critical --- are all valid keys for the interpretation of a literary work, but to imagine that any one of them could exhaust the semantic implications of a given text is both limiting and arbitrary.

Still, commentators of Philip K. Dick's work fret over the question of Dick's refusal to arrange his narrative world into a neat, single-layered structure. Darko SUVIN regrets "Dick's difficulties after 1966,"<sup>1</sup> when "the ontological preoccupations" of his fiction "begin to weigh as heavily as, or more heavily than, the political dystopianism."<sup>2</sup> Kim Stanley ROBINSON deplores "Dick's impulse to inclusion and extravagance,"<sup>3</sup> which spoils the purity of his novels' political content.

However, the coherence of a narrative structure should not be evaluated according to standards of thematic or ideological uniformity. A literary text is justified by its own internal unity, by the organic interaction of its inner oppositions, rather than by its ability to function as a

vehicle for political analogies or emotional instigation. As Roland BARTHES remarks in Critique et vérité, if the plurality of meanings is the basis of the literary work, then multisignification should not be a hindrance to the critical discourse. "Mais pourquoi, après tout, cette surdit  aux symboles," BARTHES writes, "cette asymbolie? Qu'est-ce donc qui menace, dans le symbole? Fondement du libre, pourquoi le sens multiple met-il en danger la parole autour du libre?"<sup>4</sup>

While discussing the question of the symbolic openness and ambiguity of the literary narrative both Roland BARTHES and Fredric JAMESON refer to the fourfold interpretive scheme of the medieval theological tradition.<sup>5</sup> In medieval Christian and Cabalistic hermeneutics four different levels of meaning were identified in the sacred text, which was conceived of as comprising a literal, an allegorical, a moral and an anagogic, or spiritual, meaning.

This notion of a hierarchy of semantic levels is particularly relevant for the understanding of Philip K. Dick's fiction. In the Dickian narrative the literal referent supports a "moral" (socio-political) and an "anagogic" (metaphysico-mystical) level of meaning, and it can on occasion support an allegorical meaning along with the other two. In this manner, the political and religious dystopianism of The divine invasion is combined with an extensive allegory in which the characters are embodiments of figures and concepts from Cabala and the Bible. Thus, the boy Emanuel is, literally, the Son of God; Rybys Romney, his mother, is the Virgin Mary; Linda Fox, the pop singer, is the yetzer ha-tov, or guardian angel, of Herb Asher, the Everyman who plays the

role of Joseph; a baby goat is Belial, the girl Zina is the Shekinah personified, and Elias Tate, the elderly wanderer, is the Prophet Elijah.

A Dick novel typically tells a tale of fierce struggle with an overwhelming power. This power is on one level the capitalist system or a totalitarian state or a combination of both. On an additional level, however, the oppressive system harassing the characters is no longer a politico-economic dystopia but something more radical and universal which can be identified with the constriction and absurdity of existence itself. The problems that Dick's characters have to face in the "moral" or political dimension of his novels stem from the fact that the world they live in is run by bureaucrats and technocrats to the politico-economic advantage of a power elite. At the same time, this reality of political repression and social discrimination is set in a devolving universe, a world collapsing into both physical and metaphysical chaos. As reality decays into physical ruin and metaphysical meaninglessness the characters' problems from an "anagogic" perspective are a lack of meaningful emotional bonds and a sense of alienation from an elusive, often perfidious divinity.

The two dimensions --- political and metaphysical, temporal and transcendental --- hinge on a single axis, that of the novels' literal signified. The same elements that can be read as political metaphors on the social, objective level of a Dick work function on its existential, subjective level as material for metaphysical speculation. As the two

conflicting layers of meaning are superimposed upon each other the Dickian narrative appears as a semantic palimpsest, with an invisible underlying argument underneath an additional apparent one. The synthesis formed in the reader's imagination of the two opposite narrative perspectives is representative of the ambivalence of the human experience, of our commitment to the antinomial claims of the shared and the private, the rational and the mythical, the trivial and the transcendental.

Martian time-slip, The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, and Ubik are three different instances of Philip K. Dick's antinomially structured narrative. Each of the three works is an integrated whole in which a tale of metaphysical doubt is as it were printed over one of political skepticism. In reading these novels, however, we shall decompose their structural wholeness and isolate the two narrative dimensions, discussing first the political and then the ontological argument of each of them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>SUVIN, Darko. P.K. Dick's opus; artifice as refuge and world view. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.16.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.15.

<sup>3</sup>ROBINSON, Kim Stanley. The novels of Philip K. Dick. San Diego, 1982. Dissertation, Ph.D., University of California, San Diego. p.141.

<sup>4</sup>BARTHES, Roland. Critique et vérité. Paris, Seuil, 1966. p.42.

<sup>5</sup>The theory of the four levels of meaning in the medieval hermeneutical tradition is mentioned by Roland BARTHES in Critique et vérité, p.51, and by Fredric JAMESON in The political unconscious; narrative as a socially symbolic act. London, Methuen, 1981. p.31



### III.1 MARTIAN TIME-SLIP

The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

John Milton, Paradise lost, Book I

The drabness and hostility of the Martian environment make life difficult for colonists from Earth. The local weather affects metal and wiring, and, as there is no way that mechanical apparatuses can be replaced, the repairman becomes a high-priority figure in the colony. The Great Powers on Earth are more concerned with further exploration elsewhere in the solar system than with the improvement of the conditions on Mars, and as there is no prospect of a change for the better the colonists' main activities are doing repairs and merely getting by.

Such is the entropic background against which Philip K. Dick sets the intricate character system of Martian time-slip,<sup>1</sup> one in which almost all the characters belong to Dick's set gallery of types. The powerful union boss Arnie Kott is the big protagonist, and the little protagonist is Jack Bohlen, the powerless handyman. Silvia Bohlen is Jack's estranged wife, Doreen Anderton is Arnie Kott's attractive mistress. Dr. Milton Glaub, the underpaid psychiatrist, is the middleman between the powerful and the powerless; like Robert Childan in The man in the high castle, Dr. Glaub is at the same time selfish and idealistic, and he does not dare to stick up for his own beliefs. Manfred Steiner, the

precognitive autistic boy, is the idiot savant, the deranged person whose vision of reality is more clairvoyant than that of the mentally sound.

Exceptions in the characterology of Martian time-slip are Anne Esterhazy, Arnie Kott's shrewd, politically-minded ex-wife, and Heliogabalus, Arnie's embittered Martian cook. Anne is an only case among Dick's female characters of a woman active in civic affairs, and Heliogabalus, who reads Time and Pascal's Provincial letters, is a unique example in the Dickian microcosm of a non-prepossessive highbrow.

Heliogabalus is a Bleekman, an autochthonous Martian. The poverty-stricken, nomadic Bleekmen, who look like African Bushmen, are in theory under the protection of the United Nations; actually, they are a waning race and pariahs in their own planet, which has been entirely partitioned into United Nations colonies (Nova Britannica, the United Kingdom colony; America the Beautiful, the U.S.A. colony; New Israel, and so on). Though unconfessedly, the hostility between Earth's nations goes on on Mars, where colonizers never adapted to the new environment, but strive to perpetuate the culture and values of the societies they left on Earth.

Arnie Kott, the syndicalist-capitalist in search of absolute power, is the most prominent economic figure in the colonial world. However, although he controls a multimillion-dollar fund the corrupt boss of the Plumbing Union (which, because water is so scarce, has a stranglehold on the whole community) does not have much political power. The vital decisions concerning the fate of Mars take place in the United

Nations, back on Earth. A decision eventually taken by the United Nations politicians to intensively develop the planet alters the balance of power, revealing Arnie Kott to be a provincial authority only. And, as he is pressured, so Arnie pressures the people in his power, as is the case with Jack Bohlen, the repairman fighting against psychosis, and Manfred Steiner, the time-controlling "precog."

Martian time-slip, which succeeds the sketchy The game-players of Titan, is remarkable for its narrative virtuosity. The characters' behavioral and emotional attributes are delineated in this novel through a system of shifting dialectal levels, in what is quite a narrative tour de force. In a like manner, the sense of reality breakdown (brought about by the time-slipping of the title) is also conveyed at the level of the signifier, by means of an association between verbal repetition and unstated point of view.

In this manner, the aggressiveness, confessed vulgarity and uncontrolled capitalistic greed of labor boss Arnie Kott, who calls the Bleekmen "niggers" and his political opponents "fairies" and "fruits," can be detected in his choice of words, in the matter-of-factness of his speech:

"Now, we can't allow the UN bureaucrats to dictate to us how we'll run our settlement (....). We set up operations here before the UN was anything here but a flag painted in the sand; we had houses built before they had a pot to piss in anywhere on Mars (....). However, (....) there's the problem that those UN fruits control the waterways, and we got to have water; (....) I mean, those buggers can cut off our water any time; they've got us by the short hairs." (p.27).

The self-sufficient roughness of Arnie's discourse is contrasted with the commercial smoothness of that of Otto Zitte's, with its covetous formality and politeness. Lonely Otto, who smuggles gourmet food items into Mars, is just a small scale, free lance capitalist, and his speech style reflects his economic and emotional dependence on other people:

"Passage across barren miles of desert wastelands finds its just reward in seeing you once more at last. Would you be interested in seeing our special in kangaroo-tail soup? It is incredible and delightful, a food never before available on Mars at any price. I have come straight here to you with it, seeing that you are qualified in judging fine foods and can discriminate the worthy without consulting the expense." (p.189).

Otto's diction functions both as the parody of some old-fashioned style of commercial persuasion and as the revealer of his anxious desire to please. Unlike Otto, Arnie's servant Heliogabalus is bitter and "really twisted inside" (p.194). Heliogabalus is the slave of a man who is his intellectual inferior, and it is mainly through his cryptical, self-mocking pidgin that the reader is told of the character's skepticism:

"Purpose of life is unknown, and hence way to be is hidden from the eyes of living critters. Who can say if perhaps the schizophrenics are not correct? Mister, they take a brave journey. They turn away from mere things (...); they turn inward to meaning. There, the black-night-without-bottom lies, the pit. Who can say if they will return? And if so, what will they be like, having

glimpsed meaning? I admire them."  
(p.93).

A parody of the psychoanalytical jargon, Dr. Glaub's speech (including his interior monologues) depicts the equivocalness of his self-deceiving personality:

Possibly I am doing it to get back at Arnie for treating me in a cruel manner.

No, he decided, that does not seem probable; I am not the psychological type who would seek revenge --- that would be more the anal-expulsive or perhaps the oral-biting type. And long ago he had classified himself as the late genital type, devoted to the mature genital strivings. (p.166).

Manfred's father Norbert Steiner, the bored housewives June and Silvia, the Public School teaching machines themselves, are each allotted a distinctive voice in the world of Martian time-slip. The telling exception is Manfred Steiner, who is totally absorbed in himself and incapable of getting in touch with the outside world.

Manfred's speechlessness (his language is made up of an only word, "gubble," which stands for the horror of entropy and death) is connected with his giving up of any social role, of his total rejection of external reality. In his mind Manfred refuses, as Heliogabalus finds out, to leave "that dear spot" (p.189), his mother's womb, where there is no time, no change, and therefore no suffering. As Carlo PAGETTI notes in "Dick and meta-SF," Manfred is "beyond any psychological description, being the living emblem of a cosmic loneliness and a total incommunicability expressed only through a vision of metaphysical horror."<sup>2</sup>

In the same perspective, it is very significant what Dr. Glaub finds out about Jack Bohlen after the latter has had a schizophrenic fit, that "language for him had become a hollow ritual, signifying nothing" (p.173). The characters' level of linguistic aptitude is associated to their level of acceptance of the status quo: Arnie is extremely prolix, Jack Bohlen uses a minimum of words, Manfred never speaks. When the characters enter the asocial, subversive world of insanity language ceases to matter for them.

The plurality of speech registers in Martian time-slip, which is one of the factors that characterize it as a Dickian masterpiece, is used as a means of conveying the plurality of ideological standpoints coexisting in the novel. The association between language and ideology is made clear in a dialogue that takes place between Jack Bohlen and the tycoon Arnie at the time of their first meeting. The two of them meet in the desert, where they land their helicopters in order to save a party of dying Bleekmen (Arnie does so only because the United Nations would have fined him if he refused to stop). Jack Bohlen teasingly asks big, bald-headed Arnie if it did not make him feel good to know he had saved the lives of five people, to what Arnie retorts, "Five niggers, you mean. I don't call that saving five people. Do you?" Jack answers, "Yeah, I do. And I intend to continue doing so." And Arnie says, "Go ahead, call it that. See where it gets you" (p.38).

The political antagonism of the two men is presented in terms of language. What is established in their semantic controversy is a contest between those who call powerless

people "people" and those who call them "niggers." Jack and Arnie challenge each other into competition ("I intend to continue doing so;" "See where it gets you"): eventually, the former, in association with powerless, asocial, psychotic Manfred, is paradoxically victorious over the latter, but only at the cost of great suffering.

The sense of reality breakdown, which is a central concern of the novel, is also induced at the level of narrative procedures, by means of alternative descriptions of a single episode. Ten-year-old Manfred Steiner, who cannot help but live certain moments of his life over and over again, carries the people he is involved with through the repetitions with him, so that they are also made to relive a pivotal hour in Manfred's life. In order that the reader experience this sense of repetition along with the characters, three variant renderings of a particular episode are presented, all of which starting with Manfred's vision of the real Arnie Kott:

Inside Mr. Kott's skin were dead bones, shiny and wet. Mr. Kott was a sack of bones, dirty and yet shiny wet. His head was a skull that took in greens and bit them; inside him the greens became rotten things as something ate them to make them dead. (p.141; p.149; p.157).

The intermission of this passage, an estranged insight into a familiar organic process, functions as an indication that the characters are being thrust back into the hour of the time-slip. Just who the viewpoint character is (Manfred, Jack, Arnie, Doreen Anderton) in each of the repetitions is impossible to tell. As Kim Stanley ROBINSON notes, "if one

could (....) tag each section , so that segment one was clearly Jack's view, two Manfred's, three Doreen's (....) then the experience would have that logical structure that is exactly contrary to the experience of psychosis Dick is attempting to convey."<sup>3</sup>

Dick's narrative skilfulness in Martian time-slip is used to depict an economic situation analogous to that of frontier society in the western U.S.A., with its rural economy and large cattle ranches. Carlo PAGETTI observes that "the planet of Martian time-slip is revealed as a replica of budding American society not only with its generous pioneers, but also with phenomena from the formation of a capitalist society dominated by the inexorable law of profit and speculation."<sup>4</sup>

In this economic context the little characters, Jack Bohlen and the small-fry capitalists Norbert and Otto, are opposed, as in most of Dick's novels, to big retainers of economic power such as Leo, the big-time land speculator, and Arnie, who controls the capital of an important trade union fund. The two antagonistic groups, however, are menaced by the looming on Earth of a gigantic cooperative movement which, with the nihil obstat of the United Nations, plans to build a vast housing tract, the AM-WEB, in the Martian Franklin Delano Roosevelt mountains.

The AM-WEB (a contraction of the cooperative slogan Alle Menschen werden Brüder<sup>5</sup>), a multiple-unit, infinitely large structure with its own shops and supermarkets, is the epitome of American big-scale capitalism as opposed to the no less American tradition of private enterprise and healthy



individualism, to the American love of craftsmanship and do-it-yourself technics. Otto Zitte, Dick's small scale black market peddler who has his business taken over by Arnie Kott, is a victim of this American economic duality:

He hated the big racketeers, too, same as he hated the big unions. He hated bigness per se; bigness had destroyed the American system of free enterprise, the small businessman had been ruined --- in fact, he himself had been perhaps the last authentic small businessman in the solar system. That was his real crime: he had tried to live the American way of life, instead of just talking about it. (p.95).

Like Otto, who is punished for his economic naivete, and Norbert Steiner, whose commercial incompetence leads him to suicide, most of Dick's little Americans cannot afford to live in accordance with their convictions, moral or economic --- the reality of AM-WEB, of capitalistic bigness, imposes itself.

However, the advent of AM-WEB on Mars, which would supposedly release the colony from its entropic inertia, is really bound to be a failure. The magnificent AM-WEB buildings will eventually, in some decades time, turn into a decaying, partially abandoned slum, the monstrous ruin Manfred Steiner is able to foresee. Entropy is in the end victorious over material progress.

The American mathematician Norbert Wiener (1894-1964) has written about the role of progress in a universe which, according to the second law of thermodynamics, is globally in decline. In The human use of human beings WIENER points out

what he believes to be the main inconsistency undermining the American Protestant capitalistic ethos, namely, the regarding of progress not as a fact, but as an ethical principle. For WIENER, who coined the term cybernetics, having faith in progress in a deteriorating universe is an attitude which does not denote strength, but fear and weakness.

A similar premise is at the basis of most of Dick's novels, in which the idea of progress is usually associated to that of physical decay. In Martian time-slip the demystification of the American belief in what WIENER calls a "continual ascension toward Bigger and Better things"<sup>6</sup> is carried out through the breakdown of the American dream of space pioneering, this set model of traditional science fiction.

The futility of the wishful notion of interplanetary imperialism is summed up in a passage of Martian time-slip in which Jack Bohlen takes his father sightseeing about Mars. "This is the dream of a million years," he tells the old man, "to stand here and see this" (p.130). What they see is Jack's own house and the Steiners' house against the background of the Martian desert. Seeing terrestrial, human habitations set on Mars is indeed the realization of a million-year-dream, the apparently successful outcome of mankind's struggle against "gubbish," the entity that is synonymous with "decay, deterioration, destruction (....), death. The force at work everywhere, on everything in the universe" (p.138).

Nevertheless, Jack Bohlen is "grinning cookedly" as he speaks, and what is implied in his statement is the

pointlessness of the whole dream. Man's arduous advance toward a relative mastery over universal disorder proves to be lost labor in the end, and what one finds on Mars or any other planet colony is again "a world where gubbish rules" (p.126). Entropy is always one step ahead of human civilization in the struggle for power over matter.

Still, although Dick's stories depict a world in which material progress is identified with ruin, there is no question of an idyllic return to nature as a way out for the societies he describes. While criticizing science fiction which relies on stale formulas of a "return to Nature," after smashing and discarding everything "artificial," Stanislaw LEM notes that such pipe dreams are "happily" absent in Dick. "The action of his novels," LEM writes, "takes place in a time when there can no longer be any talk of return to nature or of turning away from the 'artificial,' since the fusion of the 'natural' with the 'artificial' has long since become an accomplished fact."<sup>7</sup> Since in Dick's novels reality is a run-down technological hell and a pastoral escape is out of the question one wonders how his characters can survive and not be crushed by a sense of their own insignificance.

"The secret of survival in Dick's universe," Brian ALDISS propounds, "is not to attempt escape into any alternate version of reality but to see things through as best as you can."<sup>8</sup> In the Dickian physics, as in that of Norbert Wiener's, there is no possible eluding of the ultimate entropic chaos, so that all effort toward the organization of the material world is irrelevant. Now this assumption, which is apparently totally pessimistic, is presented in Dick's stories with a

positive side to it, namely the fact that entropy is not as unavoidable in the sphere of humans feelings and values as it is in the physical universe.

When physical reality is crumbling down all around the Dickian characters there is one valuable principle left them, and this is a civic sense of responsibility toward the people in one's community. The characters who survive, as Jack Bohlen in Martian time-slip, are usually those who can manage to oppose the resources of human solidarity to the entropic nightmare of impersonal capitalistic reality.

Jack and Silvia Bohlen are kept apart by Jack's work and by their inability to relate emotionally with each other, but when they do get back together they realize that the history of their relationship, its mere continuity, is something valuable in itself. In the final scene of the novel Jack Bohlen is out in the dark, flashing a torch and looking for Manfred's mother, and Silvia is at the door calling him to dinner. "In the darkness of the Martian night her husband and father-in-law searched for Erna Steiner; their light flashed here and there, and their voices could be heard, businesslike and competent and patient" (p.240).

"It is the quietest, calmest, and most resolute of Dick's endings," Kim Stanley ROBINSON remarks.<sup>9</sup> Competence and patience, and the fraternal act of caring for family and neighbours, in other words a meaningful private life, can counteract the pressure of entropy and death as well as that of a dystopian political situation.

The AM-WEB metaphor is as important in the context of the political implications of Martian time-slip as it is in relation to the novel's psychologico-philosophical concerns. Darko SUVIN deciphers AM-WEB as "the American Web of big business, corrupt labor aristocracy, and big state that turn the difficult life of the little man into a future nightmare."<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding, there seems to be a whole additional dimension to the AM-WEB symbol, one into which Suvin does not inquire.

Manfred Steiner, who is made to repeatedly experience his own unending old age, knows he is going to lie indefinitely at AM-WEB, in the present not yet built, and in the future turned into a hospital or old persons' home of some kind. Manfred's limbs and internal organs having been removed and replaced by machinery, he will be held at AM-WEB for decades on end, "an object, not a person," (p.197), painfully kept alive through senseless legalities. It is the preknowledge of this, his terrible anxiety about his future life at AM-WEB that causes the boy to be autistic. According to Heliogabalus' diagnosis, "when he tries to fix his eyes on the present he almost at once is smitten by that dread vision (....) once again" (loc. cit.), and in order to escape this vision Manfred retreats back to happier days, to the womb life, so that he is totally isolated from external reality.

"I been at AM-WEB for a long time," Manfred thinks (p.139). The connection between AM-WEB and Manfred's autism is manifest. True autism, Jack Bohlen realizes, consists of "a dreadful preoccupation with the endless ebb and flow of one's own self" (p.157) --- "a coagulated self, fixed and immense,

which effaces everything else and occupies the entire field" (p.160). This entangling web of the self finds its objective equivalent in the shape of the two immense AM-WEB buildings, that function from this perspective as a monument of psychosis, in which case AM must not be read as the two initial letters of American, but as the first person singular inflection of the verb to be.

Actually, the AM-WEB symbol is a prototypal Dickian element in that its public and its private connotation are elaborated to an equal degree. AM-WEB as the American web of multinational consumer capitalism is a central image in the political Martian time-slip just as AM-WEB as the psychotic web of the inside world is at the heart of the existential Martian time-slip. The two webs, public and private, intersect at a common point --- the physical AM-WEB, "that abominable building" (p.206).

Carl Gustav JUNG identifies two different, complementary struggles in the life of man, the one against the others (for his social rank and profession), the other against himself (in the process of individuation).<sup>11</sup> In Martian time-slip the first struggle takes place in the context of the collective AM-WEB of capitalism, in which the employer is opposed to the employee, the speculator to the craftsman, the powerful to the powerless. The second struggle occurs in the individual AM-WEB of the self, in which sanity and psychosis combat each other. But as the psychotic characters are powerless and the powerful ones are reputed to be the sane the two oppositions are really one and the same.

The close relationship between the social and the psychological is grasped by Jack Bohlen, whose conscious effort to elude schizophrenia is subverted by his association with Manfred: schizophrenic "meant, simply, a person who could not live out the drives implanted in him by his society. The reality which the schizophrenic fell away from --- or never incorporated in the first place --- was the reality of interpersonal living, of life in a given culture with given values" (p.75-6).

Jack Bohlen's position on the mental sanity issue is contradictory. On the one hand he regards psychosis as something altogether undesirable. Psychosis, he thinks, is "the stopping of time. The end of experience, of anything new. Once the person becomes psychotic, nothing ever happens to him again" (p.160). On the other hand, he considers the possibility that the world view of the psychotic might not only be as acceptable as that of normal people, but might actually, unlike the normal view, correspond to the truth of reality.

The little protagonist wonders if rather than a hallucination the harrowing experience he had had back on Earth at the Corona corporation, when he saw the personnel manager "in a new light," (p.80), as a mechanical structure with internal organs made of plastic and steel, was not instead "a glimpse of absolute reality" (loc. cit.). In a like manner, when he sees Milton Glaub as an object composed of metal parts and switches Jack Bohlen is tempted to tell the doctor, "Doc, I can see you under the aspect of eternity and

you're dead" (p.109-10). However, he does not let his "terrible state of awareness" (p.107) show, though he knows he has seen the psychiatrist sub specie aeternitatis, "under the aspect of absolute reality" (loc. cit.).

It is at this stage that the psychological implications in the novel part with the social and start referring to metaphysical issues. Gradually, as the plot unfolds, one realizes that it is the nature of reality itself that is at stake. Is the AM-WEB of mental derangement the ultimate enemy, a menace to be avoided at any cost? Or are psychotic delusions, terrifying as they may be, not really delusions but privileged glimpses into "absolute reality," in which case the normal perception of the world is really made up of a series of illusions?

The reality puzzle is further complicated when we learn that Manfred Steiner, whose state is one of total, extreme insanity, can not only see things in their nasty "aspect of eternity," but actually makes things assume their true form for all to see, so that everyone around him is bound to see the world as he does.

Unlike Jack Bohlen, who is only occasionally introduced to "reality," Manfred's contact with the sub specie aeternitatis side of things is continuous. "He could see everything that went on inside Mr. Kott, the teeming gubbish life. Meanwhile, the outside said, 'I love Mozart. I'll put this tape on,'" (p.141). The boy's insights, which make up his corrupt "Realm of Gubble," are basically visions of entropy eating away at people and things:



Bending over her he saw her languid, almost rotting beauty fall away. Yellow cracks spread through her teeth, and the teeth split and sank into her gums, which in turn became green and dry like leather, and then she coughed and spat up into his face quantities of dust. The Gubbler had gotten her (....). So let her go. She settled backward, her breaking bones making little sharp splintering sounds. (p.150).

Jack released her and she folded up into a little dried-up heap of transparent plates, like the discarded skin of a snake, almost without weight; he brushed them away from him with his hand. (p.151).

Dust fell on him through the walls. The room creaked with age and dust, rotting around him. Gubble, gubble, gubble, the room said. The Gubbler is here to gubble gubble you and make you into gubbish. (p.152)

With normal reality threatened with irreality, and with the "real" world of schizophrenia disposed of by the Gubbler, what is a Dickian character supposed to do? In Martian time-slip the mentally sound characters, who are naive enough to play the game without ever stopping to ask questions, end up by being wiped out, like Arnie Kott, by the very rules they show uncritical respect to. As for the mildly psychotic, like Jack Bohlen, whom mental illness makes uncomfortably skeptical, a lack of standards of conduct and belief causes them to be frozen in a spell of anomie.

Neither of the modes of being, sick or sound, maladjusted or socially fit, is spared within the boundaries of what Brian ALDISS refers to, as quoted before, as Dick's "maledictory web," a wicked network of social and spiritual oppression in which his beings seem hopelessly trapped. Yet

some characters do find a break in the maledictory circle. Manfred Steiner, whose very presence can contaminate reality with "gubbish," and Jack Bohlen, estranged from his family and exploited by his employer, are, as previously mentioned, survivors.

Manfred's deliverance is performed through his alliance with the bon sauvage Bleekmen and their eschatological religion. In his last appearance at the Steiners', an extremely old, partly mechanical man surrounded by Bleekmen, Manfred is able to speak, and thank Jack, who had left him as a boy only a few hours before, for having tried to communicate with him. "Did you escape AM-WEB?" Jack Bohlen asks the thing that is Manfred, and the thing answers, "Yesss (....), I am with my friends" (p.239). The machinery of reality, deceptive and deathly as it is, can then be transformed, as in Manfred's case, by an instance of extempore divine assistance.

As for Jack Bohlen, whose involvement with Manfred proves to be beneficial rather than harmful, he is greatly modified by the boy's victory over AM-WEB. "It's all over," he tells Silvia Bohlen in the end, "Everything's OK" (loc. cit.). Next he and his father are looking for Erna Steiner in the night. Though she knows they will not come, Silvia calls them to dinner: "they were far too busy, they had too much to do. But she called them anyhow, because it was her job" (p.240).

What Jack and the other Bohlens learn is apparently the faculty to conscientiously do their job, to play their part even if in a skeptical, cold-hearted frame of mind, but with just the slightest expectation that things might make sense in

the end. Dick's secret of survival, which ALDISS describes as an ability "to see things through as best as you can," involves neither optimism nor pessimism, but is something that is carried out in a mood of dutiful, dispassionate acceptance. When one is caught in the world-spider's "web of determination,"<sup>12</sup> and when the only way one can be released from its meshes is the elusive, unlikely way of grace, the best thing for man to do in the universe of Dick is to cooperate with his fellow creatures.

Summing up, two correlate though distinct resolutions are to be found at the closure of Martian time-slip, corresponding to the two complementary tropisms --- individual-directed, group-directed --- according to which the novel is structured. The collective resolution (Jack Bohlen's) concerns the idea of an ethical communal order, whereas the individual resolution (Manfred Steiner's) has to do with the notion of personal freedom attained by means of mystical illumination. The two ways, Manfred's and Jack's, the way of mysticism and the way of civic responsibility, are representative of the two extremities --- subjective and objective, private and shared --- of the axis about which the whole of the Dickian opus rotates.

In conclusion, we can describe Dick's first "Martian" work as really being made up of two juxtaposed novels, the one "profane" and the other "sacred." One novel is the political Martian time-slip in which the characters combat with the external AM-WEB of the world, of the pressures imposed on them

by society, and the other is the ontological Martian time-slip in which the characters, wound in the inner AM-WEB of the ego, are in search of both a proportioned self and a consistent imago mundi.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Martian time-slip. London, New English Library, 1983. All quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition, its page numbers indicated in parentheses. Martian time-slip first appeared in Worlds of Tomorrow (1963) as a serialized story called "All We Marsmen;" the novel was first published in its revised, definitive form by Ballantine Books in April, 1964. The story takes place in August of 1994.

<sup>2</sup>PAGETTI, Carlo. Dick and meta-SF. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.10.

<sup>3</sup>ROBINSON, Kim Stanley. The novels of Philip K. Dick. San diego, 1982. Dissertation, Ph.D., University of California, San Diego. p.113.

<sup>4</sup>PAGETTI, p.27.

<sup>5</sup>From Schiller's ode An die Freude, "To Joy," sung by the chorus in the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. A typically Dickian musical allusion, "Alle Menschen werden Brüder," "all men become brothers," is of course ironic as the motto of the mammoth real estate cooperative.

<sup>6</sup>WIENER, Norbert. Cibernética e sociedade; o uso humano de seres humanos. São Paulo, Cultrix, 1968. p.41.

<sup>7</sup>LEM, Stanislaw. Philip K. Dick; a visionary among the charlatans. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.63.

<sup>8</sup>ALDISS, Brian W. Dick's maledictory web; about and around Martian time-slip. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.45.

<sup>9</sup>ROBINSON, p.114.

<sup>10</sup>SUVIN, Darko. P.K. Dick's opus; artifice as refuge and world view. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.14.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Juan-Eduardo CIRLOT, Dicionário de símbolos. São Paulo, Moraes, 1984. p.548.

<sup>12</sup>The world-spider is mentioned in Clans of the Alphane moon, "the world-spider as it spins its web of determination for all life" (quoted in ALDISS, p.43). CIRLOT describes the spiderweb as the symbol of a negative intuition of the universe, one which perceives evil to be located not only at the periphery of the wheel of changes, but also at its very center, that is, at its origin (p.555). Taken in this sense the spiderweb symbol is a Gnostic notion (the Gnostics, flourishing in the early Christian centuries, maintained that

matter was evil and spirit good, and believed in the dualism of the godhead; gnosticism taught that the union of good and evil originated the world, in which light and darkness are combined, but with the predominance of darkness). Gnosticism is admittedly the intellectual basis for Philip K. Dick's construction in the novels of the early 1980s of his elaborate system of theology.

### III.2 THE THREE STIGMATA OF PALMER ELDRITCH

The Vision of Christ that thou dost see  
Is my Vision's Greatest Enemy.

William Blake, "The Everlasting Gospel"

Like Martian time-slip The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch<sup>1</sup> is on the temporal level a description of expanding capitalism in an entropic setting. Unlike Martian time-slip, however, this novel deals on the transcendental level with a much weightier question than any to be found in the previous work, namely, with the problem of the existence of God and the nature of this existence.

The difference between the two novels is evidenced from the beginning, since before even starting the reading of this second Martian story one has to face up to its uncanny title. The titles of Dick's novels can be roughly classed under two categories. One is that of the traditional, Vanvogtian, adjective-plus-noun titles (The cosmic puppets, The zap gun, The Ganymede takeover), and the other is that of the enigmatic, allusive, often phrasal titles (Dr. Bloodmoney, or how we got along after the bomb, Do androids dream of electric sheep?, Flow my tears, the policeman said) which usually characterize his major works. Although unmistakably a major novel, Martian time-slip was titled in conformity with the classic science-fictional tradition, whereas The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, with its long provocative title, clearly belongs to the second group.

What is interesting about the title of this later novel is the semantic tension established within it. The word stigmata evokes the wounds of the crucified Christ and the notion of religious ecstasy associated with them. Palmer is also suggestive of spiritual experience (that of the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, of which the two crossed palm leaves worn by the pilgrim are a token), but of an entirely different nature. While palmer summons up the image of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday stigmata is remindful of the crucifixion on Easter Friday. Lastly, eldritch further adds to the tension by its intimations of the magical and fantastic, of a sense of eeriness from outside the Christian religious tradition. The word three brings the three clashing concepts together under an overall ensemble allusive of the Christian dogma of the Trinity.

On the whole, the title The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch carries an antinomial semantic burden connoting both life and death and suggestive of both the Christian faith and the occult, with overtones of physical and spiritual suffering.

But who is Palmer Eldritch? This question is the narrative basis upon which the whole novel has been structured. On the economic, mundane level Palmer Eldritch is not only a wildly successful "mad capitalist" (a tag coined by Darko SUVIN to counterpart "mad scientist"<sup>2</sup>) but the epitome of big-scale capitalism, the very spirit of capitalism personified.



When the action starts Palmer Eldritch, the well-known interplanetary industrialist who had been gone ten years on a business trip to the Proxima Centaurus system, has just got back to Terra bringing with him a hallucinogenic drug called Chew-Z. Eldritch's commercial exploitation of Chew-Z is going to radically modify the balance of power in the solar system, where the P.P.Layouts Corporation holds a monopoly over the supply of drug to the involuntary Terran immigrants on the planet colonies.

P.P.Layouts manufactures the doll Perky Pat and all the miniature units of her elaborate micro-world. These comprise Perky Pat's boyfriend Walt, her car, apartment, miniature ritzy clothes, and even a Perky Pat minute psychoanalyst set complete with tiny desk, bookcase, couch and psychoanalyst. In addition, P.P.Layouts supplies the colonists with the habit-forming drug Can-D.

The doll layout is used by the Terran expatriates in association with the drug as a means of escape from the hard and essentially meaningless life in the unnatural environment of the colonies. When they take Can-D the colonists cease to be themselves and are "translated" for a few moments, in what they consider to be a religious experience, the men into Walt and the women into Perky Pat, the happy inhabitants of a consumer paradise in which it is always Saturday.

Palmer Eldritch's offer of a drug that is both cheaper to produce and more effective than the P.P.Layouts' product revolutionizes the market. His drug Chew-Z is sold at about one-tenth the price of Can-D, it does not require a toy layout to create a sense of translation, and its effects last longer

and are of still greater intensity than those of Can-D. Accordingly, Chew-Z is eagerly taken up by the consumers in the colonies, with the consequent obsolescence of the commodities merchandised by P.P.Layouts.

The relationship between Palmer Eldritch, a tall gray man with steel teeth, artificial eyes and an artificial hand, and Leo Bulero, the powerful chairman of the board of directors of P.P.Layouts, is not restricted to Palmer Eldritch. It iterates the pattern established in The man in the high castle and employed again in Martian time-slip that shows the big protagonist (Leo Bulero in Palmer Eldritch, Arnie Kott in Martian time-slip, Mr. Tagomi in The man in the high castle) threatened by a still bigger, more powerful entity (Palmer Eldritch in Palmer Eldritch, the United Nations in Martian time-slip, the Nazis in The man in the high castle).

This duplication of the big-versus-little model so characteristic of much of Dick's writing into a still-bigger-versus-big pattern confers as sense of depth and perspective to the structure of these novels, and is one of the elements that make The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch into such a fully articulated work.

The standard character system and overloaded, extravagant setting of Palmer Eldritch are the tools for Dick's depiction in this novel of a society in which a viciously consistent economic system takes advantage of the very conditions (like forced immigration to off-Earth colonies) that it has created. Ever-increasing consumption is

the unwilling colonists' only way out of the drabness and meaninglessness to which consumer society has committed them.

This trap situation in which the individual's effort to make life bearable only adds to the big industrialists' manipulation power over the masses gives no opportunity to people like Barney Mayerson, Bulero's precognitive fashion consultant.

Barney Mayerson is the little protagonist (Frank Frink in The man in the high castle, Jack Bohlen in Martian time-slip) torn between the struggle for social reputability and the search for the emotionally true. Still in love with his ex-wife, whom he divorced because she was a social hamper to him, Mayerson finds he is unable to face the danger involved in trying to rescue his boss Leo Bulero from captivity in the hands of Palmer Eldritch. In order to atone for having let his boss down Mayerson volunteers for deportation to Mars. There, he is eventually instructed by Leo Bulero to poison himself with an epileptogenic toxin so that P.P.Layouts can claim his illness to be a side-effect of Eldritch's Chew-Z.

The little protagonist's story (and especially so the scene in which he is considering infecting himself with epilepsy so that an economic monopoly can survive) is emblematic of the fate of the individual in a society in which capital is the all-important value and personal relationships are pointless and superficial.

The world of interplanetary capitalist bigwigs and helpless consumers depicted in Palmer Eldritch is a metaphor in which one term is the unfamiliar America of 2016, where temperatures rise to 180 degrees daily, and the other the

real, contemporary America with its well-known cultural icons and economic tactics (imperialism, the big corporations, the Barbie doll). When the reader identifies the estranged items in the fictive world with the ones in the actual world then recognition, the second step in the process of literary estrangement, takes place, and the ensuing effect is that of an instructive breakthrough into the ethos of contemporary social and economic institutions.

In the context of this metaphor Palmer Eldritch as the super capitalist manipulator in pursuit of universal market domination is a terribly effective image. GOD PROMISES ETERNAL LIFE. WE CAN DELIVER IT is the slogan of Eldritch's Chew-Z Manufacturers, a corporation backed by actually unlimited capital. What Chew-Z really delivers, though, is total subordination to Palmer Eldritch, who controls each of the Chew-Z-induced dream worlds and turns consumers of the drug into extensions of himself. The people turned into his replicas bear the three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch --- the prosthetic eyes, hand, and teeth --- three ominous signs of nonhuman artificiality, images of the ultimate obliteration of individual selfhood.

The novel is on this level a consistent allegory about consumer capitalism as a threat against human individuality, and in this sense it is as effective as or more effective than Martian time-slip as an indictment of multinational monopoly capitalism as an inadequate economic system.

Still, almost every critic of The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch has considered the novel "flawed." "To my

view," writes Brian ALDISS, "Eldritch is a flawed work, over-complicated, and finally disappearing into a cloud of quasi-theology."<sup>3</sup> Darko SUVIN refers to the novel as "that flawed but powerful near-masterpiece,"<sup>4</sup> and as an "important if ambiguous"<sup>5</sup> work. SUVIN writes,

Politics, physics and metaphysics combine to create in 3SPE a fascinating and iridescent manifold, but their interference (....), to my mind, makes for an insufficiently economical novel. It starts squarely within the political and physical field (clash of big drug corporations, temperature rise, colonization of Mars) and then drags across it the red herring of ontologico-religious speculations grafted upon Vanvogtian plot gimmicks (....) which shelve rather than solve the thematic problems.<sup>6</sup>

Darko Suvin's idea is that the work is flawed in that it fails to stick to the "physical field" but associates this to metaphysical speculation instead. A positive character is ascribed in his reading to the "physics" and a negative one to the metaphysics in this particular novel as well as in the whole of Dick's work. However, even supposing this discrimination to be valid, Suvin's claim that Palmer Eldritch is "insufficiently economical" due to an interference of ontological, non-economic issues does not follow, since plentiful textual evidence shows how the basic premises in the economic Palmer Eldritch are brought to a full, coherent culmination. In reality, SUVIN is bothered not by a supposed absence of the political but by the presence of the ontological:

The appearance of Eldritch, signaled by his stigmata, inside the other characters shifts the conflict into their psyches (....). The political theme and horizon begin here to give way to the ontological. While the ontological dilemmas have a clear genesis in the political ones, they shift the power relationships from human institutions to mysterious entities, never quite accounted for or understood in the narration.

Kim Stanley ROBINSON sees through the superficiality of Suvin's response to the double-structuring of Dick's novels in this phase. "For Suvin," ROBINSON notes, "the problem lies in the choice of subject matter (....). A fairly simple criterion is set up: when the work's concern is political it is good; when it becomes ontological, it is bad."<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding, Robinson himself does not seem more comfortable with the novel's "mysterious entities" than Darko Suvin is, and he makes no attempt to analyze them in the context of the work's ontological concerns but accounts for their presence in the story in terms of economic allegory only.

ROBINSON writes, for instance, that the alien that invaded Palmer Eldritch on his power trip to the Prox system "represents the spirit of capitalism, just as his product Chew-Z [stands for] the ultimate consumer item."<sup>9</sup> Much as this is correct, the meaning of the Palmer Eldritch symbol is exhausted in Robinson's appreciation in a rather restrictive manner. The Chew-Z and the alien motif are equally functional in the sphere of the novel's ontological issues, but these are dismissed by ROBINSON on the grounds that "the ontological theme" of Palmer Eldritch amounts "to little more than the demonic-possession motif from supernatural fiction, lightly

disguised as the story of an alien encounter."<sup>10</sup>

Maybe the reason that the metaphysical dimension of Palmer Eldritch is underplayed in the interpretations of Aldiss, Suvin and Robinson has to do with these critics' admiration for such neat, controlled Dick works as The man in the high castle and Martian time-slip. Palmer Eldritch is a much more extravagant novel, not only because it openly violates the science-fictional criteria of narrative believability but also because its metaphysical content is presented in a more straightforward way than in any previous work. When the growing tendency in Dick's novels toward metaphysical complexity eventually declared itself in Palmer Eldritch in an explicit way the critics' expectation in relation to his work was broken, and their response to this other aspect of Dick's fiction was one of frustrated, embarrassed vagueness.

Both Darko Suvin and Brian Aldiss oppose Martian time-slip to Palmer Eldritch as the prototype of the exemplary (non-complicated) Dickian novel. SUVIN calls Martian time-slip "a masterpiece"<sup>11</sup> (flawed Palmer Eldritch, as mentioned before, is a "near-masterpiece"), while ALDISS contrasts the "calm and lucidity"<sup>12</sup> of Martian time-slip to the "over-complication" of Palmer Eldritch. However, a full "physical" and a full metaphysical reading of Martian time-slip are both possible and are both throughout supported by textual evidence, which shows how the appearance of the manifestly metaphysical in Palmer Eldritch is not the result of an unsuspected change in the author's concerns. Rather it is the

logical outcome of a tendency suggested in The man in the high castle (and in still earlier works), established in Martian time-slip, and finally brought to its full expression in this novel.

Robinson and Suvin locate the deficiencies of Palmer Eldritch in its latter half, when the multi-character network is abandoned in favor of a single conflict (Robinson) and when Eldritch starts manifesting himself in the persons of the other characters (Suvin).

However, the novel does not "start squarely," as SUVIN writes, it never "shifts" from the squarely political to the disturbingly ontological. Rather, the complementary themes are referred to simultaneously from the beginning to the end of the story. The first intimations of the "ontologico-religious" nature of the novel's concerns occur as early as the second chapter, in a dialogue between Leo Bulero and a lady friend about Palmer Eldritch's reported return from his trip to the Prox system:

"I used to think," Miss Jurgens said, "that when the ships first left our system for another star --- remember that? --- we'd hear that ---" She hesitated. "It's so silly, but I was only a kid then, when Arnoldson made his first trip to Prox and back; I was only a kid when he got back, I mean. I actually thought maybe by going that far he'd --- " She ducked her head, not meeting Leo Bulero's gaze. "He'd find God."

Leo thought, I thought so, too. And I was an adult, then. (....).

And, he thought, I still believe that, even now. About the ten-year-flight of Palmer Eldritch. (p.26).

In the same manner, just as Eldritch and God are



concepts associated from the beginning, so the economic conflict on the non-metaphysical level is sustained to the end of the novel, with, for instance, Bulero's complicated scheme to have Chew-Z juridically indicted as biochemically harmful (ninth chapter). Or with the Bulero/Eldritch spaceship duel which reads on one level as the deadly confrontation of two mammoth commercial cartels for the sake of total market manipulation.

The Bulero/Eldritch conflict, described by ROBINSON as "a simple conflict between hero and villain,"<sup>13</sup> is carried on throughout the novel, and it conveys the human (Bulero)/non-human (Eldritch) opposition established on the metaphysical level as well as a surrealistic, parodic view on the economic level of the power clashes in the world of big business.

This comprehensive double-structuring of the argument requires that we ask the question Who is Palmer Eldritch? not only once but twice. The answers that we get in the physical context, "a mad capitalist," "the epitome of capitalism," are adequate on one level, but fail to give a satisfactory account of the complexity of the Eldritch puzzle as a whole. Who, from the metaphysical angle, is Palmer Eldritch?

Clues leading to the magnitude of the problem stem from the other characters' speculations about Eldritch's return to the Sol system. A rumour suggests that who or what came back from Prox is not really Palmer Eldritch, but an alien that took his place (this is never confirmed, but remains to the end a possibility only). The nature of the alien power that supposedly invaded Eldritch is likewise a matter of dispute.

Was Palmer Eldritch substituted by one of the Proxers as a means of infiltration of the Sol system, or was he taken over by an even more fearsome entity? Whatever is the case, the point about Palmer Eldritch's turning alien is the character's dehumanization, and this is foregrounded throughout the narrative:

The hell with waiting, he said to himself; I came millions of miles and I expect to see the man or the thing, whichever it is. (p.46).

It had yet to be established that what had come back from Prox, the person or thing that had crashed on Pluto, was really Palmer Eldritch. (p.57).

"Or try to (....) contact Palmer or whatever's taking Palmer's place, and deal directly with it." (p.72).

"I wonder (....) if we want to work for a man that clever. If it is a man." (p.72).

"Because I'm even more convinced he's not human." (p.95).

"Even though he may be a wig-headed Proxer or something worse, some damn thing that got into his ship while it was coming or going, out in deep space, ate him, and took his place." (p.95).

This is no human being. In no sense whatsoever. (p.138).

Because I know he's not human; that's not a man there in that Palmer Eldritch skin. (p.157).

With vast trailing arms he extended from the Proxima Centaurus system to Terra itself, and he was not human; this was not a man who had returned. (p.172).

The man will be dead soon enough...or rather it will be. (p.177).

There had been a vast, reliable wisdom contained within the substance of the man or creature, whatever it was. (p.178).

(all underlinings, with the exception of the ones in the third passage and in the passage before the last, are mine).

Whether Palmer Eldritch's nonhumanity is indeed the result of his metamorphosis into an alien or an immanent quality about him is irrelevant, because, as Mark ROSE remarks in his examination of the monster motif in science fiction, "dehumanized man, man as either monster or superman, is in principle indistinguishable from any other kind of alien, and the figures in such stories are sometimes synonymous with aliens."<sup>14</sup> According to ROSE's view in Alien encounters, the confrontation with the nonhuman may be presented positively or negatively, depending on whether the dehumanized, alien element is presented as something less or more than human, and again on whether it has a maleficent or beneficent nature.

The Palmer Eldritch entity, which clearly stands for something other than human, is presented in Dick's novel as admittedly maleficent. Eldritch is referred to successively as "an invader" (p.86), "the Renegade" (p.88), "the enemy of the Sol system" (p.90), "an evil visitor" (p.127), and "our opponent" (p.178). The Chew-Z illusory worlds, all of them haunted by Eldritch's sinister presence, are described as "the domain of someone or something (....) absolutely evil" (p.126-7). ("I decided to write a novel," Dick wrote about Palmer Eldritch, "dealing with absolute evil as personified in the form of a 'human,'"<sup>15</sup>).

Palmer Eldritch is of course a monster, but certainly not a less than human monster: concurrent with his radical malignity is his ostensive superiority to man. Palmer Eldritch, "the master hallucinator" (p.88), "the fisherman of human souls" (p.164; note the allusion to the Gospels<sup>16</sup>), is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent; he is "eternal" (p.161), and "where (....) Palmer Eldritch can't go (....) nothing exists" (p.159). In fact, Palmer Eldritch is endowed with a series of attributes usually ascribed to the divinity itself, appearing as a "renegade" god, the supernatural all-powerful, all-knowing "opponent" of mankind.

This treatment of the Eldritch theme in Dick's novel is not idiosyncratic but has to do with a traditional trait of science fiction. Palmer Eldritch's demonic divineness is in conformity with Mark ROSE's idea that all mediating figures (Eldritch mediates between the organic and the inorganic, the human and the superhuman, the physically definite and the spiritually unbounded) "move readily toward the daemonic." "The ultimate daemonic power," ROSE observes, "is the infinite itself, the science-fiction equivalent of god, and the tendency of science fiction to move toward the daemonic is evidently related to the problem of the representation of the infinite."<sup>17</sup> (the underlining is mine).

In Palmer Eldritch, as in Olaf Stapledon's Star maker (1937), the alien identifiable as an emblem of infinitude is not merely connotative of the concept of divinity, but is actually presented in the absolute condition of God, or if not of God then of a consciousness so vast as to be identified

with that of God himself.

The Palmer Eldritch organism is described in the novel as extending throughout the cosmos, omnipotent but abysmally lonesome, craving after some vital association to suppress the hollowness within it: "and he had great power. He could overcome death. But he was not happy. For the simple reason that he was alone. So he at once tried to make up for this; he went to a lot of trouble to draw others along the route he had followed" (p.170).

Eldritch's greedy relationship with mankind derives from his yearning for symbiotic association with other live beings, whose experiences, emotions and memories he intends to share. In the same manner, Palmer Eldritch's omniscience, his quality of "absolute awareness" (p.178), is explained as the result of an eternity of observant isolation, of "unending solitary brooding:"

Our opponent, something admittedly ugly and foreign that entered one of our race like an ailment (....) knew much more than I did about the meaning of our finite lives, here; it saw in perspective. From its centuries of vacant drifting as it waited for some kind of life form to pass by which he could grab and become...maybe that's the source of its knowledge: not experience but unending solitary brooding. (loc.cit.)

The eternal creature's introduction of Chew-Z to the Terrans is equivalent to the institution of a sacrament. Chew-Z is the real thing that comes to replace the ersatz "transubstantiation" of the Can-D experience, in which the miniature Perky Pat artifacts are supposed to actually become,

as with the wine and wafer in Mass, the reality they represent. Unlike Can-D, whose effects are only experienced as genuine, Palmer Eldritch's diabolical Eucharist affords real, authentic transportation outside of time and local space into actual new universes, so actual that one can even die in them. The analogy of the Chew-Z miracle with that of transubstantiation is internal to the work, and is repeatedly pointed out in the narrative.

Dick's Palmer Eldritch, like Stapledon's Star Maker (an entity combining in one being the qualities of Satan and God), has a dual nature. In Palmer Eldritch the Dickian narrative performs the side by side embodiment of both the malignant joy the creator God takes in the defeat of all rebellions against his imposing trompe l'oeil scenery and the sorrow, owing to his powerlessness, experienced by the redeemer God.

Eldritch's role as the creator God is that of the "master hallucinator," the "damned magician" (p.94) who by simply "supplying the logos" (p.77) is able to conjure this whole "play of phenomena which we call reality" (p.92). All of the components of "reality" are in fact "constructs of Eldritch's busy mind" (p.89) which he sets going for his amusement and the confusion of those who inhabit his domain:

It's all the same, it's all him, the creator. That's who and what he is (....). The owner of these worlds. The rest of us just inhabit them and when he wants to he can inhabit them, too. Can kick over the scenery, manifest himself, push things in any direction he chooses. Even be any of us if he cares to. All of us, in fact, if he desires. (p.161).

However, unlike the terrible Star Maker, who is beyond

compassion, Palmer Eldritch can, on occasion, show benevolence to the people in his "dirty, semimechanical hands" (p.156). Barney Mayerson, who takes Chew-Z so he can revert the past and make up with his ex-wife Emily, asks Eldritch for help in the scene in which the six people in the elevator become Palmer Eldritch. Eldritch's answer to his prayer comes in a prolix, evasive speech in which the six Eldritch's tell Mayerson the situation is hopeless and advise him not to bother: "their tone was mocking, but compassion showed on the six faces; it showed in the weird, slitted mechanical eyes of each of them" (p.162; the underlining is mine).

Actually, Palmer Eldritch is unable to help Barney Mayerson out of his plight as a wandering, disembodied Chew-Z phantasm. Later, when Eldritch shows through the future self of Mayerson himself, his helplessness becomes clear: "His future self said mockingly, 'god helps those who help themselves, Mayerson. Do you really think it's going to do any good to go knocking all around trying to dream up someone to take pity on you? Hell, I pity you. (....) I'd release you from this if I knew how,'" (p.167).

Worried Roni Fugate, Mayerson's lover and his secretary at P.P.Layouts, asks Eldritch if Mayerson is going to remain a roving ghost forever: "'Good question,'" Palmer Eldritch answers, "'I wish I knew; for myself as well as him. I'm in it a lot deeper than he, remember,'" (loc.cit). Later, having eventually recovered from the effects of the Eldritch drug, Barney Mayerson tells his hovel mates back on Mars what he found out about Palmer Eldritch, that "that thing" was God,

and that God cannot help one much:

"That thing (....) has a name which you'd recognize if I told it to you. Although it would never call itself that. We're the ones who've titled it. From experience, at a distance, over thousands of years. But sooner or later we were bound to be confronted by it. Without the distance. Or the years.

Anne Hawthorne said, "You mean God."

It did not seem to him necessary to answer, beyond a slight nod.

"But --- evil?" Fran Schein whispered.

"An aspect," Barney said. "Our experience of it . Nothing more." Or didn't I make you see that already? (....) Should I tell you how it tried to help me, in its own way? And yet --- how fettered it was, too, by the forces of fate, which seem to transcend all that live, including it as much as ourselves. (p.179).

In this world in which God himself, hindered by the forces of fate, is "just trying to live, like the rest of us are" (loc.cit), what will become of man? Palmer Eldritch evidently cannot save mankind, nor can Leo Bulero, "champion of our nine planets" (p.90) against Eldritch's power. The answer, as is typical of Dick's novels, lies in the little characters' ability to make a free choice based not on subjective fancy but on objective, factual knowledge.

After meeting man's ancient opponent and accepting the paradox within this eternal power of creation and destruction, Barney Mayerson determines not to go on helping Bulero fight it. His decision to remain on Mars for the rest of his life growing his garden in spite of the Martian predators and the inhospitable Martian soil is taken on a rational, clear-headed basis, that of his awareness of a conflict repeatedly staged



in Dick's novels between man's will to ascend and the forces that drag him down into the realm of entropic causality:

Below lay the tomb world, the immutable cause-and-effect world of the demonic. At median extended the layer of the human, but at any instant a man could plunge --- descend as if sinking --- into the hell-layer beneath. Or: he could ascend to the ethereal world above, which constituted the third of the trinary layers. Always, in his middle layer of the human, a man risked the sinking. And yet the possibility of ascent lay before him; any aspect or sequence of reality could become either, at any instant. Hell and heaven, not after death but now! Depression, all mental illness, was the sinking. And the other...how was it achieved? Through empathy. Grasping another, not from outside but from the inner. (p.62).

Mayerson's choice for Mars and the communal life in the novels is similar to that of Jack Bohlen in Martian time-slip, who also elects the median layer of empathy and cooperation in a human context away from the selfish isolation of psychosis. In Dick's stories the possibility of redemption for mankind does not proceed from the agency of a supernatural power nor from the achievements of supermen like Leo Bulero, but from the conscious struggle of common people like Barney Mayerson if not to ascend to a higher level than at least to avoid descent. Only human beings can save themselves, is the feeling that runs through the whole of the Dickian fictional web.

Philip K. Dick considered Palmer Eldritch "the most vital" of all his novels; he referred to it not only as an

"interesting" but actually as a "unique" book and an "extraordinary" one, "so extraordinary that it may have no peer."<sup>18</sup> This is a surprising statement on the part of an author who was always willing to misprize his own work with some derisive, skeptical remark,<sup>19</sup> and it certainly does not concern the novel's economic implications, which do not greatly differ from those to be found elsewhere in his work. The uniqueness of Palmer Eldritch has rather to do with the disconcerting propositions considered in the context of its ontological dimension, which make this novel stand out among all others.

With the exception of Kim Stanley Robinson's, the cited critiques of Palmer Eldritch in which the ontological element is overlooked were all written before 1975, and therefore lack the perspective which one gains by reading the novel in the light of later works. A diachronic reading of Palmer Eldritch reveals some elements in the novel to be the precursors of what were to be recurrent Dickian themes (in particular the motif of the collective mystical experience --- the Perky Pat miracle in Palmer Eldritch, the Udi religion in Counter-clock world, Mercerism in Do androids dream --- and the notion of an occluded, evil god corresponding to Dick's neo-Gnostic Christianity). In fact, echoes of Palmer Eldritch reach out into the novels of the late 1960s as well as of the 70s, and can be detected in a novel as distanced from it as Valis.

Also, an analysis of this aspect of the novel glossed away by Robinson as a mere demonic-possession tale of dubious taste can throw some light on a striking feature of Dick's fiction, namely his disturbing literality. Dick's peculiar

trick of extravagant literality shows clearly in a minor novel of the late 1960s, Counter-clock world, in which the basic premise is that biological time has reversed itself, with the consequence that the dead come to life in their graves, are excavated, and then grow younger and younger with the passing of time. This amazing assumption (much criticized, as was mentioned in II.2, by American critics concerned with the science-fictional tradition of logical plausibility) is made the more amazing when one realizes that the whole story is a reenactment of that passage in I Corinthians, often referred to in the novel, in which St. Paul writes about the dead being raised incorruptible at the sound of the last trumpet (I Cor. 15:51-4).

The passage itself, along with other ones from Paul's two letters to the Corinthians, is a central reference point in several of Dick's novels (Ubik, A scanner darkly, Deus irae). In Palmer Eldritch both Paul's vision on the road to Damascus and his letters to the Romans and the Corinthians are directly mentioned. The passage is connected in this novel with the Can-D and Chew-Z translation experience, in which the characters discard their "corruptible bodies" and "put on immortality" (p.43), "put on imperishable bodies" (p.38). The Chew-Z experience is described as "a taste of incorruption," as "the only hint we can have on this side of death" of what it feels like for "corruptible man to put on incorruption" (p.162).

In I Corinthians 15:28 it is stated that God shall "be all in all." The occurrence of translations of religious

doctrine into fictional form elsewhere in Dick's work encourages the reading of Palmer Eldritch's transmutation of everything into his own image as the literal allegorization, negatively coloured, of the tenet expressed in Paul's letter. What Dick writes in Valis, that "the entire universe is in the invisible process of turning into the Lord"<sup>20</sup> is also true of Palmer Eldritch, with its protoplasm-like divinity that is "everywhere, growing and growing like a mad weed" (p.155).

"I'm going to become a planet," Eldritch tells Barney Mayerson, "I'm going to be everything on the planet. (....) I'm going to be all the colonists as they arrive and begin to live there. I'll guide their civilization. I'll be their civilization" (p.171). The uncontrollable proliferation of the Eldritch being, its voracious becoming "all in all," is described in metaphors involving images of food and nourishment:

Because that's what we are for him:  
food to be consumed. It's an oral  
thing that arrived back from the Prox  
system, a great mouth open to receive  
us. (p.156-7).

Well, [Bulero] thought, two more  
hours of independent life (....).  
Maybe ten hours of private existence,  
and then --- swallowed. (p.157).

Maybe he ate the Proxmen during those  
ten years, cleaned the plate there,  
and so then came back to us.  
(loc.cit.).

Maybe the damn organism was like a  
protoplasm; it had to ingest and grow  
--- instinctively it spread out  
farther and farther. (p.190).

When the conversion of all humans into Palmer Eldritch

is consummated (a conversion that respects "not just the anatomy of the thing but the mentality as well;" loc.cit.), when Palmer Eldritch is "all of us" (p.189), manifesting himself "through his congregation everywhere" (p.164), then humankind will have turned into "a civilization of Palmer Eldritch's, gray and hollowed and stooped and immensely tall, each with his artificial arm and eccentric teeth and mechanical, slitted eyes" (p.190).

A passage out of I John (3:2) quoted in Valis ("but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is"<sup>21</sup>) could also be a source for the transformation of each of the characters into Palmer Eldritch, indicated by the appearance of the three stigmata, symbols of Eldritch's "evil, negative trinity" (p.191). The manifestation of the three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch --- the gleaming artificial right hand, the huge, light-splintering steel teeth, and the horizontally-slotted, "luxvid" eyes<sup>22</sup> that replaced (the superb job of Brazilian oculists) Eldritch's natural eyes --- is described as a vision of "absolute reality" (p.183), of "the essence beyond the appearance" ("we shall see him as he is"). When Barney Mayerson sees Anne Hawthorne, his girlfriend on Mars, in the shape of Palmer Eldritch he realizes that what he saw was not only "a residual view of Eldritch, superimposed on Anne," but instead a "genuine insight, the perception of the actual, of their unqualified situation; not just his but all of theirs together" (p.150).

Chew-Z would "contaminate us all," sensed Leo Bulero, "starting inside and working to the surface --- it's utter

derangement" (p.105). The visible emblem of this contamination, the visitation of the three non-organic stigmata upon the human characters, stands for the sign of a bond established, without the willingness or the consent of human beings, between Palmer Eldritch and mankind:

The Presence abides with us,  
potentially if not actually. (....)  
All three stigmata --- the dead,  
artificial hand, the Jensen eyes, and  
the radically deranged jaw. Symbols of  
its inhabitation (....). In our midst.  
But not asked for. Not intentionally  
summoned. And --- we have no mediating  
sacraments through which to protect  
ourselves; we can't compel it (....)  
to confine itself to specific elements  
such as bread and water or bread and  
wine. It is out in the open, ranging  
in every direction. It looks into our  
eyes; and it looks out of our eyes.  
(p.183).

The Palmer Eldritch curse of association with an alien, nonhuman being is the price humans must pay for their desire to undergo the putting-on-incorruption experience with Chew-Z, "like the apple originally" (loc.cit.). "Once you've taken Chew-Z you're delivered over. (....) Like sin (....). It's the condition of slavery. Like the Fall" (p.158). The problem with Palmer Eldritch's blasphemous slogan ("I can do better; I can deliver it;" p.75) is not, as Mayerson intuitively feels, that it is a big lie, "but instead the big truth:" "an evil visitor (....) offering us what we've prayed for over a period of two thousand years. And why this is so palpably bad? (....) Because it'll mean bondage to Eldritch (....); Eldritch will be with us from now on, infiltrating our lives" (p.127-8).

Palmer Eldritch's gift to mankind of "genuine

reincarnation," of "triumph over death" (p.78), is in fact a device contrived for the alluring of human beings into his domain so that he can merge with them and make them into the inheritors of his own predicament:

"I'd like to know," Barney said, "what you were trying to do when you introduced Chew-Z to our people."  
 "Perpetuate myself," the creature opposite him said quietly.  
 "(....) "A form of reproduction?"  
 "Yes, the only way I can."  
 With overwhelming aversion Barney said, "My God. We would have all become your children." (p.187).

Curiously, there is a passage in Valis<sup>23</sup> that functions as an accurate survey of the components of the Palmer Eldritch problem: Horselover Fat (this is the literal English translation of the Greek and German words that make up the name Philip Dick) spends a whole year analyzing the encounter he had with the divinity, and then comes to the conclusion that it ("God, or the Logos, whatever")

had invaded our universe; and a year later he realized that it was consuming --- that is, devouring our universe. [It] accomplished this by a process much like transubstantiation. This is the miracle of communion in which the two species, the wine and bread, invisibly become the blood and body of Christ. (the underlining is mine).

Actually, the apparent complication of the theological Palmer Eldritch encases a quite coherent tale about a creature whose nature radically differs from that of man, "a being superior to ourselves" (p.181) that in order to suppress its loneliness "invades our universe" and leads mankind into

temptation so that it can gain domination over human beings and adopt them as its own children. The evil sort of transubstantiation into incorruption that the superior entity offers as a bait is not enough to make up for its hungry "devouring" of the universe, and as the creature is helpless to extricate itself and its unwilling progeny from the spell of "alienation, blurred reality, and despair" (p.192) that rules over their world redemption seems hardly achievable.

The main point about Palmer Eldritch as the supreme capitalist schemer is the effectiveness of this image as a metaphor for real capitalism in the real world. In the same manner, the characterization of Palmer Eldritch as an ambiguous divinity is figurative of the notion of God in the Western religious tradition, in which the deity is presented as a loving father but also as a vengeful antagonist. These metaphors, however, do not function as representational restatements of reality, but are rather a medium for the deconstruction and subversive reconstruction of these real --- economic and religious --- referents.

What is interesting about the theophany in Palmer Eldritch of a ravenous, loathsome divinity is the fact that the statements made in the novel about the Palmer Eldritch god are on a metaphoric level a meditation on the nature of the "real" God, the real Judeo-Christian conception of God.

In this manner, if we take Mark ROSE's view that the alien motif can function as "the science-fiction equivalent of god" (which proves literally true in Palmer Eldritch), we shall find this notion to be present in Dick's novel both in a



literal and in a reverse form, so that instead of simply conveying the idea that "The alien is god" the Dickian text is also secretly, silently suggesting the "God is an alien." In Palmer Eldritch not only is the monster god but the converse is also true in the way of a metaphor, since what is implied at every turn of the narrative is the disconcerting assumption that God is a monster.

Mark ROSE observes about the alien motif in science fiction that this is "charged with the mystery of unthinkable otherness."<sup>24</sup> So, we are reminded in Palmer Eldritch, is the notion of God to the human mind. God's quality of absolute otherness is philosophically unthinkable --- as a concept it does not submit to cognition by the human reasoning, and is therefore, from the intellectual, philosophical angle, virtually monstrous.

Palmer Eldritch as an exercise in the estrangement of the concept of God contains a series of postulates about the nature of the divinity. These postulates are based on the central premise that God, a foreign, conceptually repulsive being, "really exists:" "he --- you know what I refer to --- really exists, really is there. Although not like we've thought and not like we've experienced him up to now --- not like we'll perhaps ever be able to" (p.181). God is saddened by isolation, which moves him to establish a bond with mankind in what is an uninvited, one-way relationship imposed by him and unasked for by human beings. God appears to men in an earthly, human form, performing the union of divinity and humanity through his will to incarnate as a man.

God is helpless in the face of an adverse global

situation: "he can't help us very much (....). Some, maybe. But he stands with empty, open hands; he understands, he wants to help. He tries, but...it's just not that simple" (loc.cit.). God longs for death (13th chapter) and there is a forty-five percent chance (6th chapter) that he has died; this, however, does not prevent him from subsisting in a way that transcends his own extinction (11th chapter). From the human angle God is perceived as basically wicked, and it is in his nature to grow "like a mad weed," making all creatures into receptacles of his all-pervading essence.

God is essentially unknowable: "we can't judge it or make sense of what it does or wants; it's mysterious and beyond us" (p.183). This last observation arises as a by-product of the characters' attempt at discriminating the real God from Palmer Eldritch, who could be merely "a living entity from intersystem (....) shaped in His image. A way He selected of showing Himself to us" (p.182). The distinction between God and something with the qualities and powers of God is of course fallacious, and the only sensible attitude concerning the problem of the human apprehension of God is formulated in Anne Hawthorne's advice to Barney Mayerson not to "talk ontology," not to "say is" (loc.cit).

Two statements by Scotus Erigena (815-877) that Dick uses as epigraphs in Counter-clock world can function as an effective summing-up of the notion in the last chapter of Palmer Eldritch that man cannot declare anything about God, not even the fact of his very existence: "nothing can be predicated of God, literally or affirmatively. Literally God

is not, because He transcends being;"<sup>25</sup> "we do not know what God is...because He is infinite and therefore objectively unknowable. God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything."<sup>26</sup> God does not exist in a way that human beings can know him, is the message underlying the disquieting theology of Palmer Eldritch.

On the whole, the image created in the novel of a propagating, hideous deity rejected by the creatures it elected as its own children is only apparently exotic and unfamiliar. The theological argument of Palmer Eldritch presents no novelty in itself but amounts to a new, estranged reading of the complex notion of God in the Western religious ideology. The striking aspect of the ontological Palmer Eldritch is not the mere drawing in the story of an entropic universe whose God appears as an uncanny pilgrim, a protoplasmic invader with whom man wants no part. Rather what makes the novel into such a forceful, provocative work is the reader's realization of what is implied from beginning to end in the story, that that universe is our universe, and that Palmer Eldritch is our god.

To conclude, having traced the development of the main ideas in the novel's two central levels of meaning, let us note that both a political and a mystical interpretation of Palmer Eldritch reveal the story to be concerned with the notion of individual human suffering in the face of powerful forces. Palmer Eldritch as either the supreme capitalistic con-man or the ubiquitous spiritual superpromiser is the single element that works as a constraining power over individuals in the physical as in the metaphysical world. The

children of Palmer Eldritch are the manipulees of capitalism, and there seems to be no easy escape for them out of this impasse.

Nonetheless, as is the case with most of Dick's novels, Palmer Eldritch ends with an intimation of hopefulness. There is a way that the individual can elude the deadlock situation imposed on him by the uncompromising Powers, and this is, like in Martian time-slip, the way of acceptance with dignity. The characters accept the fact that Palmer Eldritch has a hold on them which works, moreover, from inside out, but they know that one should "never grovel." "God, or whatever superior being it is we've encountered --- it wouldn't want that and even if it did you shouldn't do it" (p.182).

A passage that beautifully pinpoints the problem of how man can live with the knowledge of his bondage to what Palmer Eldritch stands for occurs in the context of Barney Mayerson's encounter with the Martian telepathic jackal. Mayerson learns from the jackal's thoughts, projected telepathically toward him, that he is defiled by contact with Palmer Eldritch, by the presence of Palmer Eldritch that the jackal senses about him. The starving jackal refrains from eating him because to it Mayerson is a sickening "unclean thing" (p.185), unfit to be ingested. Deeply upset by this revelation, Mayerson manages nevertheless to play down his mortification and to bear "with dignity" the evidence of his enslavement :

He did not bother to look at his arm and hand; it was unnecessary.

Calmly, with all the dignity that he could manage, he walked on, over the loosely packed sand, toward his hovel. (p.186).

The delicate, unspoken hopefulness that we find in Palmer Eldritch is explicit only in that P.P. Layouts matter-of-fact interoffice memo dictated by Leo Bulero which serves the novel as the epigraph:

I mean, after all; you have to consider we're only made of dust. That's admittedly not much to go on and we shouldn't forget that. But even considering, I mean it's a sort of bad beginning, we're not doing too bad. So I personally have faith that even in this lousy situation we're faced with we can make it. You get me?

The epigraph highlights the idea diffused in the novel that things might turn out well for human beings in spite of everything. In The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch the possibility of success for man is not, as mentioned before, related to the grandiose but to the small. Human freedom will ensue not from mankind's major, outstanding accomplishments, but from the individual's willingness to recognize his weakness and strength, and then, making the most of his own resources, as in Voltaire's Candide, to tend his own Martian garden.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch. New York, DAW Books, 1983. All quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition, its page numbers indicated in parentheses. The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch was first published by Doubleday in November, 1964. The story is set in New York City and on Mars, the year is 2016.

<sup>2</sup>SUVIN, Darko. P.K. Dick's opus; artifice as refuge and world view. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.14.

<sup>3</sup>ALDISS, Brian W. Dick's maledictory web; about and around Martian time-slip. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.45.

<sup>4</sup>SUVIN, p.8

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.12.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.16.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.15.

<sup>8</sup>ROBINSON, Kim Stanley. The novels of Philip K. Dick. San Diego, 1982. Dissertation, Ph.D., University of California, San Diego. p.120.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.121.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.120.

<sup>11</sup>SUVIN, p.8.

<sup>12</sup>ALDISS, loc.cit.

<sup>13</sup>ROBINSON, p.122.

<sup>14</sup>ROSE, Mark. Alien encounters; anatomy of science fiction. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1981. p.179.

<sup>15</sup>In Dick's 1968 "Self-Portrait." The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (2), December 1983. p.13.

<sup>16</sup>Matthew 4:19: "And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (also Mark 1:17 and Luke 5:10).

<sup>17</sup>ROSE, p.187-8.

<sup>18</sup>In 1968 Dick wrote about Palmer Eldritch: "I am afraid of that book; it deals with absolute evil, and I wrote it during a great crisis in my religious beliefs (....). When the galleys came from Doubleday I could not correct them because I could not bear to read the text, and this is still true." ("Self-Portrait." The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (2). loc.cit.). Almost a decade later, in an interview to D. Scott Apel and Kevin Briggs dated June/July 1977, Dick's opinion about the novel had not changed: "An interesting one is The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, as far as I'm concerned. I have read that and had the distinct impression that it was an extraordinary book --- so extraordinary that it may have no peer. It may be a unique book in the history of writing --- nothing was ever done like this. And then I've read it over and thought it was completely crazy, just insane; not about insanity, it is insanity. God, it's a weird book." Dick added: "I think if anything I write is to be retained within the cultural flow that Three stigmata stands a very good chance. Either it will eventually be consigned to oblivion as a bizarre exercise in madness, or it will be considered a breakthrough book." (The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (6), April 1985. p.13).

<sup>19</sup>Dick's judgement about his own work as stated in conversation, interviews, etc., is often an unreliable source of information, because of his tendency to radically alter his view about his writing a number of times. Do androids dream of electric sheep? was included by Dick in the "Self-Portrait" piece (see note 15) in his list of the few of his novels that he wished would "escape World War Three." In the Apel/Briggs interview (see note 17), however, Dick declared he did not like Do androids dream "at all." "I really loathe that book," he said. On the same occasion he stated that he "did not care" for Martian time-slip, which he considered a "dull" novel; likewise, "nothing could be said for" Galactic pot-healer, that "stupid book." (The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (6). p.12-3). Dick's consistency of opinion about Palmer Eldritch, which he refrained from running down, is an exceptional instance in his overall depreciating evaluation of his own work.

<sup>20</sup>Valis. New York, Bantam, 1985. p.61.

<sup>21</sup>Valis, p.59.

<sup>22</sup>Gregg RICKMAN writes that Dick "discussed in several interviews (....) his 1963 vision of a giant face in the sky with slotted eyes, an evil face he eventually realized resembled French fortifications in World War I." (Philip K. Dick; the last testament. Long Beach, Fragments West/The Valentine Press, 1985. p.11). In Deus irae Pete Sands' vision of the Antagonist, the Deus Irae, or God of Wrath, is that of a creature with "horizontal eyes (....). And without pupils. Just slots.." The Adversary views "straight across the surface of the world, as if the world were flat and his gaze, like a laser beam, travelled on without end, forever." (Deus irae. London, Sphere, 1982. p.38).

<sup>23</sup>Valis, p.61.

<sup>24</sup>ROSE, p.191.

<sup>25</sup>Counter-clock world. New York, Berkley, 1967. p.82.

<sup>26</sup>Counter-clock world, p.92.



### III.3 UBIK

His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself, which these dead had one time reared and lived in, was dissolving and dwindling.

James Joyce, "The Dead"

In spite of its standard thematics and character framework, Ubik is in more than one way an exception among Dick's science-fiction works.

The one-word cryptical title, for instance, is not typical, Valis being the only other one-word title to be found among his novels. The made-up word ubik is clearly suggestive of an analogy with ubiquity, from the Latin ubique, meaning everywhere. In fact, this is explicitly confirmed in the text, in which ubik is explained as being simply a different spelling of ubique, the two words having the same meaning.<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, both Ubik and VALIS eventually get to be identified with the concept of God. VALIS --- an acronym for "Vast Active Living Intelligence System" --- is, as Ubik in the epigraph to the final chapter, just another Dickian name for God.

Again, in Ubik the reality-breakdown problem, featured as the central concern of the narrative, is foregrounded as it has not been in any other of Philip K. Dick's novels.

Moreover, as Kim Stanley ROBINSON points out,<sup>2</sup> unlike the other novels, in which the differentiation between reality

and fantasy is reasonably clear, Ubik frustrates any attempt at a definite distinction between the parallel reality and the consensus reality. Rather, thanks to the novel's open ending, achieved through the traditional science-fiction device of a "final twist," in Ubik there is no telling which is which. Robert SCHOLES and Eric S. RABKIN write about this novel that as "there is no comfortable return to a 'real' present at the end" of it "we are denied that satisfaction here in much the same way that we might be denied it by Alain Robbe-Grillet or some other practitioner of the French 'new novel.'" <sup>3</sup>

Along with other peculiarities of Ubik the concern with the reality problem, which it shares with the experimentalist works of the nouveau roman, has attracted more critical attention to this novel than to any other Dick work, excepting The man in the high castle. Critical responses are unanimous in their interest for the epistemological aspect of Ubik. Nevertheless, commentators have greatly disagreed as to the perspective from which the work is to be considered.

While Mark Rose <sup>4</sup> and Scholes and Rabkin concentrate on the impossibility of drawing distinctions between the real and the unreal worlds in Ubik other critics find still further implications in the novel. Thus, a group of French Marxist scholars who visited Dick at his home in Orange County is reported to have been enthusiastic about the wealth of philosophical (pre-Socratic) implications that they found in the book. <sup>5</sup>

Then, in contrast with the French view, Peter Fitting reads Ubik as an ideological exercise in the deliberate,

controlled contravention of traditional "bourgeois" literary practices. FITTING's idea is that by subverting a central generic convention (the final "explanation" which should account for the events narrated in the text) Ubik reminds the reader that "['reality'] is a mental construct which may be undermined at any time."<sup>6</sup> In doing so, according to FITTING, Ubik performs "a critique of (....) a priori modes of perception,"<sup>7</sup> literary or otherwise. FITTING writes,

The reader's usual satisfaction in finishing a novel and looking back over how everything fits together derives from the formal confirmation of his conception of reality and, in the case of Ubik, from his relief at having finally resolved the disquieting tension between fictional reality and illusion. But this satisfaction is short-lived (....) and the reader's traditional response --- the discovery of (....) interpretation --- is frustrated. However, that frustration was planned; this kind of text is no longer a window opening onto a transcendental meaning, but a mirror which reflects the reader's look, forcing him out of his familiar reading habits while drawing his attention to the functioning of the novel as a form of manipulation.

This quality of sheer openness that Peter Fitting detects in Ubik is what accounts for there being so many possible levels of interpretation of it. Ubik can be read as either a "fantastic grotesque, a 'macabresque' with obscure allegorical subtexts" (Stanislaw LEM<sup>9</sup>), or as "a nihilistic collapse into (....) mystifying forms of SF melodrama" (Darko SUVIN<sup>10</sup>), or as the deconstruction of the bourgeois concept of literary representation (Fitting). George Turner sees nothing

in Ubik but inconsistencies and unresolved complexity,<sup>11</sup> while Hazel Pierce draws an interesting parallel between this novel and the Bardo Thödol or Tibetan book of the dead,<sup>12</sup> a sacred text of Tibetan Buddhism which Dick also used in The man in the high castle.

Further possible variae lectiones are the assessment of Ubik as the collage of a series of skilful pastiches parodying the rhetoric of scientific jargon, organized religion and advertising jingles. Or as a story within the thriller genre --- with the classical withholding of information, listing of clues, clues pointing to one of the characters as the main suspect, surprising death of suspect, and so on.

In fact, the narrative of Ubik is a flexible framework that invites appreciation from multiple angles and refuses to fit into an only interpretative pattern. As Peter FITTING puts it, "there is no satisfactory single interpretation of Ubik, my own included."<sup>13</sup>

Having the open character of the novel in mind we shall be concerned here with the allegorical implications of Ubik, at the same time highlighting the coexistence in it of both a physical (economic) argument and a metaphysical one.

Taken at surface value Ubik tells the story of a business competition between Raymond Hollis of Hollis Talents and Glen Runciter of Runciter Associates. Hollis' "psi" agents --- telepaths and "precogs" --- are hired for industrial spying and other such necessary activities in the capitalistic world of 1992. Runciter's "inertials" can block and nullify the psionic abilities of the Hollis' people, so their services

are always in great demand.

When Runciter's world-renowned anti-psi "prudence organization" loses track of too many of Hollis' psis Glen Runciter turns for advice to his wife Ella. Ella Runciter has been dead for many years, but she is preserved in "cold-pac" in the Zürich Beloved Brethren Moratorium. Cold-pac is a process by which the dead can be reached for communication by their family and friends as long as their waning cerebral activity is retained.<sup>14</sup>

Runciter's interview with Ella at the moratorium is interrupted by the intrusion of Jory Miller (the mentalities of those in half-life tend to grow together due to prolonged proximity), a fifteen-year-old half-lifer with an aggressive, impertinent personality.

Back in his office in New York City Runciter debates with a new client about a demand for a large number of inertials to nullify a strong psi field at a research installation on the moon. The request is made on a rather irregular basis, but tempted by the hunch that they will find the missing Hollis agents Runciter himself and twelve of his best operators (including his chief psi-field tester Joe Chip and a newly-hired talent, Pat Conley) go to Luna in Runciter's spaceship Pratfall II.

They move into a trap, of course, but as they realize this it is already too late. Their customer Stanton Mick is really a self-destruct humanoid bomb<sup>15</sup> which explodes in the same room with Runciter and his top anti-psi. Runciter dies in the blast and Joe Chip and the eleven inertials get him

into cold-pac and then to Zürich to the Beloved Brethren Moratorium, where their employer's mental life is to be tapped.

However, although afterlife cephalic activity is detected Glen Runciter for some reason cannot be brought into full half-life functioning, hence his employees cannot communicate with him. This is a problem, because Joe Chip and the others need Runciter's advice to both administer the prudence agency and pay back at Ray Hollis for having plotted Runciter's murder.

As they give up attempts at getting in touch with their boss via the normal cold-pac procedures the inertials start getting enigmatic, fragmentary messages from him. The manifestations of Runciter reach them through unexpected media, like Runciter's voice on the vidphone, Runciter's likeness on fifty-cent coins, small print ad on a matchfolder, graffiti on the men's toilet wall, Runciter on a television commercial that keeps broadcasting even after the set has been turned off. However, there is no way for the inertials to respond to these attempts at communication.

Concurrently with these eerie manifestations two tropisms --- one a process of physical deterioration, the other a process of time reversion --- start modifying reality as the characters know it. Faced with the gradual disintegration of their environment, which loses consistency by either dissolving into decay or reverting to prior forms, Runciter's employees strive to understand just what is going on.

By the time Runciter is to be buried (all chances of

reviving him into half-life having been abandoned) in his birth town Des Moines, Iowa, time has reversed to the year 1939, "a period in which none of [the characters] lived --- except Glen Runciter" (p.178). And Philip K. Dick, of course, who was ten years old in that "backward, no-good time period" (p.162). Dick's virtuosity at detailing the minutiae of the U.S.A. of 1939 features everything from a radio soap opera, "brought to you by mild Camay, the soap of beautiful women" (p.119), to turret-top G.E. refrigerators, La Salle automobiles and Atwater-Kent cabinet radios.

In 1939-Des Moines there occur a series of disclosures. The death of Pat Conley, the sadistic young woman with time-controlling abilities, reveals that not her (as was suspected, even by Pat herself) but someone or something else has been causing the instantaneous aging and death of one inertial after the other. Actually, as Joe Chip learns, this is not really the Middle West in the late thirties, but somewhere outside of time entirely; the group of inertials is trapped in a mental construct of half-lifer Jory Miller's, and Jory has been feeding on the life in the bodies of the inertials so as to preserve his own fading life-energy. They are all dead and in cold-pac, after all, and Glen Runciter, the only survivor of the blast on the moon, is sitting in the consultation lounge at the Beloved Brethren Moratorium, trying to contact his deceased employees.

This revelation does not come as any great surprise, because the possibility of Runciter being alive and the inertials dead is one of the different hypotheses that the

latter develop earlier in the narrative in their effort to account for what is happening to them.

Still, when this supposition is confirmed to both the characters (Joe Chip is finally reached in half-life by Runciter, who tells him what his real condition is) and the reader (a three-page passage shows Runciter alive and conferring over the vidphone with his legal department about a criminal charge against Ray Hollis for the murder of his twelve best agents), one is pleasantly surprised at finding how the events in the narrative beautifully fit together.

In fact, a retrospective survey of the plot shows how neatly everything in the story adjusts to the information that the inertials died in the blast but Runciter survived it. In the first place, it was to be expected that there would be a great number of casualties, not just one, upon the explosion of the fragmentation-type bomb; then there is the group's strangely easy flight from the Stanton Mick facility on the moon, Runciter's manifestations which correspond to the inertials' apprehension of their boss's effort to contact them "from outside," and the declining and dwindling away of reality normally experienced by the people in half-life.

As Peter Fitting writes, however, the reader's is only a short-lived satisfaction. Gratified with an interpretation which finally explains the narrative (as the dream of dead people as they lie in a state of half-life) the reader of Ubik turns to the final chapter of the novel, which again shows Glen Runciter at the Zürich moratorium, preparing to talk to his half-lifer wife Ella. As he tips the attendant who wheels Ella's casket in Runciter glances at the coins he hands the



man. The fifty-cent pieces bear the profile of Joe Chip:

I wonder what this means, he asked himself. Strangest thing I've ever seen. Most things in life eventually can be explained. But --- Joe Chip on a fifty-cent piece?

It was the first Joe Chip money he had ever seen.

He had an intuition, chillingly, that if he searched his pockets, and his billfolds, he would find more.

This was just the beginning (p.191).

The likeness of Joe Chip on Runciter's money is of course an indication (as was Runciter's face on the inertials' money) that this reality is again delusional. Is Runciter dead and only dreaming he is alive in the real world providing for the welfare of his agency? But then all the characters in the novel, Runciter and inertials alike, are dead to begin with. Or are they? As the first, crafty explanation of Ubik is overturned by the "one final twist" gimmick the reader's literary expectations are uncomfortably frustrated.

By deranging one's reading habits Ubik also performs, as Peter Fitting propounds, the shattering of one's conception of reality as a positive, unquestionable value. In its refusal to yield to an ultimate, definitive interpretation Ubik can strike one as a rather disconcerting work. Still, the novel ends, very significantly, with the word beginning: for the characters "the beginning of an endless series of illusory realities," as FITTING remarks, "but for the careful reader also the beginning of an end to a number of illusions about both reality and the novel."<sup>16</sup>

In contrast with other Dick works Ubik is marked by

this subverting of a traditional structural principle (that of the one final explanation) of the novel. The plot itself, however, does not display much innovation when compared with other novels; rather it features a series of traditional Dickian motifs --- business rivalry, reality breakdown, time warp, the ravages of entropy.

Likewise, the character types in Ubik thoroughly coincide with those to be found in earlier novels. The characterology of Ubik comprises, as is formulated in Darko SUVIN's neat résumé, "the bitch Pat, the redeemer Ella, the bewildered old-fashioned tycoon Runciter, the shadowy illusion creator Jory (....) and, most important, the buffeted but persistent schlemiel Joe Chip."<sup>17</sup>

One modification, however, is introduced in the context of the employer/employee relationship, which is presented in more positive terms here than in any other Dick novel. Unlike Dick's other business titans, who though never totally bad are pre-eminently tyrannical and malicious, Glen Runciter is presented as "a good individual and citizen whom his employees could trust" (p.113). Accordingly, Runciter's relationship with Joe Chip, the professionally competent technician with a confused personal life, is not based as in other novels upon oppression and mistrust, but on a genuine, though unspoken, reciprocal affection.

As for the characterization of Joe Chip in Ubik, this is emblematic of the complexity characteristic of the Dickian little protagonist. An unimposing have-not, as is suggested by his name (chip meaning something small, worthless, or trivial), Joe Chip typifies the antinomial make-up of Dick's baffled

Everyman. The little protagonist's intimate, deep down strength in spite of his fundamental weakness is for the most part implicit in Dick's novels, but in Ubik this duality is unambiguously pointed out:

Joe Chip had a peculiar defeated quality hanging over him, and yet, underneath, he did not seem to have given up. A vague and ragged hint of vitality lurked behind the resignation; it seemed to Runciter that Joe most nearly could be accused of feigning spiritual downfall (....), the real article, however, was not there (p.42).

"In my opinion," Al said, (....) "you have a will to fail. No combination of circumstances (....) is going to change that."

"What I actually have," Joe said, "is a will to succeed. Glen Runciter saw that, which is why he specified in his will that I take over in the event of his death (....)." Within him his confidence rose; he saw now the manifold possibilities ahead, as clearly as if he had precog abilities (p.83-4).

As Stanislaw LEM observes, Dick subjects his characters "to the pressure of a terrible testing," but "they struggle bitterly and stoically to the end, like Joe Chip (....) against the chaos pressing on them from all sides." LEM writes about the psychology of Dick's little characters that "in a world smitten with insanity, in which even the chronology of events is subject to convulsions, it is only the people who preserve their normality".<sup>18</sup>

Joe Chip's persistent toil is particularly representative of the efforts of Jack Bohlen (Martian time-slip), Barney Mayerson (Palmer Eldritch), Rick Deckard (Do

androids dream) and others among Dick's ordinary people to "preserve their normality," to protect themselves from the cogency of a deranged environment so as not to lose contact with being.

On the whole, in Ubik Philip Dick uses what are basically his customary materials (motifs and characters) to rework traditional concerns of his from yet a different angle.

In this manner, Dick's recurrent critique of capitalist consumerism is centered in this novel around the product Ubik, like Palmer Eldritch's Chew-Z a symbol of the definitive consumer commodity.

In the context of the narrative Ubik first appears in the tenth chapter as a substance that counteracts "manifestations of decay" (p.114), a "reality support" that comes in a brightly colored spray can. Long before this, however, the reader is introduced to Ubik as it appears in the epigraphs heading each chapter, written like kitschy commercials that advertise the thing as best beer, instant coffee, cleaning product, cereal, deodorant, salad dressing, sleeping pills, and other usual consumer goods...

We wanted to give you a shave like no other you ever had. We said, It's about time a man's face got a little loving. We said, With Ubik's self-winding Swiss chromium never-ending blade, the days of scrape-scrape are over. So try Ubik. And be loved. Warning: use only as directed. And with caution (6th chapter).

My hair is so dry, so unmanageable. What's a girl to do? Simply rub in creamy Ubik hair conditioner. In just five days you'll discover new body in your hair, new glossiness. And Ubik hairspray, used as directed, is

absolutely safe (9th chapter).

Could it be that I have bad breath, Tom? Well, Ed, if you're worried about that, try today's new Ubik, with powerful germicidal foaming action, guaranteed safe when taken as directed (15th chapter).

Like the irrelevant, mislabelling chapter titles in A maze of death (1970) the epigraphs promoting Ubik in cheap ad terms bear no relation to the narrative content of the chapters. As parodies of the hollow rhetoric of commercial publicity they denounce the deceptiveness of the capitalistic discourse, which tends to mask the real value of commercialized commodities. In Peter FITTING's view the epigraphs in the form of commercial messages

provide a restatement of Marx's description of value, for Ubik is a universal equivalent (the embodiment of exchange value), which can represent or replace any other commodity: under capitalism everything has its price; while the presentation of Ubik through these ads stresses the obligation of capitalism to produce<sup>19</sup> needs (use-values) in the consumer.

Fitting's interpretation of the novel's digressive epigraphs is based on Karl Marx's theory about the origin of the money form of value. As the "universal equivalent" used in the process of exchange of commodities money dissimulates, according to Marx's theory, the fact that consumer goods are the product of labor, that concrete human labor is incorporated in the production of commodities.

Actually, the perception of money as an abstract, conventional value with controlling power over a world of

concrete human wants for goods that are the product of concrete human work is a notion that runs through the whole of Ubik.

Intimations of the arbitrary quality of money as an exchange value are particularly manifest in the novel's repeated allusions to counterfeit or obsolete money and to the different currencies in the different periods of American history.

In fact, coins and currency play an important role in Ubik. In the first place, nothing is free in Dick's 1992, but everything, from one's own shower and refrigerator to the front door of one's own apartment, is coin-operated. Then the little protagonist --- note that chip can also mean real money (as in the phrase in the chips) as well as make-believe money (as the counters used in card games) --- is permanently broke, which lays stress on the money motif. Then again, as reality loses its integrity the inertials' currency becomes obsolete and is rejected by television sets, vidphones and other coin-operated facilities. Finally, there is the Runciter and the Joe Chip money replacing the characters' authentic 1992 American fifty-cent coins (these should bear either Walt Disney's profile or then Fidel Castro's, which is typical Dickian humor).

Likewise, individual coins are set apart and amplified in a blow-up process, like the "uncirculated U.S. gold dollar" in a rare-coin shop window (p.50), the recalled George Washington quarter expelled by the vidphone (p.81), the "authentic buffalo nickel" (p.130) rejected by the man in the 1939 Des Moines airport because it is dated 1940.

On the whole, all these recurrent allusions to fake money, devalued money, and different money denominations, plus Joe Chip's comic-pathetic financial problems, play a significant part in Dick's critique of capitalism through the demystification of the notion of money as a reliable medium of exchange.

Although the economic criticism of Ubik is not as transparent as that to be found in Martian time-slip, for instance, it can be as forceful.

Thus, an attack on the capitalistic strategy of fabricating an artificial need in the buyer is implied in the very nature of the services rendered by Runciter's and the various other "prudence organizations," which could be nonexistent for all that the customers know.

"Defend your privacy," the anti-psi organizations advise hourly in commercials on television and in the "homeopages:"

Is a stranger tuning in on you? Are you really alone? (....) Are your actions being predicted by someone you never met? Someone you would not want to meet or invite into your home? Terminate anxiety; contacting your nearest prudence organization will first tell you if in fact you are the victim of unauthorized intrusions, and then, on your instructions, nullify these intrusions --- at moderate cost to you (p.12).

But then the clients have to trust the prudence people as to the real need for an anti-psi action in their home or business establishment. A significant passage tells about Herbert Schoenheit von Vogelsang having been notified once by

a prudence organization that a telepath had infiltrated the staff of his Beloved Brethren Moratorium. Upon Vogelsang's signing of a work contract an anti-telepath was sent who nullified the action of the spy telepath. The moratorium became psi-free, "and to be sure it stayed so, the anti-psi prudence organization surveyed his establishment routinely once a month," naturally at the moratorium owner's expense:

Of course, Herbert thought (....), I took their word for it that a telepath got in here; they showed me a graph they had obtained, citing it as proof. Maybe they faked it, made up the graph in their own labs. And I took their word for it that the telepath left; he came, he left --- and I paid two thousand poscreds (p.12-3).

The inference that the well thought of prudence organizations could really be rackets "claiming a need for their services when sometimes no need actually exists" (p.13) is part of the novel's overall ethos of deconstruction. The obviously unverifiable materiality of the prudence organizations' psi-field graphs parodies the claim for objectivity which is an ideological principle of the capitalistic alliance of science and commercialism.

By both subverting the form of the classical representational novel and demystifying the objectivity of scientific and commercial imperialism, Ubik operates from the political angle the deconstruction of central capitalistic ideological icons.

But other questions arise in the context of the novel's metaphysical argument, which centers around two main



concerns, one the cognition-of-reality problem, and the other the Dickian motif of death and rebirth, or in more general terms, destruction and creation. The first of these topics unfolds from the characters' search for an explanation of what is happening as they slide from one counterfeit, degenerating reality to another.

Runciter's inertials cannot rely on their perception of phenomena to tell if the events they experience as real are actual or fake, present or past, or even if they are themselves dead or alive. Accordingly, there arises the question of the validity of one's cognition of the reality external to the self. This classical philosophical problem is plainly set down in an interior monologue of focal character Al Hammond's as he succumbs to the process of rapid decay which kills the inertials in succession.

Al Hammond perceives the loss of heat<sup>20</sup> characteristic of fast degeneration and death as actually affecting the world around him and distorting its form:

The chill debased the surfaces of objects; it warped, expanded, showed itself as bulblike swellings that sighed audibly and popped. Into the manifold open wounds the cold drifted, all the way down into the heart of things, the core which made them live. What he saw now seemed to be a desert of ice from which stark boulders jutted. A wind spewed across the plain which reality had become (p.107).

However, Runciter's Negro anti-precog is aware that this deformation of reality is really a projection on his part of the cooling off into death undergone by his own body:

It isn't the universe which is being entombed by layers of wind, cold, darkness and ice; all this is going on within me, and yet I seem to see it outside. Strange, he thought. Is the whole world inside me? Engulfed by my body? (....) The uncertainty which I feel, the slowing down into entropy --- that's the process, and the ice which I see is the result of the success of the process. When I blink out (....) the whole universe will disappear (p.107-8).

The passage is clearly suggestive of the traditional controversy between the philosophical doctrines of realism and idealism. Do the objects of human perception and cognition really exist outside the mind, independently of it (realism)?, or does the essential nature of reality lie in human consciousness, so that the self is the only existing thing (idealism)? In Ubik the former, realist alternative is discarded by the open ending, with its deliberate refusal to tell the factual reality from the imaginary one.

What is implied in the ambiguousness of the ending is the feel that neither "reality" is real, but that both are projections of the characters' own thought-formations, embodiments of what goes on in their own minds.

The reader, rather than the characters, gets the message that the self can know nothing but its own modifications. Joe Chip fails to realize that the girl come from the future to save him with a can of Ubik is an illusion summoned by himself, a projection of his own mind. The girl herself tells Joe Chip so, but, unheedingly, he keeps asking her to dinner while she ebbs away from him. As reality is thus reduced to a solipsistic minimum the novel ends with the

notion of a paradoxal objectivity based on the awareness of one's incapacity to ever apprehend the ultimate essence of truth.

This intimation of a docta ignorantia, of a knowing relinquishment of cognition, is remindful of the thought of the Eleatic philosophers, who questioned the actuality of the sensory world and denied that reality could be described in the categories of ordinary experience. But the philosophical attitudes of pre-Socratic skepticism are not the only source underlying the notion inbuilt in Ubik that human life in the world is a distressing delusion.

The whole idea of the non-existence of the external world is linked in the novel with a major allegorical source, namely the Bardo Thödol or Tibetan book of the dead, a Buddhistic canonical text written in the eighth century which constitutes an undeniable substratum for the novel's mood of world-denial.

What Stanislaw LEM refers to, as quoted previously, as the "obscure allegorical subtexts" of Ubik becomes a not so obscure characteristic of the novel at the moment when one identifies the source material allegorized in it. The only apparent intimation that the Bardo Thödol is one such source consists of two brief but unequivocal allusions to it. The first reference to the Bardo Thödol in Ubik occurs when Glen Runciter disconcertedly reminds his dead wife Ella of instructions contained in it concerning rebirth and reincarnation:

"I was dreaming," Ella said. "I saw a smoky red light. And yet I kept

moving toward it. I couldn't stop."

"Yeah," Runciter said (....) "The Bardo Thödol, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, tells about that. You remember reading that; the doctors made you read it when you were (....) dying."

"The smoky red light is bad, isn't it?" Ella said.

"Yeah, you want to avoid it (....), you're heading for a new womb to be born out of. And the smoky red light --- that's a bad womb; you don't want to go that way. That's a humiliating, low sort of womb." (p.15-6).

The other direct allusion to the Bardo Thödol is also related to the notion of life after death, and it appears as Joe Chip wonders about the death of his teammate Wendy Wright and the opposition of body and soul:

The ancient dualism: body separated from soul. The body ending as Wendy did, and the soul --- out of its nest the bird, flown elsewhere. Maybe so, he thought. To be reborn again, as the Tibetan Book of the Dead says. It really is true. Christ, I hope so. Because in that case we all can meet again (p.119).

These two apparently digressive references are really keys leading to the numerous veiled allusions to the Tibetan book of the dead disseminated in the novel. Impressive correspondences between the plot of Ubik and the doctrinal content of the Bardo Thödol are, as was mentioned before, indicated by Hazel Pierce. PIERCE gives the following explanation of the material contained in the Bardo:

The Bardo Thödol is a guidebook or set of instructions for the dead as they pass through the forty-nine-day interval between the moment of physical death and the moment of reincarnation. The consciousness, now

free of the body, remains active, able at any point to liberate itself from the cycle of existence and merge with the essence of real being. Liberation depends upon recognition that all human existence is illusion, a projection of the human mind, behind which is the luminous void of reality. Refusal to recognize dooms the consciousness to a progressive descent toward rebirth and continuation of the illusion.<sup>21</sup> (the underlining is mine).

According to the Tibetan scripture after-life reality is divided into three stages. Hazel PIERCE writes about their respective characteristics:

At the moment of death, if training and meditation have prepared the person for immediate enlightenment, he may recognize and merge with the clear light of reality. Those with less perfect understanding will descend to the state of 'karmic illusions' (....) . The consciousness re-experiences various mental projections (....). Forms, colors, lights, symbols, these fantasies of the mind may terrify the consciousness or at least confuse it. If there is still no recognition and fusion with the Void of True Being, the consciousness descends to the time of (....) rebirth. This state is more terrifying. The environment crumbles and decays (....). There is an increasing awareness of other egos, some pleasant, some repellent. At all times the active consciousness may be aware of persons and actions in the world of the living (....). Finally, at the end of the forty-nine-day period, the consciousness re-enters the world of human existence.<sup>22</sup> (the underlining is mine).

Pierce does not detail the affinities between Ubik and the Bardo, but these are readily identifiable from her survey. The Ubik half-life state, in which the dead person's cerebral activity is artificially sustained corresponds to the Bardo

forty-nine-day after-life period in which the dead person's consciousness "remains active." In the Bardo the conscious dead are subject to mind-created illusions, residual memories of life that haunt them in death, just as the half-lifer characters in Ubik are mystified by embodiments of their own thoughts,<sup>23</sup> to the extent that they imagine they are still alive. Then the disintegration of the environment experienced by the inertials and Joe Chip's growing awareness of the pleasant Ella-ego offering liberation from decay and the repellent Jory-ego feeding on his life-energy are characteristic of the third stage of after-life in the Bardo, as is the inertials' perception of Runciter's attempts to reach them from the world of the living.

Finally, and more important, there is the Bardo Thödol Buddhistic notion that the manifold phenomena of the sense-world are but mirages concealing the unity of absolute being, the "luminous void of reality." As stated before, in Ubik this idea is conveyed chiefly by the "final twist" ending: the inertials are dead and in half-life, so it is only natural that their world as well as their existence in it turn out to be imaginary --- but Glen Runciter is alive in the world of the living, and yet what becomes evident in the very last paragraph is that his reality is as unreal as that of the killed inertials, and that he is as deprived of real life as they are. As in the Tibetan Bardo Thödol actuality is denied to the dead and the living alike.

In fact, the assessment of Ubik in the light of the Tibetan book of the dead allows for the reading of Dick's

novel as an almost literal allegorization of its leading tenets. The preciseness with which this is carried out is illustrated by Dick's treatment of a minor instruction in the Bardo. Hazel PIERCE observes that as a teaching book the Bardo Thödol is not directed to the dead only, but also to the living; thus, part of its tradition dictates, for instance, that the living should sit close to their dead and recite the Bardo into their ears, "urging them constantly toward liberation".<sup>24</sup>

This is clearly the inspiration for Dick's drawing of what is a routine image in the world of Ubik, that of the "faithful" who regularly visit their half-lifer relations at the moratoriums. The moratorium customers sit by the transparent caskets of their dead relatives and talk to them through an earphone-microphone apparatus: the analogy with the instruction in the Bardo could not be more manifest.

Interestingly, however, a central concept in the doctrine of the Bardo is not observed in the narrative of Ubik. This one important exception in the transposition of articles of faith from the Tibetan book of the dead to the form of fictional situations in Ubik concerns the treatment given in the novel to the notion of rebirth. The possibility of rebirth is presented in the Bardo Thödol in a negative light, as the aftermath of a person's failure to understand the truth of reality. Rebirth in the Bardo means "continuation of the illusion" and the opposite of liberation. Notwithstanding, in Ubik the concept is not dealt with in the negative Buddhistic sense but in the positive Christian sense of resurrection and new life, as in the passage quoted above

in which Joe Chip wishes there really is rebirth after death so that one can again be together with one's beloved.

Actually, a series of clearly recognizable Christian motifs coexists in the novel with the allegorical representation of the contents of the Bardo Thödol. In fact, the "Christian" argument in Ubik is made up of images so pronounced and consistent as to allow for the re-appreciation of the whole of the story from this additional angle.

A first step in the reading of Ubik from the point of view of Christian religious allusions is the recognition that the novel is marked by a dualistic stamp characteristic of the Christian ethics. Ubik is structured upon a permanent tension between opposing principles --- decay and restoration, chaos and order, death and life --- and it features a world split up by a never ending struggle between good and evil.

Minor reminders of the novel's dualistic ethos are numerous. A representative passage is, for instance, the inertials' realization that Glen Runciter is at the same time in the "real" Zürich (suspended in cold-pac at the Beloved Brethren Moratorium) and in the phony Des Moines (lying in state at the Simple Shepherd Mortuary): "Runciter is in Zürich (....) and also in Des Moines. In Zürich he has measurable brain metabolism (....) and yet he can't be reached. In Des Moines he has no physical existence and yet (....) there contact can be established" (p.105). This sense of an inverted symmetry persists as the inertials realize that in spite of all evidences they are in cold-pac and Runciter is alive: "if Runciter were alive, then not one but two Runciters existed:



the genuine one in the real world who was striving to reach them, and the phantasmagoric Runciter who had become a corpse in the half-life world" (p.117).

Another example of a secondary dualistic pattern is the talent/anti-talent opposition between Ray Hollis, Psis and precogs and Glen Runciter's team of inertials. The "ecological," interdependent relationship between Hollis' "talents" and Runciter's "anti-talents" is outlined in Joe Chip's argument:

"The anti-psi factor is a natural restoration of ecological balance. One insect learns to fly, so another learns how to build a web to trap him. Is that the same as no flight? Clams developed hard shells to protect them; therefore birds learn to fly the clam up high in the air and drop him on a rock. In a sense anti-psi are a life form preying on the Psis, and the Psis are life forms that prey on the Norms. (....) Balance, the full circle, predator and prey. It appears to be an eternal system." (p.27).

Characteristically, the Runciter/Hollis business contention is delineated in terms of a combat between the forces of good and evil. It is inferred from the narrative that the Hollis people, who have been known to actually kill inertials sent out to negate them, are altogether malevolent. Interestingly, Hollis' functionaries never intervene directly in the narrative, but are rather indirectly referred to, as is the case with S. Dole Melipone, Raymond Hollis' often mentioned top telepath who never really enters the action as an operative character. The one exception is Pat Conley, the Hollis spy infiltrated into the Runciter party, and she is

pictured as rather dangerous and evil-minded.

Ray Hollis himself is described in his only and brief appearance, and that through a vidphone apparatus, as "a grim blue face with recessive eyes (....), a mysterious countenance floating without neck or body" (p.81). Hollis' eyes are uncomfortably remindful of Palmer Eldritch's satanic "luxvid" slotted eyes: "the eyes reminded [Joe Chip] of flawed jewels; they shone but the faceting had gone wrong; the eyes scattered light in irregular directions" (loc. cit.). In conspicuous contrast with the wicked, almost devilish quality about Hollis and his psychic employees Runciter's inertials appear as quite ethical people, as exorcists driving away the presence of Hollis' spy "evil spirits." As for Runciter, he is referred to, as previously quoted, as both a "good individual" and, which is so important in the Dickian ethics, a "good citizen."

But the major ethical polarity featured in Ubik has to do with the characters' awareness of an enduring contradiction. The characters in Ubik have an acute consciousness of the ravages of the chaotic physical world on the one side as opposed to an ordering, renewing force on the other. After Runciter's death and with the food and objects around the inertials showing frightening signs of decay (prefiguring the later crumbling of their own bodies into discarded heaps of skin and bones) the characters perceive a parallel counter-force, an anti-entropic process somehow associated with Runciter. There are two processes at work, they realize. One is a process of physical deterioration, "an orientation (....) toward death, decay and nonbeing" (p.157); and the other is a

regenerating process that counteracts both corruption and obsolescence.

The characters' awareness of the clash between the two antagonistic tropisms is specified to an extensive degree and in quite a straightforward way:

"There's some force at work producing rapid decay. (....) We also know (....) that another force, a contra-force, is at work, moving things in an opposite direction. Something connected with Runciter." (p.98).

"I think these processes are going in opposite directions. One is a going-away, so to speak. A going-out-of-existence. The second process is a coming into existence. But of something that's never existed before." (p.96).

(....) here, too, the pair of opposing forces were at work. Decay versus Runciter (....). Throughout the world. Perhaps throughout the universe. Maybe the sun will go out (....) and Glen Runciter will place a substitute sun in its place. (p.103).

"There are two forces at work (....); one helping us and one destroying us." (p.167).

The Runciter anti-decay process is accomplished by means of the mysterious product Ubik, a substance "created to reverse the regressive change process" (p.124). At first, the product is advertised in a parody of a television commercial in which Glen Runciter and a caricatural housewife sell Ubik as the best thing to stop "world deterioration:"

"One invisible puff-puff whisk of economically priced Ubik banishes compulsive obsessive fears that the entire world is turning into clotted

milk, worn-out tape recorders and obsolete iron cage elevators, plus other, further, as-yet-unglimpsed manifestations of decay." (p.114).

Later, however, Ubik acquires still more effective attributes as it appears as a substance "of universal healing value" (p.148) that can regenerate wounded flesh and practically resuscitate a dying person, in which quality it saves Joe Chip from death in Jory's phantasmagoric Des Moines. At this stage in the narrative Ubik starts taking on a truly numinous dimension, as in inertial Francesca Spanish's religious "Ubik dream:"

"A great hand came down from the sky, like the arm and hand of God. Enormous, the size of a mountain. (....) the hand was closed, made into a rocklike fist, and I knew it contained something of value so great that my life and the lives of everyone else on Earth depended on it. And I waited for the fist to open, and it did open. And I saw what it contained."

"An aerosol spray can," Don Denny said (....).

"On the spray can (....) there was one word, great golden letters, glittering; golden fire spelling out UBIK. Nothing else. Just that strange word. And then the hand closed up again around the spray can and the hand and arm disappeared, drawn back up into a sort of gray overcast." (p.138).

Actually, it might be argued that unlike the Palmer Eldritch entity, which is really ubiquitous, Ubik has got a protean quality rather than a ubiquitous one (Palmer Eldritch appears everywhere by turning everything into himself, whereas Ubik, especially that of the epigraphs, turns itself into

everything). Anyway, the repeated manifestations of Ubik-induced renewal on the one side and of decadence on the other point to the existence of an original source on each side, of a first cause of both order and disorder, creation and destruction.

Glen Runciter is involved in the life-giving, counter-death process but he is not, as Joe Chip realizes, its final cause. Runciter is rather working with "the force or entity or person that's trying to help" the inertials, and he "got the Ubik from them" (p.167). "I don't think," Joe Chip senses, "that we've met our enemy face to face, or our friend either" (loc. cit.).

He eventually meets both of them, though. The "enemy," as was to be expected, is Jory, the perverse, irresponsible agency of illusion and death which devours<sup>25</sup> the life of the people ensnared in its dilapidated simulacrum of reality. And the "friend," a little more surprisingly, is Ella Runciter, the inventor of Ubik, preventer of decay and promoter of redemption in the half-life world.

Jory and Ella are "the last entities involved:" as "there is nothing" behind the cruel Jory entity so "there's no one" beyond the beneficial Ella force. "That's one of the two agencies who're at work," Joe Chip thinks when he encounters Jory, "Jory is the one who's destroying us --- has destroyed us, except for me. Behind Jory there is nothing: he is the end" (p.176). And again, when he comes across Ella Runciter, Joe Chip exclaims: "You're the other one, Jory destroying us, you trying to help us. Behind you there's no one. I've reached

the last entities involved" (p.182).

The novel's allegorical scope is clear from these passages. The Ella agency is analogous to God and the Jory agency analogous to the Devil of Christian theology. Glen Runciter as an intercessory agency is Christ as the Mediator between man (the doomed inertials cornered in a world on the way to dissolution) and the superior power of God. And Ubik may be seen as an allegory of divine support providing comfort and regeneration for man. In Peter FITTING's words

the thing Ubik is (....) an analogue to Christian "grace," the divine assistance given man to help him through the earthly vale of tears into which he is fallen, towards the afterlife and his heavenly reward.<sup>26</sup>

Ella, Runciter and Ubik correspond then in their allegorical acceptation to the three persons of the Trinity, the three units that the Christian God is made up of. Ella Runciter is God the Father, the preserver of life and metaphysical reality. Glen Runciter is God the Son, the Intercessor appealing to the Father ("I'm the one fighting to save all your lives [....] out here in the real world plugging for you;" p.166) in favor of man. Finally, Ubik is God the Holy Ghost, the Comforter sent to man as an active presence of the divinity in human life.

In this allegory in which "God" is a pretty young woman "with gay, blond pigtails" (p.179) and "the Devil" an adolescent boy, "disorganized and immature" (p.168), such a correspondence is of course not devoid of a demystifying irony ("Christ" is a tall elderly businessman and autocrat and

divine Providence comes in a gaudy spray can). This desacralizing purport is further stressed by the epigraph to the last chapter, in which the word Ubik appears as the common cipher under which the three constituents of the Trinity are unified as a whole.

In accordance with Dick's customary identification of the religious and the commercial the last epigraph with its "biblical" diction and syntax (parataxis, parallelism) occupies the organic space reserved for the "commercial messages" that the reader has been conditioned to expect at the head of each chapter of the novel:

I am Ubik. Before the universe was, I am. I made the suns. I made the worlds. I created the lives and the places they inhabit; I move them here, I put them there. They go as I say, they do as I tell them. I am the word and my name is never spoken. The name which no one knows. I am called Ubik, but this is not my name. I am. I shall always be.

But concurrently with the ironical intent of this "theological super-ad," as Peter FITTING calls it,<sup>27</sup> there is an earnest side to it which features Ubik as the western, Christian equivalent of the Buddhistic "Void of True Being." Like the absolute nothingness in Buddhism, the distance, mystery and elusiveness of Ubik, whose name "no one knows," may be read as a numinous ideogram for the inexpressibility of the sacred.

Now this major allegory opposing Ubik as an emblem of the creator and supporter of the cosmos to Jory as an emblem of the diabolic action of chaos encloses a minor, subordinate

allegory concerning the relationship between Glen Runciter and his twelve top employees.

As an allegorical representation of the second person of the Trinity Runciter appears not only as a mediatory figure but as a propitiatory one too, as a Saviour and a Redeemer. Runciter's messianic status is evident from Joe Chip's response to his death. As Runciter's body is being taken to the Beloved Brethren Moratorium in the moratorium chopper Joe Chip grieves at the loss of his employer, "a man greater than all of us put together" (p.78). The background music playing in the cabin of the chopper is Beethoven's Missa Solemnis, with the chorus singing, "Agnus dei, qui tollis peccata mundi" (John 1:29, "Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world"), in a clear reference to Runciter's redemptional nature.

Disconsolate at the idea of Runciter's death Joe Chip thinks, "Christ (....). Of all the people in the world. A man that vital" (p.72), "the most life-loving, full-living man I ever met" (p.77). The choice of Christ as an interjection is naturally not without significance, especially when considered in the light of Joe Chip's view in the same context that Runciter "gave his life to save" that of his employees. "You know what I realize now, Al?," he tells Al Hammond, "he gave his life to save ours" (loc. cit.). Later, when Joe is reached by Runciter in the hotel room in Des Moines Runciter tells him: "I wanted to save your life (....). Hell, I'd like to save all your lives" (p.167).

On the whole, the redemptive quality about Runciter



seems to be quite unmistakable. The fact that in mid-1974 Philip Dick had what he called his "Ubik dreams," in which he "became aware of a certain Christ-likeness to Runciter"<sup>28</sup> confirms our reading of the character as a Christ figure.

Glen Runciter's role as the Messiah interacts with that of his twelve operators, who play the twelve disciples to Runciter's Christ. The fact that the Runciter team is made up of twelve people is not accessory but stands out as a significant factor as the inertials are introduced one by one in the fifth chapter. Of the ten loyal inertials four are women (Edie Dorn, Tippy Jackson, Francesca Spanish, Wendy Wright) and six are men (Al Hammond, Jon Ild, Tito Apostos, Don Denny, Sammy Mundo, Fred Zafsky); they are not, as Runciter (or Dick) mistakenly counts, "five females (....) and five males" (p.49).

"The eleventh" (loc. cit.) inertial is Pat Conley, who is of course a traitor in the service of Ray Hollis, and Joe Chip is the twelfth member of the group. The number of people that are appointed to go on the moon mission is underlined by Runciter's statements (p.56) about the composition of the group when this is set up: "we're leaving now for Luna," he says for instance, "you eleven inertials, Joe Chip and myself." One of the main points about the chapter is the stressing of the fact that with the twelve that Runciter chooses from his functionaries plus Runciter himself there are thirteen of them in all.

Besides Joe Chip, who is set apart from among the others as Runciter's favorite henchman (like John the Evangelist, the disciple --- John 20:2 --- "whom Jesus

loved"?) two more "disciples" are distinguished from the otherwise homogenous group of twelve. One of them is Pat Conley, who plays the part of Judas Iscariot, the impostor who unlike Joe Chip is never impecunious; like Judas, who was the Apostles' treasurer (John 12:6), Pat both values money and is never short of it.

And the other one is Tito Apostos, by his meaningful name, which supports with its biblical overtones the view that Runciter's twelve agents are on one level allegorical representations of Christ's twelve disciples (whom Jesus "named apostles," as is stated in Luke 6:13). The first name, Tito, is suggestive of apostolic connotations associated with Titus (in Greek Titos), the early Christian convert who assisted the Apostle Paul in his missionary work. The surname Apostos is remindful of apostle and also, paradoxically, of apostate, which is in keeping with the mood of nihilistic renunciation of religious faith and rejection of any metaphysical truth to be detected in the conclusion of Ubik.

"And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses, and to cast out devils" (Mark 3:14-15): Runciter's puzzled Apostles can, with the aid of a spray can of Ubik, "heal sicknesses," just as they can drive out the unwanted presence of "devils" in the form of ill-wishing Psis and precogs. What is really to the point about their troubled apostleship, however, is the extent to which it parallels passages of I and II Corinthians in which Paul discusses the Apostles' relationship with mortality, with Christ's and their

own death.

Although there are no direct references to Paul's letters in Ubik there are plentiful foregrounded quotations from them elsewhere in Dick's work --- as in Counter-clock world and Deus irae --- testifying to the author's familiarity with the Apostle's writings, which constitute a requisite key for the interpretation of several of his novels.

The main problem that the inertials have to face after Runciter's "death" is the evidence that they themselves are on their way to annihilation. The inevitability of their own death is pinpointed soon after their return from the moon and the discovery of the century-old dehydrated corpse of Wendy Wright: "we're going to die like that one after another. One by one. Until none of us are left. Until each is ten pounds of skin and hair in a plastic bag, with a few dried-up bones thrown in" (p.98).

Paul writes about how, in contrast with the converts he is addressing and as an implication of their relationship with the crucified Christ, the Apostles are "as it were appointed to death" (I Corinthians 4:9). In the same manner, the imminence of death (which comes in an ultimate, hyperbolic form) for each of the inertials is a consequence of their close association with their deceased employer ("If Runciter were alive [....] everything would be okay. I know it but I don't know why"; p.78). It is as if they depended on Runciter's life to go on living; when he is killed they are seized by a keen sense of impermanence, by an extreme awareness of their own mortality.

Actually, Dick's story about the killed big-time

businessman and his mystified staff may be interpreted as a parodical but nonetheless moving reading of the plight of the bereaved Apostles after the martyrdom of Christ. Like Christ's Apostles Runciter's mourning employees exert themselves in the name of their intellectual guide and spiritual custodian; like the surviving disciples they persevere in their effort to uphold the dead leader's undertakings.<sup>29</sup> However, there is a certain amount of contradiction inbuilt in all this activity performed for the sake of a leader who is no more.

In the case of Runciter's inertials, and in spite of their loyalty to him, the stubborn facts are first the inescapable ascendancy of entropy and then the absence of their mentor and protector, who seems to be irrevocably out of reach. Because the inertials' world is under Jory's dominion everything in it, including themselves, is on its way to chaos and death, so that instead of connoting positiveness their dedication to the dead Runciter appears growingly unpractical and pathetic as the narrative unfolds.

Dick's treatment of the inertials' dilemma displays a remarkable similarity with Paul's discussion in II Corinthians 4 about the contradiction between the transcendence of Christ's message and the transience and vulnerability of those who pass on that message. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (II Cor. 4:7), he writes: Paul resolves this dramatic question by driving home the reality of Christ's resurrection from the dead, in which all participate and which becomes the basis for the new religion. (That there was doubt among the early Christians that the Resurrection had really happened as well

as efforts to rationalize the Resurrection is clear from I Cor. 15, a text which admittedly stands as a central reference in at least four other Dick novels).

The human quality of mortality, Paul instructs, allows for the Apostles, sharing in in the dying of Jesus, so that they can participate in His resurrection too. The "perplexed" (II Cor. 4:8) Apostles, Paul writes, are "always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus," but this is so that "the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body" (II Cor. 4:10). "Death worketh in us" (II Cor. 4:12), the Apostle insists, "we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake," but that is in order that "the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh" (II Cor. 4:11).

What is revealing about the content of II Corinthians 4 vis-à-vis the plot of Ubik is the manner in which the terms of the life/death equation are inverted in Paul's theologizing. The living disciples are declared in the passage to be the ones who are in the domain of death ("we which live" are "delivered unto death," and that not as something that will yet have to take place but "always," that is, at all times, in every juncture of the Apostles' lives). The disciples' dead Master, on the other hand, is featured as retainer of life as well as bestower of it: death "works" in the persons of the living, but life in that of the dead one.

A similar paradoxical reasoning supports the disclosure in Ubik that the killed boss is really alive in the "living" universe, whereas the surviving employees are all dead in an entropic "half-life" world.

The substance of this revelation is foregrounded in different stages of the narrative, and a growing degree of factuality is displayed each time the issue arises. First, there is the characters' intuition, in spite of the fact that Runciter is not only dead but also past being reached by the cold-pac communication process, that "in some sense (....) he must be alive" (p.99). Then there are the irreverent toilet-wall graffiti prompting the inertials about their actual situation:

JUMP IN THE URINAL, AND STAND ON YOUR HEAD. I'M THE ONE THAT'S ALIVE. YOU'RE ALL DEAD (p.109).

LEAN OVER THE BOWL AND THEN TAKE A DIVE. ALL OF YOU ARE DEAD. I AM ALIVE (p.111).

Finally, confirming Joe Chip's suspicion that "Runciter had not died: they had died (....) and Runciter still lived" (p.117) Runciter in person informs him about the truth:

"You wrote that we were dead and you were alive."

"I am alive," Runciter rasped.

"Are we dead, the rest of us?"

After a long pause, Runciter said, "Yes." (p.113).

The common gist to all these passages is an opposition between death and life in which the inversion of the two concepts is suggested --- the living are dead and the dead one is alive. A pertinent passage in II Corinthians which may be instrumental for the interpretation of this priority feature of the narrative is again II Corinthians 5:14-15:

For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead:

And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again. (the underlining is mine).

Paul's extraordinary statement that "if one died for all then were all dead" is paraphrased in the inextricable life/death interplay of Ubik, in which the redeemer's death does not bring life to the redeemed but death instead. In Ubik as in the quoted passage even that residual life that is left to the disciples is employed in the service of the dead leader; in the novel from the moment the boss dies his twelve employees stop living "unto themselves" and start living "unto him which died for them," and who, from the inertials' perspective, eventually "rose again."

There is a revealing passage in an earlier novel that may shed some light on the puzzling superposition in Ubik of the life/death and the Christ/Apostles opposition. The passage, in Counter-clock world, is connected with the death of the lovable Anarch Peak, the founder and spiritual leader of the Udi religion. The Anarch had been dead for some time but then thanks to the "Hobart phase" time-reversion process he comes back to life, only to be killed again not before long. Sebastian Hermes, the little protagonist in that novel, thinks about the Anarch's second death, which deeply disturbed him: "sum tu (....). I am you, so when you died I died. And, while I still live, you, too live on. In me. In all of us."<sup>30</sup>

An interesting aspect about the treatment of the same motif in Counter-clock world is the indication that the death

followed by the resurrection of the Christ figure is a cyclical, presumably non-stop process in the Dickian world. Thus, in Ubik the reader is told first that Runciter died, then that he is alive after all, and finally, in the final twist ending, that he could be dead indeed; still, as the novel's final sentence ("This was just the beginning") suggests, a whole new cycle may be about to start.

But the fundamental point about the passage above is its intimation of a sense of mystical union, a notion which may explain the interchangeable relationship between the human and divine element in major Dick works like Ubik and Palmer Eldritch. A Dickian reading of the Christian concept of unio mystica, of a fusion of man and the godship in a reciprocity so complete that it becomes identity (cf. Palmer Eldritch) may underlie the interaction in Ubik between the four angles of the man-god-life-death structure.

As in the sum tu passage the spiritual identification in Ubik between the inertials (human element) and Runciter (divine element) is such that when the latter is killed the former also die "one by one." Conversely, Runciter "lives on" through the inertials, remaining life store; he insinuates himself "everywhere" (p.121), infiltrating the inertials, private lives and making his own the individuality of each of them (Joe Chip's snapshots of his family and friends that he keeps in his wallet are all replaced by photographs of Runciter).

While man dies in the death of the deity God lives through the life of man: what is expressed in the novel's



fourfold pattern of oppositions (life against death and the human as opposed to the divine) is, not differently from Palmer Eldritch, the notion of a meeting of the human and the holy into a single selfhood.

Now this meeting of man with the divineness is presented with a negative connotation to it in both novels. In Ubik the motif of mystical unity does not have, as in Palmer Eldritch, a diabolic quality, but it appears as a rather empty, inconclusive experience. The inertials' association with the Christly Runciter does not seem to help them much in their effort to elude the general chaos. Like Palmer Eldritch's, Runciter's "ability to alter things (....) is limited" (p.162), and he does not "know the answers" (p.166) any more than Joe Chip himself does. In the final analysis, in Ubik the occurrence of communion with the divine does not contribute to man's welfare but is more like an extra harassment burdening the individual in an already hostile, deceptive world.

In the "Buddhistic" Ubik the existence of the external world is assumed to lack any demonstrable basis, which leads to an utter rejection of human knowledge claims. In a like manner, the "Christian" Ubik suggests first that examination of the world shows it to be unintelligible and absurd, and then that faith itself cannot lead to understanding.

On the whole, the metaphysical plot of Ubik is characterized by that same skeptical, iconoclastic purport that runs through its politico-economic plot. Doctrinal concepts like those of the Saviour or the Holy Spirit are postulated in the narrative only to be emptied of their

significance. The ideological notions of "God" and "the Devil" are shown to be devoid of any final, meaningful actuality. Joe Chip's realization that there is "nothing behind" the "final entities" Jory and Ella implies the denial of both metaphysical and religious truth. With nothing beyond the empty reality of God and the Devil there is apparently no answer to the problem of existence in the world of Ubik --- there is only the frustration of man's irrepressible desire to know confronted with the absence of all meaning.

A concluding survey of three aspects of Ubik --- its rhetoric, aesthetics and thematics --- may provide a more general view of the pervasive mood of rejection of various forms of ideological dogmatism (political, metaphysical and literary) which characterizes the novel.

The interweaving of unrelated narrative modes constitutes the main distinctive trait about Ubik at the formal, outward level of style. The narrative articulates a series of distinct generic paradigms, so that, as was previously noted, the plot seems to contain four or five heterogenous sub-plots (Ubik combines an offbeat science-fiction plot with a suspense plot, detective story conventions and two thorough, superimposed allegories, all enveloped by a sly, pervasive humor). The text continuously plays with conventional narrative patterns, and this mixing of different genres (allegory, comedy, whodunnit, science-fiction, melodrama) and their respective ideological implications is ultimately looking for the explosion of a genre (the "rational" science-fiction novel which is the ideological

extension of the traditional well-made realist novel).

The Ubik rhetoric of utter intertextuality is part of Dick's general revolutionary strategy in that by subverting generic expectations it promotes the evolution of the science fiction narrative into a more sophisticated, less elementary literary form.

The novel's calculated discontinuity at the form level is matched by the ambiguousness and elaborate extravagance of the descriptions of the settings and of the characters' mode of dressing. In Ubik the physical settings of the action are characterized by disparate, overloaded decors, of which the kitschy "splendor" of Joe Chip's hotel room in Zürich is a representative illustration:

Daylight rattled through the elegant hotel room, uncovering stately shapes which, Joe Chip blikingly saw, were articles of furnishings: great hand-printed drapes of a neo-silkscreen sort that depicted man's ascent from the unicellular organisms of the Cambrian Period to the first heavier-than-air flight at the beginning of the twentieth century. A magnificent pseudo-mahogany dresser, four variegated crypto-chrome-plated reclining chairs...he groggily admired the splendor of the hotel room (p.85).

From the "neo-silkscreen" drapes boastfully picturing the triumph of human civilization along the biological scale and over time and entropy to the "variegated" reclining chairs the room is decorated with fundamentally incongruous, though "stately" and "magnificent" elements. The ostentatious, bourgeois "elegance" of the hotel room has an altogether stultifying effect to it (Joe Chip "groggily" admires what he

sees) and the whole passage can be said to constitute a mordant criticism of middle-class notions of solidity and opulence.

The narrative is haunted by the gloomy excessiveness of the baroque visuals, as in the description of the "high-ceilinged," "crimson-carpeted" (p.149) hotel lobby in provincial Des Moines "with its ornate crystal chandelier and its complicated yellow light" (p.152). Or of the ubiquitous turn-of-the-century open-cage elevator hanging from a wire cable with its latticework and polished brass fittings which is a recurrent image of regression and death. The flavor of a dusty, morbid sumptuousness implied in all these passages is summed up in the description of the ornate patterns of the carpet as Joe Chip collapses on the floor in the Des Moines hotel room:

The floor rose toward him and he made out shapes in the carpet, swirls and designs and floral entities in red and gold, but worn into roughness and lusterness; the colors had dimmed, and as he struck the floor, feeling little if any pain, he thought, This is very old, this room (p.160).

Like the jumbled and pompous settings, the characters' bizarre style of clothing is also marked by a stamp of complexity and incoordination. From the depiction of Runciter's costume ("varicolored Dacron wash-and-wear suit, knit cummerbund and dip-dyed cheesecloth cravat"; p.8) to that of Herbert von Vogelsang's "Continental outfit" ("tweed toga, loafers, crimson sash and a purple airplane-propeller beanie"; p.74) the narrative contains over sixteen such humorous,

detailed descriptions of the characters, chaotic toilettes.

When the inertials first appear as group in the fifth chapter Edie Dorn is wearing "a cowboy hat, black lace mantilla and Bermuda shorts," Francy Spanish is in "a silk sari and nylon obi and bobby socks," and Tippy Jackson is dressed in "ersatz vicuna trousers and a gray sweatshirt on which had been printed a now faded full-face portrait of Bertrand Lord Russell" (p.49).

All these outfits are clearly hybrids, motley ensembles of contrasting elements. In the case of Edie Dorn's costume, for instance, each of the components of the set --- cowboy hat, black lace mantilla, Bermuda shorts --- plainly typifies a different cultural myth, each item being the token of a stock category of the bourgeois imagination. Whatever the icon "cowboy hat" usually signifies (manliness?, aggressiveness?, the Western conventions?), it certainly clashes with the implications of "black mantilla" (latinity?, femininity?, romance?), just as "mantilla" and "cowboy hat" disagree with "Bermuda shorts" (vacation in the Tropics?, juvenile unconcern?, the Beach Boys?). In fact, the composite toilettes worn by the characters are like miniatures of the mixing of genres that takes place on a larger scale at the formal level of Ubik.

With everything under the sign of kitsch and disparity the novel's baroque aesthetics of disharmony corresponds to its general "deconstructive" tactics: contrasting aesthetic conventions are brought together throughout the narrative and the issuing effect is the demystification of such conventions.

As for the argument of Ubik, this also bears the stamp

of the novel's overall tendency toward the interweaving of different semantic fields. In this manner, the cold-pac, half-life gimmick which supports the plot is founded on a rupture in the boundary between the antagonistic domains of death and life. The two realms, life and death, are mixed up in the story, the frontier separating them is blurred, the narrative is marked by a deliberate refusal to discriminate one semantic territory from the other.

The half-life contrivance also contributes to the mood of destruction and transformation that permeates the novel. Despite what Stanislaw LEM suggests when he calls Ubik a "macabresque," as quoted before, the point about the recurrent Dickian theme of death and the living dead<sup>31</sup> is never so much the macabre connotations of the subject as its eschatological substance. The traditional eschatological motif of the dead belongs to the general imagery of the end of the world (the Last Judgement, the resurrection of the dead from the netherworld, the weighing of souls, the new world of God) and hence it shares the revolutionary implications (criticism and rejection of the present experience of suffering within a perverted world, hope for a better world in a perfected future) inherent in the symbolism of apocalypse.

Rather than suggestive of gruesomeness Dick's treatment of his theme of the dead gives rise to such estranging eschatological questions as "What is death?," "What is life?," "What is reality?" which are basic concerns in most of his novels. In Ubik the motif is clearly associated with the apocalyptic theme of last things, as is indicated by the

quotations from the Dies Irae hymn on the Last Judgement which is a part of the office for the dead and the Requiem mass in the Catholic liturgy.

The first four stanzas of the Latin Dies Irae are quoted at intervals in the seventh chapter as the dead but unknowing inertials are waiting around in the lounge of the Beloved Brethren Moratorium to the background sound of Verdi's Requiem. The quoted stanzas tell about how on Judgement Day (Dies irae, "day of wrath") the world will dissolve into ashes (Solvat saeculum in favilla) at the coming of a strict Judge; all of those in the realm of the dead shall gather before the Judge's throne (Per sepulchra regionum coet omnes ante thronum) at the sound of an overpowering trumpet, and death and nature will be stunned (Mors stupebit, et natura) as the dead rise to come before their Judge.

Compared with the orthodox Christian eschatology of the Dies Irae the narrative of Ubik displays a similar apocalyptic structure, with the general dissolution of the environment and the animated dead in their half-life limbo. Still, the central Christian apocalyptic image, that of Judgement itself, is missing in the novel: the dead have risen, the world is dissolving into scum, the scene is set for God to judge the living and the dead, but Judgement never does take place.

The whole ideology of Christian apocalypse is based on the anticipation of this wrathful but righteous Judgement which should abolish the present deranged world and inaugurate a new age founded on the revelation of meaning born out of the justice of God. In Ubik, however, in spite of the apocalyptic tenor of the narrative eschatological expectation is wholly

frustrated: the characters are defeated in their search for a way out of a corrupt and nonsensical world in the same manner that the reader is denied a single, final explanation for the events in the narrative.

At the end of Ubik no alternative is provided with which to fill the cognitive and metaphysical gap postulated in the novel. There is no revelation of truth, no deliverance from the cycle of "beginnings" set going by the "eternal return" mechanism of the ending. Characters and reader alike are faced not with the celebration of meaning but with its annihilation instead.

And yet, even if the narrative "cheats," propounding a given structure and then upsetting it, what results from this is a paradoxical sense of gain. The reader is deprived of an ultimate interpretation for the events narrated, but then a new, instigating structure arises from this breakaway from the standard generic formula, one in which technical clichés are subjected to a demystifying illumination.

The fact that in Ubik the rules of the game are revoked and that one can no longer trust the narrative for "explanations" contributes to the improvement of one's own capacity as a reader. Compelled to leave off seeking a conventional interpretation for the events in the story the reader of Ubik may either resent a loss of literary innocence or then shift his attention to the underlying makeup determining the arrangement and interaction of those events. In other words, by frustrating readers out of a mechanical response pattern the text of Ubik suggests that the meaning of



a literary work should be sought for in the constructive principle of that work rather than in the sphere of the fictional events themselves.

Summing up, after going over the main textual procedures of the novel we can assume that a single apocalyptic streak of destruction and creation anew runs through the whole buildup of Ubik --- through its thematics of mortality as through its aesthetics of discontinuity and through its rhetoric of intertextuality. The novel's stamp of non-linearity, the frequent deflections of semantic tone, the shuffling of different generic patterns, all bring about the desacralization of prevailing ideological and literary principles.

The jumbling of so many distinct conventions results in a caricatural nonsense which divests the challenged dogmas of their purity, validity, and authoritative quality, in a process that could be described, in Mikhail BAKHTIN's terminology, as "carnivalistic" prose, an aesthetically complex writing which reflects the confusion and diversity of the narrated reality.<sup>32</sup>

In Ubik the breaking down of accepted concepts (the value of money, the reality of the physical world, the significance of God and the Devil, the "reliable," monolithic quality of the novel form) allows for the inspection of mechanisms internal to these concepts. Accordingly, together with the process of unmaking of dogmas the critical posture of the narrative also provides an alternative insight into them, as when it casts a new, estranging light on the very relationship between text and reader.

The most important of the novel's breakthroughs into axiomatic assumptions concerns the challenging of the reality and meaningfulness of existence itself, which is achieved through the image of the dead in the half-life state of purposeless suffering.

Dick's half-lifers are ultimately a metaphor for the living, as his half-life purgatory is a metaphor for the ordinary conditions of life in the actual world. The point about the feelings of isolation, vagueness and dispersal experienced by the dead characters in Ubik is the conveying of a sense of vacuousness and insubstantiality that Dick detects in the core of life itself.

In Philip K. Dick the concern with the meaning of existence as the primary philosophical question is best understood in the context of a general existentialist trend in contemporary literature. His characters' frustrated search for revelation, as is the case in Ubik, parallels the problem of man's search for authentic existence and impossibility of getting it which is a fundamental issue in existentialist philosophy and theology.

In this manner, the most effective way to give an account of the inertials' experiences of dread and anxiety in their harrowing "suspended" ethical situation and of revulsion when confronted with the decaying world of matter would be to resort to concepts as typically identified with Existentialism as angst and nausée.

As is characteristic of existentialist metaphysics the basic philosophical presupposition in Ubik is not so much the

denial of true Being as the acknowledgement of an unbridgeable gap between human existence and ultimate reality. The notion that reality lies elsewhere, in a realm transcending phenomena and the human sphere is an implicit premise in many of Philip Dick's novels. "We did not fall because of a moral error," Dick writes in Valis, "we fell because of an intellectual error: that of taking the phenomenal world as real."<sup>33</sup> In Ubik as in other novels of his the world of empirical experience is reduced to the status of a subjective delusion, devoid of solidity and authenticity; the innovation in the present novel, however, is the stressing of the impossibility of escape from a condition of mere half-life into the fullness of genuine existence.

As the novel reaches its solipsistic conclusion there is a general sentiment that the difference between being dead and alive is only nominal, and that both the living and the dead are held in a limbo apart from the "full-life world." Glen Runciter and his inertials toil and struggle throughout the story in pursuit of their objectives, not knowing that the "life" they live is but a self-induced illusion, and that they are dead all the time and entirely cut off from the living world and reality.

When Joe Chip realizes he is not alive but suspended in half-life he is thankful to Glen Runciter for the possibility of communication with the "true" dimension of the world:

We are served by organic ghosts, he thought, who, speaking and writing, pass through this our (...) environment. Watching, wise, physical ghosts from the full-life world, elements of which have become for us

invading but agreeable splinters of a substance that pulsates like a former heart. And all of them, he thought, thanks to Glen Runciter. (....) The writer of instructions, labels and notes. Valuable notes. (p.188-9).

He is pathetically mistaken, of course. Glen Runciter is as removed from life and realness as Joe Chip himself is, and his "valuable notes" are really worthless and misleading. As the story ends it is inferred not only that actual life is missing in human existence but also that hope of ever attaining a means of access to absolute, plenary life is nothing but wishful thinking. Accordingly, the only coherent intellectual attitude in the negative world of Ubik would have to be one of sheer epistemological and religious skepticism.

On the whole, the transgressive tenor of Ubik resolves itself into an attitude of doubt and disenchantment both at the "physical" and the metaphysical level of the narrative. Just as there is no escape from consumerism in a society in which consumer commodities are ubiquitous so there is no way out of half-life in a world in which the sacred is powerless in the face of the profane.

In conclusion, Philip K. Dick's "Book of the dead" comprises both a critique of the mores of consumer capitalism and an inquiry into human existence stemming from a reflection on death and mortality in which the comic and the tragic interpenetrate.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ubik. London, Granada, 1984. p.138. All the quotations from the novel will be taken from this edition, its page numbers indicated in parentheses. Ubik was first published by Doubleday in May, 1969. In 1975 Philip K. Dick wrote a screenplay for this novel at the request of the French movie director Jean-Pierre Gorin. The film never did come off, but Dick's screenplay was published in June of 1985 (Ubik; the screenplay. Minneapolis, Corroboree Press, 1985. 154 p.). The ending of the story was changed in the screenplay, which Dick considered "better than the novel" (Philip K. Dick letter to Robert Jaffe, 3/4/75, quoted by D.S. BLACK in "Puttering about the silver screen; the story of UBIK, the movie." The Philip K. Dick Society Newsletter, (11), May 1986. p.1). The story takes place in June 1992 in New York City and Zürich and on the moon, and then in a fake 1939 Des Moines, Iowa.

<sup>2</sup>ROBINSON, Kim Stanley. The novels of Philip K. Dick. San Diego, 1982. Dissertation, Ph.D., University of California, San Diego. p.181.

<sup>3</sup>SCHOLES, Robert & RABKIN, Eric S. Science fiction; history, science, vision. New York, Oxford University Press, 1977. p.72.

<sup>4</sup>ROSE, Mark. Alien encounters; anatomy of science fiction. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1981. p.16.

<sup>5</sup>Philip K. Dick letter to Goran Bengston (7/10/75) quoted in D.S. BLACK's "Puttering about the silver screen" (see note 1).

<sup>6</sup>FITTING, Peter. Ubik; the deconstruction of bourgeois SF. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.52.

<sup>7</sup>FITTING, p 51.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>LEM, Stanislaw. Philip K. Dick; a visionary among the charlatans. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.57.

<sup>10</sup>SUVIN, Darko. P.K. Dick's opus; artifice as refuge and world view. Science-Fiction Studies, (5), 1975. p.19.

<sup>11</sup>TURNER, George. Letter of comment. In: GILLESPIE, Bruce. Philip K. Dick; electric shepherd. Melbourne, Norstrilia Press, 1975. p.47-8. Quoted in ROBINSON, p 183.

<sup>12</sup>PIERCE, Hazel. Philip K. Dick. Mercer Island,

Washington, Starmont, 1982. p.27-32. PIERCE mentions C.G. JUNG's essay on the Bardo Thödol, "Psychological commentary on The tibetan book of the dead" and the 1927 translation of Kazi Dawa-Samdup and W.Y. Evans-Wentz (from which the English title, The tibetan book of the dead, derives) as well as the 1975 translation of Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa which stresses the affinity of psychology and the Bardo Thödol by its use of psychological terms.

<sup>13</sup>FITTING, loc. cit.

<sup>14</sup>Deep freezing as a technique for the preserving of human life is a stock science-fiction gimmick. Dick had used the same idea in the short story "What the dead men say" (Worlds of Tomorrow, June, 1964) in which he featured not only the concepts of cold-pac and half-life but also a Beloved Brethren Mortuary, in Ubik changed to Moratorium, and its owner Herbert Schoenheit von Vogelsang (with the same name in Ubik). Dick's choice of the term moratorium is intended as a pun that works in the economic context of the novel --- as Hazel PIERCE notes, "in the moratoriums (....) the final payment to Death is deferred as the debtors draw on their intellectual capital." (p.28).

<sup>15</sup>Another science-fiction convention. The humanoid-bomb motif was used by Dick in the short story "Impostor" (1953) in which a man called Olham is really (but unknowingly) an Outspace robot containing a bomb designed to detonate upon the uttering of a given trigger phrase. When the phrase (expressing Olham's shocked realization that he is not Olham but a self-destruct machine) is eventually spoken Earth is destroyed in a blast that "was visible all the way to Alpha Centauri" (A handful of darkness. London, Granada, 1980. p.39).

<sup>16</sup>FITTING, loc. cit.

<sup>17</sup>SUVIN, loc. cit.

<sup>18</sup>LEM, p.59.

<sup>19</sup>FITTING, p.50.

<sup>20</sup>Heat was the main entropic agency in The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch (crossing a street in the New York City of Palmer Eldritch could mean dying from exposure to excessive solar radiation). In Ubik, inversely, the chief metaphorical token of deterioration is cold. All that dying Al Hammond sees around him is "encroaching darkness and utter loss of heat, a plain which is cooling off, abandoned by its sun" (p.108). Because "frigid death" (p.160) has overtaken him "fragments of ice crackled and splintered" (p.108) in the water that he starts running in the bathroom basin. In Ubik the presence of coldness amounts to the absence of life, because "metabolism (....) is a burning process, an active furnace. When it ceases to function, life is over. They must be wrong about hell (....). Hell is cold; everything there is cold." (p.158).

<sup>21</sup>PIERCE, p.31.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Dick himself commented on this section of the Bardo Thödol doctrine when discussing Ubik in one of the Gregg RICKMAN interviews: "in the Tibetan book of the dead (....) you die and all of your prior thought formations come back and tell you that they're objective reality, and you finally have to say, wait a minute, this is not objective reality, this is my own prior thought formation" (Gregg RICKMAN, Philip K. Dick; the last testament. Long Beach, Fragments West/The Valentine press, 1985. p.46).

<sup>24</sup>PIERCE, loc. cit.

<sup>25</sup>Jory literally eats the residual life of the people in cold-pac, as in the scene in which he bites into Joe Chip's right hand and starts chewing it. This alimentary preying on human life is a demonic attribute in the Dickian universe: Palmer Eldritch, as has been previously quoted, is "a great mouth open to receive us;" human beings are for him "food to be consumed." In the same way, the Antagonist in Deus irae is said to "feed" on people: "in the form of decay, the Antagonist fed on (....) the bodies of the living, making them revert to their final earthly state (....) from which God would lift them when the time approached." (Deus irae. London, Sphere, 1982. p.142-3).

<sup>26</sup>FITTING, p.49. Although he initially describes Ubik in these terms, FITTING later discards this view in favor of a conclusive reading of Ubik as a "human invention, an image of humankind's own struggle against entropy, rather than an image of divine assistance or guidance in that struggle" (loc. cit.). The two views depend of course on whether one sees Ella Runciter, who invented Ubik, as a human being or as an allegorical representation of God. Actually, the narrative shows her as both, and there is no reason why one interpretation of the question should invalidate the other.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>BLACK, loc.cit.

<sup>29</sup>Hazel PIERCE reads the inertials' compulsive loyalty to Runciter's interests as a criticism of the managerial/working class relationship: "if there is a need for a business to continue to function after the owner's death, certain key employees must remain in their positions and work out details. But they do not necessarily need to follow the employer's rules blindly after his death. Joe Chip's compulsion to do so could point to a capitalistic version of totem-worship and suggesting [sic] a reading of Ubik as a not-so-veiled attack on worker subjugation." (p.29).

<sup>30</sup>Counter-clock world. New York, Berkley, 1967. p.149.

<sup>31</sup>The motif of the dead appears regularly in the Dick canon. Precursors of the "half-lifers" in Ubik are the "deaders" of Counter-clock world and the dead in the short story "What the dead men say" and in the 1965 novel Dr. Bloodmoney, or how we got along after the bomb (in which the realm of the dead is not an abstraction but the actual crowded abode of the vegetating but individualized dead).

<sup>32</sup>BAKHTINE, Mikhaïl. La poétique de Dostoïevski. Paris, Seuil, 1970.

<sup>33</sup>Valis. New York, Bantam, 1985. p.87.



#### IV CONCLUSION

Ubik, The three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch and Martian time-slip are representative of three different stages of Philip K. Dick's technique of a stratified narrative. In Martian time-slip the antinomial interplay of the political and the metaphysical plot is framed in quite formal, conventional terms. In Palmer Eldritch economic and ontological concerns are juxtaposed in a much less ordered rhetorical universe; science-fictional plausibility is utterly disregarded and the narrative reflects the extravagance of the novel's hallucinatory, uncanny content. In Ubik this evolution from normality to unconformity is pushed through to its conclusion; the economic and the epistemological theme of the novel are delineated in a narrative context which transgresses not only science-fictional conventions but also those of narrative fiction as a whole.

Although all three novels are balanced between the claims of the public and the private they differ considerably from one another. Each of them is a distinctive universe in which social and philosophical problems are approached in a specific light.

Thus, Martian time-slip focuses on the social level on the clash between the pristine values of frontier America and those of contemporary American imperialism. Palmer Eldritch, on the other hand, features a social environment in which all traces of America's original political and economic principles

have been effaced; monopoly capitalism prevails as the single possible economic reality and the only tolerated interpersonal associations are those involving production and consumption. Ubik depicts a world drowned in ubiquitous and superfluous consumer goods in which literally everything works on a money basis.

The philosophical argument of the three novels deals with the problem of the subjectivity or objectivity of one's experience of reality. However, in Martian time-slip the question stems from a conflict between sanity and psychosis in a psychoanalytic context and against the background of a desert wasteland which is the objective correlative of the characters' feelings of moral and spiritual constriction. In Palmer Eldritch the dissolution of the sense of reality takes place within a general context of mystical encounter and spatiotemporal discontinuity; the hostile urban landscape and the novel's ghastly hallucinatory worlds reflect the characters' experiences of uneasiness and dread in the hands of an ominous divinity. Ubik poses a challenge on the absoluteness of reality through a negative mystique in which the death and resurrection of the Saviour figure are but mirages in an insubstantial world; in the nightmarish environment of a tumbledown universe the characters are suspended between being and nothingness, waiting for an epiphany that never comes.

The political and the metaphysical content of the three different works convey a negative vision of the situation of man in the secular world and in the world of abstract, philosophical concerns. Just as there is no way that Dick's

characters can overthrow the established order in an unfree and unjust society so they are unable to make sense out of a reality that is hostile and inscrutable. Still, as is characteristic of Dick's writing, the three novels can hardly be said to be pessimistic in the sense of being cynical or despairing. In Dick the fact that the world is ultimately absurd does not rule out the need to struggle on with it. Even in the total metaphysical vacuum of Ubik it is through continuous action that the characters find a relative personal meaning, much as this has no objective significance in the context of general meaninglessness. A sense of communal responsibility is the answer in Dick's universe to the dystopian situation in the social and the ontological world, and it is through commitment and solidarity that his characters attain whatever freedom they can.

Philip K. Dick's theme of opposition to conventional authority and his vision of an ethical society in which individuals are linked only by voluntary relationships correspond to the anarchist outlook of his political posture. In the same way, Dick's metaphysical concerns are not isolated from the collective drives of contemporary thought, but they reflect the influence of specific philosophical and theological trends. Fundamental issues of existentialist philosophy, such as the concern with questions of ontology and gnoseology, the difficulty of communication in human relationships, and man's inability to find any ultimate truth are central topics in Dick's work. Likewise, major problems of contemporary theology are hypostatized in his novels into

strangely literal metaphors. Thus, the conception of God as a "wholly other" entity, basically foreign and unknowable (Karl Barth, Rudolf Otto) is objectified in the personality of Palmer Eldritch, the alien being that is identified as the creator of reality and as a frustrated redeemer. In a like manner, the idea of God as absence or absolute nothingness that is implied in Ubik echoes the premises of the Death of God theological movement flourishing in the U.S.A. during the 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

In Dick the anarchist repudiation of established authority and the existentialist search for meaning in the context of a senseless world are conciliated in a single antithetical structure that yields itself as easily to a political as to a metaphysical reading. We have attempted to demonstrate how the narrative premises of the novels discussed here are doubly functional, operating with equal effectiveness in the social as in the ontological dimension of each of the three works.

In Martian time-slip the AM-WEB grandiose condominium works as an embodiment of the oppressive network of multinational capitalism in the novel's outward, collective theme as well as of the constriction of the psychotic self in the inward, individual context of the story. The image of Palmer Eldritch, the interplanetary tycoon who turns people into counterparts of himself, functions from a secular perspective as a metaphor for the standardizing action of consumer capitalism; from a cosmic, non-physical angle, however, Palmer Eldritch is a demystifying allegory of the God of the Old and the New Testament who identifies himself with his creatures and asks

them to be identified with him in return. The tale in Ubik about suspended life and business competition reads on one level as a satire on the empty principles of a society in which money and commercial success are the most fundamental values; but on an additional semantic level Ubik depicts a dualistic universe in which good and evil contend in the hollowness of an unreal setting which resolves itself into utter spiritual and philosophical nothingness.

Most literary texts can be read according to distinct interpretive keys; in Dick's stories, however, semantic ambivalence is not a contingent quality but the central attribute of the narrative, the very essence of its individuality. The dialectical makeup of Dick's novels is not so much a matter of the natural multivalence of the literary text as it is a consciously controlled technique for the presentation of the complexity of the human situation with its paradoxal bondage to opposite classes of demands. Dick's twofold narrative scheme reproduces with its dynamic inner tension the conflict between history and the individual, the ego and society, the claims of desire and the limitations of reality which is staged in every circumstance of daily life.

Accordingly, any discussion of Dick's writing that does not take this fundamental ambiguousness into account but reads his work from a single perspective fails to convey the intrinsicalness of the Dickian narrative structure. Dick's literary representation of the world is not artificially univocal, but it aims at a realistic inclusiveness, a sense of completeness designed to capture the element of contradiction

and discontinuity of reality itself.

The universe that Dick's novels depict with their heterogeneous combination of politics and ontology, theology and economics, is closer to the reality of everyday experience than is the selective fictional world of the traditional realistic narrative or that of the conventional science fiction of logical plausibility.

The surreal world of Dick's fiction is ultimately a realistic, truly cognitive attempt at representation of the real world of everyday life. In Philip K. Dick the action takes place not in a level, neatly uniform environment, but in an ethical context in which, as in real life, the common man stands at the point of intersection of the opposed forces of physical immanence and metaphysical transcendence, the conscious and the unconscious, the State and God.

The inclusive quality of Dick's writing makes it hardly feasible for one to give an accurate account of his work's thronging, tantalizing flavor. Dick's plots can be summarized, which itself is a laborious task, but his worlds cannot be described. A Dick novel is a richly documented universe with its own physics, astronomy, history, mutant fauna, political leaders, religious movements, dress styles, and deadly time-disconnecting drugs. Baroque cityscapes sprinkled with Sony, Shell and Coca-Cola signs, the typical Dickian oddities --- incs and precogs, quibbles and flapples, Martian sand fleas and chitinous Syrians, "electric" pets, humanoid politicians, homeostatic devices that talk on cue --- and a veritable delirium of realistic trivia combine in each novel to compose a whole that stands on its own as an integral reality.

Dick's fantastic naturalism, the Proustian flavor of his convoluted plots with the several webs of unsuspected relationships, his association of the contradictory problems of politics and metaphysics in a single fictional context, all correspond to a tropism in his work away from the limited or fixed and toward potential infinity.

For this reason, Dick's fiction does not lend itself easily to any ultimate, definitive interpretation. As Robert SCHOLLES and Eric S. RABKIN remark about Dick's books, "these complex works must be experienced and reexperienced to yield their secrets --- and even then they will often remain enigmatic."<sup>2</sup> No synthesis of Philip K. Dick is ever final, and the process of reevaluation of his work is without end.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Always disquietingly literal, Dick usually alludes to the notion of the death of God in quite concrete terms, as in this joke in A scanner darkly (1977): "'--- as near as I can figure out, God is dead.' Luckman answered, 'I didn't know he was sick.'" (London, Panther Books, 1985. p.186). Or in the ironic reference in Our friends from Frolix 8 (1970) to the discovery of God's floating carcass:

"Listen to this. 'God tells us...'"

"God is dead," Nick said. "They found his carcass in 2019. Floating out in space near Alpha."

"They found the remains of an organism advanced several thousand times over what we are (....). And it evidently could create habitable worlds and populate them with living organisms, derived from itself. But that doesn't prove it was God."

"I think it was God." (London, Panther Books, 1984. p.50).

<sup>2</sup>SCHOLES, Robert & RABKIN, Eric S. Science fiction; history, science, vision. New York, Oxford University Press, 1977. p.75.



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