

# Philip K. Dick's Suburban Jeremiad

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## THE FLUID FIFTIES

Better known as a science-fiction writer, Philip K. Dick was during the fifties also the author of numerous mimetic novels, mostly published posthumously, set in the years of the rise of suburban communities in the West.<sup>1</sup> In scholarship, references are largely aimed at detecting autobiographical traces or hints of later characters, types, situations (e.g., Butler; Robinson). The aim of this essay is to show how these novels address and foreground one of the overall concerns running through much of Dick's work: the theme of community-building. Present in a number of his science fiction novels, in these mimetic, "realist" works this theme becomes the central focus.

The son of migrants to California during the Depression, after spending his formative years in Berkeley, Dick was among the settlers of suburbs like Marin County. In his later years, he stressed the role of fifties culture in the develop-

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is part of an ongoing project on Philip K. Dick's fiction: see the bibliography in my "Dialoghi." I am grateful to Cristina Bon and Matteo Battistini for organizing a most stimulating panel on Cold War culture, and to Darko Suvin and David Ketterer for their reading and comments. For biographical information, I rely on Sutin's *Divine Invasions*. In the case of Dick's posthumously published novels, the year provided in parenthesis refers to the completion dates as researched by Sutin.

ment of his artistic and political awareness, as in this December 1979 entry in the notebooks he called *Exegesis*:

This counterculture did not arise *ex nihilo* . . . What were its origins? Consider the 50s. The concept of “unamerican” held power. I was involved in fighting that; the spirit (counterculture) of the 60s evolved *successfully* out of the (basically) losing efforts by us “progressives” of the 1950s—we who signed the Stockholm Peace Proposal, and the “Save the Rosenbergs,” etc.—losing, desperate efforts. *Very* unpopular & *very* unsupported. Berkeley was one of our few centers; this takes me back to *Eye in the Sky*, etc. (*Exegesis* 471-72)

In this reconstruction of his roots as a very eccentric figure of the sixties counterculture (Proietti), Dick seems to subscribe to the model of the “long 1950s” (Booker), whose *durée* he extends both forward and backward. A complementary quote is the opening of *Confessions of a Crap Artist*, published in 1975 but written in 1959:

I am made out of water. You wouldn't know it, because I have it bound in. My friends are made out of water, too. All of them. The problem for us is that not only do we have to walk around without being absorbed by the ground, but we also have to earn our livings. Actually there's even a greater problem. We don't feel at home anywhere we go. Why is that?

The answer is World War Two. (Dick, *Confessions* 1)

In the narrator's overwhelming sense of anomie, the War is the origin of a disturbing feeling of fluidity and rootlessness. As Tony Tanner wrote in his classic *City of Words*, the main tension in many post-war American writers involves two specular threats: a rigid, crystallizing and paralyzing form of identity, and a total lack of any identity whatsoever. Embodied in an array of oppressive forces and ensuing in disruptive, fragmented narratives of schizophrenia, hallucination, and reality-breakdown, which bear comparison with the postmodern fiction of Thomas Pynchon and especially William S. Burroughs, the first threat, has been a crucial focus for scholars, starting with Suvin. These fifties novels show how relevant the second threat was as well. In Dick's highly polyphonic fictional worlds, the early fifties left their mark as the memory of a time of troubled healing after a traumatic collective experience.<sup>2</sup>

#### GETTING ALONG AFTER THE BOMB

Recurring throughout Dick's science fiction, in different forms, images of the Cold War are central at least until the mid-sixties, as part of a very complex constellation, which is not limited to a purely “negative” critique. If war scenarios

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<sup>2</sup> For Bakhtinian approaches to Dick's language and ideologies, see Freedman; Proietti.

allow him to deconstruct dominant ideologies, the frequent presence of the suburbs—both on contemporary Earth and on other worlds—is a *pars construens* that should not be underestimated. I intend to concentrate in the next few paragraphs on this presence in Dick's science fiction, before moving on to an overview of his mimetic novels, as evidence of the pervasiveness of his fascination with suburban settings.<sup>3</sup>

In the satiric *Eye in the Sky* (1957), several visitors at a nuclear facility in Belmont, California, are involved in an accident and caught up in a series of hallucinatory “fantasy-worlds” which literalize the ideological obsessions of four characters: first a racist fundamentalist; then a prude who gradually “abolishe[s]” (145) everything she considers unclean, and a “paranoiac, with delusions of conspiracy and persecution” (194), whose epitome is her own house turned into a predatory living creature; finally, an ostensible right-winger who dreams of a farcical Communist America.

The main viewpoint is provided by Jack Hamilton, a technician in the weapons industry, who is being fired because of his wife's Leftist activism, and who lives in a “two-bedroom modern ranch-style house” (34). The reference clearly echoes Frank Lloyd Wright's ideal of a housing system capable of attaining a happy fusion between rural and urban landscapes (Carosso 63-65)—an ideal re-imagined here on a smaller scale in the suburban dwelling. No matter how scathing the satire on military technology and the downside of suburban homes, a hopeful ending is envisaged, the fulfilment of a dream which involves both technology and suburban life: “I'm going to have to find something that doesn't involve classified material. Something that doesn't bring in national defense... Maybe I'll be a plumber. Or a TV repairman; that's more along my line,” says protagonist Jack Hamilton, and his wife reminds him that he “wanted to be a big name in high fidelity” (Dick, *Eye* 29). The couple and an African American friend (i.e. three characters embodying “other” non-paranoid viewpoints) plan their future in the same area, “st[anding] on a rise of uncleared ground, critically studying the small corrugated-iron shed that Hamilton and Laws had leased,” with crates of equipment for a hi-fi business (252). This might be a new fantasy for the main viewpoint character, but it is still a democratic fantasy which is not over at the end of the novel.

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<sup>3</sup> The enduring strength of this ideal might be best shown by one of Dick's (typically rambling) notes for a possible new novel, written in May 1981, less than a year before his untimely death; in the social upward mobility in post-World War II California Dick seems to find a connection to both Stendhal's realism and the visionary possibility of a Dantesque ascent to (earthly) paradise: “What I need to do is study a modern person . . . and trace that person rising through the triune realms from say his high school years to his first marriage, divorce. Without ever referring to the Middle Ages or Dante I will show him rising analogically to Julien Sorel's rise in society in terms of wealth and influence; this however, is *spiritual* rising, through the vertical realms, in Berkeley in the 40s and 50s (?) And then (perhaps) a crisis, disaster and Fall. (Why? Why not just have it as in Dante?) Successive levels of spiritual enlightenment: ‘the *Commedia* revisited’ with no theology. All merely secular: aesthetics, politics, his job. . . . Best method: fairly short time period (e.g., 1948-51). Unity of time and space. From last year in high school to first job to marriage and divorce” (*Exegesis* 742-43).

In *Time Out of Joint* (1959), Earth has assembled a fake fifties suburb to allow a key figure in the military defense system to work out his calculations for counteractions against Lunar missile attacks—and slowly the fake reality breaks down. Underneath the future war, all of America's wars seem to be lurking: alongside contemporary allusions, the Civil War is evoked in the mention of a new best-seller, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (8). And in *Time Out of Joint* what is happening is indeed a civil war, in which the protagonist eventually chooses the other side—but the little pastoral scenario of the fake suburb is not questioned. His best friend chooses to stay in "Old Town," and his final thoughts are about his lost family and neighbors.

In *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), Dick's alternate-history novel about a post-World War II America dominated by Germany and Japan, the cult-book for all those who oppose the regime is an alternate-history novel in which the United States have won the War. In the ending, one of the characters meets the novelist Hawthorne Abendsen, who lives an ordinary life in an ordinary suburban home (Dick, *Man* 184), and remarks to him: "So you gave up the High Castle and moved back into town" (186). In Dick's America, the oppositional intellectual no longer needs high castles and ivory towers, nor does he feel the need to rise above popular literature and everyday life.

Even on Mars the suburban ideal manages to survive. The frontier myth has been cruelly betrayed in *Martian Time-Slip* (1964), and the communities of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1964) can only survive the harshness of everyday life thanks to a drug-induced simulated world (a Barbie-like fantasy of illusory domesticity). Still, both novels end with the protagonists, after their devastating contacts with evil and entropic forces, being ready and willing to assume their role in a sparsely inhabited community.

Similarly, after the nuclear disaster of *Dr. Bloodmoney* (1965), in a world which now includes a number of new mutant entities, the ending is about the reconstruction of a sense of community in suburban California, somewhere in the Berkeley area: "how we got along after the bomb," says the subtitle of the novel. Many things have changed for good, and yet the pastoral innocence of the suburb maintains an enduring strength: "The business of the day had begun. All around . . . the city was awakening, back once more into its regular life" (Dick, *Dr. Bloodmoney* 290). In this novel, Fredric Jameson writes, as in "all of Dick's obligatory happy endings," the final, hopeful vision of a post-catastrophe community points at "some genuinely Jeffersonian commonwealth" (42), whose agents are artisans and self-employed businesspeople.

In Dick's work, the suburban community is a site of necessary integration after an experience of societal and psychic destruction and dissolution, an ideal of reconstruction that maintains its role for some time. In Sacvan Bercovitch's terms, "join[ing] lament and celebration" (Bercovitch 11) for this new version of the Western settlement, in science-fictional and real suburbs Dick found a source for his own American jeremiad.

Dick's earliest surviving novel, *Gather Yourselves Together* (1950), set in nascent Maoist China—with a group of characters left behind by a nationalized American company and waiting to return home—is already about the building of a sense of cohesion, superseding both a sense of displacement (5-7) and various kinds of intellectual and interpersonal clashes, among the stranded employees. However, their idyllic micro-community, repeatedly called a “paradise,” or an “Eden” (e.g., 255), can only last for the duration of their week-long wait.

From then on, all of Dick's mimetic novels discuss the building of enduring communities in the Western United States, by people who can still remember the Depression and World War II. Either in new sections of San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles, or in burgeoning small towns in more distant areas, these new social groups include women and African Americans striving to establish a place of their own in the world of small business. Dark social comedies influenced by both Modernism and the “proletarian” tradition, these novels are miniature collective portraits focusing on class mobility and dreams of emancipation, and highlighting the hopes and anxieties of a part of America Dick himself belonged to. In emphasizing race, gender, and class conflicts, the suburb is presented as a microcosmic analog of the United States as it strives to fulfill the nation's longings after the trauma of World War II, against the distant background of the Korean War.

According to his third wife Anne Rubenstein's memoir, Dick described one of these works, *The Man Whose Teeth Were Exactly Alike*, as “a novel about the proletarian world from the inside. Most books about the proletarian world are written by middle class writers. He considered himself a lower class proletarian writer” (A. Dick 63). Dick's stance *vis-à-vis* the fifties has little to do with Adorno-derived models of a peaceful decade of acquiescence and control, in which the suburbs epitomizes a monolithic dystopia of unchallenged “consumerism” and conformism. On the contrary, his novels, told from the standpoint of representatives of an upwardly mobile but highly insecure lower-middle class, foreground resisting points of view: ideologies have cracks, and do not necessarily lead to full consensus. As a result, Dick's fifties are a decade of dissatisfaction, or, as Bruno Cartosio writes, of unease. On the one hand, his plots display an undercurrent of violence (Carratello), gender conflicts (Palmer 67-84), and social fears (Thorpe). Nevertheless, he presents the suburbs as a setting in which old prejudices can be ultimately superseded, new needs precariously accommodated and aspirations for personal independence realized, especially in the fields of technology and communications, not yet dominated by big business.

Throughout his novels, political awareness is quite high, with references to oppositional culture that range from reactions to the pervasive presence of McCarthy, to mentions of Henry Wallace and intellectuals like David Riesman and C. Wright Mills, as well as allusions to William H. White's organization-man, Richard Hofstadter's paranoid politics, and popular music.

Memories of the New Deal liberal-progressive tradition are very strong in the protagonist of *Voices from the Street* (1953), a television-store salesman with intellectual ambitions. His meetings with Fascist anti-Semites and religious cult-leaders make him feel he has lost his innocence. Doubt-ridden as he is, he denies being part of a generation in revolt: “We’re not rebels—*we’re traitors*” (*Voices* 238). In a newborn community in the outskirts of Oakland, however, building a collective future is still possible, and a new innocence might be at hand: “A whole bunch of things to get done” (301).

Race conflicts come into the picture in *Mary and the Giant* (1955), revolving around the arrival of a newcomer, who opens a record store, in the country town of Pacific Park, at the outermost limit of commuter travel. Here, it is hard to avoid dealing with African American businessmen, and segregation, although it still exists, is not as strong as elsewhere. Southern California is offering “boundless possibilities” (Dick, *Mary* 32) to blacks as well, a jazz musician says. Despite the fact that many characters display racism and homophobia, the community drives even them into new relations, and a crucial, successful love story is interracial. In this part of America, the power balance is beginning to shift away from WASP supremacy.

An act of dissent starts the action in *The Broken Bubble* (1956), set in San Francisco, when a radio programmer refuses to air an ad for a used-car lot whose sign reads “Cars that work for people that work” (Dick, *Bubble* 50). His action summons up memories of sabotage (25), the possibility of monkey-wrenching in the emerging world of information. In Dick’s small-scale communities, the cultural media are an arena for struggle, to be defended against ruthless capitalists, and are vehicles for both traditional humanistic values and new forms of expression, especially a new music which recapitulates the social mosaic of new residents: “it’s everything mixed together, Western and Negro jump and sweet sentimental... a mishmash” (147). For the woman protagonist, the epiphany of freedom is a car ride on the freeway:

To her this sense of the city, this view of it, was disturbing and at the same time exhilarating. To be here, on the edge of the city... to be camped just outside, not in it but beside it, close enough to enter if she wanted, far enough out so that she was away; she was free, on her own, not bound or contained by it. (168)

Even in *Puttering About in a Small Land* (1957), a “black comedy of relationships breaking down” (Butler 27), whose characters (especially a couple who emigrated West in 1944 and are still obsessed with pre-War conflicts), are all largely negative, a radio-repair shop manages at last to embody the hope of a future in California.

The whole Northwest, accessible by means of car drives that allow for a domestic and sentimental life, appears as a single gigantic suburban sprawl in *In Milton Lumky Territory* (1958), the story of a salesman traveling across small towns in the states of California, Idaho, and Washington. In the final interior monologue, he is watching a television show that appears less Cold War propaganda

than pulp-era storytelling, and that affords the protagonist relief from the pressures of dominant ideologies:

The program had to do with action aboard submarines, and he went in to look at it with her. They sat together on the couch, facing the television set. In the peacefulness of the living room he basked and relaxed and half-dozed. The adventures beneath the water, the submarine fighting for its life against dim sea monsters and Soviet atomic mines, and, later on, the cowboys and spacemen and detectives and all the endless thrilling noisy western adventures, retreated from him. He heard his wife in the kitchen and he was aware of the child beside him, and that brought him his happiness. (Dick, *Lumky* 213)

Unlike standard nuclear-family scenarios, at the end of *Lumky* the couple are partners in operating their store as well. Increasingly, women's claims to a place in the workforce are shown as inevitable, and catalyze frequent crises of the masculine role (from competitions over jobs to squabbles concerning contraception).

Women's social assertiveness is crucial in *Confessions of a Crap Artist* (1959), framed by the narration of Jack Isidore—a character combining Twain's Huck Finn, with his racist surface, and Faulkner's Benjy—a simple mind capable of casting an estranging gaze at middle-class cruelties,—in different parts of the San Francisco area. His job as a “tire-regroover” (Dick, *Confessions* 4) is real, though, and puts him in the position of spokesman for a community that finds hope in the acknowledgment of its own limitations. In his concluding words, Jack admits: “on the basis of past choices, it seems pretty evident that my judgment is not of the best” (171). In this highly ironic *Künstlerroman*, the fictional “artist,” an avid reader of popular nonfiction and recycler of used technologies (hence the title), is in an ideal position to set an example for better, still possible, choices to come.

And it is after devastating conflicts involving two neighbors of non-WASP origin (a Jewish real-estate agent and an Italian advertiser) and their wives that *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike* (1960) presents a scenario of possible redemption. Mutual cruelties include racism and marital rape. A farcical attempt to create buyers' interest in the stagnant suburb by faking the finding of Neanderthal remains leads to the discovery of a coalminer family called “chuppers” (Dick, *Teeth* 225) who are malformed from drinking contaminated water. A community in danger of trapping itself in unrealizable dreams for the future rediscovers the unerasable harsh realities of the past, but the realtor risks all his money to save the community by buying the water company and having the water system cleaned.

Dick's final attempt at realism, *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland* (1960), describes the struggles of the protagonist to maintain the integrity of a car-repair business that is threatened by big business and violence, with new hopes opening up in Marin County for a music store, along with a new interracial relation. For one last time, although these dreams of lower-class freedom in the early fifties are

precarious and retrospectively doomed to fail, Dick clearly suggests that, at least for a while, new openings had emerged in the early history of the Californian suburbs.

In one of his last novels, *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), a semi-autobiographical, thinly disguised future version of the drug subculture of the early seventies, a return to the suburban scenario evokes an image of utter powerlessness and paralyzing repetition:

Life in Anaheim, California, was a commercial for itself, endlessly replayed. Nothing changed; it just spread farther and farther in the form of neon ooze. What there was always more of had been congealed into permanence long ago, as if the automatic factory that cranked out these objects had jammed in the *on* position. (Dick, *Scanner* 31)

The suburban ideal has been betrayed, and Dick's long fifties, with all their hopes and aspirations, are sadly and definitively over.

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