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The Paranoid Individual: An Analysis of Paranoia in the Writing of Philip K. Dick

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IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, where everyone seems connected by a smartphone and Facebook account, maintaining individuality has become a major concern. It is easy to imagine that individual agency is threatened by this web of socialization. Professor Timothy Melley of Miami University writes that our culture is presented with “a sense that complex institutions and forces are arrayed against us, that they manipulate and control both our action and our thinking.” According to Melley, conspiracy theory looks for the headquarters of power, and such theories have become a fixture of modern culture. Indeed, conspiracy theory and paranoia can easily be seen in modern discourse. Few significant events have passed without groups pointing to some hidden orchestrators. An obvious example are the theories surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. More recently, there are groups that claim to know a true cause of the September 11th World Trade Center attacks (www.911truth.org), or blame certain groups for the recent financial meltdown in the United States (Inside Job). With conspiracy theory as such a fixture of modern culture, it is no surprise to see it appear in works of science fiction, a genre that is primarily based off the writer’s extrapolation from concerns and issues that he or she sees in the world. Of course, any conversation of science fiction must mention Philip K. Dick, whose stories have been adapted into films, such as Blade Runner and Minority Report, and influenced others, like The Matrix, making his work integral to modern science fiction. Paranoia appears frequently in Dick’s work, where the protagonist finds himself in a world where everything seems focused on manipulating his actions and concealing the truth.
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One such story is Dick’s 1969 novel Ubik. I believe it is possible to see the half-life world of Ubik as an allegory to twenty-first century culture, where online interactions have blurred the line between what is real and what is fake. Indeed, Melley cites the “sense that it has become difficult to know what is real and true in the world,” as one of the main intellectual problems facing our culture. However, Ubik’s protagonist is not the victim of society as a whole, but is instead the target of a specific individual. The personification of this force, Melley asserts, is an attempt to defend the idea of individual agency in the face of social theory, which suggests that in fact there is no real force of manipulation at work. Such forces are only perceived because to see otherwise would be to admit that our actions are a result of the society in which we are a complicit part. These forces suggest that we play a role we cannot escape, and the absence of any force exerting control over us challenges the idea of individual agency. It is telling, then, that Dick’s stories ascribe this manipulation to a single individual or group. Christopher Palmer, author of *Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern*, on Dick’s writing writes that Dick was both a postmodernist and a humanist, whose characters have “the capacity to apprehend intense moral dilemmas, and to take responsibility” (33). Personifying social order as an individual controlling force, and assigning it specific desires and motivations, though it apparently threatens the individual, actually asserts the individual’s freedom and significance. Though the individual is himself threatened, his individuality is affirmed by that threat.

Dick’s fiction, and Ubik specifically, appears to contain both the ideas that the individual agent is capable of acting as an “authentic human,” and also that the individualized force may only be the result of a paranoid hermeneutic, or a paranoid framework or worldview, because the ending of the novel suggests that nothing that happens in the story can definitively be considered real. In this essay, I will attempt to negotiate this conflict of views by looking at Dick’s portrayal of the individual and the personified other, focusing specifically on Ubik. Dick once said that he liked to build universes that would fall apart.

**Hermeneutic**

1: A method or principle of interpretation
2: A framework to guide the process of interpretation

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(“Authentic Human Beings”). His stories may provide no definite conclusion, but they do negotiate the status of the individual, which has only become more significant in our hyper-connected world where we exist in a framework that may not be so different from the half-life network of Ubik or the Chew-Z reality in The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch.

In Ubik, protagonist Joe Chip finds himself in a half-life world where objects continually revert to previous forms and reality itself is inconsistent. Eventually, Chip learns that the reality is controlled by another inhabitant of the half-life network: the teenager Jory, who seems to delight in causing Chip and others to suffer. Louisiana State University Professor Carl Freedman argues that paranoia is a reasonable ideology for our capitalist society that treats individuals as commodities and forces them to interpret their role in relation to other commodities (10). The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch provides an example of the commoditization of individuals. In this story, a group of characters have become obsessed with a game, which involves the use drugs that allows the players to experience life as either the Perky Pat or Connie Companion doll. They are literally casting themselves as commodities and see their lives only in how they relate to the reality of the Perky Pat doll game. These individuals are most concerned with their relationship to the other commoditized individuals and their roles in the consumerism-driven game. Freeman argues:

What is generally true of capitalism is particularly true of twentieth-century monopoly capitalism. “Consumerism”—that is, the increased importance of individual as distinct from productive consumption and the organized stimulation of the former by techniques such as advertising—saturates the social field with hieroglyphics to an extent unprecedented in all of human history (11).

Perhaps in a nod to the idea of a society driven by consumption and economics, in Ubik Dick characterizes Chip by his inability to keep money, and opens with him arguing with his door, which threatens to sue if Chip won’t pay for its services (24). Chip’s lover, Pat, pays the door, and later asserts that without her, he would not have been able to leave his apartment (77). In this way, Chip’s ability to act is constricted by money, and he is commoditized in a financial relationship between himself and Pat. At this time in the novel, Chip has yet to enter
the half-life world, and this commoditization does seem to result simply from the prevalent social order.

It is later when Chip truly begins to notice things are wrong: the wrong faces appear on coins, objects regress to earlier forms, and people begin to die. Of course, there is a force controlling Chip’s reality, so his paranoia is justified. Sigmund Freud saw paranoia as a “ruthless hermeneutic” and the paranoid as one who ascribes meaning to every detail in an all-encompassing view of the world (Freedman 8). Freedman argues that paranoia springs logically into place in a capitalistic society, and he adds, “In a monopoly-capitalist state like modern America—intensely centralized and militarized but still governed according to bourgeois-democratic forms—conspiracy is no voluntaristic aberration but a structural necessity for ruling-class politics,” suggesting that conspiracy is logical considering the form of American society (12). Such is the case in many of Dick’s stories where the main character finds himself in a situation in which he actually is conspired against. In explanation, Freeman writes, “If Dick’s protagonists tend to be paranoid, there is always much for them to be paranoid about. For they live in a world dominated by commodities and conspiracies; which is to say, a world not wholly unlike our own”(12). Dick shows how much of the modern world—both in his time and our own—is driven by conspiracy, or the possibility thereof.

Melley seems to agree with this, pointing to the Cold War and War on Terror: “If the government admits that some of its work is ‘top secret,’ the suspicion that we are being kept in the dark – that political outcomes are shaped by powerful, invisible agencies – is entirely reasonable. ‘Paranoia,’ in other words, has become a condition of good citizenship.” However, Melley is quick to point out the distinction between this “healthy suspicion” and paranoia. “While skeptics such as Plato and Augustine saw the world only as a shadow of some truer existence, they nonetheless saw the visible world as a dim reflection, not a complete distortion of the true.” He goes on to say that what makes one paranoid is the “near total refusal to accept appearance at face value,” suggesting that much of what is perceived is in the eye of the beholder. Melley says, “The essence of paranoia is its reification of the symbolic order into a real agent.” The personification of the social force into an “other” can be seen in both Jory in Ubik and Palmer Eldritch in The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, both of whom are powerful individual entities who have power to control their worlds. Further, Melley asserts that “the modern
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Paranoid... converts a complex system of social symbols into a powerful locus of intentionally and control—a quasi-divine plot to limit individual thought and action.” This is further illustrated by Jory and Palmer Eldritch, who are both ascribed near divine status.

This is significant, because if Jory is manipulating Chip, then Chip matters. If controlling his actions and deceiving him is important, then by extension, Chip is important as an individual. Melley claims that this is the reason for the paranoid worldview:

Indeed, its specific content aside, paranoia can be seen as a panic-stricken defense of liberal individualism in the face of evidence for a more sociological account of human action. When a deeply held commitment to the liberal view of individual agency is shattered by the discovery of social influences, the result is often an all-or-nothing reaction in which the paranoiac magnifies the rather mundane fact of social influences into a nightmarish version of total external control.

The attempt to see social influences as a the result of individual intent, Melley says, is a defense against philosophies such as Althusser's theory of ideology, which interpellates individuals as subjects, and Marxist theory, which imagines individuals as commodities with an ascribed value.

Another example that suggests the all-powerful individual is really just a perceived construct of society appears in Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep. For much of the story, characters listen to the teachings of the prophet-like Mercer. However, it is eventually revealed that Mercer is only a paid actor. The society has constructed a divine force to worship. Thus, looking at Ubik from this perspective, Jory could be interpreted as a metaphor for social order. It could be said that he is only perceived to exist but has no actual being and arises solely from Chip interpreting the signs around him in accordance with Freud's paranoid framework. In Ubik, one character states “There are Jorys in every moratorium. This battle goes on wherever you have half-lifers; it's a verity,
a rule, of our kind of existence" (207). This gives weight to the idea that Jory’s existence is the result of this “network,” which can be seen representing the framework of society. And if this is the case, then Chip would be insignificant as an individual. Though he perceives a force controlling him, his actions are merely a result of the social framework in which he exists.

Of course, the fact remains that Dick chose to personify the “other” into an individual force, and his turning it into Melley’s “quasi-divine” force suggests an attempt to defend individuality against the possibility that the individual is merely a piece moved completely by social pressures on an established framework. The status of the individual is clearly important to Dick. It can be seen as a basis for many of his stories that focus on the question “What is human?” Indeed, in his speech “How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later,” Dick asked, “What constitutes the authentic human being?” this is one of his primary concerns that he attempted to address in his writing. He stated that he believed “the authentic human being is one of who instinctively knows what he should not do, and, in addition, he will balk at doing it.” Palmer writes that Dick’s “novels enact the historical tragedy of liberalism, its shaping of a monadic society which makes impossible, but also makes necessary, the action out of the most cherished individual and inter-subjective values of liberalism” (38). It appears that Dick is dedicated to establishing situations where the individual is capable of action, though he may not choose to take it. For example, in the short story “Adjustment Team,” the protagonist Ed Fletcher sees the forces that control reality, and at their insistence, chooses to conceal the truth from his wife. The Hollywood adaptation of the same story, The Adjustment Bureau, heightened the individual’s capacity to take action even in the face of significantly more powerful forces.

The ability of these personified forces to control a character’s reality is one of the markers of Dick’s stories. Jory is capable of changing things in the half-life world and Palmer Eldritch is effectively the god of the Chew-Z reality. However, Dick also presents a view of the world where reality doesn’t seem to matter, what matters is the individual choosing to act authentically. The central point of Ubik is not the “reality” of the half-life world; the point is what action Chip decides to take. Christopher Palmer, writing on Dick’s work, says, “Dick makes fictions of the disintegrations of the real in contemporary society: the action of perpetual change
both on what has previously existed, and on what is existing now but has no sta­
ble reality, because it is already marked by its inevitable dissolution” (32). This
suggests that even in the world we live in, reality can be questioned. Dick is less
interested in characters discovering what is real than in what they do with the
knowledge, with stories like the novel Time Out of Joint that stresses the idea that
there is something underneath the reality we see. It may be appropriate to relate
this to the levels of simulation established by French philosopher Jean Baudril­
lard. Baudrillard related the postmodern age with third order simulacrum where
the simulation precedes the original, breaking down the distinction between rep­
resentation and reality (8). Dick raised the issue of being unable to tell the dif­
ference between the real and fake copy in Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep, when
the protagonist, a bounty hunter named Decker, mistakes an electric toad for a
real one, and also in his speech “How to Build A Universe That Doesn’t Fall
Apart Two Days Later,” where he discuss­es the implications of replacing the fake
animals at Disneyland with real ones.

Writing on this topic, Melley says “only
through a total distrust of their sense –
a belief that the entire world might be
a lie – that the protagonists of The Ma­
trix, The Truman Show, and most of Dick’s
fiction actually break through the ideo­
logical shells containing them.” In our
postmodern society, “reality” no longer
seems to be a relevant concern for the
individual, and Dick’s stories suggest
that we can only control how we act in
the world we live in. The characters in
Dick’s fiction are continually portrayed
with the capacity for action. Melley says
that, “throughout his career, Dick at­
ttempts to deepen the human – to affirm

Understanding Simulacrum

Jean Baudrillard examined
reality in relation to signs
and symbols. The first stage
of simulacrum is a faithful
copy. The second stage is a
copy that twists and subverts
the reality. The third stage of
simulacrum is a copy with no
original. That is, an object that
pretends to represent some­
thing that does not actually
exist, such as a photograph
of a non-existent person. The
final stage is pure simulation,
where the images and sym­
bols have no relationship to
any reality, and the signs only
point to other signs.
values such as solidarity and empathy and to endow his characters with the capacity to apprehend intense moral dilemmas, and to take responsibility" (33). The last time Chip appears in Ubik, he elects to take over the struggle against Jory. In the final chapter, a character outside of the half-life world sees Chip’s face on a coin, mirroring Chip’s early discovery that reality is breaking down (216). This may be another way that Dick points to how little reality matters, but it also could suggest that by acting authentically, Chip has transcended reality. Though Chip is ostensibly still in the half-life world, he now seems to have the ability to reach beyond it. He has become the individual capable of manipulating reality.

This is not the only time that Dick shows his protagonists eventually assuming the role of what at was originally perceived as a god-like force. In The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, the protagonist exchanges bodies with Palmer Eldritch, while in Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep, Decker eventually sees himself as Mercer, reenacting the struggles of Mercer’s life. In Time Out of Joint, Raggle Gunn was placed into the world because of his own hallucinations and he is the capable of choosing to change things. As I’ve already established, the “other” is a quasi-divine force. By showing the individual becoming equal to this force, Dick’s stories show the authentic individual becoming god. If that force is, as Melley suggests, merely the personification of the social order, then the individual becomes equal to that order. It is a force capable of breaking free of the control that order exerts. On the other hand, if the powerful other was merely an individual acting with its own purpose and intention, then, as Palmer says, “The conditions of the novels reflect an extreme, literal-minded liberalism: society is no more than a collection of individuals, monads, the world no more than an accumulation of objects” (36). There may be no social order that pressures individuals to action and they truly are capable of agency.

Paranoia results from individuals feeling their agency is threatened, and Dick’s stories deal with this in two ways. First, they present paranoia as justified. It is a reasonable response to the outside forces threatening the character. Second, by individualizing that force, and establishing the protagonist characters on an equal level, the stories suggest that even if such forces are purely the embodiment of social order, the individual is still capable of overcoming them. In once sense, Dick’s fiction establishes the authentic individual as a “quasi-divine” force. In an interconnected world where it may be impossible to determine the difference
between the real and simulation, Dick’s stories demonstrate the unimportance of reality to the actual being of the individual. The materiality of the world has no bearing on the individual’s ability to choose between what is right and what is wrong. In Dick’s fiction, the person that makes that choice has the capacity of transcending reality. In the real world, perhaps this suggests that the authentic individual who will balk at doing something that is wrong, is the individual capable of breaking away from the forces of social control and thus is capable of asserting his own freedom.
Bibliography


