

Book Reviews

Philip K. Dick: Essays of the Here and Now

DAVID SANDNER, editor. **Philip K. Dick: Essays of the Here and Now.** (Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy, 69). McFarland & Company, 2020. 226 p. ISBN: 978-1-4766-7789-7, \$39.95.

In 2025, Philip K. Dick (PKD) does not require a special introduction due to various movie adaptations of his works, particularly in the past twenty-five years, which have brought his works back into the limelight. Despite his life's vicissitudes, he was able to write incredible and often prescient novels that were far ahead of their time and are finding their true audience and appreciation in the twenty-first century. David Sandner begins his introduction with the following assessment of Philip K. Dick's legacy:

His works speak to contemporary fears of being continually watched by technology. They speak to the paranoia of modern life in which we watch ourselves and lose our sense of identity. When corporations have "human rights" and AI personalities (Siri, Alexa, and on), the Turing Test is a relic because we are all robots: who will find who to be fake? We are but commodities...consumers, cogs. (1)

In order to commemorate this legacy and to enthrall new generations of students—not only with this author, but with other authors of science fiction—Sandner has compiled a collection of essays which represent a variety of thoughts, discussions, and scholarly observations that transpired during the 2016 Philip K. Dick conference at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). This collection is divided into two parts: "Future Ecologies" (Ursula Heise, Umberto Rossi, Richard Feist, Sean Matharoo, Gabriel Cutrufello, Michael Kvamme-O'Brien, Gregg Rickman, Gary Westfahl) and "Archaeologies" (Jonathan Lethem, Tim Powers, James Blaylock, Daniel Gilbertson, Gary Westfahl, Paul Sammon, Samuel Sousa). An *Appendix* contains images and Ephemera from the conference. Sandner credits English master's students Jamie Brody and Christine Granillo as associate editors. The purpose of this book is to "seek PKD as if for the first time, looking for his traces in places he lived, in the SF community he came from, and his influence on contemporary American literature and culture, and beyond" (2).

The division of the book into two parts makes sense, but the terms used for Part One raise some questions. Entitled "Future Ecologies," it focuses on new research and studies regarding the works of PKD. "Ecologies" seems to be an odd section title, since the term hints at ecocriticism and related areas of research, not meaningfully addressed in the essays; the focus is on various interpretative approaches. The use of "Future" does make sense, however, as Matharoo, Kvamme-O'Brien, Feist, and Westfahl provide new insights

and interpretations of Dick's works, which could ground future research. The second part's title, "Archaeologies," is quite apt. It focuses on Dick's legacy and the perspectives of people who were involved professionally or personally with him, and could be relevant to those who are using biographical approaches in a research program. In other words, it brings to light older, personal experiences that can be further studied.

Sandner's introduction is somewhat of an *homage* to the bequeathed papers of PKD that found their place in the Special Collections at the Pollack Library, CSUF. He attributes this happenstance to the efforts of Willis McNelly, who was an English professor at CSUF in the seventies, and who had the good heart of giving refuge to Dick at a time when he was struggling. Sandner goes into the specifics of Dick's move to Fullerton, writing, and leaving his works to the school. He also laments the fact that decades later, those in charge of Dick's estate removed certain papers, which never resurfaced and can no longer be accessed by scholars. Additionally, Sandner proposed a Digital Literary Studies course, and the students' final assignment was creating the website *Philip K. Dick in Orange County*. The introduction is heavily laced with interesting biographical details and ends in a brief overview of the essays.

The first part of the book, "Future Ecologies," explores various new theoretical interpretations of his works. The objective is to reassess and revitalize PKD scholarship and to introduce his works to new critical approaches and analyses. The focus is on works that were not considered canonical and which were not bestowed the attention that some of his more popular works have. Sandner's intention is to bring about a new invigorated interest in the visionary perspective and the hybrid nature of spaces that Dick captured in his works. Furthermore, he wants to emphasize the importance that moving to Orange County had on his later writing. Here is a selection of some thought-provoking essays for scholars who are interested in engaging in different approaches to PKD's works.

Richard Feist's rather ambitious title "Voice, Consciousness and the Bicameral Mind: *A Scanner Darkly* on the Road to Julian Jaynes' Psychology" offers a medley of philosophical insights into the background readings of PKD before writing *A Scanner Darkly*. He distinguishes Dick's embracing of Spinozan metaphysics and the notion that the self and the mind are fused with God. Feist sees the works of Robert E. Ornstein, Michael S. Gazzinaga, and Joseph E. Bogen influencing Dick's philosophical approach to the notion of the duality of consciousness, i.e., the bicameral view of the mind. He uses this bicameral lens to analyze *A Scanner Darkly*, and posits that Dick tried to articulate the nature of personal identity, concluding that, for PKD, it was a functional category based on who others think one is and not an ontological category.

Sean Matharoo's essay "Ubik Does Not Yet Exist: Reading *Ubik* as a Case of Extro-Science Fiction" is a philosophically dense interpretation of this novel. Matharoo engages with Peter Fittings argument of "non-representational aesthetics pitted against the metaphysicians of the bourgeoisie" (40). However, Matharoo takes the discussion a step further and adds Quentin Meillassoux's extro-science fiction (XSF) theory arguing that this novel provides a good example of an XSF world, and how it works with speculative realism and radical contingency, showing that any traditional metaphysical reading falls short of understanding the work itself. This essay is undoubtedly for aficionados of complex philosophical musings and was probably perplexing for the attendees of this conference.

Michael Kvamme-O'Brien's essay "Evolving Dickian Criticism: *The Exegesis* and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin" is a welcome example of Dick's works engaging with ecocriticism; albeit briefly. The chapter uses yet another theoretical lens, one probably unfamiliar to both philosophers and literary critics, to investigate issues relevant to the philosophy of mind. Kvamme-O'Brien explores how Dick addressed the tension in inner and outer realities, using de Cardin's theories about consciousness evolving to a spiritual and theological end called the "Omega Point." Several novels are discussed: these include *The Penultimate Truth*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, *A Scanner Darkly*, and *Valis*. Most importantly, this essay demonstrates how using atypical interpretive lenses can unify some of PKD's works around themes, and provide new insights.

Gary Westfahl's short, concise, and imaginatively engaging essay "*Galactic Pot-Healer: A Singular Way Station*" makes an interesting comparison between Dick and Clifford D. Simak. This essay is an original approach to the novel due the interesting interconnection between the two authors. Apart from discussing different editions of these works, he critiques the usual but misguided interpretation of the novel as either solely an allegory or a novel. Westfahl embraces both interpretations, while discussing the intertextuality of their works.

The "Archaeologies" section is rather unusual, since it provides transcripts from three conference panels and Jonathan Letham's introduction. Letham's introduction, "The Philip K. Dick Society: A Preliminary Archeology" records an inspiring talk about Paul Williams, who was the keeper of Dick's legacy. The first panel, "PKD at California State University, Fullerton," (CSFU) was run by the authors Tim Powers and James Blaylock, and it was followed by panel two, "PKD Goes to the Movies" which included Daniel Gilbertson, Gary Westfahl, and Paul Sammon. The panelists recalled personal experiences with PKD and the movie adaptations of his works. The final panel with Samuel Sousa was entitled "Dick's SoCal Dream"; Sousa discussed his favorite novels by Dick, followed by a lengthy Q&A regarding Dick in SoCal, the influence of California on his writing, and Letham's personal experiences of SoCal at the time.



With this collection, Sandner set out to pay an *homage* to Philip K. Dick, provide more understanding of his works, and continue the legacy that was bestowed upon CSUF. This legacy is threefold as it pertains to the influence of his works in academia, his life in Orange County, and the significance of CSUF as a conservator of his life and work. For the most part, the book seems to have accomplished those tasks. Scholars will find that the chapters of "Future Ecologies" add interesting outlooks on less studied works in PKD's catalogue, and thus is a welcome addition to scholarship. Casual students may find this part less interesting since Matharoo's, Feist's, and Kvamme-O'Brien's essays require knowledge of other theories. But these chapters will introduce students to the idea that criticism is always shaped by specific theoretical assumptions. These same students may find the second part to be entertaining if they are into the personal aspects of PKD's life. Scholars will find "Archaeologies" interesting as far as anecdotal information is concerned, but it is

unclear what value these anecdotes have for literary criticism. Overall, the value of this book lies in introducing new literary perspectives to some works that are often not included in scholarly discussions, thus viewing PKD's oeuvre from a different angle. Furthermore, it appears that Sandner's ultimate aspiration is to pass the proverbial torch to younger generations who will not only continue the legacy of this author but will also propagate the importance of science fiction as a genre.

ZORICA LOLA JELIC, Ph.D.

Faculty of Contemporary Arts, Belgrade, Serbia.

zorica.jelic@fsu.edu.rs

