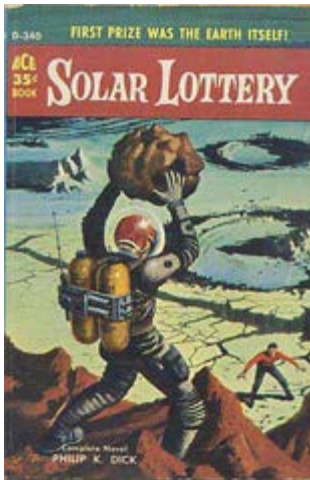


Giuliano Bettanin

Psychological Terror and Social Fears in Philip K. Dick's Science Fiction

As it developed during the twentieth century, the genre of science fiction has often used themes belonging to horror literature. In point of fact, these two genres have a good deal in common. Most obviously, science fiction and horror share a fantastic background and a detachment from the probabilities of realistic fiction. Also, the birth of science fiction is closely connected to the development of the gothic novel. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which is commonly considered proto-science fiction, also represents a nineteenth-century development of the gothic novel. In addition, Herbert George Wells, whose work lies at the basis of modern science fiction, wrote at least one gothic novel, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.¹ The fusion of horror and science fiction has often generated figures of terrifying and evil aliens, robots that rebel against their human creators, and apocalyptic, post-thermonuclear-global-war scenarios. In this brief essay I shall analyze the ways in which Philip K. Dick incorporated horror themes into his oeuvre and the highly original results he obtained by mingling the two genres. For this purpose I shall discuss several of his short stories and his early novel *Eye in the Sky*. Besides the already mentioned motifs of the alien, the rebel robot and the atomic holocaust, Dick develops a mystical-religious motif as he explores a number of metaphysical problems that are strictly connected to his most characteristic interest in epistemological questions.



Solar Lottery

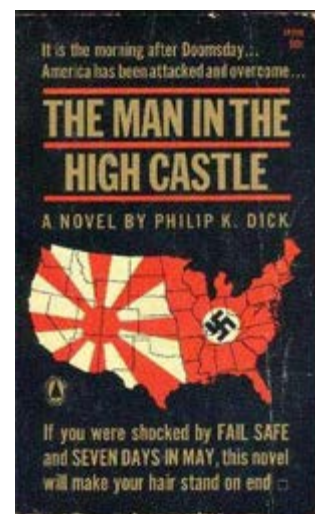
From the moment of the publication of his first short stories and novels in the 1950s, Dick became one of the most representative authors of American social science fiction. According to Piergiorgio Nicolazzini, Dick's first novel, *Solar Lottery* (1955), is already an example of social science fiction (Nicolazzini, 25-26), and the same can be said for most of Dick's novels and a good number of his short stories. In the first decades of the twentieth century, science fiction focused on the celebration of science and progress. But after World War II, thanks to writers like Ray Bradbury, Robert A. Heinlein, and Dick himself, science fiction began to show an explicit awareness of the historical and social environment. In other words, science fiction began to investigate and criticize society and the effects that science and progress had on it. Part of this

social commitment fed on Cold War themes and produced pessimistic visions of atomic holocaust. In Dick's science fiction, for example, the theme of war is one of its most recurrent elements. The writers of his generation were children during World War II and grew up in a Cold War climate dominated by suspicion and fear. This existential climate certainly influenced young Dick's imagination and pushed him to explore the theme of nuclear war and the post-atomic wasteland. He also focused on the milieu of suspicion and paranoia that characterized small town America in those years.

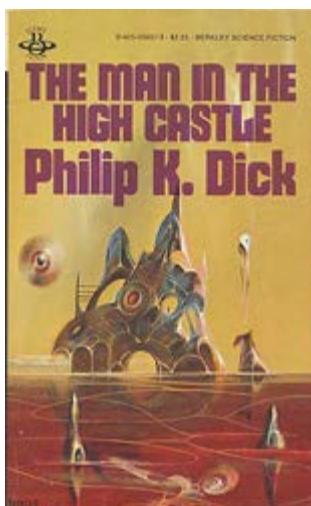
Regarding the threat of atomic war, in 1955 Dick wrote an essay titled "Pessimism in Science Fiction" in which he defends his work and that of his fellow writers as follows:

Since science fiction concerns the future of human society, the worldwide loss of faith in science and in scientific progress is bound to cause convulsions in the SF field. This loss of faith in the idea of progress, in a "brighter tomorrow," extends over our whole cultural milieu; the dour tone of recent science fiction is an effect, not a cause. If a modern science fiction writer mirrors this sense of doom, he is only doing what any responsible writer does: If a writer feels that present-day saber-rattling and drum-beating are leading the world to war, he has no choice but to reproduce his feelings in his writings - unless he is writing purely for profit, in which case he never reproduces his feelings, only those sentiments that he feels will be commercially acceptable. (Dick, 1955, p. 54)

This passage nicely captures how Dick felt: his sense of moral duty and his need to speak out against war and destruction in his works. Many of his short stories and novels deal with this theme, one of the most famous (although it does not actually deal with atomic war) being *The Man in the High Castle* (1962). Instead, *Dr Bloodmoney* (1965) describes the life of human survivors after a devastating atomic war.



The Man in the High Castle

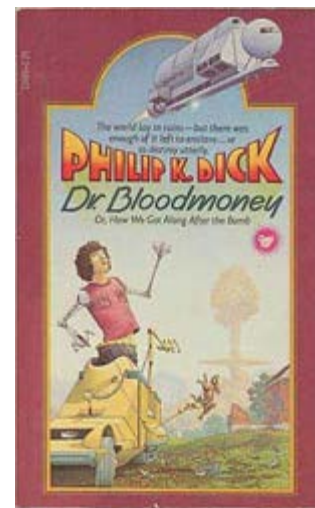


The Man in the High Castle

Instead of analyzing these well-known novels, about which a great deal has already been written, I would prefer to turn to one of Dick's short stories, *Breakfast at Twilight* (1954), since it nicely captures people's sense of horror after an atomic conflict. In this story a middle-class American family is suddenly thrown into the middle of a nuclear war scenario. American soldiers burst into the house looking for survivors and supplies, under the family's amazed and frightened eyes. Unlike most of Dick's fiction, this short story has a positive and potentially optimistic ending. When they come back to their own time continuum during a bombing, and right before their house is atomized, the members of the family are conscious of what may happen and willing to do all they can to avoid the future. At the end of the story, the words spoken by Tim McLean, the head of the family, rekindle the hope that men can work for a better future. Tim reassures his amazed and worried neighbors by saying that the damage to his house was caused by some problems with the central heating. Then he comments, "I should have got it fixed ... I should have had it looked at a long time ago. Before it got in such bad shape ... before it was too late"² (Dick, *Collected Stories* vol. 2, 220).³ These words suggest how dangerous carelessness and the refusal to confront problems can be, especially

when one has to cope with problems like those created by the Cold War. Tim's words also serve as a warning to all humankind; they encourage people to commit themselves to work for a better world and a better future.

On the one hand, novels like *Dr Bloodmoney* and short stories like *The Great C* (1953), "Second Variety" (1953), and "Survey Team" (1954) are more pessimistic and disaster-oriented than "Breakfast at Twilight." On the other hand, the latter story is more effective in describing the atomic war as a horrific and irrational event. Irrationality also contributes to create the atmosphere of amazement and fright at the beginning of the story. In fact, there is no plausible reason why Tim McLean's house and family are transported through time to a future of destruction. Of course Dick does provide a pseudo-scientific explanation, according to which the concentration of energy due to the explosion of a nuclear bomb caused a distortion in the spatio-temporal texture and thus the transportation of house and family to the future during the night. Yet, this explanation mostly serves to prepare us for the family's



Dr. Bloodmoney

eventual return to their own time continuum and to raise a fundamental dilemma for the protagonists. Is it better to stay in the house and risk being pulverized during the next bombing, hoping that the bombing itself would produce an effect similar to that of the first and send the house back to the past; or is it better to follow the soldiers to the anti-atomic shelters and try to survive in that disastrous future. Tim has no doubts. He prefers to risk his life and those of his children rather than accepting the latter destiny. "You call that [being] alive?" he asks his wife when she expresses doubts about his decision. To the protagonists, and to the reader who shares their point of view, the situation is senseless and frightening. Suddenly, without any warning, the world they know disappears and gives way to a terrifying scene. Death and destruction surround the protagonists, and the horror of it all strikes the reader forcefully. Dick creates this effect to reinforce Tim's words at the end of the story: "Before it was too late."

Also the fear of strangers plays an important thematic role in Dick's short fiction of the 1950s. In "The Skull" (1952) the protagonist is a time traveler who returns from the future to a small American town of the 1950s. Since he speaks with a strange accent, wears strange clothes, and sports a beard, he is immediately suspected of being a communist spy. Dick's critical attitude toward this kind of collective suspicion clearly emerges in stories like *Martians Come in Clouds* (1954) and *Explorers We*. In *Martians Come in Clouds* some aliens come to Earth from Mars and they are systematically destroyed by humans as soon as they land. The typical science-fiction motif of evil and monstrous aliens (memorably exploited in Ridley Scott's film *Alien*) is turned upside-down in Dick's story. The aliens are weak and defenseless while the humans behave like merciless villains. What turns men into evil doers is their fear of the other and the unknown. In this story they do not even try to communicate with the Martians. The only person who contacts the aliens is a boy. The Martians communicate with him through telepathy and they show him a series of images that explain their situation. They are fleeing from a dying world and all they need is water. Since they saw big bodies of water on the surface of

Earth, the aliens have come to ask men for permission to land and settle over a small area of the sea. They would live there quietly and cause no trouble to the human race. But men prefer to destroy them before even learning why they have come to Earth; they burn them alive at their arrival.

Something similar happens in "Explorers We". In this story some aliens come to Earth as perfect replicas of a group of astronauts who died during a mission to Mars. The astronauts seem to be utterly convinced they are humans and they do not understand why the FBI chases them after they have "come back" to Earth. Humans only know that these astronauts are not the same as those who originally left for Mars, and nothing more. The original astronauts could have been saved and/or cloned by the aliens. The disguise could be a way to try to communicate more easily with the earthlings. Still other factors could explain these perfect copies of human beings, but the earthlings have no intention of investigating them. Above all, the possible threat must be eliminated, and only then questions can be asked. At the end of the story, Wilks, an FBI agent, poses the central question raised by the story:

If it was up to me, Wilks asked himself, what would I do? Try to find out what they want? Anything that looks so human, behaves in such a human way, must feel human... and if they - whatever they are - feel human, might they not become human, in time? (C.S. 4: 154)

After this brief meditation Wilks goes on to kill the last of the six astronauts, but he soon realizes that he did it only because he was afraid of an alien invasion: "That's what we are told... they are plotting against us, are inhuman, and will never be more than that" (C.S. 4: 154). At the end of "Explorers We" the beginning is repeated. Another spaceship with the same six astronauts aboard lands on Earth. According to Neil Easterbrook, in this way the story, "which couples duplicity with recursion or iteration, inscribes doubling's signature: estrangement, for both the human and the alien" (Easterbrook, 1995, p. 27).

Some of Dick's short stories, like "Expendable" (1953), "Out in the Garden" (1953), "The King of the Elves" (1953), and "Small Town" (1954), transcend the science-fiction genre and come closer to being fantasy or, more generally, fantastic literature. Occasionally, these stories introduce horror themes or at least motifs. In the story "Of Withered Apples" (1954) the protagonist, a girl called Lori, is able to communicate with an old, dying apple tree, and this ability fascinates and scares her at once. Lori decides to put an end to this odd relation, but when she goes to bid the tree a last goodbye, one of its withered apples follows her down the slope and all the way home. The girl picks up the apple and takes a bite of it. That same night the protagonist falls prey to sudden convulsions and has a pain in her stomach. In a short time she dies in agony while her husband Steve stands helplessly by. The physician tells Steve that Lori died of appendicitis. About seven months later, when Steve brings some flowers to his wife's grave, he notices that "in the center of the neat green field [a] little apple tree rose proudly. ... The young tree was strong and very healthy" (C.S. 2: 255). In April the tree already has red apples, red like Lori's cheeks. A mysterious and supernatural atmosphere is central to this story. A natural and common element like an apple tree assumes disquieting and sinister qualities, as if to remind us that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy, and certainly in our common sense. The

morbid relation - only hinted at, in truth - between Lori and the apple tree produces effects that are not only supernatural, but also full of dark omens and occult meanings.

In other short stories of Dick's, for example "The Hanging Stranger" (1953), there is a better mingling of science fiction and horror. This story belongs to the "body snatchers" plot made famous by Jack Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers* (1959) and films based on it. Dick used this motif several times and he often tied it with stronger and more powerful themes (see my discussion of *The Three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* below). "The Hanging Stranger" connects the themes of suspicion and the hidden invasion to mystical-religious elements in Dick's science fiction. In fact, the aliens who secretly have taken the place and shape of humans in the small American town where the story unfolds, are insect-like creatures that are as big as men. The religious reference is not explicit and direct, but knowing the author's interest in such themes, an allusion to Belzebug, the Lord of flies, seems evident. Besides, the title of the story suggests a reference to ancient mystical traditions through its evocation of tarot cards. One of the Major Arcana is called the hanged man. The adjective "stranger" represents a connection to the theme of xenophobia and fear of the unknown. The atmosphere of this short story also recalls one of Dick's first novels, *The Cosmic Puppets* (1956). In this novel, too, there are mystical references which become mythological thanks to the presence of the two ancient Zoroastrian gods of evil and good, Ahriman and Ormazd respectively.

Horror and mystical-religious motifs often intermingle in Dick's science fiction. Both religion and fantastic, supernatural stories are closely connected with mystery and phenomena that human science cannot explain. Howard Phillips Lovecraft, one of the most famous American authors of supernatural and horror stories, argues that fear of the unknown creates an irrational imagination that often gives way to religious feeling. While religion, through conventional rituals, takes care of the good aspects of the unknown, the darkest and most sinister aspects of the cosmic mysteries nourish the popular traditions of the supernatural. From those traditions a series of horror stories and novels was born (Lovecraft, 27-45). Among Dick's short stories, "Upon the Dull Earth" (1954) is a good example of the fusion of horror and religious themes. Samuel J. Umland speaks of "nebulous supernaturalism" and explains that this story "uncomfortably straddles the genres of occult fantasy and ontological horror story ... Characteristically, the story contains Dick's hybrid allusions to both Classical and Judeo-Christian sources, as well as to occult and esoteric religious thought" (Umland, p. 85).

By offering up the blood of a lamb, Silvia,⁴ the protagonist of "Upon the Dull Earth", is able to summon creatures she identifies as angels. She thinks that the creatures are her ancestors and she is sure that one day she will join them. We can get a glimpse here of the Judeo-Christian theme Umland speaks about. At the same time, though, it is not clear whether the creatures are really good, as Silvia thinks, or wicked. Their behavior and their relation with Silvia scare the girl's relatives and Rick, her boyfriend. Rick thinks that Silvia's behavior is very dangerous, as "the white-winged giants ... can sear [her] to ash" (C.S. 3: 204). During a quarrel with Rick, the girl accidentally cuts herself. Independently from her will, Silvia's blood summons the creatures. Unable to control their power, the angel-like giants burn Silvia's body and leave only "a brittle burned-out husk" (C.S. 3: 209). This scene introduces the horror-like element of the story, but it represents just the beginning

of a series of mysterious and disquieting events.

Unable to accept his lover's death, Rick tries to bring Silvia back, but in doing so he causes the degeneration and destruction of the world⁵ he lives in. The story also develops one of Dick's favorite themes, namely the definition of what is real. The reality we think we know well turns out to be insubstantial, due to Dick's use of multiple possible realities which ends up deconstructing the idea of reality itself. As it investigates these questions, first at an epistemological level and then at an ontological one, "Upon the Dull Earth" unfolds a conventional horror plot. Rick manages to contact the light-creatures who apparently belong to a higher realm of being and he also manages to speak with Silvia. The girl now lives in the realm of the angel-like creatures, but she wants to come back and she explains that they made a mistake when they took her away. The creatures think that bringing Silvia back could be dangerous. The girl explains to her boyfriend:

The nexus between this world and yours is unstable. There are vast amounts of free-floating energy. The power we - on this side - have isn't really our own. It's a universal energy, tapped and controlled ... This is a higher continuum. There's a natural process of energy from lower to higher regions, but the reverse process is risky. ... If they send me back and something goes wrong ... I might be lost between the two regions.
(C.S. 3: 212)

Besides, Silvia explains that in order to come back she needs "some shape to enter" (C.S. 3: 212) because there are no "material forms" (C.S. 3: 212) in the higher continuum. She would have to take something from the human world, "something of clay" (C.S. 3: 212). She would "have to enter ... and reshape ... As He did a long time ago, when the original form was put on your world" (C.S. 3: 212). Silvia clearly alludes to the act of creation as recounted in the Old Testament. She adds, "the One who did that is gone. He passed on upward" (C.S. 3: 212).

The story assumes that many layers of reality exist, the higher the layer the more powerful it is. Silvia states that "the ladder ... seems to keep on going up and up. World after world" (C.S. 3: 212). These statements constitute a kind of fantastic (not really science-fictional) explanation not only of creation but also of God's omnipotence. According to them, God is a being who belongs to a higher level of existence and who created other beings out of clay with his own hands. As Umland notes, the idea of resurrection introduces a taboo, since according to the scriptures only God has the power to create life. Yet, the universe of this story seems to be more influenced by gnosticism than by the Judeo-Christian religion, and the beings that looked like angels were probably not superior to Silvia (Umland, 88-89). According to David Punter, interest in violating taboos is one of the typical elements of gothic or horror fiction. In Dick's story the taboo has to do with the assigned place of men in the natural and divine chain of being (Punter, 335). By introducing a taboo this story, like gothic fiction, places itself at the borders of common social-psychological experience, in those zones that are hidden and unspoken of, in order to maintain a certain social balance.

At the end of the story, Silvia manages to come back, but the effects of this return are disastrous. As soon as she appears in front of Rick, Silvia realizes that something has gone wrong and that she has taken the place of someone else. In

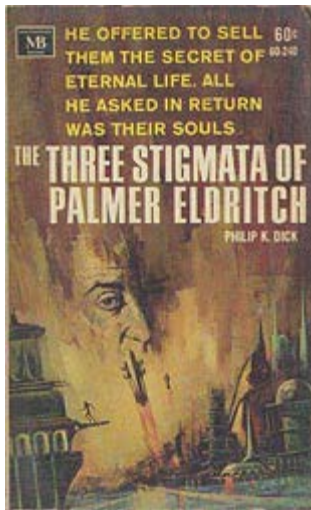
fact, she has taken her sister's body. There is a scene in which Rick sees Betty Lou (Silvia's sister) change and become Silvia, and it is definitely a horror scene, but it is just the beginning of the nightmare atmosphere which engulfs the story's ending. In fact, the process of transformation is not over. Slowly, every member of Silvia's family becomes Silvia. Rick runs away in a fright, but his body is destined to be invaded by Silvia, too. The girl has assumed the role of a revenant who invades the body and mind of any living person and spreads like a virus, a curse, leaving no hope for redemption. At the end of the story, after a useless flight, after he has seen service-station attendants, waitresses and common people change into Silvia before his very eyes, Rick looks at himself in a mirror and sees his face slowly becoming Silvia's. Suddenly, the boy is gone and only Silvia remains. The girl finds herself alone and does not understand what has happened. After analyzing the Christian and Gnostic elements in the story, Umland concludes:

There is no doubt that the spirits which take Silvia are fallen ones rather than risen ones. The symbolic action of their drinking of blood implicitly reveals their condition, since Silvia is made to stand to them in the same relationship that Christ stands to fallen humankind. Significantly, the shades first drink the blood of a lamb, and then feast upon her in Dick's characteristic inversion of the Eucharist sacrament. (Umland, 1995, p. 89)

Umland also compares this short story to Dick's famous novel *The Three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965): "In that novel's concluding action, Palmer Eldritch begins to duplicate himself in his victims, taking over their consciousness and identity precisely as Silvia does" (Umland, p. 90). The latter novel, too, deals with religious and horror themes. On one hand, Palmer Eldritch introduces himself as a new divinity, as the one who can dispense eternal life.⁶ On the other hand, Eldritch really seeks to invade ("snatch") the body and mind of every human being. In speaking about this character and about its genesis in his own mind, Dick introduces him as a terrifying personification of evil:

There I went, one day, walking down the country road to my shack, looking forward to eight hours of writing, in total isolation from all other humans, and I looked up at the sky and saw a face. I didn't really see it, but the face was there, and it was not a human face; it was a vast visage of perfect evil. ... it was immense; it filled a quarter of the sky. It had empty slots for eyes - it was metal and cruel and, worst of all, it was God. ... I decided to exorcise it by writing about it, and I did write about it, and it did go away. ... So *The Three Stigmata* is a novel that came out of powerful atavistic fears in me, fears dating back to my early childhood ... The novel which emerged came out of the most intense anguish possible. (CS 4: 377-378)

In *The Three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* the horror motif is not so central and several other themes characterize the novel and make it a very complex work. The atmosphere of horror dissolves when Palmer Eldritch turns out to be a victim of himself. According to Patricia Warrick, "to escape the world of time is to put on immortality, but if one has descended to the



The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch

underworld of reality, as has Palmer, to be unable to die is to be eternally cursed" (Warrick, p. 110).

The short story "Faith of Our Fathers" (1967) presents a better merging of horror and religion. In this story Dick introduces a dystopic future - recalling in part George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* - in which a Chinese-like communism rules over the world. The protagonist, a civil servant called Chien, realizes that something is wrong with the image of the leader, called "the Absolute Benefactor of the people" (Dick's version of Big Brother), which appears on television daily. Persuaded by a group of pseudo-dissidents, Chien decides to investigate the real nature of the leader. At a party at the Absolute Benefactor's ranch, the protagonist refuses to take the drugs that are offered to him so that he can see the leader in his true essence. Here the horror motif is used in a way that recalls the situation of Palmer Eldritch. The leader turns out to be a non-human and Chien cannot even grasp his shape:

It was, in a sense not there at all; when he [Chien] managed to look directly at it, the shape vanished ... Yet if he turned his head, caught it out of a sidelong glance, he could determine its boundaries.

It was terrible; it blasted him with its awareness. As it moved it drained life from each person in turn; it ate the people who had assembled, passed on, ate again, ate more with endless appetite. It hated; he felt its hate. It loathed; he felt its loathing for everyone present - in fact he shared its loathing. All at once he and everyone else in the big villa were each a twisted slug, and over the fallen slug carcasses the creature savored, lingered. (CS 5:217)

This passage introduces the negative and ominous atmosphere that increases to a cosmic scale in the rest of the scene.

Chien is so shocked that he refuses to completely trust his perceptions. He asks himself whether what he sees is only an illusion: "If this is a hallucination, Chien thought, it is the worst I have ever had; if it is not, then it is evil reality" (CS 5: 217). The protagonist is then struck by a sudden revelation: "I know who you are ... You, the supreme head of the worldwide Party structure. You who destroy whatever living object you touch ... You are God" (CS 5: 217-218). The religious theme suddenly comes to the fore and, as in *The Three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, it merges with the horror motif. Chien's experience now escalates into mystical horror. The Leader/God approaches him and talks to him, but the voice comes from inside the protagonist's head. Like the Christian God, the Absolute Benefactor has created and knows all creatures, but at the same time It hates them and does not care about them. Suddenly, the protagonist perceives the Absolute Benefactor as "a globe ... with fifty thousand eyes, a million eyes - billions: an eye for each living

thing as it waited for each thing to fall, and then stepped [on it]" (CS 5: 218). The end of the story is desolate and without any redeeming hope. There is no way to oppose the horror. The only thing a man can do is deceive himself by building up some consoling myths like the party or the hope for a chance to oppose and overthrow the leader. Although the scenes in which the monster/God appears are quite frightening, this short story is focused more on the theme of a social-political dystopia and on the loss of any hope and faith than on horror motifs. Not even the usual science-fiction element is very strong, as it is almost completely absorbed in the dystopia theme.

I'd like now to go back to one of Dick's first novels, the one that in my opinion best merges science fiction and horror, namely *Eye in the Sky* (1957). This novel gathers up in a science-fiction context the main themes of Dick's work that are connected to horror motifs, namely the religious-mystical theme and the social-political one. These themes and motifs merge in an atmosphere dominated by paranoia. According to Punter, paranoia is another characteristic element (together with taboo) of gothic fiction. Punter calls "paranoiac fiction,"

Fiction in which the reader is placed in a situation of ambiguity with regard to fears within the text, and in which the attribution of persecution remains uncertain and the reader is invited to share in the doubts and uncertainties which pervade the apparent story. It is this element of paranoiac structure which marks the better Gothic works off from mere tame supernaturalism: they continually throw the supernatural into doubt, and in doing so they also serve the important function of removing the illusory halo of certainty from the so-called "natural" world. (Punter, p. 404)

On the basis of this observation, a great part of Dick's work is tied to gothic fiction, since paranoia is one of Dick's favored motifs, and he uses it in the very way Punter praises.

Eye in the Sky begins as a typical science fiction novel, introducing a future setting in a para-military structure. In this setting scientists try to reach new frontiers of knowledge through experiments with an instrument called a "Bevatron." Laws, the colored guide, explains that "the Belmont Bevatron was constructed by the Atomic Energy Commission for the purpose of advanced research into cosmic ray phenomena artificially generated within controlled conditions" (*Eye in the Sky*, p. 14).⁷ As is often the case in science fiction, the experiment ends in an accident which involves the guide and a group of visitors. After the accident, time seems to freeze and re-start several times. The first part of the novel is the most interesting for our purposes, since the reader shares the fears and incertitude into which the absurd situation has plunged the characters. After the characters have found an explanation for what is happening around them, the atmosphere becomes less mysterious. Yet, a veil of inquietude and an overwhelming sense of paranoia linger on in their lives. The Bevatron accident produces a series of possible worlds, of alternative realities which match the vision of the world some of the characters involved in the accident have.

As he wakes up in a hospital bed shortly after the incident, Hamilton, the protagonist, discovers he was lightly injured and goes back home with his wife Marsha, who has only had a few scratches. At the hospital both Hamilton and

Marsha realize that something is wrong: "Since I came around, it always seems to be just behind me. I've felt it. As if ... I expect to turn around and see - I don't know what" (EitS, 25-26). This sentence is only the beginning of a growing atmosphere of paranoia which is increased by the fact that the hospital doctor seems "just sort of - well, a blob. Like doctors you see in toothpaste ads" (EitS, 26). Later, when speaking about the accident, Hamilton swears and immediately a bee stings his leg. At first, the protagonist does not pay much attention to this fact, but he remembers it later on when he experiences a real horror scene. After teasing Miss Reiss, another victim of the Bevatron incident, with an exaggeratedly macabre joke, Hamilton has no time to repent or apologize as he is suddenly covered with a shower of locusts which appear from the air in the middle of his living room. As he is getting rid of the insects, Hamilton realizes that there is a logic behind the strange things that are happening to him. Every time he behaves badly, he is punished. The following day, Laws shows Hamilton that an amulet can heal their wounds. The situation becomes even absurdly ridiculous when Hamilton applies for a new job to a firm called EDA, Electronic Development Agency, and learns that the firm deals with physical communication with God.

Since he feels he is imprisoned in a reality that to him makes little or no sense at all, Hamilton decides to ask God Himself for an explanation. With the help of an umbrella and through some kind of ritual which involves the presence of a priest, holy water and the recital of "that up-going part" (EitS, p. 82) of the Christian Credo, Hamilton and his friend McFeyffe manage literally to ascend to heaven on the handle of the umbrella. After passing the different skies of a geocentric world, the two come before God, an immense eye that scares the life out of them and burns the umbrella with a single look. The two characters fall from the sky, but they land unharmed in the prophet's homeland. There Hamilton learns that the world in which they are living is produced by the mind of Arthur Silvester, another member of the group of tourists who were involved in the Bevatron accident. Silvester's reality looks paradoxically and absurdly up-to-date to the readers of our day. In fact, the world created by the old soldier's mind is imbued with religion, but not with Christianity. On the contrary, the religion that pervades this world is a kind of pseudo-Islam. The same faith that today is placed side by side with extremist practices and terrorism occupies the mind of an American ex-soldier, a bigot who represents the dullness of a certain way of perceiving the world, a way that is typical of a conservative and fundamentalist religious culture. Silvester embodies that brand of American bigotry that is historically and traditionally connected to a form of Christian puritanism. Yet, for today's reader the fact that American bigotry is tied to an Islam-like religion opens the way to a series of comments. Certainly, any reference to the current international situation would produce an intriguing, though strained, interpretation of a novel written almost fifty years ago. What is important, though, is the author's undoubtedly negative criticism of any form of religious extremism.

To eliminate Silvester's influence on reality is not enough. One by one, other members of the group involved in the incident exert their own influence. Old Mrs. Pritchett creates a world without sexual distinctions, where all the ugly and filthy things (according to the unquestionable judgement of Mrs. Pritchett herself, of course) simply disappear. After this bizarre and somewhat comic adventure, another horror-tale world is created. It is the world of paranoid Miss Reiss. The first clue that leads the protagonists to realize that they have not yet come back to

the "real" world is introduced by means of suspense and horror-fiction techniques. The Hamiltons think they have finally found peace, but the quiet atmosphere of their home is broken when "her [Marsha's] screams began" (EitS, p. 180). Also Hamilton is upset by the scene when he runs to help his wife. Only after he has been struck by the horrified reactions of the protagonists, by Marsha's screaming and by Hamilton's effort not to cry, does the reader learn what has caused all this commotion. The description is plain and direct, without any grisly touch or detail, yet it is quite frightening:

Miss Reiss had never liked cats ... The thing on the floor was Ninny Numbcat [Hamilton's domestic cat]. He had been turned inside out. But he was still alive; the tangled mess was a still-functioning organism. ... Quivering, palpitating, the moistly-shining blob of bones and tissue was undulating sightlessly across the kitchen floor. ... The grotesque mass, in three and a half hours, had managed to drag itself in a kind of peristaltic wave, halfway across the kitchen. (EitS, 181)

This is just the beginning. First, Hamilton is almost seized by a monster hiding in his basement. Silky, the girl Hamilton had met in Silvester's world as a sinner and who had simply disappeared in Mrs Pritchett's world, has now turned into some kind of spider-like monster. Then, the Hamiltons' house becomes a living thing that tries to "swallow" all the members of the group who have gathered there. This is one of the most terrifying scenes in the whole novel. From the kitchen faucets runs not water, but "warm, thick, red blood" (EitS, 197). "From the furnace vent in the hall came a rhythmic wheezing. ... The air that billowed out was warm - and fragrant! Not the dead, stale air of a mechanical appliance, but the personal, body-warmed breath generated by a living organism" (EitS, 198). The floor and the walls are "warm - like human flesh" (EitS, 199), and the carpet has turned into "a warm, spongy surface, it was already becoming moist" (EitS, 200). This is the most horror-driven part of the novel. Irrational fears and phobias have become real. The pseudo-scientific explanation of the distortion of reality is not much help to the protagonists. On one hand, Hamilton and his friends know what has caused their awful situation and they can try and change it. On the other hand, what is hidden in a person's mind represents an unpredictable universe. The characters may have known that Miss Reiss was a bit paranoid, but they could not be prepared for the horrors that haunt the Hamiltons' house.

In the end, Miss Reiss falls victim to her own paranoia and to the other characters who have been transformed into insect-like monsters. But the adventure is not over yet. It is now the turn of a political paranoia, a world in which communists rule the United States and harshly suppress small resistance groups of hard-core capitalists. Hamilton suspects that this world may be generated by the mind of his wife Marsha, and Marsha herself is almost convinced that this is the case. At the beginning of the novel, Hamilton had been expelled from the missile research center where he worked because his wife was suspected of being a communist. The novel here deals with the same theme that haunts Dick's short stories of the 1950s, namely the fear of the stranger and the unknown. In *Eye in the Sky* that fear takes shape in an America ruled by reds. Dick's irony is not simply represented by this grotesque anti-capitalist fantasy. The author's witty touch emerges as we learn that the distorted political reality was not created by Marsha but by McFeyffe, the "captain of the security cops who prowled around the missile plant" (EitS, 4) and

the one who first had accused Marsha herself. Thus, the ingenious defense that Hamilton had tried to sustain at the beginning - by arguing that the one who accused his wife was just trying to protect himself from suspicion - turns out to be true. Ironically, the man who was supposed to embody the American standard of life and who was committed to defend it from possible communist saboteurs, represents the greatest danger to America itself. The narrator's hints and comments, in a period of witch-hunting and McCarthyism, do not need further elucidation.

In conclusion, Dick may not be a writer of horror novels, yet he frequently exploited features of that genre to create his stories of multiple realities, whether parallel and distorted. Dick deals with paranoia and taboos - central elements of horror fiction - from different perspectives. The precarious psychological and mental situation of many of his characters fuses with Dick's inclination to create universes that fall apart.⁸ Dick himself, in an essay, admits: "I like to build universes that do fall apart. I like to see them come unglued, and I like to see how the characters in the novels cope with this problem. Do not believe - and I am deadly serious when I say this - that order and stability are always good, in a society or in a universe" (Dick "How to Build," 262). So, even Dick's most well-known novels, although they are science fiction novels, present ominous atmospheres which make them similar to horror stories. Since they introduce horror themes from a science fiction perspective, some of Dick's short stories and novels characterize him as a science-fictional-horror writer. *Eye in the Sky* is a paramount example of what I have been arguing here. In fact, along with its investment in an atmosphere of horror, the novel presents some of the most important and recurrent themes of Dick's whole work, namely his characters' delicate mental balance, the multiplication of realities, the splitting between inner and outer worlds,⁹ and the religious theme. Finally, another element common to the majority of Dick's novels is the lack of a conclusive solution to the plot. At the end of *Eye in the Sky*, the characters think they have come back to the "real" world, but when Laws makes a promise that betrays too much self-confidence, he is immediately stung by an insect. Perhaps this is just a coincidence, perhaps the altered reality sequence is not over yet, or perhaps no "real" reality exists and we are all prisoners of a more or less distorted mental world of our own.

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Notes

¹  For a discussion of gothic literature, see David Punter's *The Literature of Terror*. In particular, chapter IV deals with, among others, Mary Shelley, and chapter IX with Herbert G. Wells.


²  My emphases.


³  Further reference to and quotations from *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick* will be indicated in brackets with the acronym C.S. followed by the volume number and page number. The sources are those indicated in the bibliography.


⁴  As Umland notes, "the title of the story comes from a line in a Song from Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (IV, ii: 39-53) as does the female protagonist's name" (Umland, 1995, p. 85).


⁵  I use here the term "world" to indicate one of those co-existing possible

realities that characterize Dick's work. In this same story the author supposes that different levels of reality, the higher being the less material, exist. In general, almost all of Dick's works can be interpreted according to possible worlds theory. This theory was developed within modal logic by philosophers like Jaakko Hintikka, Saul Kripke and David Lewis, and then it was used in semiotics and literary theory by scholars like Umberto Eco, Lubomir Dolezel and Thomas Pavel. I argue that Dick created, in his work, his own theory of possible worlds through the development of one of the typical themes of science fiction, namely the existence of alternate realities which differ in more or less important ways from the reality we know and experience every day. Dick used this theme not only to write some good social science fiction, but also to investigate, in his short stories and novels, first epistemological and then ontological issues, calling into question the existence of a "real" reality itself, objective and independent from individual perceptions of it. In this sense we may say that Philip K. Dick developed his own take on possible worlds (even though he did not use this term) independently from what was happening in the modal logic field (but starting from the same philosophical premises that can be found in Leibnitz's work). Dick's interest in the opposition and clash between objective and subjective realities (that I explain in note 9) is part of this same quest.

⁶  "'God,' Eldritch said, 'promises eternal life. I can do better; I can deliver it.'" *The Three stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, p. 86.

⁷  Further reference to and quotations from *Eye in the Sky* will be indicated with the acronym EitS in brackets and followed by the page number(s). The source is that indicated in the bibliography.

⁸  Francesca Rispoli focused her analysis of Dick's work on the concept of worlds that fall apart in her monograph *Universi che Cadono a Pezzi. La Fantascienza di Philip K. Dick*.

⁹  In a letter of 1978 Dick explains his ideas on the relations between subjective and objective realities: "I have been very much influenced by the thinking of the European existential psychologists, who posit this: for each person there are two worlds, the *idios kosmos*, which is a unique, private world, and the *koinos kosmos*, which literally means shared world (just as *idios* means private). No person can tell which part of his total worldview is *idios kosmos* and which is *koinos kosmos* ... and in all of my books ... the protagonist is suffering from the breakdown of his *idios kosmos* - at least we hope that's what's breaking down, not the *koinos kosmos*. As his *idios kosmos* breaks down, the objective shared universe emerges more clearly ... but it may be quite different from the *idios kosmos* which he is in the process of losing. Hence, strange transformations take shape." (Mackey 1988, pp. 22-23 -This passage was taken from a "Letter of Comment" included in *Philip K Dick: Electric Shepherd*. Ed. by Bruce Gillespie. Melbourne: Nostrilia Press, 1975. 31-32).