The Nature and Function of Images in the Science Fiction Works of Philip K. Dick

ブアリブ, アラン

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The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the nature and function of images in the science fiction works of Philip K. Dick. The thesis is divided into three chapters that explore images from three different perspectives, respectively metaphysical, socio-economic, and psychoanalytical-literary. There are four main contributions of this thesis to the body of criticism on Dick: 1) a careful use of the concept of the simulacrum to understand Dick’s problematization of representation, 2) an original emphasis on the formal effects of images—in particular media—on personal and social relationships, with a special attention to isolation and the process of consumption as a signifying practice, 3) a methodical exploration of the Dickian protagonist’s desire to escape, its possible origins, and the spatial and temporal hatches he fantasizes about, and 4) an attempt to understand gender bias in the works of Dick by relating them to Dick’s interrogation on reality.

In the first chapter, I examine those works by Dick where images are treated as magical objects capable of having an effect on the very texture of reality. Such issues as the relationships between copies and models, the ontological and axiological differences between the former and the latter, and the fear associated with representation are considered. The core of this chapter is an in-depth discussion of The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch using the key concept of the simulacrum to account for the complete subversion of reality in the novel. By regarding the eponymous character Palmer Eldritch as a simulacrum of the Christian Divinity, I show that the narrative dynamic of the novel expresses the alternation of two movements of domestication and destabilization.

In the second chapter, it is no longer the substantiality of images that interests us but their social character, in particular the role they play in mediating human relationships. After examining several examples of Dick’s fiction where personal human relations are articulated by various images and media systems such as the polls, the electoral system, and the
commodity system, the chapter ends with a long analysis of the separation induced by media
in the short story “Chains of Air, Web of Aether” through the lens of Guy Debord and Jean
Baudrillard.

The third chapter surveys the contradictory views that Dick puts forth about the creation
of images (and fantasy in general), when he seems to desire that a) images can achieve a
critique of the state of things, while simultaneously fearing that b) they compensate for reality,
and are therefore coopted by dominant forces and used as safety valves to release social
discontent. Moreover, this chapter also considers several works in which Dick seems to view
the reality principle as something inherently gendered, with female characters cast as enemies
of fantasy, at least of those fantasies that potentially express the revolt of the male protagonist
against the definition of reality forced upon him by his society.

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