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

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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.

論文目次:

Abstract......................................................................................................................... 4
Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 7
   Epistemology and Ontology .......................................................................................... 8
   Structure of the Thesis ................................................................................................... 10
   Notes ............................................................................................................................. 12
Chapter One: Images as Magical Objects................................................................. 14
   I. Introduction ............................................................................................................... 15
   II. Similarity Magic ...................................................................................................... 19
   III. Contagious Magic .................................................................................................. 21
   IV. Nominal Realism .................................................................................................... 23
   V. The Apotheosis of Palmer Eldritch: Simulation and Simulacrum of the Divine
      in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* .............................................................. 27
      Introduction ............................................................................................................... 28
      1. Simulacrum ......................................................................................................... 29
      2. Can-D: Fake Eucharist and Illusion .................................................................. 32
      3. Chew-Z: Inverted Eucharist and Simulation .................................................... 35
      4. Desire for God ..................................................................................................... 41
      Conclusion: The Stuff Virtual Reality Is Made Of .............................................. 47
   Notes ............................................................................................................................. 53
Chapter Two: Images as Social Relations ........................................... 59

I. Introduction ....................................................................................... 60
   1. From the Material Mode of Being to the Social Mode of Being of
      Images ......................................................................................... 60
   2. Complexity of Dick’s Discourse on Media .................................. 65
   3. The Content and the Form of Images ......................................... 68

II. The Ideological Content of Images .................................................. 69

III. Ideology as Form ............................................................................. 71
   1. Indicting the Media: Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard .............. 71
      Requiem for Big Brother ............................................................... 71
      Unilaterality and Reversibility .................................................... 73
   2. Polling ......................................................................................... 75
   3. Election, Politics, and Television .............................................. 77
   4. Conspicuous Consumption ....................................................... 80
   5. “A Human Life Won and a Synthetic Media Image Wrecked”: Media,
      Communication, and Alienation in “Chains of Air, Web of Aether” ⋯ 88
      Introduction ................................................................................ 88
      “Hell is Other People”: Alienation from Others ....................... 89
      The Self as Other: Idolatry, Narcissism, and Self-Alienation ...... 93
      Structure of the Media and Social Control ............................... 100

Notes .................................................................................................. 105

Chapter Three: Fantasy, or: Images as Compensation for and Critique of Reality .......... 110

I. Introduction: Escape from the Real ............................................... 111

II. Desire, Openness, and Closure in Three Early Short Stories .......... 120
   1. Break on Through to the Other Side: The Inestimable Value of
      Novelty and the Quest for Otherness ......................................... 122
   2. Paradise Lost .............................................................................. 132
   3. The Individual, the Social, and the Death of the Subject ............ 136
   4. The World as a Picture: The Aesthetics of Power and Closure .... 145
   5. Ambivalence, or How “to Hold Two Opposing Ideas in Mind at
      the Same Time and Retain the Ability to Function” ................. 148
      A Portrait of the Artist as a Rebel .............................................. 150
      The Double-Edged Sword of Fantasy: Critique and
      Compensation ............................................................................ 152