

Swallowing Simulacra : The Cases of Philip K. Dick and Shinji Kajio

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Bouarib Allan

Every reader of Dick is familiar with . . . this reality fluctuation . . . in which the psychic world as it were goes outside, and reappears in the form of simulacra.

Frederic Jameson. *Archaeologies of the Future*

The purpose of this paper is to compare two short stories that deal with simulacra in order to point out common features in the way they describe the interactions between these simulacra and the “Real”¹ world. It is worth noting that none of these stories involve computerized simulacra such as virtual reality, but instead utilize physical devices – a scale model of a town in “Small Town” and a maquette of the Universe in “Reiko’s Universe Box” – that aim to simulate “Reality.”

The first story, “Small Town” (1954) by Philip K. Dick, presents the growing fascination of the main character with the model of a town and culminates with the replacement of the diegetic “Real” world by the simulacrum of the model. The second work, “Reiko’s Universe Box” (1981) 「玲子の箱宇宙」 is a short story by Shinji Kajio (梶尾真治) which depicts the destruction of “Reality” by a simulated universe contained in a box received as a present.

After a brief outline of these stories, this paper analyzes the dynamic by which the expansion of the main characters’ subjectivity beyond its original frontiers eventually leads to an overthrow of the “objective” reality. Both stories seem to locate the origin of this process in the protagonists’ inability to relate to others, specifically with their spouses. As a result, these characters cease to communicate with their surrounding and instead devote all their attention to a simulation of the world into which they gradually disappear. Reversing this autistic flight from “Reality,” both stories conclude by depicting the sudden overthrow of the “objective” world by the simulacra.

1. A brief outline of the stories

The main character of “Small Town,” Vernon Haskel, is exhausted by his life in Woodland, a small town in California, where he has been working for the past twenty years. His bitterness and hatred are mainly due to his conflicts with his colleagues and his boss, and to his empty marital life. Every day he locks himself up in the cellar and devotes his time to the only activity he seems to care for: the construction of a giant maquette of Woodland. One day he decides that his maquette does not need to be a perfect imitation and thus proceeds to render his own vision of the town. He quits his job and begins dedicating all his time and energy into remaking the maquette, investing his whole subjectivity into the task. Surprisingly, instead of Haskel disappearing into his substitute world, the climax of the story reveals that it is “Reality” itself that has been replaced by Haskel’s maquette.

In “Reiko’s Universe Box,” Reiko, a newly married housewife, becomes fascinated by one of the wedding gifts, a box containing a miniature cosmos simulating the Universe. As her husband Ikutarô dedicates most of his time to his work and to an extra-marital affair, he begins to neglect his wife. Feeling extremely lonely at home she discovers that staring into the box has a soothing effect and she develops an affective link with the miniature universe. As her initially benign interest assumes abnormal proportions and develops into monomania, the gap with Ikutarô becomes so deep that communication between the spouses is increasingly hampered. One day Ikutarô becomes enraged at Reiko

and damages the universe box causing the formation of a black hole inside the box that starts swallowing everything outside of it. After Ikutarô has been swallowed as well, Reiko happily plunges after him into the black hole, just realizing her revenge has been accomplished.

2. Relationship problems as a source of instability

Interestingly both narratives devote a large space to describe the problems encountered by the main characters in their relationships with other people. Vernon Haskell is described as an individual who entertains conflictual relationships with others. His employer's despotism, his neighbors' vexations, and especially the barrenness of his marital life with his unfaithful wife Madge, all cause Haskell to hate his present life in Woodland. His disappointment with "Reality" induces him to look for fulfillment in the synthetic world of models and miniature trains, a world from which he realizes he has the power to exclude anything he judges unpleasant. In the case of Reiko, the narration makes clear that the failure of her relationship with Ikutarô is central to the development of her fascination with the universe box. Indeed, her urge to escape from "Reality" into the beautiful depths of the universe box arises from her loneliness:

That night, too, she waited for [Ikutarô] out on the veranda. Tears sprang unexpectedly from her eyes, though she could not understand the reason at first. Then it came to her.

She was lonely.

... And she remembered the universe box. (226)

Contrasting with the bleakness of their daily routines, Haskell and Reiko view simulacra as a refuge into which they can withdraw, and, as a result, they slowly lose contact with reality.

However, because escapism is generally condemned as a form of moral regression, it is not surprising that Haskell's and Reiko's infatuation for their models is reproved by their respective spouses, Madge and Ikutarô. While the former expresses her disgust at seeing "a grown man . . . playing with model trains" (345), the latter despises the universe box and the inexplicable attraction it exerts on his wife who

appears to him as "some slack-faced drug addict" (230). In both relationships, one member occupies a dominant position thanks to the authority bestowed by his/her putative objectivity, whereas the other is weakened by the difficulties posed by his/her growing estrangement with consensual reality. Interestingly, the hierarchy within the couple is not a function of gender, but reproduces the admitted difference in value between objectivity and subjectivity. Both stories, however, challenge this hierarchy in the end through the depiction of a dynamic by which the main characters' subjectivity merges with simulacra and expands until it assimilates the "objective" reality.

3. The dynamic of the expansion of subjectivity

Both narratives regard conflicts with others and the ensuing psychological distress as the starting point of the dual processes that affect the characters' subjectivity: the first being an absorption of their subjectivity into simulacra, followed by a dilatation of these simulacra beyond their original frontiers until they in turn absorb the "Real."

Firstly, the simulacra are appropriated by Haskell and Reiko in a move which is reminiscent of the way children take possession of a coveted toy:

No, she [Reiko] thought, this is not a miniature universe but my private universe. (228, emphasis in the original)

His trains. And his town. Haskell bent over the miniature houses and streets, his heart glowing with pride. He had built it – himself...the whole town . . . He had built it; the town was his. (*Dick* 342–43)

Reiko's mere claim of ownership is complicated in "Small Town" where Haskell sees himself not only as the owner of the maquette, but also as its creator and therefore its master. In the position of a demiurge, he decides to completely modify the maquette in order that it suits his tastes and moral exigencies. Even though Reiko does not try to alter the universe box, she does not content herself with merely staring into it; instead she adopts an active attitude, buying astronomy books in order to understand the laws of a universe she gradually comes to consider her own. It is worth noting that it is only after she has laid claim to the universe

box that Reiko notices that it is “really alive!” (228) as if she had indeed animated it through her commitment. Part of what is at stake here is the issue of power. While mundane reality is regarded as intractable by Haskell and Reiko, the space of simulation created by the simulacra of the maquettes can be manipulated, submitted to the will, or at least its laws can be learned and possibly mastered. For both characters, the space of simulation does not constitute a mere model of “Reality,” but rather, an improved version that evinces ideal qualities (the beauty of Reiko’s universe box, the rectitude of Haskell’s small town) of which “plain” reality is deprived, and on which they can exert their power. At the end of this process of appropriation, subjectivity has completely fused into the simulacra, or as Dick puts it: it has “gone into [its] other world” (352).

However, the frustrated self cannot be satisfied by merely disappearing into simulation. The rancor accumulated over the months demands vengeance upon the “Real” world. This revenge is accomplished, in a move that is typical in many of Dick’s works,² when the private self invades the “objective” world, using the simulacrum as a way to claim authority over territories previously beyond its control. Thus, in “Small Town,” Dick minutely describes how Haskell rebuilds his maquette to suit his own tastes and as a way to punish his enemies: shops and institutions felt to have caused him prejudice are destroyed and people who are supposed to have wronged him are removed from his new town. Then, when the model is deemed perfect, it mysteriously supersedes and replaces the “Real” world according to the very Dickian idea that “the mind constructs reality. Frames it. Creates it” (353). Although Reiko’s need for revenge is less marked than Haskell’s, Kajio’s narrative nonetheless suggests that Reiko has reasons to hate her husband by linking her withdrawal into the universe box to Ikutarô’s adultery. It is only when the simulacrum swallows Ikutarô that Reiko eventually understands that the universe box functions as “her revenge” (234).

In a brilliant analysis of Dick’s major novels of the 1960s, N. Katherine Hayles invokes psychoanalysis, politics and cybernetics in order to show that the protagonists of these novels experience an “alternation between [an] expanding self and [a] shrinking

self” due to both what she calls “the constitution of subjectivity under capitalism” (170), and what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr refers to as “the difficulty of having to live in relationships without being able to define a stable self” (319). In particular, Hayles uses the cybernetic notions of observer and system to posit that the typical Dickian character reacts to psychological instabilities by locating the formation of the boundaries of his self in “Reality,” such a move being possible by virtue of Dick’s belief that “the mind constructs reality” (353).

Here I would like to suggest that the issue of boundaries between self and world is heralded by “Small Town” and repeated in “Reiko’s Universe Box” in ways that are less elaborate than the complex presentations seen in Dick’s later novels. To be sure, the influence of capitalism, which constitutes a cornerstone of Hayles’s interpretation of boundaries’ dissolution, is not explicitly addressed by either short story. However, it should be noted that 1) Hayles’s contention that ontological and psychological instabilities originate in interpersonal relationship difficulties is verified in both narratives, and 2) the dual processes identified above are similar to the oscillation described by Hayles. Faced with interpersonal problems that they are unable to endure, Haskell and Reiko try to escape “reality” by entirely investing their subjectivity into the space created by simulacra. At this point, the protagonists are faced with a reflexive paradox leading to what Hayles describes as “the infinite regress of observers watching other observers” (189) when they realize that they are both observer and observed. Reiko thus describes her vertigo:

Then, maybe there’s someone like me who is gazing into her own universe box, within which there may be a planet like the Earth, on which someone may be looking into her universe, within which... Maybe I’m in someone else’s universe box and she’s wondering about me and whether I might be here...!

She went on mumbling about the infinite regression of universe boxes wheeling through her head.³ (231, emphasis in the original)

The possible existence of an endless regress of worlds further undermines the ontological asymmetry between the putative real world and simulation. Not

only is the mind regarded as capable of constructing reality but the "Real" world itself comes to be viewed as a mere level in an infinite series of universes nested within each other.

To briefly recapitulate, in two stories that have been discussed interpersonal relationship difficulties appear to be prerequisite to launch the dynamic of the expansion of subjectivity. First, the self is compelled to look for an exit from daily reality into the synthetic realms of miniature models; in that sense, the character's disappointment with "Reality" can be said to trigger the complete investment of his/her subjectivity into the reality of the simulacra. Then, although subjectivity is expected to have been completely absorbed into simulation, it triumphantly reappears when the simulated realities generated by the maquettes begin to "pour out" into "Reality." With the absorption of the material world into the simulation, the self can finally fulfill its long awaited revenge against the "Real" world.

Notes

¹ In this paper, "Reality," "Real" world and "objective" world all refer to reality as existing independently from the mind (metaphysical realism). Quotation marks are used because there is no consensus over this view.

² Consider for example "The World She Wanted" (1953), "The Commuter" (1953), "The Electric Ant" (1969), *Ubik* (1969) or *Flow my Tears, the Policeman Said* (1974).

³ Other science fiction examples of infinite regress can be found in Edmund Hamilton's "Fessenden's Worlds" (1937) and Dick's "The Trouble With Bubbles" (1953).

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Every reader of Philip K. Dick is familiar with the notion of the simulacrum illustrated in such novels as *The Simulacra* (1964) or *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), in which technologies (respectively media and biotechnologies) are used to construct fake human beings and/or generate fake realities. However, in the early short story “Small Town” (1954), the simulation and subsequent overthrow of reality by a miniature model is depicted without specific references to technology. Indeed, here the simulacrum appears to derive its potency first and foremost from the main character’s initial dissatisfaction with reality.

Likewise, Shinji Kajio’s “Reiko’s Universe Box” (1981) describes the destruction of the diegetic reality by a simulated universe contained in a seemingly harmless box that one character receives as a present. As in “Small Town,” what is remarkable in Kajio’s story is not only the capacity of the simulation to enthrall the protagonist, but also the tendency it evinces to literally replace mundane reality.

The purpose of this paper is to compare “Small Town” and “Reiko’s Universe Box” in order to point out common features in the way they describe the interactions between simulacra and the “real” world. More precisely, this paper analyzes the dynamic by which the expansion of the main characters’ subjectivity beyond its original frontiers eventually leads to an overthrow of the “objective” reality. Both stories seem to locate the origin of this process in the protagonists’ discontent with daily life and their inability to relate to others. As a result, these characters cease to communicate with their surrounding and instead devote all their attention to a simulation of the world into which they are gradually absorbed. Ultimately reversing this autistic flight from “Reality,” both stories conclude by picturing the sudden swallowing of the diegetic “objective” world by the simulacra.