“A Human Life Won and a Synthetic Media Image Wrecked”:
Media, Communication, and Alienation in Philip K. Dick’s
“Chains of Air, Web of Aether”

Allan Bouarib

The alienation of the spectator, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires.

Guy Debord. The Society of the Spectacle

We know that the simple presence of television transforms our habitat into a kind of archaic, closed-off cell, into a vestige of human relations whose survival is highly questionable.

Jean Baudrillard. The Ectasy of Communication

Introduction

The presentation of media in the works of Philip K. Dick has been the subject of insightful analyses by a number of scholars such as Peter Fitting, Fredric Jameson, Jill Galvan and Anthony Enns. Thus, Fitting interprets the characters’ addictive use of the technological apparatus called P.P. layout in The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch (1965) as a “critique of the role and function of television in our lives” (227). Likewise, Galvan treats the empathy box as a media technology which allows the followers of the pseudo-religion called Mercerism to share empathy in Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (1968).

The point of contention lies with whether Dick views media as a neutral technology merely serving the interests of political power or, like Jean Baudrillard, as instrumentally totalitarian. The instrumental position is thus stated by Galvan:

Do Androids Dream [of Electric Sheep?] does not bear out Baudrillard’s somewhat Luddite perspective on the problems of an advanced technological society. In Dick’s narrative version of mass-media culture, the fault lies not with a totalitarian essence in the media itself; rather, all blame falls upon the authoritarian forces who bring the image to life. On this matter, then, Dick would most likely disagree with Baudrillard, as with Marshall McLuhan before him: the medium is not the message; it simply provides a venue—in itself neutral—for the affirmation of political power. (422, emphasis in the original)¹

Scott Bukatman goes in the same direction when he claims that “it is less technology per se than the mythifying uses to which it is directed by the forces of an instrumental reason that serves as the targets of Dick’s satire” (53).

In contrast, for Jameson, Dick’s writings evince the “fear of a ‘certain fusion’ with the medium and a loss of indi-

¹ Although in this passage Galvan contests the relevance of the Baudrillardian perspective on media for the reading of Dick’s works, she brilliantly invokes (420-21) Baudrillard’s critique of Roman Jakobson’s model of communication to construe an important exchange between two characters of Dick’s novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?
vidual autonomy" (371). This fusion and its spectacular manifestations are extensively surveyed by Enns who demonstrates that Dick envisages consciousness itself as a "medial interface" (70), a field "thoroughly extended into and penetrated by the electric media environment" (69). According to this interpretation, then, in Dick's fiction the very exposure of human consciousness to media has both psychological effects for the protagonist (schizophrenia) and ontological consequences in the diegetic reality (dissolution of boundaries between self and world and the countless reality breakdowns that pervade Dick's works).

It is difficult to favor one position over the other because the portrayal of media technologies either as a vast and secret enterprise to control citizens and sustain political power (the novel The Penultimate Truth [1964] is a canonic example), or, contrastingly, as an intractable force that in itself poses a threat to human agency and personal integrity, can often be both located in one single work (The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch is a case in point). Likewise, Dick's non-fiction stories also abound with conflicting formulations of these two positions. Enns thus quotes a passage of one of the author's speeches where he explicitly describes technology as 1) an impartial instrument that is potentially liberatory, before insisting on 2) the menace of reification: as technological artifacts are themselves becoming alive, human beings are becoming more machine-like (70-71). To these two perspectives singled out by Enns, one may add Dick's following commentary on one of his short stories:

I was already beginning to suppose in my head the growing domination of machines over man, especially the machines we voluntarily surround ourselves with... I always feared that my own TV set or iron or toaster would, in the privacy of my apartment, when no one else was around to help me, announce to me that they had taken over, and here was a list of rules I was to obey. I never like the idea of doing what a machine says. (The Minority Report 375-76)

In contrast to the arguably more subtle idea of the reification of human beings, Dick's technophobia endorses in this passage a literal and familiar Matrix-like scenario of technological enslavement by machines, a fear as old as Samuel Butler's Erewhon (1872). All this demonstrates that what characterizes the Dickian discourse on media technologies—and technology in general—is heterogeneity rather than coherence.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the existing analysis of the depiction of media technologies in the works of Philip K. Dick by considering an example of his fiction where media environments do not seem to be viewed solely as tools for state surveillance or propaganda, but instead as mechanisms of social control that operate indirectly by isolating consumers. To that purpose, I want to consider the short story "Chains of Air, Web of Aether" (1980) [hereafter "Chains"], which explicitly reflects on the deleterious effects of media technologies on human relationships and communication in a manner reminiscent of Edward Morgan Forster's prophetic masterpiece "The Machine Stops" (1909). Notwithstanding its science fiction setting, Dick's story remains for the most part realistic and consistently focuses on the details of the interaction between its protagonists. In particular, it develops throughout an opposition between direct and mediated communication and a criticism of the process by which human relationships are mediated by images in terms that may be fruitfully analyzed by referring to Guy Debord's The Society of the Spectacle (1970) and the early Baudrillard of The Consumer Society (1998 [1970]) and For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1981 [1972]).

I. Indicting the Media: Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard

1. Requiem for Big Brother

The idea that social control is ensured indirectly by isolating individuals through technological means of communication (rather than by direct surveillance carried out by armed police) was hardly new at the time Debord wrote The Society of the Spectacle in 1967. For

2 Even though the story discussed here hints at a coercive governmental power, the alienation and the breakdown of communication it depicts are described as direct consequences of the structure of mediated interactions.

3 I will also refer to Dick's novel The Divine Invasion (1981) for it integrates and develops further the plot of "Chains."

4 The original date of publication of the French edition of Baudrillard's work is added in brackets so that the reader can locate these works within Baudrillard's evolving thought.
instance, when Lewis Mumford claims in 1961 that "with the present means of long-distance mass communication, sprawling isolation has proved an even more effective method for keeping a population under control" (qtd. in Debord 115), he already points out the obsolete character of dystopian visions of all-encompassing surveillance à la Orwell. Debord's original contribution is to place images at the center of this strategy of control by arguing that interactions between people are more and more mediated by images, signaling the passage into a new mode of social relation that he calls the spectacle. The spectacle pushes commodity reification to a further, "imagic" stage: "The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving" (24) in which while "the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings" (28). As images interpose between people, draw their entire attention and require an ever increasing emotional investment, they ultimately isolate spectators into a quasi phenomenological bubble while themselves becoming endowed with human-like attributes. Man's relations with his own kind are replaced by a narcissistic intercourse with the images of the spectacle. As Debord lyrically puts it, the spectator is "imprisoned in a flattened universe bounded by the screen of the spectacle that has enthralled him... knows no one but the fictitious speakers who subject him to a one-way monologue about their commodities and the politics of their commodities. The spectacle as a whole serves as his looking-glass" (140, emphasis in the original).

Baudrillard begins his analysis of media by challenging both the Orwellian view of media as a "state periscope spying on everyone's private life" (Critique 172) and the unorthodox Marxist's thesis—advocated by Hanz Magnus Enzensberger—according to which media are fundamentally liberatory tools which are simply 'monopolized by the dominant classes' (Critique 168) as a means of ideological dissemination. In contrast, for Baudrillard, who inherits Marshall McLuhan's emphasis on form (vide his famous statement "the medium is the message"), it is the very structure of the media that should be held responsible for its totalitarian effects: "It is not as vehicles of content, but in their form and very operation, that media induce a social relation; and this is not an exploitative relation: it involves the abstraction, separation and abolition of exchange itself" (Critique 169). To put it in other words, this simply means that notwithstanding what they are about (their message), media institute, promote and generalize a particular mode of personal and social relations. Thus, to be successful, social control as per Baudrillard would neither require a panopticon-like apparatus to watch over people, nor a relay for the ideological management of the consciousness of citizens (the manufacture of consent): "The situation as it stands is more efficient than that: it is the certainty that people are no longer speaking to each other, that they are definitively isolated in the face of a speech without response" (Critique 172, emphasis in the original). In the Baudrillardian version of "decentralized totalitarianism" (Critique 181), social control is indirectly carried out by replacing "authentic" interactions by a "simulation model of communication" (Critique 179), and the media are the most reliable agents of this substitution.

2. Unilaterality and Reversibility

Although Debord's and Baudrillard's denigration of the media shares commonalities, there also exist profound discrepancies as is shown by the former's claim that if "all contact between people has become totally dependent on these means of instantaneous communication, it is because this 'communication' is essentially unilater..." (30, emphasis in the original). While for Debord—in accordance with Enzensberger—it is the theorization of the spectacle as alienation, "Simulation... was at first described in critical terms, in the light (or shadow) of a problematic of alienation. It was still the society of spectacle, and its denunciation, which was the focal point" (77) before moving away: "We no longer partake of the drama of alienation, but are in the ecstasy of communication" (22, emphasis in the original). An in-depth comparison of Debord and Baudrillard is beyond the scope of this paper, but the interested reader may refer to Anselm Jappe's "Baudrillard, détournement par excès".
one-way structure of the media that is responsible for both social control and the hampering of communication, Baudrillard contends that reversibility i.e. allowing the receiver to become a transmitter, only promotes an ersatz of communication and a simulated response that "fails to place the mass media system in check" (Critique 182). Inasmuch as feedback and interactivity are "the very logic of cybernetics," they are integrated by the system as an illusion of counter-power: "the media are quite aware how to set up 'reversibility' of circuits (letters to the editor, phone-in programs, polls, etc.), without conceding any response or abandoning in any way the discrimination of roles" (Critique 181). Accordingly, for Baudrillard, Debord's castigating the passivity encouraged by a unilateral media such as television misses the point, for even reversible media such as the Internet, which allows the user to produce (potentially subversive) contents, in fact, negate what they host: "Transgression and subversion never get 'on the air' without being subtly negated as they are: transformed into models, neutralized into signs, they are eviscerated in any way their meaning" (Critique 173). This is Baudrillard's idiosyncratic interpretation of McLuhan's "the message is the medium": the media establishes a strict equivalence between all the different types of messages (notwithstanding their contents) it transmits because these messages are treated as signs which derive their meaning in relation to each other (Consumer Society 187-88). As soon as something is placed in the space of the media, it becomes an object for consumption or entertainment among other objects. In Baudrillard's utterly pessimistic vision of mediated experience, the way one watches a video of political activism on the Internet is fundamentally no different from the way one watches an advertisement or a movie.

When Baudrillard accuses the media of enacting a "simulation model of communication," (Critique 179, emphasis in the original) he targets more generally the theories that reduce communication to the transmission of a message (i.e. information) and emphasize the mutually exclusive role of transmitter and receiver, thus expressing "a certain type of social relation, namely, in which one speaks and the other doesn't" (Critique 178-79). To this abstraction, Baudrillard retorts that communication should be understood as an exchange where participation is immediate, active, and reciprocal. Exchange can involve antagonism and sometimes even violence. It allows the ambivalence of meaning and human interactions, whereas this is precluded by the message-transmission model of communication theory. For Baudrillard, mediated communication negates emotional investment by establishing a distance between its participants as well as between the subject and the referent of the spectacle. William Merrin provides useful examples of this:

Phone calls, for example, act not just as a means of communication but also as a means to avoid communication. 'Keeping in touch' by phone allows us to forestall physical contact while retaining a nominal friendship, and now even the physical time and effort of the phone call can be conjured away with email . . . . (23, emphasis in the original)

Media technologies allow cybernetic man the comfortable and vicarious pleasure of communication without presence—and thus without the antagonism and conflicts that inevitably accompany it—through pseudonyms and avatars, thus partitioning off society into a collection of insulated spectators occupied solely in the transmission back and forth of messages. To illustrate this condition, Baudrillard summons a powerful image of man so engulfed in communication that he has himself become a mere mediatic appendage:

Today one's private living space is conceived of as receiving and operating area, as a monitoring screen endowed with telematic power, that is to say, with the capacity to regulate everything by remote control. Including the work process, within the prospects of telematic work performed at home, as well as consumption, play, social relations, leisure. (Ecstasy 16-17)

This science fictional nightmarish vision of a home that has become an empty shell haunted by the ectoplasmic silhouettes flickering on computer screens and the disembodied voice of television eerily evokes the bleak habitat of the characters of Dick's short story "Chains of Air, Web of Aether."

II. Impalpable but Unbreakable Chains of Air

1. "Hell is Other People": Alienation from Others
The story takes place at an unspecified time of the future when a part of humanity is living inside hermetic domes scattered across the surface of a distant and inhospitable planet. With the exception of the "food man," whose task is to distribute food to the settlers, nobody seems to travel outside his or her dome to engage in direct contact with others. Labor, daily activities, communication, and social relationships are all carried out entirely within the confines of the domes which are connected to each other and to artificial satellites in orbit around the planet via an electronic system that can receive and transmit both audio and video signals. The two protagonists are Leo McVane, a music lover who spends his time manipulating his cybernetic environment and listening to the current pop idol Linda Fox, and Rybus Romney, a woman dying alone of multiple sclerosis in the dome next to McVane's. The narrative begins when McVane is told of Rybus's condition by the "food man," and reluctantly decides to contact his suffering neighbor.

It is no coincidence that the title of the story refers to two elements—one actual and the other mythical—that are themselves invisible and imperceptible media. As McLuhan wittily observes that fish are not likely to be the discoverers of water (191), likewise, the mediated communicational environment in which McVane and Rybus are living has become so natural to them that they do not perceive their radical isolation. Only the "food man," who seems to be the only one on the planet to experience direct contact with others, notices this strange situation and urges McVane to call Rybus and talk to her. In addition, the title of the story links media with the words "chains" and "web," which both suggest subjection. In the context of media, the word "web" has come to be used as a synonym of network, but it also means something that ensnares, and although it suggests fragility, we will see that this is not necessarily the case.

McVane's distaste of human contact is unmistakable and made even more blatant in the modified episode of "Chains" included in the novel The Divine Invasion, where the protagonist Herb Asher (who plays the part of McVane in this novelized version) exclaims: "Contact with another human. Herb Asher shrank involuntarily. Oh Christ, he thought. He trembled. No, he thought. Please no" (Divine Invasion 15). As a way to rationalize his fear of direct contact, McVane reasserts the priority of his job which he defines as "information traffic between planets, information that connects us with home and keeps us human" (336). It seems, then, that the all-pervasiveness of mediated communication in the world of "Chains" serves the vital and noble end of allowing contact between human beings kept apart from each other by a hostile environment. But this appeal to use value is only an apologetic strategy. Indeed, the argument of geographical separation is later exposed as a mere pretense when Rybus, although weakened by her disease, succeeds in walking from her dome to visit McVane. In fact, what the man hopes, and what is effectively enabled and even promoted by electronics, is to keep a physical and emotional distance between him and Rybus, and avoid by all means (even if it requires lying to her) a direct encounter: "I've got to keep her out of my dome" (339, emphasis in the original). To that purpose, using a telephone (or in this case a videophone) is a way to hypocritically assuage his guilt toward the sick girl without committing himself. The attitude of Rybus is very different in that she longs for human presence: "It would mean a lot to me, someone to sit with for a little while" (338). In contrast to McVane, who is more than content to converse with Rybus via electronics and who defines communication as the transmission of information (336), Rybus simply needs a human presence, someone with whom she can talk and eat a meal now and then. The kind of relation she yearns for is not the rational form of communication that emphasizes the transmission of a message, but instead direct contact with someone to whom she can express her fear of dying, her pain and distress, and the concomitant hatred she feels toward the world. It is precisely antagonism and ambivalence— which Baudrillard singles out as those necessary constituents of human intercourses that are overlooked by mediated communication—that are constantly evinced by Rybus's attitude.

From the onset, the narrative consistently develops large semantic fields opposing non-mediated interaction to mediated communication. The former is associated with terms and notions such as real, human being, concrete presence, the earthly realm, and life, to which are opposed respectively the terms media image, abstraction, aether and death. This explains why discussing the pop star Linda Fox constitutes such an important issue for McVane and Rybus. For McVane the image of the media idol is more alive than the dying Rybus:
But I will hang onto the Fox [Linda Fox]; the Fox will outlast you [Rybus Romney]. And so will I. You are not going to shoot down the luminiferous aether which animates our souls.

I will hang onto the Fox and the Fox will hold me in her arms and hang onto me. The two of us—we can’t be pried apart. I have dozens of hours of the Fox on audio- and videotape. (341)

Rybus objects that what McVane finds disgusting in her disease (her hair falling out, her emesis, the dirtiness of her dome which she is no longer able to keep tidy, all these earthly manifestations of the flesh that are opposed to the pure and clean spectrality of the synthetic image) is synonymous with life as it is: "This isn’t death. You know what this is? In contrast to what’s coming out of your audio system? This is life" (341). Life and lived experience necessarily involve pain and conflicting emotions, in contrast to the abstract and "recycled sentimentality" (338-39) — i.e. emotions prefabricated and mass-produced for distribution and consumption on a large scale via the media system — embodied by Linda Fox.

As the story approaches its conclusion, McVane seems to escape the bewitching influence of the media Lorelei. His melancholic acknowledgement that he "saw and heard a synthetic image. It was not real. Rybus Romney had sucked the life out of the Fox" (347), is immediately followed by a scene where the previously-dying Rybus informs him that she has recovered and attributes to him the miracle of this sudden revival. "Chains" thus gives the impression of describing a trade-off — epitomized by the line: "A human life won and a synthetic media image wrecked" (349) — between the abstract life of a media personality and the life of a real human being, which echoes in reverse Edgar Allan Poe’s "The Oval Portrait" (1842). With McVane’s final recognition of the fundamental unreality of the media simulacrum and the apparently successful exchange between Linda Fox and Rybus, Dick’s narrative appears to agree with Debord’s belief in the ability of individuals to see through the illusions propagated by the media system and tie again

meaningful relationship. Yet, this optimistic interpretation is contradicted by the ultimate scene of the narrative which shows Rybus engrossed in a TV soap opera and entirely oblivious of McVane’s presence, turned, in the words of Umberto Rossi, into a "sort of soulless robot, having sacrificed all those emotions that give life much of its meaning" (237). Besides the Sartrian definition of alienation as “hell as others,” the notions of self-alienation and reification are also helpful to understand the relation of the protagonists to each other and to the electronic images that surround them.

2. The Self as the Other: Idolatry, Narcissim and Self-Alienation

As a musical product manufactured only to be reproduced and consumed, what characterizes the media idol is its seriality: "Linda Fox is not a person. She is a class of persons, a type. She is a sound that electronic equipment, very sophisticated electronic equipment, makes. There are more of her. There will always be. She can be stamped out like tires" (Divine Invasion 86, emphasis in the original). Like tires, cultural products are submitted to obsolescence and the "law" of change, but this is not related to the contents of culture; indeed, the music of the Fox is a recycling of "high culture" (the lute compositions of John Dowland) through advanced technology: a mix of "high" and "low" culture so to speak. Rather, as Baudrillard contends, the decisive factor is the form taken by culture, its subjection to "the same pressure to be ‘up-to-the-minute’ as material goods" (Consumer Society 101-02). Hence, the necessary function of the media personality to advertise and "distribute" cultural contents through the type of relation, namely idolatry, she ties with the consumer. This constant recycling of culture according to the "needs" and expectations of consumers is explicitly described as a retroactive process:

Big Noodle [the A.I. system] had first imagined the Fox. The A.I. system had invented her, told her what to sing and how to sing it: Big Noodle set up her arrangements ... even down to the mixing. And the package was a complete success.

Big Noodle had correctly analyzed the emotional needs of the colonists and had come up with a formula to meet those needs. The A.I system maintained an ongoing survey, deriving feedback; when
the needs changed, Linda Fox changed. It constituted a closed loop. (Divine Invasion 86)

The survey conducted by the A.I. system (via mediatic channels) constitutes an abstraction of the needs of the consumers. It abstracts a part of what they want, desire or expect, and commodifies it into a cultural artifact (here the media personality). But as the expression "closed loop" makes clear, the process is retroactive in the sense that the cultural product resulting from the survey becomes in turn a model that informs consumers' behavior. This is identical to the process identified by Daniel J. Boorstin in his analysis of the mechanism of opinion polls, which he views as operating like a mirror:

Having been polled as a representative of the public, [the citizen] can then read reports and see how he looks. . . Public opinion—once the public's expression—becomes more and more an image into which the public fits its expression. Public opinion becomes filled with what is already there. It is the people looking in the mirror. (238)

In other words, this is just to say that the results of polling retroactively influence the opinions of those who are polled. Although the purpose of the survey is originally to represent with accuracy the needs or the desires of a given population (the original), the product of this act of representation becomes in turn a model for the individuals who are polled. After a few iterations of the survey, the dividing line between original needs and the needs produced by the result of the survey becomes blurred.

In The Divine Invasion, the renaming of the protagonist as the "Linda Fox man" (12) by the media people who provide the music to him signals not only the creation of a profile of the consumer's tastes by the industry of the mass media, but also and more significantly, shows the reduction of the individual to the only attributes that are useful for his activity qua consumer. As Boorstin claims, the consequences of this "mirror effect" are striking for the radical reduction of human experience it entails threatens to dehumanize man:

The more planned and prefabricated our experience becomes, the more we include in it only what interests us. Then we can more effectively exclude the exotic world beyond our ken: the very world which would jar our experience, and which we most need to make us more largely human. (256)

Because the "Linda Fox Man" is only confronted to what has been deemed potentially interesting for him by the media, his encounter with "alterity" is negated and replaced by a reflexive greed in which his self preys on itself. Dick's story accordingly ties idolatry—McVane's yearning to embrace and be embraced by the media simulacrum of Linda Fox, who is said to be "a phantasm of yours [Herb Asher's]" (Divine Invasion 159)—and narcissism.

Yet, the topology of the mirror may be misleading in one respect for it overlooks the alienating effects of idolatry. Indeed, it is not oneself in its entirety that one sees in the idol but an abstracted self, some fragments of subjectivity stolen by the media and molded into the mass media idol. As Erich Fromm perceptively remarks: "The idol is the alienated form of man's experience of himself" (37). Instead of a faithful reflection in the mirror, the idolatrous McVane contemplates his own unfulfilled needs and frustrated aspirations as they are caricatured, fetishized and poured into the hollow shell of Linda Fox. The reflection cast back by the media is a view of the self as something foreign: the self as Other.

Remembering the pervasiveness of the motif of the double in Dick's fiction,7 it is possible to go further in the interpretation. The real being (Rybus), its evil doppleganger (Linda Fox) peered from the mirror—here the TV screen—and made substantial by the devil (the media), the ontological struggle between the being and the tempting image for the soul of the protagonist (McVane): all these are familiar motifs that haunt the works of romantic and symbolist literature as well as expressionist cinema. Works such as Adelbert von Chamisso's Peter Schlemihl (1814), E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Tale of the Lost Reflection" (1815), Rainer Maria Rilke's The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (1910) and the movie (based on a scenario by Hans Heinz Ewers) The Student of Prague (1913), all stage the competition between the alienated image and the self by associating the motifs of

7 According to Neil Easterbrook, "most of Dick's fiction inscribes the problematic of the double" (26). See his "Dianoia/Paranoia: Dick's Double 'Impostor'" for an important discussion of doubles in Dick's fiction.
the double with that of the magic mirror. These stories represent reification and the protagonist’s self-alienation as the loss of a precious part of himself and the concurrent animation of what was formerly inanimate. Theodore Ziolkowski shows how the alienated part (the soul of the protagonist or the subject’s desire) may either “emerge from the glass in the form of a ghost” (161) to torment the protagonist or, on the contrary, may disappear forever into the mirror’s limbo with dire social repercussions for the victim. Baudrillard similarly insists on the consequences that alienation entails:

There is a part of us which gets away from us in this process, but we do not get away from it. The object (the soul, the shadow, the product of our labour become object) takes its revenge. All we are dispossessed of remains attached to us, but negatively. In other words, it haunts us. That part of us sold and forgotten is still us, or rather it is a caricature of us, the ghost, the spectre which follows us. (Consumer Society 189, emphasis in the original)

The opposition between image and reality, which constitutes the focal point of the story, dwells richly upon the traditional romantic motifs of the mirror and the double, and can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, Linda Fox functions as the artificial evil doppelgänger of Rybus, which competes against her rival both for animation and McVane’s soul, in a manner that evokes the animistic contest between the painting and the model in Poe’s “The Oval Portrait.” On the other hand, if we prefer to understand the screen of the electronic media as a modernization of the motif of the magic mirror, then Linda Fox can be viewed as the soul of McVane (his feminine psyche), which after having been dissociated from him and commodified by the cultural industry, emerges from the screen in the form of a hologram (337) to lure him into the web of a narcissistic passion, estranging him at the same time from human society.

The fate of Rybus is no more enviable, for although she appears by the end of the story to have won both the physical battle against her disease and the ontological duel against the simulacrum, her final absorption into the world of TV soap operas is equated to a death of the spirit (340). In fact, when “Chains” ends, it is the TV which is alive, whereas man has been transformed into a passive thing, petrified by the medusa-like gaze of television, and like Narcissus forever bent over the fountain of the screen. Deprived of its own momentum, consciousness merely reflects the always available but inaccessible spectacle that unfolds behind the impassable surface of glass. Accordingly, in contrast to what is alleged in favor of mediated experience, in “Chains,” there seems to be no exchange between people within the space of the media, but rather an exchange between human and the media. The ambiguous conclusion of the story signifies perhaps the ironic reversal of the sentence “a human life won and a synthetic media image wrecked” (349).

To conclude this section, it is interesting to succinctly compare “Chains” with its illustrious and visionary forerunner: E. M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops.” Although there would be much to say, it is enough here to focus on the authors’ respective attitudes toward electronic images and sounds. Forster’s Machine.

8 See Ziolkowski 168-201 for a close reading of Chamisso, Hoffmann and Rilke. Especially relevant to our concern is Ziolkowski’s argument according to which the motifs of the double and the mirror are employed to depict reification:

Human beings are gradually becoming depersonalized in our society while, in a compensating movement, things and objects take on human characteristics. Thus at the end of the mirror-scene, the mirror-image becomes real and Malte [the protagonist of Rilke’s novel] feels that he has been reduced to the function of the reflecting surface, merely reflecting the other. (201).

The Student of Prague is commented upon by Baudrillard to show that “the alienated human being is not merely a being diminished and impoverished but left intact in its essence: it is a being turned inside out, changed into something evil, into its own enemy, set against itself” (Consumer Society 190). On the link between Dick and the German Romantics, see Warick 119, 199-200.

9 Forster’s and Dick’s stories share an impressive number of commonalities. Both deal with mediated experience in terms of alienation and reification. Both authors contrast direct human contact through the body to what they regard as the abstraction of mediated communication and use the same type of vocabulary to express this opposition. Compare for example Forster’s “seraphically free/ From taint of personality” (70) with Dick’s “the luminiferous aether which animates our souls” (340). Finally, both stories are concerned with the disappearance of the world in its representation.
did not transmit *nuances* of expression. It only gave a general idea of people—an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes, Vashi [the protagonist] thought. The imponderable bloom, declared by a discredited philosophy to be the actual essence of intercourse, was rightly ignored by the Machine. Something “good enough” had long since been accepted by our race. (53, emphasis in the original)

With McVane’s recognition of the futility of Linda Fox ("He saw and heard a synthetic image. It was not real" [347]), Dick, like Forster, also appears to condemn once and for all mediated experiences as an inferior ersatz for genuine experience. Yet this interpretation is somewhat into question by the lines immediately following McVane’s dismissal of the synthetic image: “[McVane] put on a Vivaldi concerto for bassoon. There is only one Vivaldi concerto, he thought. A computer could do better. And be more diverse” (347). Although both stories denounce the alienation owing to mediated experience, their characterizations are different. While Forster unambiguously disparages indirect intercourse as an inferior substitute for direct contact, Dick is more equivocal, for his narrative suggests both that the protagonist has become aware of the fundamental unreality of electronic images and the contradictory claim that the simulacrum may in some occasions provide a superior form of experience. To the systematic loss of nuances and the “good enough” that denotes both the operational definition of human intercourse and the limits of technology in “The Machine Stops,” succeeds the “better” of electronically synthesized classical music in Dick’s story.

For Forster, the psychological shift that results from man’s interaction through and with machines constitutes such an impoverishment of the realm of experiences and a moral regression that it eventually leads to a cataclysm compromising the very survival of humanity. It is worth noticing, however, that death is experienced as a moment of revelation and disalienation by the characters of Forster’s story: “We have come back to our own. We die, but we have recaptured life . . .” (77). Contrastingly, although “Chains” also mourns the lost ability of its protagonists to communicate, here reification does not appear to bear upon the stability of society, let alone its survival. It is this “sustainability” of a reified humanity that paradoxically renders Dick’s lugubrious status quo even more pessimistic than Forster’s technological apocalypse. Even though Rybus passes victoriously through the ordeal of her disease and remains alive, she does not experience the liberation that death brings to the protagonists of “The Machine Stops.”

3. Structure of Media and Social Control

In its depiction of McVane alternatively as an exploited technician prisoner of his labor schedule cycle (what Debord calls the “pseudocyclical time” [106] of alienated labor) and an apathetic consumer (even leisure is alienated), the story endorses a Debordian critique of the media that stresses its effects in terms of alienation from others and self-alienation. This stage of the reflection on media is comprehensively summarized by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner:

> The stage of the spectacle described by Debord, congruent with Sartre’s analysis of the fate of subjectivity in the present age . . . was that of the consumption of spectacles in which individual subjects were positioned to be compliant andpliant spectators and consumers of mass consumer society and media. In this early stage theorized by Debord and later Baudrillard, the subject sat more or less passively in front of a movie or television screen . . . there was domination of the subject by the object, and categories of passivity, serality [sic], separation, and alienation accurately described the contours of this stage.

In the world of “Chains,” the success of social control is, arguably, only a function of the unilaterality of the media insofar as the attitude of the two protagonists toward their electronic equipment is one of passivity. Moreover, they are isolated in both their activities as workers—the reception, storage and transmission of messages are entirely managed within the confines of their domes—and as consumers. In contrast to what is hinted in *The Divine Invasion*, in “Chains,” there is apparently no Machiavellian plot to program the media for thought control. Instead, revolt from harsh and unjust living conditions is effectively prevented by putting an end to social relations between colonists and by encouraging individuals to escape from their plight into fantasy.
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Incidentally, the absence of media conspiracy is not incompatible with the presence of ideological contents. Consider for example the following passage: "When his [Job's] sorrows came as fast as floods, Hope kept his heart till comfort came again. As the Fox would put it" (348). This could perhaps be read as a subliminal message designed to foster McVane's apathy in the face of adverse conditions by instilling a false hope in the future, and thereby forestalling a possible revolt. Yet, nothing indicates that this "message" has been planted on purpose by authority, and even supposing that it is indeed a conscious attempt at ideological manipulation, it is arguably supererogatory to the main function of the media—viz. to disrupt the bonds of the collectivity—insofar as they are regarded as a system of control.

Nevertheless, if it is the unilaterality of the media that can be first and foremost held responsible for their alienating effects, then, in agreement with Debord and Enzensberger (and contra Baudrillard), it would seem enough to allow reversibility—the consumer to become producer, the receiver to become transmitter—to liberate the media and escape social control. It is worth noting, however, that the telematic apparatus used by McVane and Rybus is not a mere TV but allows—besides reception—the storage, manipulation and transmission of information. In this respect, it is analogous to modern computers with Internet access, and does not preclude, in principle, a productive and creative use. To be sure, in "Chains," the media is depicted as functioning in a singular direction from producer (the media industry, Linda Fox) to consumer (McVane, Rybus), but its structure allows for interactivity.

To support her claim that Dick views technology in general as neutral and susceptible to be used by individual out of the sphere of governmental control, Galvan mentions the typical Dickian character "who co-opt machinery for his own purposes" (422). In "Chains," although we learn that McVane has mastered the electronic equipment that surrounds him and "illegally" (333) redesigned every device to make his life more comfortable, it is obvious that all his "electronics-savvy" has no consequences beyond the privacy of his dome. This looks like an example of isolated resistance practices such as desertion, pilfering or sabotage, which neither lead to outright confrontation with power, nor impugn the unjust foundations of the system. On the contrary, in a Baudrillard-like manner, it could be argued that McVane's smug satisfaction at having circumventing the government's rules in fact benefits the government, for it extends the status quo and cancels in advance other forms of (potentially) more effective resistance. It may as such constitute a sort of illusory force of opposition (counter-power) that paradoxically contributes to the durability of the system it opposes: "The equivalent of Sunday tinkering on the periphery of the system" (Critique 182).

Some readers may regard Dick's vision of monadic domes united by telematics as a mere rehearsal of the endless technophobic (and some might say reactionary) attacks on mediated interaction that can be found throughout science fiction, especially in dystopias. Furthermore, does not the structure of our more recent interactive media such as the Internet radically differ from McVane's and Rybus's numbing communicational apparatus, in that it allows the user to express her creativity and sometimes even engage in a meaningful social practice or political praxis?

With the widespread and daily use of manifold means of mediated communication, the analysis of their effects on human relationship and the reflection on what we call communication become urgent tasks. In this respect, "Chains" (and Dick's work in general) functions as a fictional laboratory for the critique of media. It may, in particular, suggest that despite their claim at facilitating contact between people who would not otherwise be able to speak to each other, the media simultaneously promotes a form of aloofness. This paradoxical tendency, already commented upon by Baudrillard with regard to "old" technologies such as telephony, might also be brought against social networks like Facebook or Twitter, and web sites for personal expression such as blogs, which allow users to have distant relationships with hundreds of "friends" whom they will never meet and with whom they will never develop a relationship beyond a few words occasionally exchanged.

Another interesting point signaled by Dick's story concerns the media user in its relation to culture which becomes paradoxically more personal and more abstract. Thus, as The Divine Invasion suggests, the polling system implemented by the media creates a circular interaction between, on the one hand, the particular tastes of individual consumers and, on the other hand, the abstract
result known as public opinion. The referendum-like system of rating (the buttons "I like it" and "I don't like it" one finds on YouTube, for instance) by which the media system conducts permanent survey to probe the reaction of the consumers not only fosters the "closed-loop" system depicted in the story, but may also reduce the horizon of our (interactive) relation to culture to curt judgmental comments at best, and to bare approval or dismissal at worst.

This being said, if we attempt to locate the criticism of media found in "Chains" within the history of critical media theory, we should insist on the fact that in Dick's characterization, mediated interaction is largely regarded as a loss, a threat to identity insofar as the latter is regarded as something autonomous. By contrast, in the next stage of the critique of the media, while the fundamental issue becomes the communication with the media itself, alienation is replaced by schizophrenia and the implosion of the difference between subject and object as the germane analytical categories. Instead of an impoverishment of the subject's identity, what this later stage emphasizes is the collapse of consciousness and electronic fields into each other, and the ensuing creation of a fluctuating identity with no discernible boundaries. In Dick's fiction, this type of concern is most vividly illustrated by works such as The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, "The Electric Ant" (1969), and A Scanner Darkly (1977). Although written after these more "postmodern" works, "Chains" appears to return to an earlier critical stance.

Works Cited


