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Escape from the Real:
Desire, Openness, and Closure in Three Early
Works by Philip K. Dick

Poor fellow, sick with love for that which never was!
Put him in irons—must we?—throw him overboard?
Mad, drunken tar, inventor of Americas...
Which, fading, make the void more bitter, more abhorred.

Charles Baudelaire. Travel

1. Break on Through to the Other Side

A specter haunts the soul of the characters created by Philip K. Dick—the specter of escapism. The Dickian protagonist is almost invariably pressed by an imperious desire to escape the conditions in which he lives. His dissatisfaction with reality and subsequent "need for illusion" (Fitting 227, emphasis in the original) are so strong as to often constitute the forces that set the plot into motion. The means for transcendence are manifold; technology, drugs, and art are all employed at various points in Dick's works to seek the longed-for liberation. This is by no means an uncommon desire in science fiction. For instance, in a sub-genre such as space opera, outward movement, and the search for new experiences, wonder, or extra-terrestrial truth, partly reflect discontent with local circumstances. However, as Jean Baudrillard (124–25) and Christopher Palmer (50–51) both claim, Dick's fiction is one of implosion, in which the urge to escape, albeit seemingly legitimate and necessary, generally leads to further entrapment. The attempt to discover or create elsewhere the conditions of happiness is marred by human limitations and seems irremediably condemned to closure. As in Charles Baudelaire's "Travel," the journey to distant

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lands only reveals the bitter knowledge that "The small monotonous world reflects me everywhere:/ Yesterday, now, tomorrow, for ever — in a dry/ Desert of boredom, an oasis of despair!"

The purpose of this essay is to examine Dick's ambivalent treatment of fantasy by focusing on three early short stories: "The Troubles with Bubbles" (1953), "Small Town" (1953), and "Exhibit Piece" (1953) [Hereafter "Bubbles," "Town," and "Exhibit," respectively]. Although they lack the richness and delightful deviousness of Dick's more mature works, these stories already contain the germination of many of Dick's recurrent concerns: the critique of epistemological and metaphysical realism, the aesthetic rendering of this critique as an antinomy between openness and closure, and the critique of power. As Umberto Rossi remarks of "Town" (but this also applies to "Bubbles" and "Exhibit"), the value of this story for scholarship on Dick also lies in its paradigmatic expression of the reversals that characterize the plot of most of his works (217).

Firstly, I consider Dick's contradictory account of fantasy as wishful thinking, an ally of power, and an agent of subversion capable of molding social and historical realities. On another level, insofar as they are self-reflexive portrayals of fantasizing, all three stories can be read as indirect commentaries by Dick on his literary activity. Finally, this portrayal is set against Dick's explicit statements about the genres of science fiction and fantasy. Here also, what arises is a conflicting assessment of creative imagination, which is at times invested with the power to destabilize the grounds of reality, while at other times it can be suspected of escapist wish-fulfillment.

"Bubbles," "Town," and "Exhibit" seem an almost literal illustration of Freud's claim in "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" that fantasy is an attempt to escape or improve unsatisfactory reality. Thus, the protagonist of "Town," Vernon Haskel, locks himself up every day in the basement of his house (an obvious metaphor for the unconscious as the location of the creative process) and devotes his time to the construction of a giant maquette of the town where he lives. The construction of this maquette is explicitly compared with child's play (342) and mimics Freud's characterization of child's play as a rearrangement of "the things of [the child's] world in a new way which pleases him" ("Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" 144). The Freudian connection is strengthened with allusions to the child's narcissism, omnipotence of thoughts, and the displacement of Haskel's unsatisfied
libido (the trains as power fantasy). In "Exhibit," the main character Miller is also depicted as an alienated member of a repressive futuristic society who engages in the construction of a historical diorama representing a section of an American town from the twentieth century. Here again fantasy is regarded as an escape from reality (especially social reality) and as a longing for the past and for values and ideals (such as individuality, independence, and freedom) either extinct in the bureaucratic world of the future, or at best crushed under the yoke of instrumental rationality. While "Exhibit" is mostly concerned with the temporal dimension, in "Bubbles" the emphasis is put on space. The world of "Bubbles" is entirely mapped: all locations on Earth are connected and readily accessible (the story significantly begins with a report on the achievement of building a tunnel connecting America and Asia) whereas space exploration is over because the universe has been found to be devoid of life. Society has achieved apparent stability due to a strict social stratification dividing the population into classes, a leisurely lifestyle made possible by technological progress, and, perhaps, a curiously tolerant attitude toward sexuality somehow at odds with the otherwise rigid construction of society (repressive desublimation?). The whole of reality appears to be known, stable, and circumscribed by distinct geographical and social boundaries. As a result, people suffer from boredom and their dissatisfaction takes the shape of an irrepressible yearning for another frontier. As in "Exhibit" and "Town," in "Bubbles" the solution to the problem of closure is a compensatory move which allies art and technology. It consists in creating material "substitutes" (197, emphasis in the original): the eponymous bubbles are miniature worlds that enable people to escape from boredom and find a simulacrum of novelty.

On an individual level, the view of the protagonists' investment in fantasy as a form of narcissistic regression is further sanctioned by the authoritative figure of the psychoanalyst who is omnipresent in the three stories. Thus, in "Town," Doctor Tyler expounds with "suave confidence" (346) on Haskel's inability to reach a stage of mastery over the world of objects, whereas the psychoanalyst of "Exhibit" interprets Miller's anger as a reaction against "the whole petty frustrations and defeats of . . . [his] whole life" (162). But fantasizing is also endowed with a socially acknowledged utility when it serves as an outlet for what a character in "Bubbles" calls "man's innate destructive tendencies" (198) (compare with Freud: "The inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man" [Civilization and Its Discontents 122]). It is the putative function of
fantasy to sublimate these impulses and thus preserve civilization from destruction.

2. "The Inestimable Value of Novelty"

In his criticism of the rationalization of life due to instrumental rationality, Erich Fromm asserts that capitalism’s most praised virtues, “individual initiative, the readiness to take risks, independence — have long disappeared from industrial society and are to be found mainly in westerns and among gangsters” (34). Likewise, Tim Amstrong understands modern man’s desire to “return to violent life, to frontier life” as an attempt to recover his “natural drives” and an answer to the “technological conquest of nature” (170) and to the dehumanization of modern life that is thought to accompany technological progress (E. M. Forster’s mourning of the loss of “the sense of space” in “The Machine Stops” is archetypal). Idealized visions of struggle and discovery on the ever-receding edge of the world are the staple of such diverse sub-genres as Victorian adventures in lost worlds, westerns and space operas. They often perpetuate the romantic opposition between city and countryside as respective sites of alienation and freedom. When viewed as compensatory fantasies, the power of these visions is proportional to the perceived unsatisfactory conditions of life under capitalism.

According to Eric Rabkin, however, while the possibility of an actual return to nature is still entertained in the industrial novel, such a return is made impossible by the disappearance of nature in the post-industrial novel (168). There is little doubt that Dick’s works largely belong to the latter category, and Palmer’s view that Dick’s works may be seen as a rejection of modernity’s (especially America’s) celebration of expansion and the concomitant association of technology with progress is most persuasive (56). In Dick’s works, the return to nature and frontier life is either debased (Martian Time-Slip [1964] and The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch [1965]) or impossible (Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? [1968]). As Rabkin contends, technology is often regarded by Dick simultaneously as the cause of nature’s destruction and the only way to remedy this loss (168). The situation of the Dickian protagonist in this regard is remarkably similar to the predicament of modern man as per Hannah Arendt: “Wherever he goes, [man] encounters only himself. All the processes of the earth and the universe have revealed themselves either as man-made or as potentially man-made” (89).

Yet, although nature has disappeared and movement often leads to further
entrapment, there remains in almost all of Dick's works an indomitable desire to move away from present circumstances. There is a fundamental ambivalence in Dick's appraisal of movement and novelty, which Palmer, making use of Fredric Jameson's notion of political unconscious, interprets as Dick's "response to his society" (58). To be more precise, the modern perception of change as both destructive and a guarantee against stasis and entropic regression informs the tensions between static and kinetic that lie at the core of Dick's fiction and "[twists] modernity towards postmodernity: we have change without direction... rather than a movement to something new" (Palmer 59).

In "Bubbles" the possibility to discover the unknown is a psychic necessity. Only movement into the new can ensure the release of dangerouslypent up libido and fight ennui, which is why reaching the edge of the world is such a catastrophe. When there is no longer any natural outlet, the only solution that remains is to manufacture one: "All of us have energy, the desire to move, act, do. But we're bottled up here, sealed off, on one planet. So we buy Worldcraft bubbles and make little worlds of our own. But microscopic worlds aren't enough" (198). The failure of the bubbles to compensate for the real thing is explained in terms of their lack of authenticity. This may be an illustration of Dick's unfailing distrust of mass production. If, as Rabkin affirms, in Dick's works rational replication "steals value from nearly everything" (168) through the overall equivalency it establishes amongst the copies, it is no coincidence that the problem of the authenticity of the bubbles is discussed in the context of the commodity system. In addition to being mass produced, Worldcraft bubbles are advertised and marketed before being sold, and furthermore they give rise to spin-off, educational materials for using the bubbles, and official tournaments as a way to incite consumers to stay up-to-date.

Walter Benjamin understands Baudelaire's praise of "the inestimable value of novelty" (to use Benjamin's terms) as the French poet's attempt to counteract the commodification of art and distinguish genuine art from commodity. For Baudelaire novelty constitutes a non-commodifiable absolute, preserving the work of art from reification (22). By adducing the case of fashion, however, Benjamin shows that newness is in no way immune to commodification, but quite to the contrary that the valorization of novelty may in fact strictly mark the logic of consumerism: new products serve the dual functions of perpetuating the system and remedying boredom, which is, however, a natural state under capitalism. In a likewise manner, the characters of Dick's story derive their frustration from their
sensing that instead of revealing another world and allowing them to find newness (as space exploration would supposedly do), the bubbles are specifically designed to promote the consumption of a false novelty. In this context, the plea of the main character for recognizing that the life forms contained in the bubbles are real may be read as an ultimate attempt to guard them from the reification caused by the commodification process (200). Indeed, to grant autonomy to these artificial civilizations, to recognize their capability of creating individual histories, that would make them truly new, truly different, rather than the technological projection of human interiority.

Contrastingly, “Town” and “Exhibit” evoke the return to a golden age of freedom and opportunity by strongly drawing on Freud’s comparison of the realm of fantasy to natural and historical reserves. The Freudian account deserves to be quoted at length, as it throws light on the recovery of the past, which is staged many times in Dick’s works:

The creation of the mental realm of phantasy finds a perfect parallel in the establishment of “reservations” or “nature reserves” in places where the requirements of agriculture, communications and industry threaten to bring about changes in the original face of the earth which will quickly make it unrecognizable. A nature reserve preserves its original state which everywhere else has to our regret been sacrificed to necessity. Everything, including what is useless and even what is noxious, can grow and proliferate there as it pleases. The mental realm of phantasy is just such a reservation withdrawn from the reality principle. (Introductory Lectures 372)

Clearly, the maquette of “Town” and the diorama of “Exhibit” are material equivalents of psychic recesses supposed to protect the subject from destructive change and repressive society either through a return to the past (“Exhibit”) or the suspension of time (“Town”). But the cases of Haskel and Miller do not forthrightly support the optimistic belief that “the recherche du temps perdu becomes the vehicle of future liberation” (Marcuse 19, italics in the original). Instead, the gratification they obtain is as much a relief from the reality principle as a manifestation of the death drive.

Taken together, the three stories illustrate Dick’s ambivalent treatment of movement and stasis as a response to two issues. On the one hand, there is what
Palmer calls "the contradiction between SF's confident kinetic extraversion and the unbalanced nature of change" (59) in modernity, and, on the other hand there is capitalism's simultaneous extolment and deflection of novelty. Although returning to the past is condemned as compulsive repetition or narcissistic regression, Dick's portrayal of futuristic societies as oppressive bureaucracies casts serious doubt on the idea of progress. Likewise, while the quest for novelty may originally express a legitimate desire to escape the frustrations of everyday life under the regime of capitalism, it is soon neutralized and becomes a structural underpinning of consumerism.

3. The World as a Picture: The Aesthetics of Power and Closure

In all three stories, escapism constitutes a form of social criticism, in the sense that it is a direct reaction to alienation, which is in turn identified as the disruption of collective bonds (especially within family and the workplace) by both capitalism and the rational organization of every aspect of life. At first glance, fantasy is an attempt to distance oneself from the conditions of being in a place and time whose contradictions have become unbearable, as well as an imaginary restoration of that which has been alienated.

Drawing on Lacanian theory, Rosemary Jackson shows how "fantasies try to reverse or rupture the process of ego formation which took place during the mirror stage, i.e. they attempt to reenter the imaginary" (90, emphasis in the original). In particular, she views fantasy's staging of the retreat from the Lacanian symbolic order into the imaginary order as a protest against the prohibitions of society. Dick's insistence on the social origin of the protagonists' dissatisfaction may then allow us to read their attempt to escape as a desire to return to the imaginary order preceding socialization. While in Victorian tales of dualism such as The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886) or The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), the revolt against social norms is carried out by the double of the main character, in Dick it is reality itself that is doubled so as to create a space where the subject has the illusion of being freed from the rules of society. Among the three narratives considered, Haskel's fantasy appears to bear the most striking similarity with Jackson's description of the imaginary order as "a state of primary narcissism [where there is] no discrepancy between self (as perceiving subject) and other (as perceived object)" (89). Yet, for Dick, it is seldom a matter of simply opposing the individual to society. Rather, there is a profound contradiction at the core of the
individual's behavior: a simultaneous denial and longing for the collective. Thus, Haskel's small town is neither a romantic escape from society nor the mere negation of everyday life, but rather a nostalgic and reactionary attempt to recreate a lost sociality. In the fantasy of regaining the consideration—or at least frightened deference—of others, we sense a hunger for unity and unanimity. Difference is not to be tolerated, for it threatens the community (incidentally, inequalities of wealth among the citizens of Haskel's town are toned down presumably less for the sake of justice than for fear they might cause social unrest). In "Exhibit," Miller's fantasy of living in Twentieth Century America is also a dream of reintegration into social wholeness. His rejection takes the shape of an opposition between the putative "organic" character of family and community and incorporation into what he calls a mechanistic "impersonal cultural totality" (156). Finally, Jackson's likening of Freud's death drive to a "desire for undifferentiation" (72), which characterizes the subject's return to the imaginary order, echoes Dick's own reference to Thanatos for explaining Haskel's withdrawal (Collected Stories Volume 2 381).

Yet, on the face of it, the portrayal of fantasy in "Town" and "Exhibit" elicits doubts as to whether it constitutes a departure from the symbolic order or merely the reinstitution of another law. Indeed, Haskel's new community is a surveillance society, which is "extremely moral" (351), and has efficient police forces and a "fine jail for undesirables" (351). These are all elements that suggest he has internalized repression. Resumption of the symbolic is also obvious in "Exhibit" where the old-fashioned language used by the protagonist to challenge his native society signifies at the same time his integration into the symbolic order of a past society.² Far from questioning the necessity of a dominant value system, Haskel's and Miller's fantasies appear to substitute one order for another, while both characters continue to be spoken for by the symbolic structure.

The aesthetics of the three fantasy realms is an aesthetic of power which expresses a specific relationship of man to reality in which the latter is seen as a picture:

— Absolute transparency and penetrability. The wish to seize reality down to the subatomic level (the magnifying apparatus of "Bubbles"), the panoptical gaze of Haskel hovering above his well-lit town, and the possibility of wandering into the three dimensionality of Miller's diorama: this is the end of secrecy.

— Control. All three fantasies are power fantasies that entail a total
objectification of the world. Gabriel McKee points out the significance of Martin Buber's notion of the You and the It for understanding Dick's insistence throughout his works on the moral necessity of recognizing "the subjectivity of another being, rather than viewing it as a mere object" (McKee 18). In "Bubbles," the protest of the protagonist (200) can thus be understood as an urge to go beyond the subject-object relationship.

— Closure. Temporal closure (the eternal return of "Exhibit," the eternal now of "Town," and the time immeasurably dilated by boredom in "Bubbles") is almost always a sign of pathology in Dick. In addition, the dream of an internally cohesive world sealed off from both society and history is condemned to ideological closure. As Rossi observes: "What we have at the end [of 'Town'] is a one-man utopia: Verne's dream of an ideal town comes true. But what is utopia to one person may well be a dystopia to others" (218).

The mimetic representation of the world as a picture, i.e. as an internally coherent, ordered, stable and self-enclosed totality that is entirely knowable through the gaze of the subject, is a defining characteristic of the three fantasies depicted in "Town," "Exhibit" and "Bubbles." It is no coincidence that the sense of sight is viewed as an instrument of both domination and knowledge. As Jackson observes, "Knowledge, comprehension, reason, are established though the power of the look, through the 'eye' and the 'I' of the human subject whose relation to objects is structured through his field of vision" (45, emphasis in the original). At the same time, Dick's manner of criticizing fantasy in these stories is very similar to how he expresses his hostility towards the notion of absolute reality in other works, in particular, how absolute reality purportedly serves as an ideological foundation for power. David Columbria strongly emphasizes this anti-realist strand in Dick's works: "It isn't the falsity, or the deceptiveness, of the ideologically-imposed Reality, but the very attempt to posit such a reality that is called into question" (93, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, for Dick, univocal understandings of the world are not only morally questionable, but also the sign of rationality gone mad:

All systems—that is, any theoretical, verbal, symbolic, semantic, etc., formulation that attempts to act as an all-encompassing, all-explaining hypothesis of what the universe is about—are the manifestation of paranoia. We should be content with the mysterious, the meaningless, the contradictory,
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the hostile . . . (“The Android and the Human” 208, emphasis in the original)

It may be that the central issue in these texts is not the danger of losing one’s grip on reality, but rather the wish to force reality to match preconceived notions with the final result being foreclosure of any real possibilities for change. Moreover, by constructing fantasies that mirror the main characteristics (wholeness, coherence, order and stability) that realists associate with reality, the three stories would seem to gesture toward the idea that it is the Real itself which is a fantasy.

4. Ambivalence, or How “to Hold Two Opposing Ideas in Mind at the Same Time and Still Retain the Ability to Function”

The psychoanalytic reading of the three stories as illustrating the Freudian notion of images as substitutes for desire is problematized when the realm of fantasy begins to encroach on or even supersede mundane reality, apparently testifying to a revenge of magical thinking against the reality principle. More precisely, on a first (epistemic) level, the authority of psychiatry is completely undermined: the psychiatrist as embodiment of reason and the person “supposed to know” is either ridiculed (the libidinous psychiatrist of “Town”) or put in the same position as his presumably psychotic patient (“Exhibit”). On a second (metaphysical) level, it is the existence of reality independent of the mind—its solidity and its imperviousness to desire and imagination—that are challenged, sometimes in an almost exulting manner as in “Town” and “Exhibit.” At this point, images are no longer viewed only as surrogates but become effectors of a radical transformation. Yet, this can hardly be regarded as a straightforward celebration of the liberatory potential of fantasy, for the refashioning of reality by desire, far from being a utopian breakthrough, reproduces and reinforces the closure of the oppressive societies the protagonists wanted to escape in the first place. It is as if Dick were trying to resist the notion of fantasy as compensation while simultaneously refusing to endorse the emancipatory view.

Several scholars single out ambivalence as a central characteristic of Dick’s literary project. Thus, while John Huntington views Dick as “inhabit[ing] two antithetical value systems at once” (157), Palmer sees his works as “the imaginary irresolution of [the] real contradictions” of his society (60). For Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., ambivalence is not limited to thematic concerns, but is also revealed in the
author's relationship with the fictional genre:

One could argue that Dick gravitated towards SF and wrote his best works within the confines of the genre because SF allowed him to express maximum ambivalence toward the world: toward received ideas about identity, history, necessity, natural laws, social institutions and power, and toward the genre itself.

Dickian ambivalence toward the "reality" of the real is notorious and it will be sufficient here to summarize it briefly. On the one hand, there is the realist, quasi-platonic Dick for whom the world of appearances is a prison to be escaped from so as to enter a transcendent, absolute reality. On the other hand, there is an anti-realist Dick who dismisses as "a vain pursuit [and] a bourgeois folly" (Huntington 157) the quest of the realist. While the latter dreams of liberation in another truer world, the former believes that the very concept of absolute reality is detrimental to freedom and conceives realism as undergirding power. These contradictions are also perceptible in the conflictual attitude of the Dickian protagonist: either a quasi-religious transcendence of the illusory reality, or the rejection of the metaphysical solution followed by a commitment to ordinary life and struggle in the world we live in. Likewise, the narratives' oscillation between indeterminacy and denouement reflects the conflict between the author's desire to find a solution to the reality problem and his hostility towards closure.4 Inevitably, Philip K. Dick's mixed attitude toward metaphysical realism has consequences for his handling of the literary form. What follows explores the ways in which "Town," "Exhibit," and "Bubbles" may be read as Dick's self-conscious reflection on his literary activity in connection with his ambivalent appraisal of the subversive potential of fantasy and science fiction.5

If we agree with Palmer (107) and Rossi (218) that "Exhibit" and "Town" are covert allegories of authorship and represent the transactions between the writer, his creations and reality, it is tempting to read the overthrowing of diegetic realities by fantasy as the expression of Dick's belief in the capacity of the writing activity to challenge not only our assumptions about the real, but also and more surprisingly, the real itself. The penetrability of the object-world by the desiring subject of the stories (Durham 176) would correspond with the author's belief that "words are things [that] can exert force and accomplished desired ends" ("Who Is
an SF Writer?" 74) in the world outside the story. Writing would be a sort of magical operation with the same potential to mold reality as technology.

This conjecture is supported by the numerous statements in which Dick emphatically advocates science fiction as a protest medium. For instance: "Science fiction is a rebellious art form and it needs writers and readers with bad attitudes—an attitude of, 'Why?' Or, 'How Come?' Or, 'Who Says?' This gets sublimated into such themes as appear in my writing as, 'Is the universe real?'" ("Introduction" 85). But rebelling against the "tyranny of concrete reality" should not end up in a mere dismissal of the world but instead endeavors to change it. Accordingly, he wants to see the science fiction writer as "a literary figure as well as a little of the politician" ("Who Is an SF Writer?" 74) and his activity as a way to explore other possibilities and existential/social arrangements. The outside perspectives provided by fantasy and science fiction are supposed to cast a critical light on the ideas consecrated by a given epoch. We have seen that "Bubbles," "Exhibit," and especially "Town," indirectly illustrate this critical function of fantasy. These texts dispute the legitimacy of accepted reality by showing the deep affinities between the protagonists' power fantasies and the realist conception of the world underpinning the oppressive societies they inhabit.

This belief in the progressive thrust of writing is somehow at odds with Dick's relentless questioning of the autonomy of the self throughout his works (what Durham calls the death of the subject), and hence of his ability to adopt a critical position toward the world. In the three stories considered, the individual is so thoroughly determined by forces either endogenous (the unconscious) or exogenous (society or the symbolic order), that it becomes difficult to imagine how his emancipatory project could not be shaped by the same forces. On another level, while Dick wants to retain a belief in the efficacy of critical imagination, he simultaneously remains uncomfortably aware of the Freudian view of fantasy as compensation. Following Freud, Marcuse remarks that "as aesthetic phenomenon, the critical function of art is self-defeating" (144), for art displaces the experience of liberation to a plane where it can be enjoyed and forgotten. Thus, the writing of such stories as "Town" and "Exhibit" could be simultaneously a political protest as well as a way for the author to create and dwell in a space governed by rules of his own devising.

In the same way that there exist tensions in the stories between the portrayals of images both as symptoms of dissatisfaction and effectors of transformation, Dick's
dealings with the genres of science fiction and fantasy are conflictual. At times, he attempts to "exorcise" escapism from science fiction by distancing it from fantasy, imbuing the science fiction writer with a nearly scientific frame of mind which "bond[s] him to the possibilities that have validity for us, in contrast to stories about hobbits and looking glasses" ("SF Writer" 75). The "legitimate SF writer would [not] . . . want us to drift away inside our heads and ignore the actual problems around us" ("SF Writer" 75–76). On the contrary, "he is writing about reality with as much fervor and conviction as anyone could muster to get a bad zoning ordinance changed" ("SF Writer" 74). Even though the events of a science fiction story are not possible now, there remains the possibility that they might be realized in the future, whereby not only is the writer entitled to think about them, but the reader has the "feeling that he is reading about reality" ("Vertex Interviews"). All this introduces a sort of rational or scientific guarantee according to which so-called genuine science fiction is firmly anchored in reality by contrast to the genre of fantasy and lower forms of science fiction. However, "cognitive" validity is precisely one of those traits that cannot be accepted by the anti-realist Dick, who elsewhere flatly refuses verisimilitude as an aesthetic criterion for distinguishing science fiction from fantasy:

Fantasy involves that which general opinion regards as impossible; science fiction involves that which general opinion regards as possible under the right circumstances. This is in essence a judgment call, since what is possible and what is not [cannot be] objectively known but is, rather, a subjective belief on the part of the reader. ("My Definition" 100)

Sometimes, the issue of belief in the fictive world is resolutely put aside, in favor of the pleasure arising from the sheer contestation of reality:

[The fictional] event has not happened, probably will not, and we are not being asked to believe either that it has or that it will. It is just that the daily tyranny of our immediate world, which we generally succumb to, becoming passive in the hands of and accepting as immutable, this is broken, this tyranny of concrete reality. ("SF Writer" 76)

Writing is as much a matter of social critique as it is of refusing reality:
I want to write about people I love, and put them into a fictional world spun out of my own mind, not the world we actually have, because the world we actually have does not meet my standards. Okay, so I should revise my standards, I’m out of step. I should yield to reality. I have never yielded to reality. That’s what science fiction is all about. ("Introduction" 86, emphasis in the original).

We are here very near to the romantic conception (perhaps influenced by Schiller’s view of art and freedom) of the work of art as a way to transcend reality and "bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity" (Adorno 2).⁶

So far, we have seen that both the three stories under investigation and Dick’s own comments on his literary activity betray ambiguity in the appraisal of fantasy, especially with regard to the possibility of separating its critical and compensatory functions. Moreover, the commodification of the quest for novelty ("Bubbles") and the reproduction of the conditions of alienation in fantasy ("Town" and "Exhibit") signal Dick’s awareness of capitalism’s appropriation of these functions for the reproduction and furtherance of its structures. In addition, the transformation of a desire for liberation into a desire for domination is rendered by a peculiar aesthetics of power and closure in which the world, literally brought before the subject, is viewed as a picture while pictures are reciprocally treated as worlds capable of absorbing the subject. All these elements contribute to a rather dark portrayal of fantasy in the fictions, which is somewhat at odds with Dick’s romantic belief in the connection of art and freedom.

To conclude this discussion, it is interesting to consider briefly a type of image that is quite different from those examined thus far, one that reintroduces the possibility of critical distancing and transcendence, and adds another layer to Dick’s treatment of fantasy. These epiphanic (to borrow Dick’s term) images, which seldom appear in the fictions, present unique characteristics that have caught the attention of several commentators. Thus, Lorenzo Ditommaso notices the non-representational character of the Edfrank jewelry in The Man in the High Castle, and insists that these objects point to “another world” (DiTommaso 102). Likewise, Peter Fitting views the doorway leading to a different world in A Scanner Darkly (184–85) as a utopian “glimpse of the possibility of another
world" (230). Finally, there is the fish sign in Valis (108) which triggers the anamnesis of the protagonist. In contrast with Haskel’s model (for instance), epiphanic images are “immune to human attempts to project meaning into [them]” (DiTommaso 102) and therefore preserved from closure (And this not because of their aseity since the Edfrank jewel and the fish sign are man-made). They are mediating images like religious icons: “Not a new world, but point[ing] to a new world” (DiTommaso 104, emphasis in the original). They substitute mystery, distance, and openness for the transparency, availability and fixity that characterize the three fantastic images we have examined. Their relationship to time is paradoxical, for they discover the future in the truth of the past through anamnesis. They are not only symptoms of a preexisting desire, but in turn generate desire without fulfilling it. Calling to mind Baudelaire’s exultation of novelty, but supposedly neither strictly aesthetic nor religious in nature, this other type of image might constitute one of Dick’s realist attempts (and a further sign of ambivalence) to preserve utopian impulses from both the threat of ideological closure and capitalist co-optation: “The name for it is neither art, for it has no form, nor religion . . . It is authentically a new thing on the face of the world” (High Castle 171).

Notes

1 It is fascinating, however, to juxtapose Herbert Marcuse’s psychoanalytic theory of memory with Dick’s numerous references to anamnesis (the loss of forgetfulness). In Marcuse’s account, memory is subversive because it “preserve[s] promises and potentialities which are betrayed and even outlawed by the mature, civilized individual, but which had once been fulfilled in his dim past and which are never entirely forgotten” (19). While for Marcuse remembering past psychic gratifications has the potential to challenge the reality principle, Dick understands anamnesis as a form of liberatory remembering of a past condition of freedom and insists on a gnostic-like mystical knowledge of the real conditions of existence. For discussions of anamnesis in Dick, see McKee 2–3; Easterbrook 36–38.

2 In contrast, Palmer regards Manfred’s idiosyncratic use of language in Martian Time-Slip as an echo from the imaginary realm and a threat to the symbolic order (173).

3 It seems important to me to bear in mind that Haskel’s town illustrates the traditional form of utopia (the blueprint for a better world, the spatial utopia à la
Thomas More or Tommaso Campanella) as a place of (achieved) perfection freed from history, and is therefore predisposed to the same evils as its illustrious predecessors: harsh rigorism, oppression and terror, negation of differences and anti-pluralism, and so on. “Town” does certainly not imply Dick’s opposition to the utopian project as a whole, but rather to the specific type of fascistic utopia embodied in Haskel’s town.

4 On the attitude of the Dickian protagonist, see Palmer 107. On indeterminacy and denouement, see Fitting’s “Ubik” 155–56.

5 In what follows I do not attempt to distinguish between the genres of science fiction and fantasy, nor make any reference to the vast and ongoing debate—uninterrupted since Darko Suvin’s influential Metamorphoses of Science Fiction (1979)—surrounding this question. However, it should be clear that some of the arguments brought forward by Dick in his attempt at generic classification are not unrelated to the terms used in the academic debate about genres, in particular the controversial Suvinian notion of “cognitive estrangement” as a criterion for separating science fiction from the body of fantasy literature.

6 Dick: “The German Aufklärung influenced me, especially Schiller and his ideas of freedom” (“Philip K. Dick on Philosophy” 46–47). To this romantic heritage, one can add the well-documented influence of existentialism on Dick. Compare Dick’s repudiation with Camus’s: “[Art] rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is” (253). On art and history, see Camus 254. On aesthetic unity and revolt, see Camus 255.

7 On anamnesis, see my note 1; see A Scanner Darkly 185; Valis 108.
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