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Media Simulation and Manipulation in Two Novels of Philip K. Dick from the 1960s

Elisabeth Kraus (Kraus and Auer 2000: 1) suggests that for some time now we have been cautioned to “put our traditional (Enlightenment) notions of *the truth* or *reality* into quotation marks, since our experience of *the real* is always mediated through an empire of signs, as Roland Barthes put it.” The ever evolving, ever more sophisticated information technologies have offered new powerful means of manipulating data – and in consequence of *hacking*, *warping* or even inventing new *reality*.

What becomes increasingly important is the awareness of the manipulation of reality and understanding how and to what extent the mass media have invaded or even colonised our minds, in what way they influence our unconscious, by distorting “not only our fantasies, dreams and desires, but our very concept of *reality*” (Kraus and Auer 2000: 1). After initial optimism about the role of the media in society in the 1960s¹, the persisting attempts of mass media to totally manipulate society are ever-increasingly noticeable. The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (after Kraus and Auer 2000: 1) claims that the modern visual technologies have created a new culture of images, signs, and codes, which is “impenetrable to old forms of resistance.” Baudrillard points to mass media as one of the most important invaders of our reality, and whatever attitude one may have toward Baudrillard’s thought, which is often ambiguous and unsystematic, it does provide us with an intriguing critique of contemporary, image saturated age.

Baudrillard developed his most seminal ideas in the 1980s, but, obviously, he was not the first to notice the malevolent force behind mass media. As early as the beginning of 1960s, an American Science-Fiction writer, Philip K. Dick, was already exploring the possible dangers that mass media pose. Different from the predominantly optimistic visions of “mainstream” American Science Fiction writers, Dick stood out as the gloomy prophet of the things to come. In his earliest fiction he struggled to expose the influence mass media exercised

¹ See the works of e.g. Marshall McLuhan or Hans M. Enzensberger.

over American society, and envisaged how they are bound to become the means of reality bending manipulations for the power elite.

The two novels discussed in this essay, *The Simulacra* and *The Penultimate Truth*, come from the 1960s, and do not belong to Dick's most celebrated achievements, however, they do deserve some serious attention as they approach a problem that continues to be relevant even now, about 40 years after they were published.

The Simulacra published in 1964 is a conglomerate of nearly all themes found in early Philip K. Dick's fiction. The novel features a repressive police state, huge powerful business cartels, a charismatic cult leader, fascinating and ruthless female character, time travel, psychic powers, Nazis, androids, emigration to Mars, mind and reality manipulating media, and simulacra. What it lacks is the idea of a conceptual breakthrough from *ordinary* reality into a different one, "a higher or altered state of consciousness" (Mackey 1988: 65), which is so characteristic of Dick.² On the other hand, however, it does stress the fact that the manner in which society seems to be structured is a mere fake, and the media manipulate it so that the *bona fide* centres of power are concealed, unknown to ordinary members of society.

The story takes place in Dick's typical near future dystopia-disguised-as-utopia, and the dystopian character of the world is immediately obvious. The USEA (America and Europe merged into one state) is ostensibly ruled by the First Lady, Nicole Thibodeaux, whose husband is regularly replaced in mock elections. The striking matriarchal system is actually a cover for the council, which governs the country from behind the scenes. Nothing is what it seems; people seem to live in a kind of hyperreal, simulated universe. Jean Baudrillard (1991: 3) discussing the novel makes a very apt comment in his SFS essay:

Dick does not create an alternate cosmos nor a folklore or a cosmic exoticism, nor intergalactic heroic deeds; the reader is, from the outset, in total simulation without origin, past, or future – in a kind of flux of all coordinates (mental, spatio-temporal, semiotic). It is not a question of parallel universes, or double universes, or even of possible universes: not possible nor impossible, nor real nor unreal. It is *hyperreal*. It is a universe of simulation [. . .].

The world shown in the novel has lost touch with actual reality. Nicole herself died long time ago and since then has been replaced by a succession of actresses merely playing the role of the First Lady, deprived of any power

² In fact, all major novels of Philip K. Dick contain this theme.

whatsoever. Her husband, called *der Alte*, as he is always elderly, is a mechanical contraption, a perfect simulacrum produced by a large cartel. The masses are kept unenlightened by television broadcasts starring the First Lady, an ultimate tastemaker, who is adored by most of the people. She is called “the most synthetic object in our milieu [. . .]” (Dick 1977: 98) or “An illusion. Something synthetic, unreal [. . .]” (Dick 1977: 119) for her role is not much different from the one her android husband plays, being a tool, an instrument of the big-scale fraud. She is a metaphorical android, an idea Dick will come back to on many occasions, a human deprived of humanism, being a mere tool, a product of mass media and the power elite.

It is only a select cast of people (the so-called Ges) that actually know the truth about how things really are, whereas nearly all characters in the novel are mired in the common delusion. Richard Kongrosian, a psychokinetic pianist, is deeply in love with the First Lady, evidently unaware of her fakeness. Al Miller and Ian Duncan, dream of performing in front of her in the White House, which they eventually do, but it only leads to their bitter disappointment as they discover the truth. Douglas Mackey (1988: 65) rightly compares these obsessive feelings towards Nicole with the relationship between Louis Rosen and Pris Frauentzimmer in *We Can Build You* (1972); however, here we deal with the whole society being schizophrenic, as a private delusion becomes public belief, and the central point, around which the society structures its universe is fake, a total simulation, “an image without substance” (Mackey 1988: 65).

The simulation is further perpetuated by the image of Mars as a favourite emigration destination. It is an idealized place people dream about and nearly all characters are sooner or later tempted to stop at one of the *jalopy jungle* outlets (similar to our used car dealerships) to purchase their own one-way minispaceship to get to the red planet. They are helped by papoolas, perfect simulacra of furry telepathic Martian creatures that use subliminal techniques to ensnare people with promises of unlimited freedom in the new world.

The actual situation on Mars is, however, never presented; never are we shown what the emigrants' life is like, just like the characters in the story the readers are fed commercials and promises. Mars seems to be rather a legend, a sort of promised land people have not much idea about. It is a place to dream of escaping to, an ultimate consolation, but still only a dream, which not many are to fulfil. Bearing in mind Dick's other visions of Mars from the same period of his career (e.g. *Martian Time Slip* (1964) or *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965)), which are rather bleak, grim and sterile, making Mars a place people wish they could emigrate to sounds more like an ironic joke on his part.

An intriguing fact, which might cast some more light on the reality on Mars, is that people deciding to take this step and emigrate take the illusion with them by purchasing android neighbours to keep company.

A man, when he emigrated, could buy neighbors, buy the simulated presence of life, the sound and motion of human activity – or at least its mechanical near-substitute – to bolster his morale in the new environment of unfamiliar stimuli and perhaps, god forbid, no stimuli at all. And in addition to this primary psychological gain there was a practical secondary advantage as well. The famnexdo group of simulacra developed a parcel of land, tilled it and planted it, irrigated it, made it fertile, highly productive [. . .]. The famnexdo were actually not next door at all; they were part of their owner's entourage. Communications with them was in essence a circular dialogue with oneself; the famnexdo, if they were functioning properly, picked up the covert hopes and dreams of the settler and detailed them back in an articulated fashion. Therapeutically, this was helpful, although from a cultural standpoint it was a trifle sterile. (Dick 1977: 58–9)

What the escape to Mars really means then is exchanging one illusion for another. There is no escape from the fake reality, the world of *The Simulacra* is a simulated fake, *Ersatz* world without any way out. Whatever the characters turn to is not authentic.

As Hazel Pierce (1983: 126) states, the author “pushes rather than leads the reader, shouts rather than hints at the overt manipulation of our minds and our behaviour [. . .]”. The means for that manipulation is the advertising industry, pursuing the most effective ways to seduce a possible buyer. One of the techniques is the already mentioned papoola, a tool for mind-bending, which deprives the listener of free choice, infusing them with positive feelings, thus winning them to purchase.

A more irritating device for advertising is the Nitz commercial, a synthetic life form programmed to convey a particular message, which stubbornly squeezes into cars and houses attaching itself to a person and repeats the message shrieking repeatedly. The Nitz commercials are practically everywhere, they add to the overall image of chaos and image saturation of the society, in which nothing is what it initially seemed to be. The whole power elite, media, social system, and the law constitute a sophisticated fraud.

People live in communal buildings, divided on the basis of their intelligence, education, wealth and moral standards, with frequent meetings, voting, and fruitless political discussions. This promotes stagnation of human free will and initiative, which is further completely negated by the advertising gimmicks.

Ordinary people have become mere pawns in this political game, expendable and devoid of free will, and the government is just a face-saving device for the ruling elite coupled with business cartels.

The novel ends with an image of violent civil war perpetrated by the anti-government organization called the Sons of Job, as well as by the opposing forces within the ruling council. It is yet another area, in which simulation is visible. As an illegal revolutionary faction The Sons of Job negate the totalitarian system and finally start a coup, however, it turns out to be yet another fabrication, as the charismatic leader of the organization is, in fact, a prominent member of the secret council that rules the country. So, if the coup is to be successful it will only be a cabinet coup; the power will merely change hands and the general situation of the society will not be altered. The exposure of simulation does not necessarily have to lead to the collapse of the system, Nicole broods over her position in the society:

Perhaps the potency of her presence, the old magical power of her image, would prevail. After all, the public *was accustomed to seeing her*. They believed in her, from decades of conditioning. The tradition-sanctified whip and carrot might still function [. . .]. They'll believe, [. . .] if they *want* to believe [. . .] How many [. . .] could break with the reality principle? Believe in something they knew intellectually was an illusion? (Dick 1977: 195, emphasis mine)

Dick is raising a disquieting question that the distinction between reality and illusion, which is blurred by the simulacra, might not matter after all, as the media management performs on a subrational level and, in fact, exploits human vulnerability to believe in an image, consequently it is already too late to divert this process.

Dick does not offer much solace, as everything that we touch turns into something totally different. He ends the novel with a bitter, ironic image of *chuppers*, a species of man vaguely similar to Stone Age people, an after-effect of radioactive fall out. The *chuppers* lead their lives in remote villages, separated from the rest of the society, but when the power struggle escalates into an all-out conflict, they gather round TV sets observing the televised war. This is a hint that "*homo sapiens* has had his time at bat" (Pierce 1983: 128) and the new species is now ready to take over, which is evidently a bitter joke on Dick's part. Still, these Neanderthal-like characters provide a contrasting point to the world of numbed emotions, flattened experience, and deadened humanity, which the world of *The Simulacra* is.

Dick further explores his suspicion of the media's capacity for manipulation in a novel from 1964, *The Penultimate Truth*. The novel is an extension of a short story "The Defenders," and its world is divided between two societies: those who live and work underground in huge housing complexes, called tanks, and the "neo-feudal elite" (Seed 1995: 209) living on extensive estates on the surface³. Such situation evidently perpetuates an information gap between those who rule and the mass in the tanks. The reason a large part of society stays underground is their conviction that a nuclear war is being fought on the surface, and waged by cybernetic soldiers, called "leadies," which they have to produce in large quantities. This conviction is greatly reinforced by the media. In reality, however, the war has long been over and the western world is governed by an international body in Geneva, and the "leadies" are used by the elite as servants and workers on the huge estates. The war then is a fiction that keeps the subterranean masses in a subservient position. Dick creates two strands of narrative that converge and both work to expose the truth about the war and the regime. On the surface, Joseph Adams works as a government official in the propaganda section and gradually penetrates the mechanism of the system that he hates. Underground, Nicholas St. James is manoeuvring his way up in an attempt to find a replacement pancreas for a member of his tank, in the process of which he will ultimately discover the truth about the actual situation.

The world of the novel is conditioned by and dependent on the flow of information through the media. The main medium used to maintain the status quo is television. Under the surface, the tankers gather every day to watch the news bulletin and they are fed the images of cities being blasted to atoms as the war sweeps the surface of the Earth. They refer to the TV sets as their sole window on the world above, and do not question the images they see as the propaganda machine holds them tightly in its claws. A popular question-and-answer program, for example, is in fact, an effective way for strengthening collective obedience by prompting the participants to answer in the right way.

³ The situation when a society is divided into two categories, and the ones living and working inside a fabricated world are kept in the dark about the surrounding world has often been used in S-F literature and film. A good example is the Polish S-F comedy *Seksmisja* where the underground world is inhabited by a female totalitarian society, which is misinformed about the living conditions on the surface. The leader of the no-male community is in fact a fake, a relict male dressed up as a woman, who enjoys an indulgent life in a comfortable modern villa on the surface; or a Hollywood super-production *The Island*, where a society of clones is raised in order to provide "spare" organs for the rich. This idea, in turn, is similar to Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, where people are raised and brought up in closed youth centres, only to be used as organ donors when they are older.

On the other hand, there is a tanker, who records the Protector's addresses and when viewing them again spots minor inconsistencies. These discrepancies reveal the war as a gigantic lie, but what is also implied here is that the role of the media in perpetuating the deception can eventually be disclosed.

Simulation is the fundamental defining process in the novel. The regime makes use of a guild of fabricators, who are devoted to inventing and creating a "universe of authentic fakes" (Dick 1978: 37). This is a prime example of what George Slusser called destabilising of history in Dick's fiction. Commenting on *The Man in the High Castle*, which is very much devoted to the production of fake fakes, he argues that:

The word *history* places the burden of the event not only on the thing but on the mind that seeks to place it. [...] to consider a thing as history is to accept its replication [...]. History [...] in Dick is made to function so as to undo its own fixity. By fixing a thing, we allow it to replicate. And in the proliferation of like events we lose sight of the *authentic* one, do not know its place or ours.

(Slusser 1992: 207)

Adams is a perfect illustration of that notion, as, for example, he is confused whether to value a bust he has found in the post war rubble or treat it as yet another fake. The omnipresence of simulation brings on confusion over what is authentic and the boundary between authenticity and sham has become blurred or even indistinguishable.

The narrative is punctuated by revelations that yet suspend the truth to some concluding point, which eventually never comes, hence the title *The Penultimate Truth*. Adams realises that the President of the US is a simulacrum, but not only that, he/it has an identical counterpart in Russia, Adams discovers that the Eisenbludt⁴ studios in Moscow have made two dissimilar documentaries on the history of Europe, and, simultaneously, he becomes involved in a governmental plan to produce ancient artefacts. All three cases involve a principle of recession, as David Seed (1995: 210) suggests. Adams's initial realisation that the President is lying is supplanted by a shock of the knowledge that the lie goes further up, and the agents of manipulation are technicians maintaining the simulacrum president. The two films present contrasting versions of history after the war, and each of them contains discrepancies that emphasise their status as fiction. Finally, the governmental intrigue in Geneva, between the director (who himself is hardly a human being, as his organs have been replaced by prosthetic

⁴ David Seed suggests this is an allusion to Eisenstein and the UFA propaganda studios in the Third Reich (1995: 211).

ones, and only his brain remains original) and his opposition shows that once you possess power over the media you are able to fake anything, even ancient history. A contrasting process of, actually growing in status, concerns David Lantano, a Cherokee Indian, who exists between reality and illusion. He is an actor who played the role of a charismatic leader in the bogus propaganda news stories and in this way comes to embody the typical qualities of leadership, while being no more than yet another fakery.

Lantano is similar to Benny Cemoli, a character from a 1960 short story "If There Were No Benny Cemoli." The story provides a further interesting study in the power of mass media. After an apocalyptic war people on Earth are struggling to rebuild the civilisation when a host of spaceships arrives. The spaceships carry people from Alpha Centauri, who arrive to help the locals rebuild the civilisation, but also punish the culprits in the atomic war. The Centaurians establish efficient administration and police forces, but the Earthmen, having expected the aliens' arrival, have prepared a trick to play on the invaders. They sabotage the headquarters of *New York Times*, which is a fully automated, homeostatic newspaper, which gathers data on its own and publishes itself regularly. The newspaper starts reports on a fully fictitious man called Benny Cemoli, who, as it is claimed there, seems to be the person responsible for the apocalyptic nuclear war. The police apparatus of the Centaurians instantly focuses on Cemoli, launching a detailed investigation into the man, and consequently letting the real culprits get away.

Dick stresses the importance of mass media in creating public figures, events or trends, in his opinion reality is always mediated. As one of the Centaurian bureaucrats thinks: "We are only real so long as *The Times* writes about us; as if we were dependent for our existence on it" (Dick 1991: 183). The power of the media to establish and demolish is far too great, and as Dick himself believed "at least half the famous people in history never existed [. . .]" (Dick 1991: 376) but were a product of mass media.

Both novels on one hand deal with the role of mass media in assisting power elite in getting into office and then maintaining this office, and on the other they show the political consequences of the disinformation techniques, disinformation in the meaning of spreading to a specific target group false, incomplete, or misleading information. A practice common in both the USA and Soviet Union in the 1960s and later (Shultz and Godson 1984: 37). The power elite of *The Penultimate Truth* as well as *The Simulacra* is nothing short of the totalitarian regime in Orwell's *1984*, as it systematically sustains its power by a torrent of falsifications covered up by an image of a father-like

leader with everyone's good as his sole goal. In *The Penultimate Truth* the impression created by the media is that the Protector addresses each person individually, which exposes how the image is capable of securing submission of each individual, even though the image is counterfeit. The same situation takes place in *The Simulacra*, with the First Lady and *Der Alte*. Both novels thus are tales of almost unlimited manipulability of facts and images, of dictatorship of bureaucracy that holds on to power thanks to their ability to manipulate and control the *truth* with the use of different media.

What is easily discernible here is one of the central motifs that run through Dick's fiction: reality is never given and unmediated; it is always managed by dominant ideological elites in order to gain or maintain their political role. Dick himself suggested that this was his: "[...] underlying premise [...] that the world we experience is not the real world [...] the phenomenal world is not the real world, it's something other than the real world. It's either semi-real, or some kind of forgery" (Rickman 1998: 128). His fiction, especially early fiction, contains numerous examples of characters who suddenly find that reality is not what they used to think it was, that it is "something other" to repeat Dick's words. The main idea, however, is that the real can in no time transform itself, or that it turns out to be only a mere façade perpetrated by some malevolent forces.

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