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LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Motion and mobility in the realist novels of

Philip K. Dick

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Abstract:

This essay explores the ways that ideas of motion and mobility support readings of Philip K. Dick's early novels that take full account of the changing geographical context. These novels are set during a period of rapid suburban expansion, the building of the interstate and the spread of automobility through car ownership, and their characters frequently exist in a state between continuity through conformity and the potential for change. The open-ended forms of the novels reflect a world around Dick that was still under construction, and where alternative realities can be glimpsed between incomplete materialities.

Keywords: automobility; suburban; materiality; California; 1950s; Philip K. Dick

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Introduction

Studies of the relationships between literary studies and spatial theory have transformed the ways in which literary texts are studied and read. These changes reflect developments in cultural geography in particular, but also in anthropology and the social sciences, and produce an understanding of phenomena that takes into account their spatial relationships as well as their historical development. They result in a widespread use of ideas of mapping as

both research method and aesthetic product, and of a poetics of coincidence and contiguity, creating links with landscape studies and travel writing.

This sustained interest in the spatial feeds directly into new work that has taken place in mobility studies, and has subsequently led to an interest in practices of representation, including literary writing (Merriman *et al*, 2008: 191-212). Adopting ideas and methods from mobility studies further challenges critical and creative practices, and research methods, through working with evidence gathered while things are on the move. The resulting work will be inherently unstable, always on to the next stage before the first can be fully described, disrupting established notions of knowledge and ideas and practices of representation (Thrift 2007).

In this essay I draw on the realist novels of Philip K. Dick, although he was better known as a science fiction writer, and read them alongside mobility theory and philosophies of motion in the context of the development of suburban spaces in California in the 1950s. Unpublished during his lifetime, with one exception, and critically neglected, they are important social documents, reflecting lower middle class aspirations of the new American suburbs and the ways they promoted social homogeneity but highlighted social divisions. Consequentially the novels deal explicitly with relationships between mobility, automobility, gender and race. The novels are also informed by Dick's readings of philosophy, and contain within their plots and the motivations of their characters examples of varieties of movements that draw on both pre-Socratic and medieval philosophy, as well as notions of dialectical thinking.

Mobility Studies

My interest in mobility and literature further develops the research I carried out on writing and spatial theory (Davidson 2007, 2010 and 2013). In these studies space is never neutral, a grid or container within which things happen, a Newtonian absolute space measured by Euclidean geometry, but is also something produced by social and cultural activity. There is no single or normal perspective, no time at which space doesn't change, and space is made up of moving elements in different contexts. The moving figure not only produces new spaces, but also performatively constructs itself as it moves through space.

Contemporary society increasingly involves more movement from more people and things, sometimes across larger distances, albeit over shorter time periods. 'Mobility Studies' otherwise known as 'The new mobilities paradigm', is concerned with a 'sociology beyond societies', whereby the mobility of people is examined alongside that of ideas and things (Sheller and Urry, 2006). It emphasises movement at all scales, from the individual household to the global corporation, it connects the analysis of different forms of travel with the multiple ways economic and social life is performed and organised across time and space and analyses complex social relations while they are in transit (Urry 2007: 6)

Exploring ideas and practices of mobility has become a key question for social scientists and cultural geographers. A number of recent publications, including book length

studies such as John Urry's *Mobilities* (2007) and Tim Cresswell's *On the Move* (2006), have sought to establish an agenda for the study of mobility by emphasising the broad range of its applications and the depth of its engagement with contemporary life. These longer studies have been reinforced by agenda-setting papers such as Sheller and Urry's 'The new mobilities paradigm', and three papers in *Progress in Human Geography* by Cresswell entitled 'Mobilities' I, II, and III (2011, 2012, 2014).

Consequently, increasing attention has been paid to automobility and the material presence of the car. In an article on Don DeLillo I outlined narratives of the car's neglect as well as an increasing narrative of attention and surveyed the literature in the field (Davidson 2012). In so doing I demonstrated that the car and automobility provide mobility beyond the body. Increasingly available to a global citizenry, automobility further changes relationships between time and space, appearing to provide a freedom of movement in direction and speed that is apparently under the control of the subject. The car may be a steel cage driven by polluting petroleum products, but it is also an object of desire that can provide freedom, social status and sexual liberation.

Research Methods

A broad survey of the work of Philip K. Dick identified key texts that combined social realism, experimental forms and characters and plots that were dependent on mobility. These texts provided the examples for close textual analysis and enabled the detailed exploration of the relationship between mobility practices and ideas of movement, and the form of literary works.

I followed up relationships between literary works and Dick's life experiences through archival work on his papers and letters, thereby constructing further connections between the writing and the life. Substantial holdings of Dick's papers exist, particularly at California State University, Fullerton, and the information I found on patterns of mobility had frequently been ignored by previous researchers.

The work of Philip K. Dick

In Dick's science fiction novels the characters move across time, between planets and between worlds and realities. In his early realist novels the characters are also constantly and restlessly on the move, either moving from place to place or, in a dissatisfied way, circling the same place while seeking a trajectory out. Movement does not remain at the physical or geographical level in his work, but also takes place conceptually. His manipulation of time and space constructs dialectical relationships between locations in the novels, producing worlds that are partially or entirely in conversation with each other as they are constructed and fall apart.¹ He uses motion and mobility to try to discover the nature of these worlds, and, in his more ontological moments, their material origins.

Philip K. Dick's fiction is normally divided into two main groups – the science fiction novels, and nine realist or so called 'mainstream' novels.² Written between 1952 and 1960, the realist novels centre on the lives of working or lower-middle class Americans, the geographical and cultural spaces they produce and are produced by, and the economic and material circumstances that circumscribe their lives. Unpublished during his life, with the exception of *Confessions of a Crap Artist* that had a limited print run in 1975, they provide a compelling critique of social change and mobility, and the politics of class, race and gender, in the new geographies of 1950s suburban California. They also examine the nature of reality and the humanity of humans. They construct realistic worlds, but as people inhabit and move through them they are always likely to reveal something else beneath the surface, or glimpse previous worlds in between. Similarly, while the characters are recognisable social human beings of their time, they also embody and enact social practices, including mobility, that as often deny their humanity as reveal it.

In *Voices from the Street* (2007), Stuart Hadley attempts to escape from his wife and child, their hot untidy flat, and a lifetime working in a television retail and repair shop, in the Studebaker coupe of Marsha Hadley, with whom he has a brief and violent affair. The car is a Raymond Loewy design that has some of the qualities of a starship, but by the end of the novel he is in a Hillman Minx, a more mundane European Loewy design, before moving to a small town and becoming a local handyman where he 'putters around'. *Mary and the Giant* (1987b) is set in a small town from which Mary tries to escape through affairs with an older man and with a black musician before driving out to live in the shiny new suburbs. In *The Broken Bubble* (1987d), the advertising by Looney Luke's used car lot threatens the integrity of the radio station's classical music show, alienating both listeners and presenters. The two main characters, Patricia Gray and Jim Briskin, follow each other around in a series of car journeys until finally they are reunited. The material importance of the car and its degrading effect on contemporary culture is reflected in the scene referred to in the title of the novel where a group of businessmen kick a naked girl around the room in a plastic bubble. Patricia Gray runs away to a motel on the edge of the city with a much younger man in an attempt to free herself from a childless future, and revels in the 'freedom, the sense of motion, the trucks, the cars ... transition she thought; there was nothing stable here. Nothing fixed. She could be anything she wanted. This was the edge' (1987d: 168).

Movement

Philip K. Dick describes processes of movement that are often problematic, from the 'puttering' around in the realist novels that typifies the failed attempts of the characters to escape their destiny, to the interstellar travels of his genre science fiction, where escape from one planet can often simply lead to enslavement in another. The theological concerns of the later work are similarly concerned with issues of motion and mobility. A self-taught philosopher, his writings directly or indirectly demonstrate some knowledge of Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plotinus, Giordano Bruno, Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger, particularly

the ways they challenge pragmatic and everyday understandings of time, space and movement. His later more abstract novels might be least convincing when they attempt to explore abstract theological questions, but his writing is at its most intriguing and powerful when it demonstrates creative and dynamic relationships between abstract thinking, and concrete physical and material details.³ This interest in the physical and the material extends to the act of writing itself, which Dick refers to as manual work (something he does with his hands), thereby constructing the writer as the figure of the mechanic or technician rather than the scientist or priest. He is suspicious of any ‘god-like’ authorial overview, and always has to metaphorically get on his back at the side of the road to see what has gone wrong, and fiddle with the nuts and bolts.

The notion of the writer as manual worker is further extended when, in an interview with Paul Williams in 1974, Dick talks of an act of writing as ‘building a universe’, and ‘building’ here is more in the sense of the way that a prefabricated tract house is built, a world that might soon fall apart or at least reveal its own flaws, rather than the permanent world of a more godlike genesis. He continues: ‘all my books are really one book’, that is they are part of the same constructed universe that contains ‘a TV repair man, a used car salesman and tyre regroover’⁴ (Williams 1986: 67). In many of his novels this world is held together by the figure of the putterer. For Roger Lindahl in *Puttering About in a Small Land* (1987a) his ‘puttering around’ results in foiled attempts to escape in a car, journeys that are supposed to take him to a new life but are finally circular trips around the same ground. Roger is also a putterer in his ability to build and fix things, and particularly those things that through the mediation of experience (TV and radio) suggest the possibility of constructing new worlds. He is building an FM radio, new technology of the time and a new kind of mobility: ‘“This is the new band,” he said ... He could not explain it. The whole new world, the opening up of regions and levels ...’ (125). When Walter Dombrosio in *The Man Whose Teeth are all Exactly Alike* (1984) loses his job he is similarly reduced to the status of a ‘putterer’, condemned to go round the house and garage performing inconsequential tasks. The witness to this is the female figure, similarly trapped by the suburbs, Janet Runcible, who is driven to indignant anger by the sight of him working in his garage: ‘A man like that, staying home, how is he different from a bum? How long does he plan to putter around there in his garage, building birdcages or whatever it is?’ (120). Dombrosio has lost his licence, and is unable to make the trip to the city and keep his job, thereby losing the status conferred by automobility.

Material and World

The material Dick used for the construction of his novels was often direct autobiographical experience. In the introduction to his biography of Dick, Carrère refers to the ways that: ‘In straddling the line between autobiography and fiction, Dick’s novels and stories provide the best window onto a man who, in a far more radical way than any of his contemporaries, effectively abolished the difference between life and literature’⁵ (2004: xiii). Anne Dick, his

wife between 1958 and 1963, makes the observation that his work is ‘a surrealist autobiography’ in which ‘reality and imagination flicker back and forth in his fiction as it did in everyday life’ (A. R. Dick 2010: xx).⁶ It is therefore no surprise that some of the major changes that were taking place in American society and its cultural and geographical spaces are central to his work. It also meant that the world could only stop spinning, and stop being constructed, when Dick’s life came to an end, the point at which Anne Dick went back and read all his novels. In trying to explain Dick’s approach to manual processes of world building, Jean-Luc Nancy’s distinction between ‘world’ and ‘globe’ is helpful (2007). Dick is building a world that connects to the materiality of the landscape and the figures in it. To see the totality of that constructed world, its global entirety, requires taking up a position outside the world he is producing, a centralized power that can order all things while being absent from them, and a theology that ‘perpetuates the position of the creating, organizing and addressing God’ (Nancy 2007: 41). It was a position Dick could never sustain, either in the process of writing, that consumed him, or in his philosophical speculations.

It is also a world that is never constructed in one novel, or only in the novels, but emerges from the totality of Dick’s literary output, an overall output that works and reworks the material in different forms and in different genres, from the realist fiction to the sci-fi novel, and from the experimental poetics of *Valis* (2001) to the extended speculations of the *Exegesis* (2011). Stanislaw Lem says of Dick’s work in his article, ‘Philip K. Dick: A Visionary Among the Charlatans’, that ‘essentially it is always one and the same world which figures in them – a world of elemental unleashed entropy, of decay which not only, as in our reality, attacks the harmonious arrangement of matter, but which even consumes the order of elapsing time’ (1975: no page).

For Dick, abstracted concepts or ideas are contained within particular forms of constructed material, often a car, a television set, a radio and a typewriter, those particular objects that move through or produce contemporary space either physically or virtually. These material objects do not provide a world with any sense of permanence, however. Jack Isidore, a kind of *idiot savant* in *Confessions of a Crap Artist* (1989) but with some characteristics of the author figure that so often features in the work (and both a *nom de plume* of Dick and the name of the ‘chickenhead’ in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, 1968) is employed as a tyre regroover. He re-cuts the treads of worn tyres to make them look new, producing authentic looking surfaces that lack material integrity. It produces cars that look like they can move, but as Al says in *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland* of the re-grooved tyres on his second hand cars: ‘If the guy so much as backs over a hot match the tires’ll blow’ (Dick 1986: 105).

In Dick’s late novel *Valis*, time and space are reconfigured so that multiple realities co-exist, each one revealing something of another, and linked through material objects with a capacity for movement (in this case a red Capri). The narrator (and the narrator is variously described as Philip Dick and Horselover Fat) recounts a dream in which he travels to ‘another place ... a lake up north’ which is from a different time, and is in an area in which ‘seven hundred miles of dry country exists only’ (2001: 127). He leaves the lake to go back to

his home in the south, only to find that he is married and lives in a house with a woman he has never seen (but is, of course, slim and dark haired) in a scene of suburban and domestic harmony where the couple tend their rose garden. They possess the counterfeit map of California complete with lake in the north, and a red Capri in which he might make the trip north, but both are fading in his head as he wakes up (128).⁷ There is, he reflects, only one connection between the ‘dream landscape and my actual world’, and that connection is his ‘red Capri’. The car is the means of moving between alternative realities and therefore reveals their existence, and a material object that can exist in all of them. He asks himself ‘how many worlds do we exist in simultaneously’, an abstract and general question that is made concrete by the red car (130). Similarly, in the last novel he completed, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (2011), there is an exchange between Bishop Archer and Bill, where Archer tries to use the notion of a hypothetical car to explain the notion of material evidence. Archer, it is revealed, doesn’t know what make of car he drives, and the narrator has to intervene, and tell him that it is not a Buick but a Chrysler.⁸ Commenting on this scene in his biography of Philip K. Dick, Emmanuel Carrère says:

In life what you need to know, Dick now insisted, is how to repair your car. Not some hypothetical car, not cars in general – because nothing exists in *general*; only particular things. (2004: 310)

Examining motion and mobility therefore provides ways of understanding how and why Dick’s characters move around, and what they are made of. It also reveals something of the material they move through, the physical world, and the things that move. His realist novels are set in 1950s California, so movement is normally by car, and the alternative realities consist in part of the spatial homogenisation of the new suburbs and the spatial differentiation of the towns they replace.

Mobility, change and suburban life

The early realist novels produce narratives that often seem to lose their way. Characters, stuck between motion and rest, are either left wandering off into nowhere, or find themselves locked into unlikely endings that challenge the realist ambitions of the novels and the motivations of the characters. *Puttering About in a Small Land* is a good example, structured around a series of car journeys, some of which are destined never to happen. It begins with Virginia Lindahl taking her son Gregg to visit a residential school. It ends with her husband, Roger Lindahl, setting off in a car piled high with TV sets he has stolen from his own shop to begin a new life. In between, the narrative is framed by a series of road trips to the school and back. Lindahl sees the car as a form of escape from everyday routine. The car has a dual identity, as part of the trap of homogenised suburban living for the ‘organisation man’ in the nuclear family, and as the means of escape from that trap. When Virginia refuses to go to Arkansas he sets up the arrangement to drive to the school with Liz,

another parent, an apparent act of kindness to Virginia, but also so that he has ‘... a legitimate excuse for taking off on Sunday afternoon ... not left sitting by himself on the rim of the pot’ (1987a: 114). It is an act that is to give him a limited degree of freedom, and an opportunity to continue his affair with Liz, but still remain within the domestic sphere. Mrs Watson, his mother in law, uses the legal system to support the reasons why he can’t leave the area altogether: ‘That car isn’t yours, it belongs to both of you, you and Virginia. If you run off with that car it’s stealing’ (127). Defending her daughter’s decision not to go to Arkansas she adds: ‘You can’t leave the state without your wife ... You can’t run out on your family ... That’s desertion, and taking the car out of the state is Grand Theft’ (127). He cannot escape the circular patterns of his life and the freedom the car represents is exposed as a myth. Just as Roger could not escape his first wife in the borrowed car at the start of the novel, he can’t escape from California in the jointly owned car unless Virginia goes with him. His only means of escape is not the drive into the sunset but the weekly drive to and from school and an affair with a neighbour’s wife.

Fergusson, in *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*, initially attempts to integrate himself into the perpetual motion of the new suburbs and their promise of frictionless movement through the endless circulation of traffic on the freeway by providing a service that keeps the cars running through an ‘auto-centre’. Harman, a developer who tries to sell the idea to Fergusson, describes it as ‘... a new idea in garage development. Oriented towards the future. The garage of tomorrow in a sense’ (1986: 54). It is an abstract and disembodied world where ‘ten to fifteen mechanics’ are ‘on call all the time’, a world away from Fergusson working on his own in his old garage, manipulating heavy automatic gearboxes while lying under the car worrying that the jack might slip and he would be crushed (54).

Fergusson distrusts the abstract and distant finance of modern capitalist relations and takes a trip to Marin County to see the site of his new investments. His incompatibility with the new spaces is reflected in his car. It ‘died twice as he backed ... from the garage’ and ‘almost everything in it was worn; nothing engaged’ (58). Increasingly alienated and helpless, he loses his way in the rapidly changing environment. His body similarly refuses to function. Stranded down a road still under construction he becomes paralysed with anxiety and a workman has to back his car out for him. When he finally reaches the development and is walking around it with the salesman he trips and falls, bruising his chest and initiating a heart attack: ‘his chest ... laid open by the steel beams’ (74). Through movement he not only changes his usual spatial and temporal coordinates, moving out of his familiar urban territory, but reveals something of the materiality of his car and own body, both of which fail to work properly.

Fergusson also finds out things about the materiality of the world, whether in the ‘mire of dirt that was the street’ (68) in the new development, or through the broken road in the ‘construction zone’ where ‘the pavement ended in a series of jagged projections’, and the ‘road ... had been scooped away by digging equipment’ revealing the ‘underneath part which they usually never got to see’ (61). The construction of the highway, that will

homogenise the experience of travelling through space and make everything less ‘real’, is a process that also exposes the reality of what is under the surface of the earth. Movement means change, a disruption of the uneasy balance that existed at the old garage, with Al lending the occasional hand on a heavy job. Fergusson tries to move to a new future, and cheat death by entering a frictionless world of perpetual motion. The movement, however, is not into place, but out of place, and he finds himself unable to effectively function.

Plot and form

The vacillation of the characters and the uncertainties around the purpose of their movements resulted in novel forms and narrative structures that seemed to wander rather than proceed with any sense of purpose towards a conclusion. Reflecting the changing suburban environments from which their material was derived, Dick’s early novels moved between genres and styles of working-class realism and avant-garde modernist formal experimentalism, something that the publishing industry found hard to sell. A number of rejection letters from publishers during the 1950s express dissatisfaction with the endings of the novels and apparently purposeless narrative structure. Regarding *Confessions of a Crap Artist*, Dan Wickenden from Harcourt Brace talks of the ‘loss of credibility in the final 60 and 70 pages’ (1961); while Harold Strauss of Alfred Knopf writing to Dick’s agent, Scott Meredith, talks of how ‘the story itself seemed fresh and original but runs distinctly down hill in the second half ... Mr Isidore [Dick’s pseudonym] has complicated the problem of sympathy in that he tells the story from constantly shifting points of view’ (1960). Eleanor Dimoff, of Harcourt, Brace and Company, talks about ‘feeling somewhat frustrated at the end’ (1961). Denver Lindley writes to Scott Meredith, describing Dick as ‘unable or unwilling to think his books through in advance, and as a result they never add up to anything’ (1958); while Edwin Fadiman of Julian Messner speaks of an ‘authentic talent woefully in need of discipline’. Dick, according to Fadiman, must ‘accept the necessity to focus, to pattern’, and develops a parallel between the novel and a ‘jumbled pawn shop ... full of valuables scattered over all hell and gone’ (1955).

Dick’s disinclination to reduce his narratives to a single satisfactory perspective or ending is not a weakness when the importance of movement in his work and his life is taken into account. Rather it comes from both a technique and a philosophical position that requires endless motion. It is only when things move that their material nature is revealed, as the resulting friction wears them down, and Dick was the mechanic writer who kept the world spinning and breaking apart. His novels could no more come to a satisfactory conclusion than the world could stop turning and the threads of the narratives would always remain open in the form of multiple possible connections. As Lem says: ‘Philip K. Dick does not so much play the part of a guide through his phantasmagoric world as he gives the impression of one lost in a labyrinth’ (Lem 1975: no page). Dick himself says in a letter to Lawrence Ashmead of October 2 1968, in response to a criticism about the endings of his novels, that: ‘... I selected one of the endings only when I reached the end’ (1968). In a

letter to 'Peter' of June 11 1970 he emphasises the indeterminacy of the narrative process of his novels. He says: 'I set up my characters; I set up his worlds; then I have him begin to lose his world as he knows it.' In the same letter he continues: '... I am writing about a man or men who have lost control or are losing control of their worlds. By making this my subject I am denying that this world really is as we see it; I am following Kant to a great degree. Except that I have faith that the thing-in-itself can be known, or at least glimpsed.' He further emphasises his constructivist methodology when he says: 'On one hand I know what I'm doing and on another level I suppose I don't' (1970a).

Uncertain spaces

This uncertainty is unsurprising in that it reflects a world around Dick that was going through significant material and cultural change. The 1950s saw an unprecedented expansion of the American suburbs, made possible by increased mobility through car ownership and the development of new roads. These new suburban spaces are those produced in Dick's realist novels and provide the material context for his explorations of time and space. They are an actual and symbolic movement of capital and human resources from the inner city to locations that are 'sub-urban', a new construction of the boundaries between town and country and the production of horizontally constructed living spaces. Existing within a dialectical relationship between motion and rest, they promise social mobility and an entry into the middle classes, and are dependent on physical mobility and the ability of the menfolk to get into work in the cities. The movement, from the city out, is one that releases a potential for change, drawn forward by the actuality of the lived presence and the fulfilment of the potential of the promise of capitalism through the parcel of land that suburban living provided, with its echoes of the homestead.

The Man Whose Teeth are all Exactly Alike (1984), like *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*, explores movements between the city and the suburb, but does so from the perspective of the new developments rather than the town they replace. If in *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*, building the road exposes bits of the world we never expected to see, in *The Man Whose Teeth are all Exactly Alike* we are similarly alerted to the existence of different levels and surfaces, reflecting the rapid advance of a suburbanisation that changed the visual landscape. The book begins and ends with an emphasis on the supply of clean water necessary for any human settlement. It contains discussions of drainage systems, and processes of zoning and subdivision that determine the physical infrastructure of suburban life. The horizontal movement outward from the city is also one that takes place beneath the surface, and it is lack of attention to the water supply that provides one nightmare conclusion to the novel as its characters develop a deformity from an overdose of calcium, the fate of earlier settlers in the area. History, beneath the surface, lies not only deeper than the new suburbs, but also in the older settlement of Carquinez, now stuck the wrong side of the mountain and without access to the road.

Walter and Sherry Dombrosio can only live out in Carquinez because of their car and the road that takes them into the city, and when he then goes to pick up his car from the garage and isn't sure it will be fixed he asks himself: 'How am I going to get back home' (1984: 25). Mobility is not, however, equally distributed between the married couple, and a key source of tension in the narrative lies in Walter's loss of mobility and Sherry's increasing independence (15). When Sherry turns up at Walter's workplace early in the novel his first question is: 'How'd you get into town' (21) and their relationship is torn apart when Walter loses his license for drunk driving. He is now dependent on Sherry, who not only gets her hands on his Alfa Romeo, which she drives very competently, but also begins to build a life for herself in the city, helped by a class background that can open doors. Sherry becomes pregnant when Walter rapes her, and after physically dragging her out of her friend's house, where she is finding out how to get an abortion, he takes the wheel in an act of masculine dominance even though he is still serving out his ban. His threat, to keep her at home, is that he will 'sell the car', an act that she says will: 'kill me and economically ruin us' (218) in a suburban environment that was described as 'devastating, particularly to women and children. The suburban world was a female world, especially during the day' (Jackson, 1987: 243). For a man to become immobile in the suburbs, to lose the ability to either engage in the circulation to and from work, or to throw everything in the back of the car and head out, is to suffer a kind of death.

The suburbs create the illusion of a contemporary and homogenised surface that wipes out history and frees inhabitants from the anxiety of death. Time becomes space, and Lewis Mumford remarks in his contemporary study that the 'suburb served as an asylum for the preservation of illusion [where] domesticity could flourish forgetful of the exploitation on which it was based' (1961: 563). The older inhabitants of Carquinez are marooned the wrong side of the mountain in an area where TV is allowed in but the people don't get out. The inhabitants of the 'new' Carquinez go back and forth on the road to work without even being aware of the older development. Yet the novel is always reminding us that beneath the contemporary surface different times coincide, and will keep breaking through. The Indian artefacts have only come from somewhere else, washed down the hill from someone else's land, and are themselves mobile. The water supply, running beneath the surface of the earth, not only comes to the surface because of the leaks in the pipe, but absorbs into itself toxins that will cause physical abnormalities. The septic tank from the Dombrosio's leaches effluent, and it is through its extension that the Indian artefacts are discovered. The chopper jaw, the physical deformation caused by impure water, returns in their son in a surreal and dream-like ending to the novel.

Dick's novel affirms the suburbs as more than a housing solution, but a post-war and cold war development that was both rhetorical and material. Suburbs depended on the desire for home ownership, ready availability of money through the Federal Housing Administration and the GI bill (100% mortgages), cheap cars and fuel, roads, the baby boom and 'white flight' as aspiring or middle-class white Americans left the cities. That the novels are mainly set in California is no coincidence. Kenneth T Jackson in *Crabgrass Frontier*, a

study of the development of the American suburb, says: 'More than anyplace else, California became the symbol of the post-war suburban culture' (1987: 265). Suburbs might be the 'dominant residential pattern' but were never culturally or politically neutral spaces for living, despite their promise of a normalised or average existence. Rather as the 'fullest, most unadulterated embodiment of contemporary culture' (265) they are characterised by conspicuous consumption, a reliance on the automobile (and roads), development of the nuclear family, a division between work and leisure, and racial and economic exclusiveness.

Despite their promise of a better life, the suburbs had their critics. They were 'regarded less as an intelligent compromise than a cultural, economic and emotional wasteland' (Jackson, 1987: 244); and Lewis Mumford described them as 'a low grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible' (1961: 555). For Mumford, the suburbs make houses 'uniform, unidentifiable', and they are inhabited by: 'people of the same class, the same income, the same age group.' The uniformity of the suburbs extended to other experiences, where the residents find themselves watching: 'the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods' (555). While recognising that the suburb began 'as a mechanism of escape' it has 'turned into its very opposite'. The car is 'all that is left of the original impulse towards autonomy and initiative, but that too has become part of the trap and turned into 'a compulsory and inescapable condition of suburban life.' (561).

Dick was similarly critical. He says of his time at 707 Hacienda Way in San Rafael that: 'The house I am living in appals me. A tract house exactly like all the others for miles around' (1970b). In the same letter he describes Ann Dick's detached and individually-designed modernist rural house in glowing terms. A few weeks later he writes that 'Nancy has our car, so I can't drive anywhere', a frequent complaint that begins in his time at Point Reyes, and a way that he identifies the fate of the writer with that of women stuck in the suburbs (1970c). In 'Afterthoughts by the Author' he emphasises his role as passive observer when he says: 'what the people do on my block is bring in their newspapers and mail and drive off in their cars.'" In *The Dark Haired Girl*, a collection of essays, poems and letters, he says in a letter to 'Ursula' of his life in Orange County: "This is a strange area down here by Disneyland: plastic everything except for the people' (1989: 107).

Movement and change

The characters in the novels may often appear trapped within repetitive movements that reflect the harmony of an object eternally spinning round its centre, but those same movements also contain the seeds of their own simultaneous liberation and destruction. They frequently try to break free from these patterns of movement by taking a journey to another place, but the effect is usually disastrous.

In *Confessions of a Crap Artist*, for example, the journeys to Fay and Charley Hulme's house are events in themselves that leave the characters changed. When Charlie comes back

from shopping he is angry and beats up Fay. Nat and Gwen are taken to the house as a kind of quarry, hunted down by Charlie, with their bikes in the back of his car, and their world is turned upside down. When Charlie comes back from hospital, driven by a work colleague rather than Fay, he kills the livestock in an act of revenge for Fay's infidelity. Jack Isidore, Fay's brother and the self-styled chronicler of the story, is moved up there from Seville, where, in contrast with the house, 'in only a twenty minute drive you are over into Santa Cruz where the beach is and the amusement park is. And it's four lanes all the way' (Dick 1989: 9). The course of Jack's life is changed by the trip there: 'But around me all my goods slid and rocked. What an odd sensation it was, to have them with me in motion, not back at the room' (84). And it is Jack Isidore, not Fay, who is stranded in the house, forced to circulate within the neighbourhood and around the house in a round of domestic chores. Jack has no car, and says: 'In order to visit Charley in the University of California Hospital at Fourth and Parnassus, in San Francisco, I had to take the 6.20 Greyhound bus from Inverness' (119).

The movements of the characters are therefore outside the usual suburban patterns that sustain regularity. Charley and Fay are freed by their relative prosperity from the daily journey to work and Fay has her own car, giving her a mobility many of Dick's characters lack or only gain through force. They do not, however, avoid the trap of domestic relations. When Fay drives Nat to the coast for a liaison, driving 'confidently' (122), despite the poor road, Nat is 'carsick and he felt like a child again, being driven by his mother' (122). At the very end of the story, when he is married to Fay, Nat finds himself crammed into a carriage on a fairground train ride with a group of boy scouts in uniform and on tracks that take them all in the same direction: 'The inevitability of the train's progress ... always ahead of them he saw the track, the two rails, and there was nothing the train could do but follow it' (237). The automobility provided by the bike, and then the car, is lost on the train, as his own freedom is lost in his relationship with Fay.

Motion and mobility were not activities that Dick engaged in or understood unproblematically in his own life. In a place and time dominated by car travel as the motor of social change and travel to other planets as a national ambition, his life and work function in a series of tense relationships between geographical stability, which can easily lead to an agoraphobic and domestic isolation, and an uncertain future in which he drives off without any sense of destination. Writing to the critic Tony Boucher, in 1962, but recounting his life in the 1950s, Dick says that two things happened to cure his anxiety and agoraphobia: 'I bought a car and taught myself how to drive and I stumbled on a stimulant drug called Semoxydlene'. He continues

With the car I began first driving around town, then out into the country ... I became mobile, not confined ... I re-encountered the world of people via my car ... my car, my little green pills, had saved me.' (Dick 1997: 65-6)

Some seven years later in 1969 he writes to Anne Dick and excuses himself from a family event by saying ‘I don’t drive anymore ... my phobia about driving just kept getting stronger and stronger until it became complete’ (1997: 248). This was the time he was writing his claustrophobic study of paranoia and drug use in *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), a novel in which he expresses a hatred of suburban values and the house and car that represent them, and in which cars function as part of a ‘stoner’ culture rather than a means of getting to and from work. He had, however, in line with his mechanic’s view of the world, more than a passing interest in the qualities of different cars, and their cultural symbolic value. In a letter to Tony Boucher dated on the same day Dick turns down a chance to drive in Boucher’s mother’s sports car and relates the phobia back to the ‘accident I had back in 1964’ (1997: 248).¹⁰ In a letter written when he was living with his fifth wife Tessa in 1973, and trying once more to live a settled and married life, he refers to a ‘good car, a Dodge Coronet with factory air’ (1994, p. 267). The relationship doesn’t last as long as the car and he peevishly refers, in a letter to Linda Wolfe in 1977, to the way that Tessa ‘blew up the engine of the first sports car I gave her ... I have our ten year old Dodge’ (1993: 2). His first car, according to Anne Dick, was a ‘Raymond Loewy Studebaker Starlite’ coupe that he talked about ‘for years’, and a car that features importantly in *Voices from the Street* (Anne R Dick, 2010: 252). Later he exchanges his ‘flimsy’ but ‘fine handling’ Renault for a ‘55 Chevrolet with a straight stick and a six engine which has never been to a garage yet ... although it does lean a little on the turns’ (Dick 1997: 49). A number of his characters have ‘foreign’ cars (in *Valis* Eric and Linda Lampton have a ‘white VW Rabbit’ and Gloria has a VW [[2001: 193; 13]), and most of his characters in his realist novels do have an identified make of car.

His interest in the material qualities of the car reinforces the notion that for Dick, following Aristotle, abstract ideas of motion do not exist apart from ‘things’. And the things contain within themselves a potential or a possibility for movement towards their ‘actuality’, the fulfilment of that potential. The actuality is, for Aristotle, the cause of movement, in narrative terms an end that drives the beginning. His construction of movement (a movement that, following Parmenides, includes change within it) is therefore teleological rather than ontological; it is movement by design rather than from a first cause, and pulls the movement towards its actuality, rather than being pushed by its potential. Every motion is therefore always connected to individual substances that are subject to change, a change that can also be linked to decay. It is only the planets spinning round that can go on forever. Movement from place to place, on the other hand, can be measured through ideas of absolute space and time. The characters in Dick’s novels are similarly pulled towards an actuality, but it is an actuality within a conclusion that remains stubbornly open. The end, whether continuous cycles of domestic harmony or the transformative nature of freedom, might determine the beginning, but it is an end that remains undetermined until it is arrived at, and then might only be a prognosis of future change.

The beginning of the end

Mobility and motion are not the subjects of Dick's novels. Rather it is through practices of movement and their mobility that aspects of the characters and the materiality through which they move are revealed. Different patterns of movement occur, but they are neither regular nor consistent and vary in both quality and quantity. The repeated circular journey includes that which is to and from work, but also wider circuits that weaken the link to the domestic or work centre. Journeys out from the centre are adventures into the unknown which lead to further wandering, and movements from place to place that bring about change. Moving out of place can lead to alienation or to the potential of actualisation.

Movement and motion are abstract conceptions for Dick, but they are also carried out in a concrete reality and by material things in physical worlds. The success of these early novels is that they establish realistic worlds which slowly begin to unravel through movements of people and things. The frustration of many critics at their unsatisfactory endings is a consequence of these movements, both those that go from place to place as transformational projects that are never quite complete, or those that go round and round in endless pattering actions that keep the world turning.

Staying in one place, the characters often fall into sullen and inward-looking units, revealing little of themselves. It is when they are challenged by their own mobility, either through a desire or a compulsion to move, or through a resistance to movement, that the narratives begin to explore the complexities of time and space, and through those explorations reveal something of their own materiality and the world through which they move. Reaching the limits of understanding of spatial and temporal relationships that can be validated by experience, the novels move tentatively into notions of multiplicity and infinity. Beginning with the experience of suburban life in 1950s California, they begin to develop concepts of time where all things exist simultaneously, an idea that informs much of Dick's science fiction work and the later theological novels. Similarly, geography is never an illusion, and the characters make realistic journey through possible landscapes, but the fabric of which the geographies are constructed is always threatening to fall apart or reveal other worlds in the cracks in between. The novels are an imaginative critique of the horizontally constructed world of the Californian suburb and its promise to obliterate history through the creation of new worlds. They also contain within themselves the concerns about the nature of reality and the humanity of humans that are to inform the science fiction novels for which he is to become famous, as well as the theological concerns of the *Exegesis* and the later autobiographical novels.

Notes

- ¹ The dialectic, as Karl Marx claims, not only represents a form of motion itself in the way that it sustains relationships between things, but can also take account of 'every

historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well.’ (1990: 103).

- ² The term ‘mainstream’, a description used by many critics and commentators to distinguish these novels from his science fiction, sits unhappily with the description of these novels by Dick himself. In letters to Scott Meredith and Laura in 1973 he refers to them as ‘experimental novels’ (1994: 123, 280) and in a letter to Stanislaw Lem in 1973 he refers to *Confessions* as an ‘avant-garde literary novel’ (297). Patricia S. Warrick in *Mind in Motion: The Fiction of Philip K. Dick*, remarks: ‘He called his earlier realist fiction proletarian novels about the working class’ (1987: 4).
- ³ See also the posthumously published *Cosmogony and Cosmology*, published in 1987 but written in 1978. It is an attempt to reduce his various ideas to a Gnosticism that will help to explain his personal encounter with God.
- ⁴ Eleanor Dimoff, of the publisher Harcourt, Brace and Company, says of five of Dick’s realist novels: ‘My most immediate reaction is that you have been writing around a novel; each manuscript, singly, gives us a glimpse into a very definite world – a ludicrous, frightening and wholly real place ...’ (1960).
- ⁵ Carrère is right about Dick in this respect, but fails to take into account the ways that other writers (Jack Kerouac is an obvious example) drew extensively on their own experience in their fiction.
- ⁶ Some of these intertextualities can be traced with the help of Andrew M Butler’s excellent *Pocket Essential* book on Dick, which gives a summarised account of the publication history of the novels and indicates the ways that principal themes occur and recur in the novels.
- ⁷ In a letter to Claudia Bush dated March 5 1979 (around the time of the composition of *Valis*) he writes: ‘Bought a new Capri Ghia’ (Dick, 1979).
- ⁸ The Buick is symbolically significant to Dick. In an interview he says of his father that ‘he drove a big Buick ... and lost interest in me when I was a baby’ (Williams, 1986: 57).
- ⁹ ‘Afterthoughts by the Author’ (undated), author’s manuscript, Philip K Dick Archive CSU Fullerton, Box 22., Box 23/4 (c), unnumbered.
- ¹⁰ See Sutin (2005: 135) for a description of the accident.

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