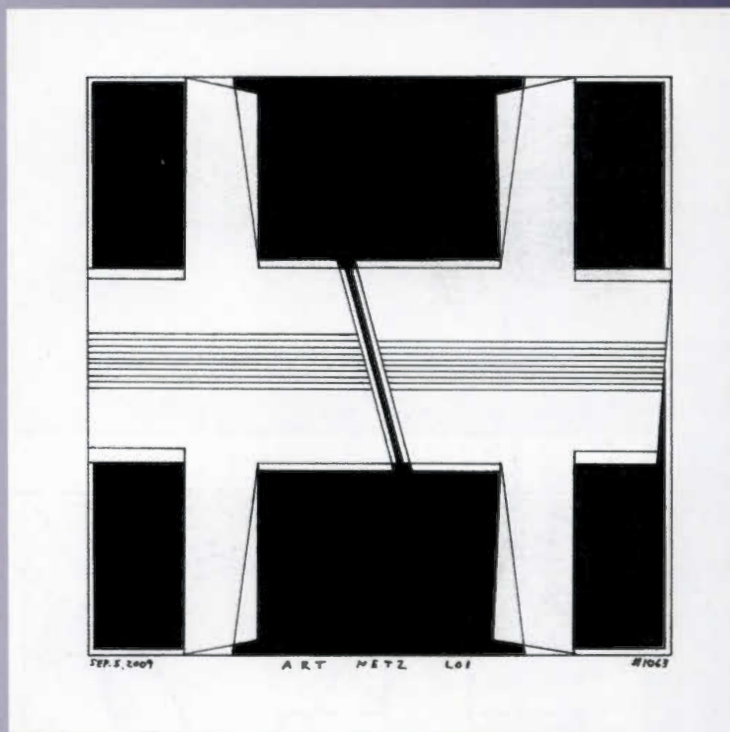


Who's
Dying
Who's
Watching?
Now?

By Laurence A. Rickels



Philip K. Dick's French biographer Emmanuel Carrère

argues that the 1977 novel *A Scanner Darkly* is, as Dick's bid for a sane or mainstream intermission from his psychotic states, his most deluded work.¹ The non-fictional afterword in which Dick declares *A Scanner Darkly* to be his own work of remembrance could indeed be seen to fit or foot that bill. However, one should also note that it is in this novel that Dick makes a breach of contact between his revalorization of psychosis in terms of alternate present realities and external topical points of interest such as drugs, violence, and surveillance. Contrary to his identification as Christian in his non-fictional word, Dick was in the word or world of his own making always resolutely ambivalent about the redemption value on our deposits of loss. It took this Christian mystic or psychotic to see through and project surveillance as belief system. What Dick adds to the closed quarters of doubling under realizable conditions of surveillance is his longstanding questions: Where are the dead here? Where are they housed, installed, included?

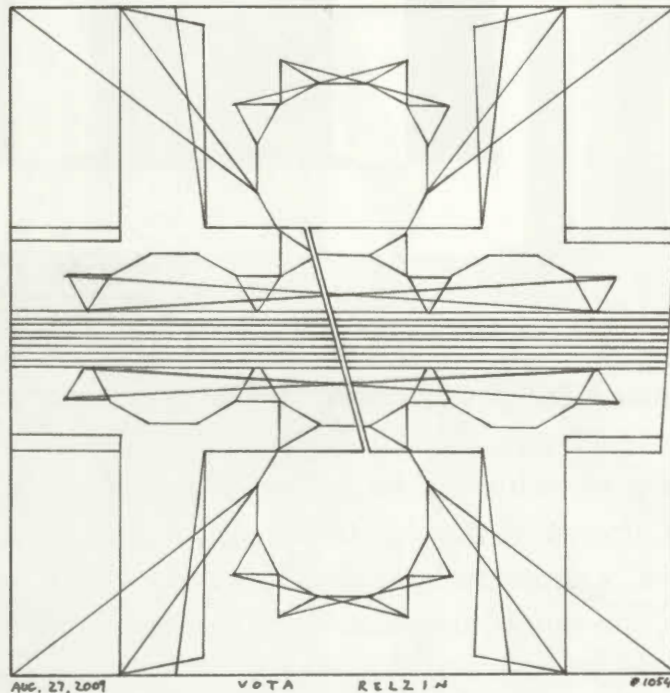
1. Emmanuel Carrère, *I Am Alive and You Are Dead: A Journey into the Mind of Philip K. Dick*, tr. Timothy Bent (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2004 [1993]).

In *A Scanner Darkly* surveillance is doubly internalized via everyone's drug of choice, Substance D, otherwise known as Death. In Dick's war of the world on drugs, actual surveillance is pressed into the service of containing the drug scene in second stage alert. Undercover agents who hang with the druggies and report back in scramble suits to their superiors occupy the first stage. To maintain their cover, however, the agents must pass at the communion they are observing as fellow Death heads. By the time agent Bob Arctor is assigned to watch the tapes of the nonstop surveillance cameras that have in the meantime been installed in the house he shares undercover with the milieu he at first was alone observing for his reports, Death's effect on his brain reflects the pull of a larger structure of control release whereby the whole mass media Sensurround recycles addiction and recovery as low-maintenance subjecthood. The tabs he takes subsume the tabs he was keep-

ing. Arctor is handed his brain fry diagnosis right before the book enters its own internal doubling in Chapter 11, which is essentially a sequence of untranslated incorporated quotations from Goethe's *Faust* surrounding the two souls in Faust's breast.

Arctor's own interior dialogue intercuts with these excerpts just as the wasted side of the brain responsible for language prompts the surviving side to find compensation through translation or cerebral lateralization. The compensation that proceeds as lateralization opens wide the alternate worlds or self-reflexive interiorities of delusion. In other words, the halfway point at which the brain on drugs and total surveillance meet and cross over promotes not the all-clear of super-vision but instead, as Arctor reflects, a relay and delay of splitting and displacement.

It is as if one hemisphere of your brain is perceiving the world as reflected in a mirror. Through a mirror. ... So left becomes right And



we don't know yet what that does imply, to see the world reversed like that. Topologically speaking, a left-hand glove is a right-hand glove pulled through infinity.

"Through a mirror," A darkened mirror ...; a darkened scanner. ... I have seen myself backward. I have in a sense begun to see the entire universe backward. With the other side of my brain!² (212)

The lateralized view sees the doubling it releases and relies on as fully inhabiting the tape medium, aggrandized via the fourth dimension which, as Daniel Paul Schreber too pointed out in his *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903), modern Spiritualism cultivated as that reversal of mirror reversal in which one not only can line up

one's own hands one on top of the other rather than fold them together as in prayer, but also can contact the dead. For this is the zone of comforts, haunting for the secular mind, doubling above for believers, and what lies between the two, comfort in nihilism: to be double and nothing.

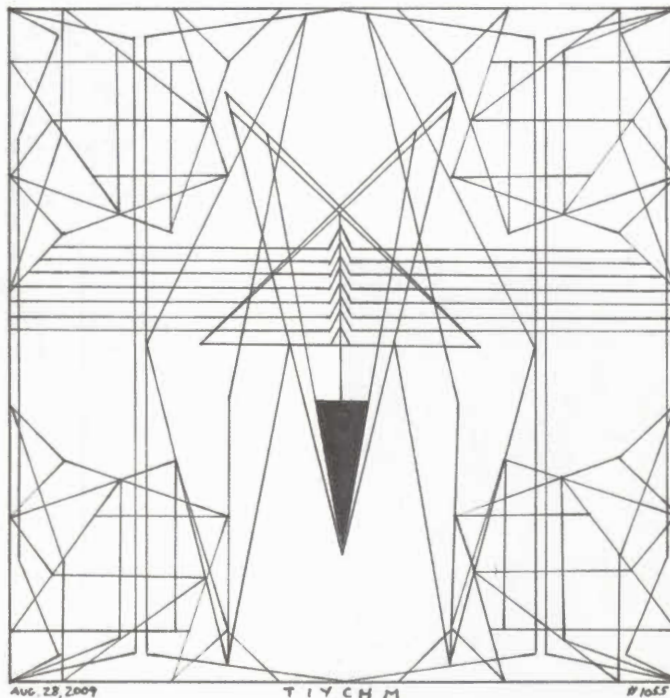
Something is being done to me and by a mere thing, here in my own house. Before my very

eyes. Within *something's* very eyes; within the sight of some *thing*. Which ... does not ever blink. What does a scanner see? ... I hope it does ... see clearly, because I can't any longer these days see into myself. ... I hope, for everyone's sake, the scanners do better. Because ... if the scanner sees only darkly, the way I myself do, then we are cursed ... and we'll wind up dead this way, knowing very little and getting that little fragment wrong too. (185)

After one of the police psychologists proclaims that "the infinity of time ... is expressed as eternity, as a loop! Like the loop of cassette tape!" (215), Arctor flashes on this timeline as the fantastic prospect of the dead winding up or rewinding *this way*:

In time—maybe the Crucifixion lies ahead of us as we all sail along, thinking it's back east. ... The First and Second Coming of Christ the same event ...; time a cassette loop. No wonder they were sure it'd happen, He'd be back." (216)

But what he is left with, over and again, is the emptied-out smallest unit of this loop—as in Arctor's two-way-mirror insight into the fast-forwarding



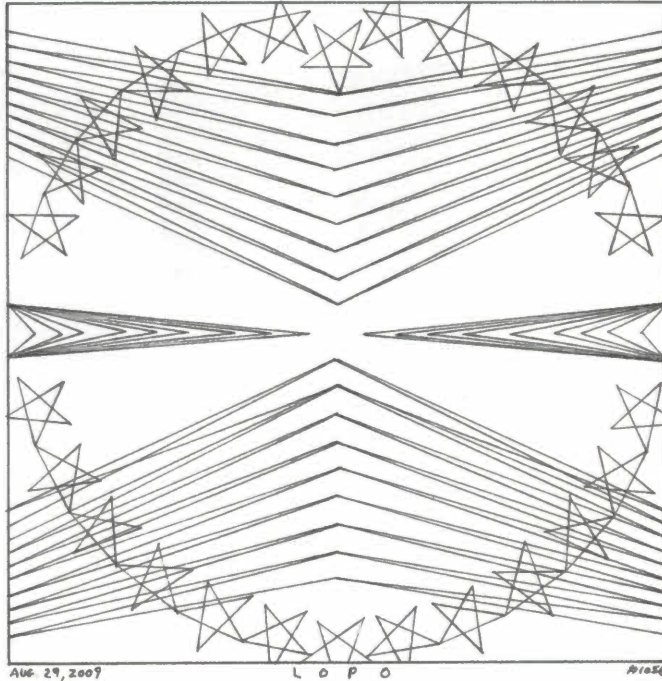
2 Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991 [1977]).

or death wishing that inheres in his surveillance.

To have watched a human being ... that you had gotten real close to, ... and most of all *admired*—to see that warm living person burn out from the inside, burn from the heart outward. Until it clicked and clacked like an insect, repeating one sentence again and again. A *recording*. A closed loop of tape. (66)

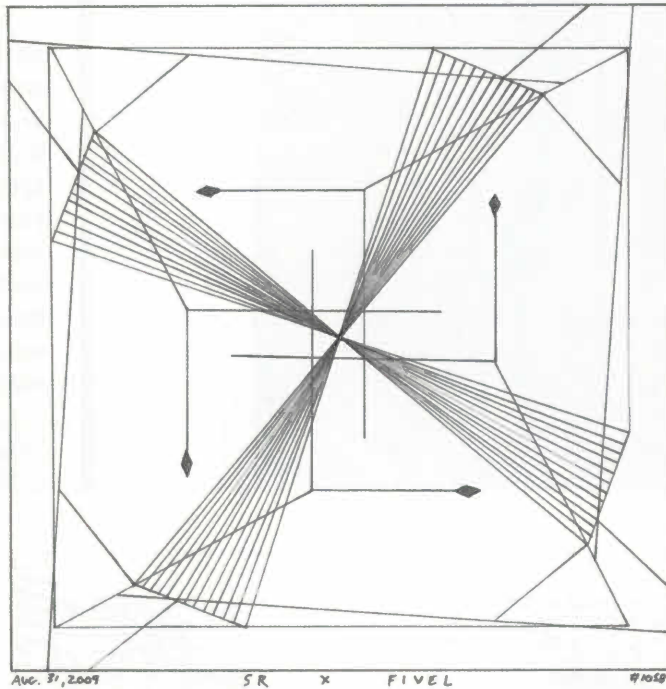
But across this bottom line Arctor now affirms the work in surveillance. "Keep surveillance alive, as I've been doing. For a while at least. But I mean, everything in life is just for a while" (220). "Otherwise, he thought, they could die and no one would be the wiser. Know or even fucking care" (221).

What does it mean to pose questions of surveillance as problems that are already upon us—all over us? In the academy at least such an acceptance of or submission to a science-factual certitude about our being under super-vision derives from a longer-term reception of a work by Michel Foucault that also bears the date mark 1977.



Foucault remade Nietzsche's genealogical account of institutionalization (or perspectivism) and its subject, the seeing I or ego, but under the aegis of realized technical controls. Thus Foucault, too catholic for Nietzsche's tastes, provided a politics of manic denial of the repressed depression hidden away in the assumed realization or reality of surveillance. According to Nietzsche, from Christianity to nihilism, mankind continues to uphold belief in an all-seeing witness who, as we say, validates our suffering, our pain, and renders it all meaningful—if only by being on record or under surveillance. And yet the need for this witness protection or projection program struck Nietzsche as so seductive that he was moved to forecast twentieth-century wars unprecedented in history through which so-called monsters of nihilism would seek ultimate

meaningfulness in mass destruction via synchronization of all our deaths all together now and at once. With *A Scanner Darkly*, Dick joined Nietzsche in re-projecting



as belief system the technical, scientific project of surveillance. What Dick adds to Nietzsche (as to his Foucauldian update or betrayal) is the allegorical prospect of mourning and unmourning. Belief system surveillance indwells the inscrutable material record of the ruined outside chances that surveillance as technology will compute.

In the closing chapters of *A Scanner Darkly*, which introduce the new path through recovery that Arctor, now named Bruce, undergoes, the encounter group re-enters the loop. According to the group's consensus, to be dead is to be an unmoving camera: not to be able to stop looking at whatever's in front of you. Mike, one of the supervisors at the occupational therapy farm where Bruce works for recovery, concludes:

But the dead—he glanced at Bruce, the empty shape beside him—should, if possible, serve the purposes of the living.... The dead, Mike thought, who can still see, even if they can't understand: they are our camera. (266)

Even though it is in this outer

limit of recovery that we find out that the fields the ex-addicts tend grow the organic beginnings of Substance Death, the slip between Death and the dead marks the spot we are in at the end of *A Scanner Darkly* as the spot the loop of surveillance tried to wash or watch out. If the dead are

our cameras, then it is before them that we begin to fill in the blank of that something that looks without blinking and lets a record show that is without identification.

In an interview, Dick turned up the contrast between the genres of fantasy and science fiction within their respective spans of retention:

In fantasy, you never go back to believing there are trolls, unicorns ... and so on. But in science fiction, you read it, and it's not true now but there are things which are not true now which are going to be someday.³

In sum, "all science fiction occurs in alternate ... universes." The basis of fantasy's appeal, at least according to Tolkien (in his 1938 essay "On Fairy-Stories"), is Christianity: the fantasy that is also true. The happy ending may

be escapist in everyday life, but in the end (of life) it becomes the Great Escape, the overcoming of death that Christianity advertises. Dick's fictions, which forgo the New Age channel of recollections of past lives, focus instead on memories of alternate *present* lives. Whatever else the present tense may be, it is, according to Dick, where the dead are, which would explain why it is elided in daydreams, the fantasy genre, and Christianity. As Adorno advised Benjamin in a letter dated August 4, 1935—and with reference to his addressee's study of allegory and mourning—the recent past is the most repressed period of time which, as prehistory, can come back only in the mode of catastrophe.

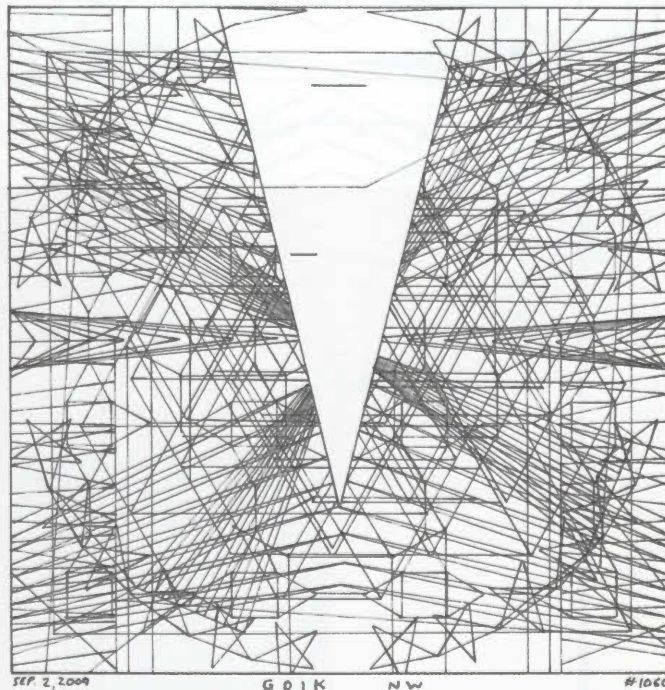
In his 1977 essay "If You Find This World Bad, You Should See Some of the Others,"⁴ Dick reviews the outside chance that his alternate history novel *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) might not only be fiction, even if it is fiction now:

But there was an alternate world, a previous present, in which that particular time track actualized—actualized and then was abolished due to intervention at some prior date. (245)

Variables undergo reprogramming "along the linear time axis of our universe, thereby generating branched-off lateral worlds" (241). In writing for over twenty years about counterfeit or semi-real worlds and deranged private worlds-of-one into which, however, others can be drawn too, Dick was sensing, as he only now (in 1977) realizes,

... the manifold of partially actualized realities lying tangent to what evidently is the most actualized one, the one that the majority of us, by general consent, agree on. (240)

Rather than the black hole of loss, the present is in Dick's view the neutral gear through which alternate realities shift into actualization or pass out of existence, but at the same time not in linear time. Finitude is there-



4. Philip K. Dick, "If You Find This World Bad, You Should See Some of the Others," in *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick: Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Lawrence Sutin (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

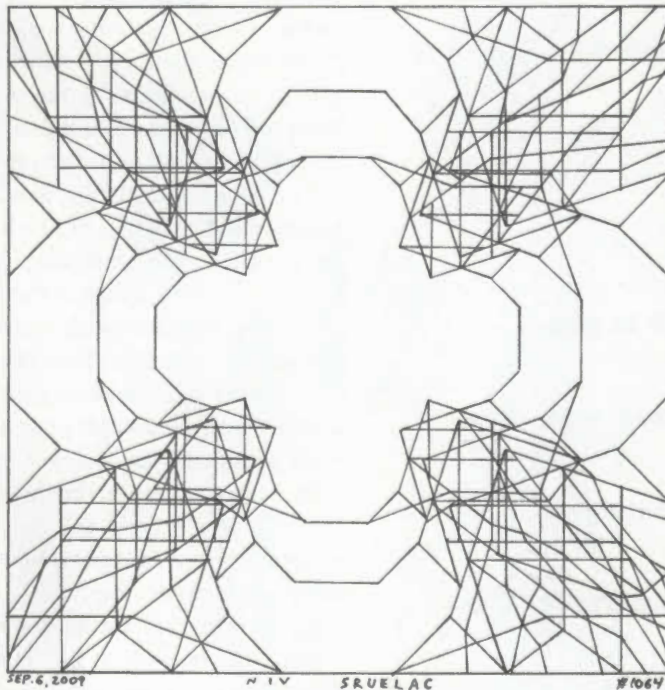
fore not so much foreclosed or redeemed as given all the times in the world to pass on.

Dick maintained a primal sibling bond at his own origin as the break that would prove constitutive of his corpus—a break not so much with reality as within the belief system of surveillance. As he also found occasion daily, by all accounts, to reveal in conversation—it was the exchange that never varied—he was born prematurely together with his twin sister who didn't survive their head start. Dick felt throughout his life the determining influence of his survival of his twin sister. From this mythic or psychotic origin onward, Dick speculated, he had inhabited a realm of undecidability specific to mourning over the other's death conceived as double loss: both parties to the death lose the other. Indeed, Dick claimed he could not decide who had died: he could be the memory crossing his surviving twin's mind. Dick's signal investment in alternate

present worlds derives from this unique specialization within the work of mourning or unmourning.

But Dick was also thus given a mythic head start to subsume the retention span of singular loss within the inside view of reality loss or, in the reverse order designating the reality that is available for testing, "loss reality." Dick's introduction of at least two realities that occupy interchangeable places in his fiction, which he would subsequently refine as alternate history in *The Man in the High Castle*, for example, or as half-life in *Ubik* (1969), originally or primally draws its inspiration from the twin's death that to his mind could, alternatively, have all along been

his own. In losing each other, either twin could be dead or alive. Hence Carrère's title: "I am alive and you are dead." The span of the "and" embraces the recent past and the near future as the period of uncertainty about the reality of one's world that both parties to one death must face. ¶



Theorist/therapist **LAURENCE A. RICKELS** was visiting professor at New York University during the fall of 2008. In September he presented this reading of *A Scanner Darkly* at a panel on "Visuality and Violence," organized by Elisabeth Bronfen. His new book, *I Think I Am: Philip K. Dick*, is coming soon to a bookstore near you.