Special Issue
Migratory Stratification. A New Analytical Perspective for a Stratigraphy of Human Mobilities, Socio-Territorial Transformation and Cultural Change



FUORI LUOGO

Journal of Sociology of Territory, Tourism, Technology

Guest Editors
Francesco Della Puppa
Giuliana Sanò
Giulia Storato

Editor in Chief: Fabio Corbisiero
Managing Editor: Carmine Urciuoli

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Summary

9. Editorial
The Depth of Places: Migration, Sedimentation, and Social Transformation
Fabio Corbisiero

13. Migratory Stratification. A new analytical perspective for a stratigraphy of human mobilities, socio-territorial transformation and cultural change
Francesco Della Puppa, Giuliana Sanò, Giulia Storato

17. Vertical migration in the Italian metromountain: migratory stratifications between agency and structural constraints
Andrea Membretti, Fabio Lucchini

27. Between factories and agencies. Migratory stratifications and changes in immigrant labour: the case of Alte Ceccato
Andrea Calabretta, Davide Marchi

41. Migratory Stratifications in a Border Transit Camp. The case study of Friedland in Germany
Anna Louise Weßling

53. «You feel like a person, not a working animal»: Emancipation trajectories after labour exploitation in Northern Italy
Franca Zadra, Serena Piovesan

3T SECTION

3T READINGS

75. Della Puppa, F., Lise, A., Matteuzzi, F., Saresin, F., & Storato, G. (2024). *I disconosciuti. Vivere e sopravvivere al di fuori del sistema di accoglienza.* BeccoGiallo.
Francesca Cimino reads

77. Ruggeri, S. (2023). *Voci da Grafica Veneta. Esperienze di vita e di lavoro nel Veneto contemporaneo tra capitalismo flessibile e caporalato.* ISTRESCO
Teresa Ferraresi reads

81. Reed-Danahay, D. (2024). *Sideways migration: Being French in London.* Routledge
Andrea Calabretta reads

FUORI LUOGO MEETING

87. Migratory Stratifications and the Dynamics of Global and Euro-Mediterranean Migration: an interview with Ibrahim Sirkeci
Francesco Della Puppa, Andrea Calabretta

FUORI LUOGO CONTRIBUTIONS

95. For a Sociology of Literature. Dystopia and Utopia in Philip K. Dick
Linda De Feo

103. Climate Justice and Biodiversity in the Mediterranean Basin
Alessandra Terenzi, Nunzia Borrelli

117. Stylistic-Linguistic Paths in Early Twenty-First-Century Travel Literature. Paolo Rumiz and the Gaze Toward Europe and the East
Milena Elisa Daniela Romano

131. Posillipo, tra fascinazione e deprivazione. Riflessioni sulla dimensione turistica di un quartiere "esclusivo"
Luca Zarrilli

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Linda De Feo[1]

For a Sociology of Literature. Dystopia and Utopia in Philip K. Dick[2]

Introduction. Figments and ultimate truths

Philip K. Dick is considered a cult writer of post-World War II America. His work starts out from the canons of orthodox science fiction and then projects itself onto a speculative horizon that raises multiple sociological questions (Nati, 1996, pp. 5-7).

Despite the fact that tropism for the fantastic (Robinson, 2000, p. 7) appears to be the natural element in which Dick's work develops, any attempt to categorise it in a specific literary current is destined to fail. He deals with themes ranging from the interpenetration of quantum physics and metaphysics to virtual reality, with its implications diffused in entire social systems. He also explores the relationship between schizophrenia and consensual collective hallucinations, observing the human qualities in the age of globalization and the epochal turning point that leads to a redefinition of individual identity.

The concept of progress that, at times, stems from the ruin of the past marks the first stretch of the author's narrative parable, but it fades in the last phase of his creation.

This paper will consist of an examination of the dimensions both utopian and dystopian of Dick's creative parable. The method used will be historiographical-epistemological. A precise philological intent will be pursued. A constant attempt will be made to interpret elements of the continuous dialogue between structural processes, theoretical assumptions and imaginative encyclopedia. The focus will be on two significant works, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, published in 1965, and *Valis*, published in 1981.

The writer's analytical lucidity, his depth of questioning, his genius and his hypothetical visions, "as if" views, create an expressive elaboration capable of exploring the contemporaneity and predicting the future.

Dick could be compared to the writers of the beat generation, but his obsessive focus on society, his extraordinary narrative power and his hypertrophic vision distance him - with the exception of William Burroughs - from the post-symbolist individualism of underground culture.

Science fiction narrative is not only a form of manifestation of needs, expression of desires or exorcism of fears, but it is also a set of unprecedented forms of aesthetic, political, economic, religious intelligence. The depiction of the conquest of space by cosmic ships and death rays has been replaced by contributions that stage a landscape of infinite and tragic desolation. Especially since the second half of the last century, this genre has moved away from the modules of the space opera, covering the undefined area between science and anti-science, between the prophets of a world composed exclusively of figments and the seekers of ultimate truths through the absurd (Hobsbawm, 1994). The atmospheres described in Dick's works are aesthetic «mirrorings», *Widerspiegelungen* (Lukács, 1971) of an objective reality, of a widespread sense of decadence, of an apocalyptic conception that does not envisage palingenesis (Dick, 1995).

The imaginary should be intended as a rich set of representations, mental or materialized in works, based on visual (paintings, drawings, photographs) and linguistic (metaphors, symbols, stories) dimensions, capable of forming coherent wholes (Wunenburger, 2003). It is a dynamic system that establishes meanings and contributes to establishing a relationship between human beings and the cosmos.

The novels placed at the center of the reflection are useful to observe how the Dickian dialectic between utopia and dystopia is articulated. In these works the presence of two horizons is linked to the presence or absence of divine inspiration.

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The first novel, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, is one of the most significant works in the entire history of science fiction and it contains various interpretative keys of the Dickian universe. The second novel, *VALIS*, was published in the year before the author's death.

1. Capitalism, anamnesis and extropy

The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch stages the conflict between the old paternalistic industrialism, metaphorised by the deuteragonist, Leo Bulero, prototype of the American tycoon, and the cosmic capitalism, impersonated by the protagonist, Palmer Eldritch. Half human and half alien, Eldritch, back in the solar system, bears three signs of his conjugation with machinic otherness, three signs of hybridization with technical heteroreference: steel jaw, bionic eyes and a grafted arm. He represents a metaphor, the temporarily last result of the process of cybernetization of the human being.

Eldritch has returned from the interplanetary expanses to market *Chew-Z*, a lichen, a psychotropic substance capable of transforming the past, manipulating the present and offering a Faustian future. The connection between religious spirit and capitalistic ideology is denounced: the mercantile hero promises immortality by selling it. The sacred perspective, with Eldritch, refers to a techno-utilitarian paradigm. Thus, on an allegorical level, the human being is a fund available for the practices of consumption and unlimited economic growth generated by technicized capitalism. The exchange value of *absolute* capital is the new monotheistic deity. The desertification of transcendence is coessential to the plane of commodified immanence. The depopulation of heaven (Hegel, 2018), the disenchantment of the world (Weber, 2004) and the death of God, understood as a dissolution of obsolete values (Nietzsche, 2022) are processes that reflect and relaunch some dynamics of creation of a dystopic space.

Palmer pursues a pantocratic design to take possession of everyone and everything. This project of domination is destined to turn into a work of destruction, of extermination. Eldritch appears in each of the reincarnations experienced by the users of *Chew-Z* and cancels out all forms of dissent, of eccentricity, to achieve an indistinct primordial unity. A process of all-encompassing cosmization of religious phenomenality is staged. The Platonic dualism between the phenomenal sphere and the immutable *ousia* is overturned by the narrative plot in the monism of the *parousia*, of the presence of the intelligible in the sensible, which Dick, thanks to Eldritch, uses in the medieval version. The protagonist is the creator of reality, who becomes the entire reality, overcoming death and reigning among the scattered fragments of the infinite multiverses. Human beings incorporate Eldritch. They subsume his stigmata into their bodies and take on the appearance of monstrous, demi-human creatures, cyborgs, perhaps even with artificial blood or flesh. They transform themselves into emblems of a deformed humanity to which the promise of eternity does not guarantee a real existence.

The main character is at the same time *eldritch*, horrific, and palmer, bearer of palm, malefic and beneficent. He constitutes a negation of the principle of non-contradiction. The contamination of good with evil, of the demonic with the angelic, of the just with the unjust, of the true with the false produces confusion of codes.

In the unified world, controlled by Eldritch, the deformed realization of the Eucharistic and transubstantiated *agape* is reconfigured. *Agape* is a Greek word meaning *caritas* in Latin language and empathy in English language. The term empathy indicates interpenetration in the mood of the neighbor, of the fellow, of *the other*. Empathy is a relevant concept in the Dickian fertile production. With the constant attempt to perceive the inscrutable horizon, to attribute an ultimate sense to life, Dick has elaborated a complex theological interpretation of a planetary technology (Formenti, 2000, p. 80). It is marked by the utopia. The treacherous nature of the technique, that emerges in the early, dystopian novels, is dissolved in the description of an extensive living system of intelligence (Vast Active Living Intelligence System), defined by the acronym VALIS

from which the title of the famous novel derives. VALIS is a system that tends to assimilate the surrounding habitat into information assets, thus performing a negentropic function. It indicates a purpose-oriented structure.
In works such as *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* the technique is judged perfidious. In *VALIS* the technique will perform a fundamental saving function. It has acquired an extropic and anamnestic role through the dissolution of mechanical hardness into electronic fluidity. This novel develops an original technological conception in the form of a mythical narration. In this portrayal the technique is conceived as a complex of human faculties embodied in the technosphere. It corresponds to a reality innervated with communication networks, in which energy and information, let us say energy and spirit, merge. A computerized transfiguration of the *anamnesis* myth is described. This myth has been configured since Orphism as a practice capable of bringing back the memory of human origins. It is referring to the rites practiced in the esoteric Greco-Roman religions, including primitive Christianity. These rites institute the attempt to free inhibited memories and to bring to light already existing contents. The recovery in Platonic thinking consists in the memory of pre-existing ideas in the soul. Plato is an author very often evoked by Dick. By deactivating the forgetting module, the *anamnesis* -word marked by double privative *alpha*- alludes to the loss of amnesia and, therefore, to the retrieval of remote and buried reminiscences. The human being experiences the regaining of genetic memory, which crosses generations. This is an important aspect of the thought of another philosopher, Giordano Bruno. Memories reflect the divine mind that governs the universe and that reveals to the Self its belonging to an order emerging from the depths of consciousness (Bruno, 2012).
There is a deep connection between the Renaissance tradition and Hermetic Gnosticism. The Gnosticism conceives personal religious experience as the production of a reverberation of the divine universal mind within individual minds[3]. According to Bruno the universe is an image in which the divinity is reflected. This divinity is a perceptible figure for the shadowy and limited human being, who is a mere detail within the infinity of finite worlds (Dick, 1995).
In *VALIS* the human creatures appear as cosmic microforms, repositories of experience, comparable to coils of memory placed in a computerized thinking system. The technique becomes an instrument of salvation, attainable through the liberating function operated by gnosis (Sanchiz, 2019, pp. 839-858), or, more precisely, by the annulment of oblivion (Dick, 1981).

2. The pink ray

The idea of absolute good in Dick becomes perfectly congruent with the image of a supreme divinity, with the image of a God-universe. Following the dissolution of mechanical technologies into electronic ones, a God-machine is identified in a God-computer, VALIS. VALIS is identifiable with the God Progress, who is no longer the historical human-divine figure described and handed down by the evangelical story, but he is identifiable with the One present in the plurality of Matter. This planetary system is an evocative anticipation of the destiny of information that ac-

3 Dick's interest in Gnosticism is partly due to his friendship with Episcopalian Bishop James A. Pike, who inspired the protagonist of *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, published in 1982. The prelate was a charismatic figure for pacifist and *radical* Christians who had fought for civil rights alongside Martin Luther King, and later for the Berkeley protesters. The discoveries, which occurred around 1946-1947, of two manuscript collections -the so-called Essene library of Qumran and the Gnostic library of Nag Hammadi- constituted two fundamental discoveries in archaeological theology. The Qumran scrolls mention Zadok, a priest of Israel at the time of David, who gave his name to the community of the Zadokites, whose existence is attested by documents dating back to the 2nd century b. C. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain a conspicuous amount of *loghia*, the sayings of Christ that prefigure the Gospels two hundred years in advance. They should be separated from the character Jesus, revealing a mysterious figure, indicated by a Hebrew term whose best translation is Expositor, to whom many of the *loghia* are attributed (Dick, 1982). The New Testament would therefore be an "imposture", and the presence of pre-Christian practices in the Messianic-Judaic sect would make Christianity a late manifestation of the Zadokite cult (Carrère, 1993). It is advisable to consult also Sutin, 2003.

quires autonomy and independence from individual brains. Thanks to capillary diffusion of the means of communication, the lumps of thought scattered on the planet are connected. VALIS corresponds to what Pierre Lévy defines «collective intelligence» (Lévy, 1994) and Derrick de Kerckhove defines «connective intelligence» (de Kerckhove, 1995; de Kerckhove, 1997).
This narrative precognition hypothesizes the future electrified plots of the Net through the mediation of the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Teilhard de Chardin, 1962). Dick explicitly refers to the Teilhardian Noosphere in his essay *Man, Android and Machine* (Dick, 1995). The Noosphere is a floating mass above the Biosphere and it is an entity in which all subjective thoughts are immersed, influencing each other. This collective brain entity is composed of transmitting and receiving stations and it is a layer of the Earth's atmosphere made up of holographic and informative projections within a unitary *Gestalt* in constant elaboration. This entity is energetically linked to the media communication networks thanks to a development that has generated the indistinction between natural evolution and artificial evolution. It organizes matter and produces interconnection between elements. It thus takes on the role of a force opposed to entropy, allowing the human beings to reconfirm themselves as the authors of a process and it offers, from discovery to discovery, constant gratification to the needs expressed in specific historical contexts. Thanks to the invention of radio transmission, the noospheric energy level, no longer a passive receptacle of information, has acquired a life of its own, transcending human knowledge, elaborating solutions and transforming itself into a titanic system of artificial intelligence (Dick, 1995). Hypostatized Reason, or what Philo calls *Logos,* would thus perform a mediating function between the particular and the universal. The antinomy constituted by Good and Evil would therefore be overcome thanks to a sophisticated Gnostic conception and its reference to divine perfection. This perfection can be found in the Valentinian Pleroma, that is the set of eternal beings to which everything will be brought back, the totality of the aeons destined to cover the distance between God and matter. The term pleroma in the New Testament is used in reference to Christ, who is described as the fullness of God, and to believers who draw upon this fullness through faith in Christ. In the Gnostic system, however, the term has a more defined meaning. It denotes the region of the heavens from which comes the secret wisdom that brings human being's salvation. The pleroma would correspond to the *Urgrund* or the point of it from which we come and to which we will return (Dick, 1995).
During the last phase of his production, Dick "transmigrates" to other horizons and celebrates the absolutization of the logic of simulation (Frasca, 1996, p. 216). The empirical world is subtended by an immutable and eternal background. It would be a kind of illegitimate imitation of what has been created, affirms Dick in *How To Build A Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later*, that was introduced, according to a Gnostic theory, by the inferior god, or Satan, the "Monkey of God", in order to weaken the faith of Christians in the return of the Saviour (Dick, 1995). For the Gnostic thinkers, considered by the Fathers of the Church as heretics, this Luciferian demiurge would be represented by the holders of power on the Earth. In the fideistic search for the absolute and the ultimate meaning of existence, the premises for the configuration of a symbolic design are developed. From this project, speculative suggestions about illness and death emerge, which, in March 1974, transform into a revealing experience, an apocalypse (Dick, 2011). In fact, the doors of the knowledge of objective reality seem to open for Dick when a pink ray, a ray of colored light, sparkling and dazzling, rich in information, strikes his brain like an illumination and, at the same time, a hallucination.
In *How To Build A Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later* Dick underlines how Heraclitus' philosophical intuition penetrates the mystery according to which "the latent structure governs the evident structure. Fragment 54". The existence of another reality that underlies the world deducible from perceptual schemes is affirmed and the most sophisticated Platonism is anticipated: "The nature of things lies in the habit of hiding. Fragment 123" (Dick, 1995), of concealing its essence behind the veil of appearance, of what Hindus indicate as *maya* and the

Greeks designate as *dokos* (Dick, 2011). In Plato's *Republic*, the original condition of humanity is expressed by an image that portrays human beings chained in a cave, where the light can be glimpsed only through a pale reflection, and where the prisoners mistake the objects of sensations, the shadows cast on the wall, for real objects. It is the partial, indirect knowledge that Saint Paul speaks of, attained *per speculum in aenigmate*, through a mirror. That reflection of oneself when one looks at oneself in the polished bottom of a metal bowl (Dick, 1977), when one looks at one's own upturned face. It is current knowledge contrasting with future knowledge, that we will acquire when we could see things *facie ad faciem*.
In *Cosmogony and Cosmology* Dick hypothesizes that the world would consist of a spurious projected reality, devoid of ontological substance. It would be generated by a machine comparable to a computer that programs and controls humanity, an artifact that reflects this reality in the image and likeness of its creator, defined in 1616 by Jakob Böhme as *Urgrund*, origin. The destiny of the artifact is dissolution. The end of human beings will be the isomorphism, the fusion with the original entity, which will absorb us, permeating us. It will break the spell of the illusory world when it will defeat the deterministic power of the artifact, annihilating it, reducing it to non-being. Then, only an exhaustive monistic structure will remain, entirely alive and sentient. There will be no possible time, place or condition outside the *Urgrund* (Dick, 1995). Human thoughts are destined to reach the Omega point, real pole of psychic convergence in the Universe, a cosmic point of total synthesis, existing beyond the human being in time and space, starting from which the brain of the Earth will no longer be a set of punctiform individualities, but a collective entity.
The attempt to explain the unknowable is an impulse that Dick felt deeply. The perfect coincidence emerged in the first novels between the deceptive nature of technology and the evil reality is diluted in an ever less accentuated dichotomy between organic and inorganic, and in an ever more complicated recognizability of artificial creatures (Fortin, 2024, pp. 53-77). The androids are frighteningly similar to human beings reduced to mechanical beings, anempathetic, unaccustomed to reaching out compassionate hands, emotionally deprived by alienation and reification (Formenti, 2000, p. 84). In *Man, Android and Machine* Dick advances the visionary hypothesis that electronic constructions could be the disguise of living realities, because they are linked, in an absolutely inscrutable way, to the "ultimate Mind". *Sepher Yezirah*, or *Book of Creation*, is a Kabbalistic text that dates back almost two thousand years. It says: "God then set one against the other: good against evil, and evil against good; good purifies evil, and evil good". In both contenders [however] there is God, who is both and neither of them". There is the *Urgrund*, which reconciles absolute opposites. There is Palmer Eldritch, who, behind the angry grin of the God of Wrath, behind the cruel metallic face, lets us glimpse soft flesh (Dick, 1995).

3. Machines and death

Utopia is a word derived from the Greek language and it means absence of place, *utopos*, but it indicates also a good place, *eutopos*. In his later works the writer supposes that the World Wide Web and its eschatological horizons could represent an *eu-topia*. Reworking the bold hypotheses of Teilhard de Chardin, Dick paints a faithful portrait of social reality, constantly malleable in the complex *continuum* of human being-machine fusions.
VALIS is the prophetic literary representation of a mathematizing cosmology reoriented from the transcendence of the divinity to the immanence of the cyberspatial knowledge, a form of unprecedented wisdom enriched by promises of immortality (Geraci, 2007, pp. 961-980).
The concept of wisdom is very relevant in Dickian works. It is a guiding concept, but also an ambiguous concept.

An adolescent memory of Hans Blumenberg comes to mind. The philosopher mentions that he read an inscription in the auditorium of his high school in Lübeck (Blumenberg, 2021): «The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom». The phrase is cited several times in the Old Testament and, in general, the genitive «of» has been interpreted in an objective sense. The phrase could refer to the fear that Dick felt towards an entity perceived one morning in 1963 and recognised as God. It could refer to fear of human beings in the face of divinity. Fear as a principle of wisdom understood as the acquisition of awareness of their non-omniscience. This fear can have an opposite sign when that «of» performs a subjective function, when the Lord is afraid and when Palmer is afraid. This character, through the *Chew-Z,* has acquired an *Unheimliche Weisheit*. He has created the spiraling desiring processes in human beings. He has re-created the world, but he has been imprisoned in the labyrinth he constructed. He has defeated death, but he reigns among the disseminated fragments of the endless wastelands.

If, in the manner of Blumenberg, a subjective sense is assigned to the genitive, God will appear intimidated by his own creatures. These creatures do not appear aware of their own precariousness and do not possess the awareness of their own finiteness.

Human finitude is also *con-finement*. It is necessary not to violate the biological *telos* and to respect the norm enshrined in human physiology. It is necessary to respect the paradigm of human recognizability.

The machine is an aspect of human embodiment, as Donna J. Haraway states (Haraway, 1991) and reiterates (Haraway, 1997), but the technique is also a way of the limit. It is just one of the functions of the human being, even if it is rooted in the material substratum of *homo natura*. Human beings are «natural born cyborgs», as Andy Clark (Clark, 2003) affirms and as also other authors assert, authors like André Leroi-Gourhan (Leroi-Gourhan, 2018), Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, 1964) or Najef Yehya (Yehya, 2001). Dick, in his creative parable, expresses his *Weltanschauung*: the human being is endowed with a changing identity. He suffers if he does not alter himself (Bachelard, 2002), but the human being is also a dynamic invariant of cultural becoming. The minor circle of science has become the existential a priori, as Jacob Needleman (Needleman, 1963) sustains. The minor circle of science transforms the properly human way of being in the world as bodily existence and transfigures the human presence, which could be dominated by an alien project.

In the exergue of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, Leo – a name that probably evokes Ezekiel's lion - alludes to the dust, of which human beings are constitutively made. The dust constitutes the only possible starting point.

Dickian celebration of the quintessence of nothingness, typical of the writer's early works, has been characterized as nihilism. A form of nihilism which is marked by sense of possibility, of virtuality, functioning as an attempt to face the implacable destiny and the ancient drama of the unattainable human infinity.

Dick is aware that human creatures cry for more life, like his androids, half organic and half cybernetic, perhaps willing to consume *Chew-Z* to freeze time, hoping that they and also their memories will continue to survive thanks to technique. Humanity is perennially intent on opposing the *katasthrophikòn*, the catastrophe in which greedy and predatory time contracts.

Death possesses the emblematic negativity and brings out the unresolved and unsolvable sense of the end of life, even, and perhaps especially, when its exact expiry date is known. This aspect of existence seems to have inspired the creation of Roy Baty, the bat-king of Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Dick, 1968), who has become the mad-king, Roy Batty, character of *Blade Runner*, cult-movie directed by Ridley Scott, with the shifting of symbolic perspectives that this transfiguration entails. This famous character represents a tragic allegory of the drift towards which a humanity obstinately intent on reformulating itself is sliding.

Human creatures are miserable bastard artifacts (Haraway, 1997), transformed into tangles of pumps, catheters and dials. They are figures inhabitable by machines and death, incarnate in

simulacra, very old like Manfred-cyborg, another Dickian character (Dick, 1964), and cultivate the intimate hope that their emotions continue to be born and to die. They lose themselves in the rhythm of artificial pulsations, with metal boxes next to their hearts, with the astonished gaze, like Manfred's, and with the *stupidity* of the androids.
In the aspiration to not close the cycle that goes from the unknown to the unknown (Piovani, 1981, p. 122), in the aspiration to bend death, each of the human creatures tries to live their own suffering, their own pain, their own passion in an absolutely idiosyncratic way. In an absolutely idiosyncratic way each of us tries to interpret the inscrutable mystery of the flesh.

4. Conclusions

Dick does not believe in the privileged role of scientific activity as the only legitimate source of knowledge and he gives problematicity to the notion of the existing as a sequence of events projected finalistically towards a result. This conception rejects the idea of a unidirectional dimension of history as an ascending and cumulative becoming, in which each event is the direct precipitate of a growth in relation to the past and the condition of a future development. Far from a historical vision that is unilinear in a vertical sense, free from ideological conditioning, the Dickian *Weltanschauung* places the rationalized, intellectualized and disenchanted modern West no longer at the peak of a story of progress.
The impossibility of accessing a conclusive truth, the denial of a totalizing theory, the critical and interpretative urgency lead to a constant redefinition of the boundaries of Dick's vision. It intertwines historical-political-sociological analysis, idiosyncratic religious refunctionalization, elaboration of the imaginary and, like a complex system of linkages, is aimed at unexpected connections.
Imaginative discoveries and material achievements jointly structure the dynamics of change. At the intersection of research, cultural production, and technologies, there are biological bodies with boundaries marked by social interaction (Haraway, 1991). These frontiers are illuminated by authors such as Dick, who draw maps of biopolitical geography and connect *logos* and *mythos*, science and science fiction.
The achievement of immortality through the manipulation of reality and time and the return of the sacred by the mysterious pilgrim Palmer Eldritch (Caronia, 1985, p. 116), foreshadow the emergence of current cyborg figures. These creatures are produced by the hybridization between machine and organism, artifice and nature, money and life (Haraway, 1997).
The human subject is overwhelmed with what was once the irreducibility of his or her body, a place of inextricable intertwining of matter and knowledge, truth and lies, life and death. The illusion of an indefinite knowledge creates the most self-destructive delusions of fantasy. The claim of scientific accuracy, associated with the management of an absolute power, typical of a world dominated by simulations, risks leading to the annihilation of planet Earth.
Dick foresees the catastrophic results of technical development (Best & Kellner, 2003, pp. 186-202). However, in the last part of his production, he glimpses the saving power of the process of technicization. This power resides in a shared system of intelligence, which will become the communication space of the global community. *Homo sapiens* is also *homo socius*. According to Aristotle, the proper condition of human being as a political animal is "negentropic", an antinomic state with respect to the general tendency of the universe (Vaccari, 1989, p. 44). The theological system is thus transformed into a technical, semiotic and socio-organizational device. From individual intelligences emerges a collective intelligence that orients human subjects in the widespread places of an immanent knowledge. It is present wherever life grows and it is permeable to the proliferation of fundamental mnemonic and organizational potentialities.

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