

# On a Projected Film of Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*

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YOU ARE READING THIS MAGAZINE. Something catches your attention at the corner of your eye, a sliver of something not right, something that doesn't belong. Later, when you reflect on it, you wonder if it could be a sign that reality is not what it seems—that behind its smooth facade there lurks something quite different.

A sense of menace grows up around you like a vine.

(Fade out Reality. Fade in The Paranoid Nightmare's of Philip K. Dick.)

For over twenty five years, until his death in 1982, Philip K. Dick was the great master of paranoid science fiction—where the world gives way, and another, darker, reality asserts itself. In one novel after another the characters confront a frightening world that is being manipulated by forces beyond their wildest dreams. They find that they have been living an illusion, one that masks a more sinister reality. Sometimes they realise that they not only don't know *who* they are, they don't know *what* they are either.

Because they are essentially thrillers—albeit *metaphysical* thrillers—Dick's novels make for good movies. *Blade Runner* was taken from one of his books: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* *Total Recall* was adapted from a Philip K. Dick short story: 'We Can Remember It For You Wholesale'. Now another book is to be given the film treatment: one of his last and most ferocious fantasies, *A Scanner Darkly*.

But if *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall* are anything to go by it will be surprising if Hollywood allows the ideas of the books to get through onto film. For despite the fact that many people have seen and enjoyed both films

most simply miss the point of them because it has not been made sufficiently clear. For example, most people do not understand that the events of *Total Recall* are not actually happening—they are the result of the malfunctioning memory machine careening out of control and producing paranoid delusions and irreversible brain damage in the main character, Doug Quaid/Arnold Schwarzenegger. When the screen goes white at the end of the film it is a sign of his total neural burn-out, after which he will be left a vegetable. This time, he won't Be Back.

The cleverness of *Total Recall* lies in the fact that while the audience is swept-along in Doug's paranoid adventure it is missing the very clues that Doug is missing as to what is really going on. If he paused just for a second he would realise that the doctor who has inserted himself into the story has been predicting the course of events very accurately—too accurately to be anything other than what he says he is. But just as Doug is unable to reflect on this, so the audience is unable to disengage from the idea that they are watching a simple adventure story. The idea is a clever one—so clever that for every handful of people who 'got' it there were millions who didn't.

Of course one of the reasons most of the audience missed the main idea of the film was the casting. Schwarzenegger makes for such a plausible action hero that it is possible to imagine that he really is doing these unbelievable things. Had they cast someone like Eric Stolz (who was the original choice for the part) the audience would have been less primed to think that it must be an action adventure because here is an action adventure hero.

But if *Total Recall* was a subtle idea that somehow got lost in the casting, *Blade Runner* was a film that hovered ambiguously without fully settling on a single interpretation. In fact the standard release cut and the Director's Cut go in two different directions. In the first release, with its weary Chandler-esque, *film noir*, voice-overs, the film is a meditation on what it means to be human, the qualities that would separate us from a mere machine. It makes the point that if it is compassion that defines our humanity—and Dick certainly thought that it did—then perhaps the replicants are the real humans. When Batty (Rutger Hauer) saves Deckard (Harrison Ford) on the roof it is as though he has discovered, to his own surprise, some new well-spring of fellow-feeling that the bounty-hunter Deckard lacks. The human becomes the machine and the android becomes fully human.

So in the first version Deckard is partially redeemed by the replicants themselves—he learns humanity from Batty's self-sacrifice and he learns love from Rachael. Audiences, by and large, hated the final scene where Deckard and Rachael escape together to the country against a back-projected sunset. They found it just too Hollywood, too corny. But again they missed the point.

What could have been more fitting than to have these fake people escaping into a fake sunset and a non-existent countryside (which if it existed at all would make a nonsense of the rest of the film)?

And because it toys with our ideas of Hollywood romance this ending also manages to suggest a Hyper-Reality—both in the setting and in what love has made of the characters. And it proffers an escape from one genre-world to another—as though the characters had found a ladder to climb out of the hell of the conventions of the *film noir* world into something better.

The point of this first version is that Deckard's weary internal monologue is not enough to guarantee him a soul, though his name is a hangover from a time when it might have been thought to (Deckard/Descartes—pronounced *Day-cart*—as in 'I think therefore I am'). By getting rid of the monologues, and the ending, the Director's Cut makes an entirely different point, one that is only hinted-at in the first version: that Deckard himself was a replicant all along.

To have Deckard a replicant makes a certain kind of dramatic sense. Just as Rachael is unaware that she is not human so also is he—a dupe without realising it. And it explains the significance of the unicorn in the dream and at the end—it is a symbol of his unreality and of the LAPD's infiltration of his thoughts, dreams, and memories. On this interpretation his name is bitterly ironic—it suggests a mutilated simulacrum of a soul, not at all the real thing. Presumably Batty saves Deckard on the roof because he realises that they are the same after all. Kin recognises kin. A kind of Masonic handshake between androids.

But by making Deckard another replicant the Director's Cut also eliminates the confrontation between the human and the non-human, with all of its moral dimensions. In fact from the beginning of Ridley Scott's involvement with the film this moral dimension, along with its associated theme of miscegenation, gradually disappeared—making *Blade Runner* ultimately more like *Alien*, Scott's earlier film. For example Hampton Francher's earlier script had Rachael Deckard's clear moral superior—she instructed him and goaded him, all to make him better than he was. Under Scott all of that disappeared. Scott also made the love scene a much more brutal affair than it was scripted to be. (And apparently Harrison Ford took to the idea like a duck to water—the actress, Sean Young, was off-work for weeks after Ford threw her repeatedly against walls. She still finds it hard to speak kindly of her fellow actor.)

In fact Ridley Scott gradually removed all of the redemptive aspects of Dick's novel until all that was left was a doomed alien love affair set in the middle of a cyber-Western. In Scott's vision there is Human and there

is Other—and the Human will defeat the Other because the former has a flexibility that the latter lacks. This is clear enough in *Alien* itself, but it can also be seen in Scott's earlier film *The Duellists*—with Harvey Keitel playing the Alien/Other. Moreover the Other is forever incomprehensible to us. And we'll have none of Dick's worries about *us* being aliens. Not on your life.

In fact, if there is a fault in *Blade Runner* it is that neither interpretation comes through well in either version—neither the Deckard-as-replicant theme nor the theme of the replicants-as-more-human-than-the-humans. By the time the film was released the screenplay had been through so many versions and changes that it more resembled a quilt. Both versions are rich with symbolism because such symbols are the fossils of defunct script ideas.

But for all that, the Director's Cut is clearly the better film; mainly because the voice-overs just don't work. They come over as trite and badly-written—and more than a little condescending. But, contrary to popular belief, they were not inserted into the film at the last minute by the Hollywood money men—in some form or other they were always intended to be there. They are a vestige of the original scriptwriter's attempt to convey Dick's ideas.

But how a scriptwriter is going to convey the ideas of *A Scanner Darkly* is, frankly, anybody's guess. Of all of Dick's novels it looks to be the most unfilmable. It is not that there are not traditional narrative elements—among other things it is a kind of Detective Novel—but rather that the ultimate point of the novel is so un-Hollywood, so down beat.

*A Scanner Darkly* is about brain damage; brain damage caused by hallucinogenic drugs (among others); brain damage as seen from the inside. It is a scarifyingly confessional novel about the very paranoid delusions that form the narrative content of the book. It is Philip K. Dick's attempt to come to terms with the death and insanity of a large number of his friends. At the end of the book there is a roll-call of those friends of who were drug casualties. His name is there in the list.

Given that Hollywood had so much difficulty with the self-critical aspects of *Blade Runner* it seems unlikely that this infinitely more depressing vision will come through unscathed. Through most of the novel we are caught up in the increasing paranoia and confusion of the main character—until he has degenerated to the point where he can no longer serve as the narrative's principle point-of-view. And running throughout there is a story of unrequited love that is genuinely heartbreaking.

The title offers the only ray of hope in the book. It suggests that perhaps we are seeing everything mirror-reversed, that all of our judgements are backwards to how things really are. Perhaps even the future is really just a mirror of the past.

Well, perhaps—but it seems very cold, paranoid, comfort. And ultimately even Dick seems to drop it as just another drug-addled fantasy.

But if Cyber Punk is going to get beyond whimpering about the apocalypse and “information technology” (cue-up the Gary Numan soundtrack) then it will have to find ways of coming to grips with the kind of ideas that Philip K. Dick has explored. No other writer has detailed the metaphysics of the paranoid world in quite the way that he has done.

Time, then, to send a rocket into *inner* space—who knows, on some distant world, we may even find intelligent life.