

Rudy Rucker, “Haunted by Phil Dick” (1999 version)

## *Haunted by Phil Dick*

By Rudy Rucker

Copyright (C) Rudy Rucker, 1999

[Published in different form in R. Rucker, *Transreal*, (WCS Books, 1991),  
and in R. Rucker, *Seek!* (Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999)]

My head was in a very bad place in the spring of '82. I often think of life as being like surfing. Ups and downs, manic-depression, all you can really do is ride it out. Hang ten. On the board. Sometimes you fall off, the board hits you in the head, sharp coral comes up, etc. I'd just been fired from my last teaching job, my wife and I were fighting, I was singing in a psycho-punk band called the Dead Pigs.

Phil Dick died around then, and I started thinking about him a lot. In May '82 I started working on a post-WWIII book called *Twinks*. Every day, starting out, I'd pray to Phil Dick and ask him for guidance — to some extent I was trying to twink him. “Twink” is an SF word I made up; to “twink” someone means to simulate them internally, to let their spirit take possession of you. The idea is based on my notion that Soul = Software.

Let me explain this concept a bit. Using a computer analogy, we can compare the body to hardware, and the mind to software. The personality, memories, etc., can all, in principle, be coded up to give the individual person's software soul. A powerful enough hardware system can boot and run any given software. Given enough information about another person, you can twink them.

In fall of '82 I got a contract for a nonfiction book called *The Fourth Dimension*, and *Twinks* was set aside. I still thought about Phil Dick a lot. Sometimes, me walking stoned around some tree-lined Lynchburg neighborhood, he would feel very close. I

Rudy Rucker, "Haunted by Phil Dick" (1999 version)

heard I'd been nominated for the first Philip K. Dick award (for my novel *Software*) and I felt I had a good chance of getting it. I begged Phil, or my internal simulation of him, to make sure I would get it. I'd done five SF paperbacks at this point, and was getting zero recognition. I really needed a break.

Later that winter — like in January '83 — Audrey and I and a friend named Henry Vaughan went out to a party at a girl's house in the country. We didn't know too many of the people — they were sort of rednecks, where those days in the South a redneck was person with long hair and a scraggly beard. It was mellow, plenty of weed, loud music, and everyone getting off.

At some point I glanced across the room and in walked Phil Dick. He didn't say he was Phil Dick, but he looked to be wearing his circa-1974 body . . . hair still dark, beard . . . hell, I don't know what Phil Dick "really" looks/looked like, but I knew *this was the guy*.

At first I just grinned over at him slyly — like Aphid-Jerry eyeing "carrier people" in *A Scanner Darkly*. Then, finally, I introduced myself and drank beer and whisky in the kitchen with him for awhile. Of course I was too hip to confront him with my knowledge of his true identity.

The man's cover was that he was in the garbage business. "The Garbage King of Campbell County." He said he had a fleet of trucks, and that he'd furnished his entire house with cast-off items gleaned from the trash-flow.

I steered the conversation around to science fiction, mentioning my novel *Software*.

"What's it about?"

"It's about robots on the moon. In a way they're black people. The guy who invented them — he's my father — is dying and the robots build him a fake robot body and get his software out of his brain."

Rudy Rucker, "Haunted by Phil Dick" (1999 version)

"Go on."

"They run the software on a computer, but the computer is big and has to be kept at four degrees Kelvin. It follow him around in a Mr. Frostee truck. There's a big brain-eating scene, too."

"Sounds all right!"

Maybe that was Phil Dick, maybe not. In any case, I got the award, and it did help my career. The award ceremony was a good party, too. First Tom Disch talked, and then Ray Faraday Nelson talked, synchronistically basing his remarks on some stories he'd happened to tell me walking over from dinner — and then I stood on the bar and read a speech which I'd prepared in advance. The speech went like this:

I'd like to just say a few words about immortality. I have a theory about how artistic immortality works. When you're reading a well-written book, and totally into it, then you are, for those few moments, actually identical with the person who wrote the book. It's my feeling that artistic immortality means that the artist is, however briefly, reborn over and over again. We could express this idea in terms of computers. If you can somehow write down most of your program, then some other person can put this program onto his or her brain and become a simulation of you.

If I say that Phil Dick is not really dead, then this is what I mean: He was such a powerful writer that his works exercise a sort of hypnotic force. Many of us have been Phil Dick for brief flashes, and these flashes will continue as long as there are readers.

Let's push the idea a little harder — that's what SF is all about, after all — pushing ideas out into new territory. Even if there were no more readers, then the Phil Dick persona would still exist. Actually, each of our personalities is immortal, as a sort of permanent possibility of information-processing.

Another push now. Just as each of Phil's works is a coding of his personality, we might go on to say that sometimes various authors are, as

Rudy Rucker, “Haunted by Phil Dick” (1999 version)

people, examples of the same higher-level archetype. I’d like to think that, on some level, Phil and I are just different instances of the same Platonic form — call it the gonzo-philosopher-SF-writer form, if you like.

One last thought. Up till now I’ve talked about immortality in very abstract terms. Yet the essence of good SF is the transmutation of abstract ideas into funky fact. If it is at all possible for a spirit to return from the dead, I would imagine that Phil would be the one to do it. Let’s keep our eyes open tonight, he may show up.

So hi, Phil, wherever you are, and thanks for everything. Let’s party.

Over the next couple of years in Lynchburg, I saw the Garbage King of Campbell County a couple more times at parties. One time we were in a house, a house like a house I often dream about, with a front and a back staircase, and the King and I were on a landing, him and his good-looking wife, and he says, “What was that writer guy you talked about? Philip Jay Dick?” Only then he gave me a sly wink. I was stoned enough at the time to think that the “Jay” was a psychic reference to the fact that the first Dick book I ever owned was *Time Out of Joint*.

I lost track of the Garbage King during the last evil times in Lynchburg, and then all at once it was 1986 and I was a computer scientist in California — more than that, a *hacker* — and I saw Phil again. He was back into the mode of *A Scanner Darkly*.

I first read that book, by the way, in Brighton: SeaCon, 1980, my first SF con, where I met my heroes Ian Watson and Robert Sheckley and sold my manuscript of *White Light* to Virgin Books in the person of Maxim Jakubowsky. I was partying the whole time thanks to following the first Brit I saw go by in lace-up white leather boots, I think his name was Gamma. I sat down next to him and his sleazy buddies and sexy girlfriends and began bragging about how great I was and how they should turn me on. One of them gave me hash and I smoked that for a day and then I couldn’t find him for more. I’m all, “Where’s Lester?” and they’re all, “Lester’s gone into the City to get some

powdah." I was shocked.

I was in Brighton two nights, staying in an attic flat up near the train station, all the hotels having been full on my arrival overland from Heidelberg. Both mornings I lay in bed leisurely reading *A Scanner Darkly* and wallowing in its greatness. Lester didn't like the book because the ending was, "Too obvious, you know, so against drugs." When it was time for me to go back to the *Mathematisches Institut*, I was on the subway-like Brighton train in time, reading *Scanner Darkly*, the part about Barris and the amphetamine plant, Barris *pausing in his work*, alertly slackful, and me laughing so hard that people are looking over, and the train is inching out of the station and I realize I've left my suitcase on the platform.

I've reread *Scanner* three or four times now. The plot is very intricate and delicate, like the nerves in a vivisected bat. And it's an incredibly sad book, even though it's so funny. Textually, the words "dreary" and "slushed" come back over and over, making a kind of sad oboe music in the background.

You wanna talk short stories, two Dick stories stand out in my mind. "The Golden Man" was the first of his stories I read, as a twelve-year-old, not noticing Phil's name, but pondering that story for years, especially its key concept of being able to see alternate futures. The other story I think of right off the bat is "Explorers We," about men who think they are astronauts landing and then they get killed because they are really Martian invaders.

How I got hold of that particular story was that my Swarthmore roommate, Greg (who appears as the canny Ace Weston in my *Secret of Life*), is now a book dealer, and, knowing my love of Phil (especially after the award), Greg gave me a dead man's set of twenty-three 1950s SF magazines, each containing a story or novelette by Philip K. Dick. I had this great crappy writing office in Lynchburg, with an overstuffed white vinyl couch, and a bookcase with the Dick mags, and usually I didn't feel like writing much on Mondays or Tuesdays, so then I'd likely lie on the white couch and read one of those old

Rudy Rucker, "Haunted by Phil Dick" (1999 version)

SF magazines. It always encouraged me to see Phil's humble roots.

Now if we pop up the stack we have "Explorers We," we have *Scanner Darkly*, we have the fact that Phil is alive, we have my move to San Jose. The way I found Phil in San Jose involves my friend Dennis. Let's assume you've read one of my *Ware* novels. The character Sta-Hi, also known as Stahn, also known as Stanley Hilary Mooney, is transreality inspired by a real person: Dennis Poague, occupation freelance mechanic, legal status Blank (like the "Blank Reg" character in *Max Headroom*), long-term resident of San Jose, now residing in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. It was Dennis, also known as Dementex, who showed me the still-living, though terribly method and bedusted, Philip K. Dick in the fall of 1986.

I met Dennis in the mid-seventies when I was teaching college in up-state New York, a state college in a small town called Geneseo, described as "Bernco" in *White Light*. Dennis's brother Lee was an English professor who lived across the street from us. One day Dennis showed up from California on his way to Europe, acting totally outrageous. He took the cheap red nylon skateboard I'd bought my five-year-old and set to carving and ripping all up and down the steep campus's sidewalks. He had some primo Thai-stick with him, and he gave me one in exchange for some acid someone else had given me — a good trade for me, as I was scared to take acid again anyway, having had my big "ordeal poison" initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries several years earlier. Dennis and I got along very well together, each of us happy to meet such a madman. And for the rest of the time in Geneseo, every half year or so Dennis would orbit through our town and we'd see him. One time he had a whole suitcase full of cheap green pot. It was so bad that he cooked a pound of it into tea. He took the rest of it to the Mardi Gras and got robbed.

When my wife and I moved from Geneseo to Heidelberg for a two-year grant I had, Dennis stayed in touch, sending joints, a hit of acid one time (see my short story "The Jack Kerouac Disembodied School of Poetics"), tapes of the Dr. Demento show,

Rudy Rucker, "Haunted by Phil Dick" (1999 version)

and, best of all, tapes of the people who rode in his cab. He was driving a cab in San Jose — just an unknown Hispanic-sounding California city to me then. The cab tapes were amazing, like of drunk hookers, or of giggly teenage girls, with Dennis's manic, insinuating voice going on and on, "You girls wanna stop and do a bowl? I'm Sta-Hi, live or die, just keep me high, chaos and confusion reign supreme!"

From Heidelberg we moved to Lynchburg, which I always write about as "Killeville," and then I found out where San Jose really is (it's at the southern end of Silicon Valley, which stretches up the Bay peninsula through Palo Alto to San Francisco), and ended up moving here. I hadn't seen Dennis in a few years, and I was a little nervous about it. Finally he called up, and asked me to stop by his apartment in downtown San Jose.

Where he lived wasn't actually a real apartment, it was simply a small room at the head of a flight of stairs in someone's house. Wherever Dennis lives there are always four or five half-assembled cars in the driveway and backyard. He was fixing one or several of these cars in return for being allowed to live there. His room was not much larger than a bed; there were shelves on the wall piled with electronic music equipment, cartons of old *Heavy Metal* magazines, car parts, ragged clothes and hundreds of T-shirts.

"You got no idea how glad I am to see you, Rudy."

I gave him a Xerox of the typescript of *Wetware*, and then Dennis took me downstairs to meet his speed connection, a muscular, shirtless fifty-year-old Filipino called Buffalo Bill. I watched them crush up some crystal, snort it, and begin to jabber about skin-diving for jade boulders as big as cars. Every so often a different woman would come in and disappear into the back room with Buffalo Bill. I sat around and enjoyed the scene. When it was time to go, I opened the wrong door, a door which led down into the basement. Standing there on the basement stairs was a punk in painter's clothes and just below him, staring up at me like out of a cover of the PKDS news-letter, was the real Phil Dick, not too tall, balding with a beard with a white stripe in it, and with

Rudy Rucker, "Haunted by Phil Dick" (1999 version)

the unmistakable aura of a hologram from Hell. He and the punk painter were snorting lines of meth off a pocket mirror.

I freaked and closed the door right back up. "Who was that?" I asked Dennis as soon as we got outside. "On the stairs, who were the two guys on the basement stairs?"

"Hell that's just Tommy the painter. His father owns the place. The other guy with him rents the back room by the garage. He doesn't talk much. Just . . ." Dennis made loud piglike snorting noises, the same noise he'd made earlier when I'd asked him what he would do if he really did make a lot of money off jade.

"The other guy, Dennis, that's Phil Dick. You know, the Philip K. Dick award I got for *Software*? That was him in the basement. He must not really be dead! He's living right here in your building!"

"Why didn't you talk to him?"

"What would I say? But, look, Dennis, do one thing for me. After you read *Wetware*, give it to him. It's dedicated to him, wave? 'For Philip K. Dick, 1928–1982, One must imagine Sisyphus happy.' That's from Camus, see, Sisyphus being the proletarian of the gods, you understand, daily proving that scorn can overcome any fate, rolling another wad of paper up to the top of the same old mountain and letting it blow away, just imagine him happy. Does he seem happy?"

"I'll ask him."

But Dennis never did talk to Phil. Phil got on his motorcycle and left that house for good, right after I did. I saw him in my rearview mirror, right before I turned onto Route 17. He was all in black, idling on the putt, wearing shades, a greasy old biker, calm with meth. Looked to me like he was headed for South San Jose. He never waved.

Is there any meaning in my visions of Phil as Garbage King and Meth Biker? Well, the real meaning is simply that I was interested enough in Phil to imagine seeing him after his too-early death. I've always hoped that when *I'm* gone I'll have fans as obsessive as Phil's fans, people who piece together my letters, fiction and nonfiction to

Rudy Rucker, "Haunted by Phil Dick" (1999 version)

try and see a soul. As you read this: Am I dead yet?