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A Message from 1974:

Post-truth and the Reality in Philip K. Dick's *Flow My Tears*, *The Policeman Said*

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Introduction

Philip K. Dick frequently depicts shifting realities in his novels, questioning the nature of reality. From his early novels such as *Eye in the Sky* (1957) and *The Cosmic Puppets* (1957) to his last novels, namely *VALIS* (1978), *The Divine Invasion* (1980), and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (1982), Dick had kept his interest in reality. In his journal in 1977 collected in *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick* (2011), he recalled he had begun his speculation on the nature of reality in his early career:

Starting in 1951, 26 years ago, I began in my stories (and then novels) to make certain very serious *guesses* about the nature of reality: Questioning if it was really there, out there (not in here), and, if so, if out there, what it really was like. In *Tears* in '70, just about 20 years after I began to ask, I began to try to answer. There are no answers in *Tears*, not even later on in *Scanner*—but for me as the *asker* in 3-74 the answer (singular) came (*Exegesis* 250; italics original)

His exploration started as early as 1951, before his debut, and he acquired the answer in 1974 through the supernatural experience which he called 3-74 (or 2-3-74). In other words, Dick could not find the answer in *Flow My Tears*, *The Policeman Said* (1974, hereafter referred to as *Flow My Tears*) written in 1970 or *A Scanner Darkly* (1977) written in 1973, both of which depict multiple realities and deal with the problem of the authenticity of reality. As the quote above implies, *Flow My Tears* does not have the answer he had sought; however, in fact, the novels before 1974 contain many clues to understand the nature of reality.

Because those hints are overlooked, *Flow My Tears* is a novel often disregarded by

critics. Eric Carl Link suggests the supposed reason for the negligence in *Understanding Philip K. Dick* (2009) as follows:

Dick's novels are often vulnerable to the charge of logical inconsistency, and *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* is one of the more blatant offenders: there are simply too many inexplicable moments in the novel to casually explain away or overlook. (Link 129)

As Link implies, it is accurate to state that Dick's literary works, as in *Flow My Tears*, lack consistency and coherence in their stories.¹ However, there are more excellencies than this deficiency of uniformity in *Flow My Tears*.² In his groundbreaking essay "A Visionary among the Charlatans" (1975), Stanislaw Lem dismisses the charge of inconsistency because it is not the main subject, and discloses the purpose of Dick's novels: ". . . to introduce the reader into a world decidedly different from the present-day one, and to convey a certain message to him by means of this world" (Lem 65).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that though Dick thought there was no answer to the nature of reality in *Flow My Tears*, there still is significance in the novel to consider the present-day concept of reality. From this perspective, section 1 analyzes the reality Dick represents in his novels as a whole. In section 2, I examine the reality depicted in *Flow My Tears* focusing on the physical aspect of it. Section 3 discusses the significance of reading *Flow My Tears* from the viewpoint of Post-truth today.

1. Construction of Reality

Before considering the reality depicted in *Flow My Tears*, let us examine how we can grasp the nature of reality in Dick's fiction. Dick describes reality from many viewpoints throughout his career, and there are certain tendencies in the ways how he treats it. Lejla Kucukalic classifies reality into three types according to the way to access reality as follows:

[A]t least three types of "reality" are prominent in Dick's work. First is reality as an evolving, continually changing process without a set point. Because of its changing course, we cannot discern the world, yet, we can participate in it. Second is the view of reality as a completely unreachable Other, an entity that is unknown to human beings, and leaves us only with profound skepticism and no final

knowledge. Third is a view that reality exists in a separate dimension from the quotidian, chronological world, as a Platonic form that can be discerned through insight, revelation, and even intellectual pursuit. (Kucukalic 3)

Kucukalic, analyzing the reality in Dick's fiction as a whole, categorizes reality into three types: ever-changing, unreachable, and Platonic. Each type has its own unique aspects that distinguish it from the others.

The first type of reality can be seen in *A Maze of Death* (1970) and *VALIS*. In *Maze*, the protagonist Seth Morley and his fellow crew members of a broken spaceship create their own reality with the help of a computer called T. E. N. C. H. 889B. This virtual reality generated by a computer keeps evolving in response to their actions so that the reality that surrounds them remains to be a natural one for them though it fails to be in the end. The reality depicted in *Maze* is, as the title shows it, an ever-changing maze. The same expression—mentioning reality as a maze—is also noticeable in *VALIS*. While the protagonist, Horselover Fat, contemplates the philosophical problems such as theophany, mind, or reality, he refers to them as a “maze,” and “the labyrinth for King Minos of Crete” and concludes like this: “There is no route out of the maze. The maze shifts as you move through it, because it is alive” (*VALIS* 204-5). The definition of reality as a living maze best describes this type of the nature of reality. To sum up, this type shows the changing nature of reality, and because it keeps changing, it is impossible to grasp as a steady one. Characters or readers can understand the nature of reality only from a certain viewpoint at a certain time and can never grasp it as a whole.

Examples of the second type of reality appear in many novels. Many protagonists in various novels cannot reach the truth. In *Maze*, Seth meets a god, which he creates in virtual reality after waking up from virtual reality, and then turns into a cactus. It is unreasonable to see a virtual god outside virtual reality, but Dick does not explain it. This contradictory description shows that the reality in *Maze* is not explicable. Likewise in *Flow My Tears*, the reality is not reachable. In this novel, the protagonist Jason Taverner experiences a trip to another reality and then returns to the reality where he originally belongs to. Though the reality he returns to seems to be the same as before, there are several differences between those two realities. This difference between the two worlds is not noticed, and Dick does not elucidate it, too. As these instances indicate, the second type of reality is not explicable, but

conversely, inexplicability would be its definition.

The third type is the reality, which appears in *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) or *VALIS*. In *High Castle*, a man named Tagomi accidentally sneaks into another reality by meditating with a fine piece of handicraft work. Moreover, the characters use ancient Chinese fortunetelling *I Ching* to peek into the unworldly true reality. Although the true reality cannot be embodied in *High Castle*, it can be revealed through handicrafts or *I Ching*. Similarly, the reality in *VALIS* is shown to the characters only through the beam of pink light emitted from VALIS (Vast Active Living Intelligence System), a god-like entity. In contrast to the second type, this type of reality is reachable, though it needs some gadgets or revelation to comprehend the whole picture.

As the examples of *Maze* and *VALIS* show, these three types often overlap with each other. They can coexist together and are not exclusive. Therefore, these types are the aspects of reality rather than the sorts of it. In other words, the reality in Dick's fiction is made up of these three aspects.

Kucukalic also categorizes the construction of reality into three levels in accord with the process of its construction as follows:

Relying on a range of philosophical, scientific, and theological ideas, Dick presented his readers with a series of narrative worlds that focus on the construction of reality. He showed how reality is created on several levels: individual (dealing with our subjective perceptions of reality), virtual (constructed by media or human-computer interactions), and institutional (realities controlled by the groups with power). (Kecukalic 6)

The reality on the first level is created individually through subjective perception. It corresponds to the reality depicted in *Flow My Tears* and *A Scanner Darkly* (1977). Virtual reality is allocated to the second level. The virtual reality in *Maze* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) are included in this level. The third level is the level of the institution. Institutional control of reality appears in *VALIS* and *Ubik* (1969).

The reality on each level has specific characteristics because of the process of its construction. For example, the reality on the individual level is subject to chemical factors because it is based on the physical function of the human body. Furthermore, each level can sometimes be observed in one novel such as *Flow My Tears*.³

2. Reality in *Flow My Tears*

Flow My Tears contains many clues to think about reality notwithstanding it was written before 2-3-74, the revelation for Dick that gave him the answer to reality. It can be said that 2-3-74 is just a trigger to bring together the crude ideas in Dick and turn them into the final answer. 2-3-74 turned Dick to a mystical approach, but before the incident, he paid more attention to the material and physical aspects of reality as the last novels written in the 1970s before 2-3-74, *Flow My Tears* and *Scanner*, focus on the shift of reality on the individual level.

Reality on the individual level is the basis of the three levels of reality construction because it depends on the perception of the individual which can exist without any media or institution. The reality we perceive before any virtual or institutional influence is the reality on the individual level. This reality depends on the perception or the five senses of the human body. In *Flow My Tears*, the reality based on the individual perception is the central theme. At the beginning of the novel, a standard perception of the world is the reality for the characters. However, as perception can be distorted under the influence of external factors such as drugs, reality can be distorted.

Dick describes the reality on the individual level as a result of perception. As Rubén Mendoza argues, Dick sees the importance of the physical body during the process of the reality construction on the individual level:

While he is clearly concerned with the philosophical, political, and metaphysical dimensions of how we perceive reality (how we metaphorically grasp and make sense of the world), he is just as concerned with how we literally perceive—how we grasp the world somatically, affectively—and sense on the bodily level. (Mendoza 242)

The perception of reality clearly has a somatic aspect, and since it is somatic, external and physical factors can affect the perception. That is why drugs play a significant role in many Dick's works, including *Flow My Tears*, *Scanner*, and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1968), all of which describe changing reality caused by the effect of drugs. Since it is based on perception, the basic function of the human body, it is the basis of the three levels of reality construction.

In addition to the bodily aspect of perception, there is one more distinctive feature in Dick's way of perception. Mendoza also reveals the active aspect as follows:

Perception is an act of skillfully reaching out to and making contact with the world. . . . In a way, it is something that we make—a skillful, habitual sensorimotor act of making sense, figuratively and literally. It is also something that therefore can be oriented and conditioned by outside forces. (Mendoza 243)

Mendoza indicates that perception is not only a passive act but also an active act. That is why the characters perceive only one reality even when they are exposed to possible another reality by external factors. To sum up, the perception as the basis of the reality construction on the individual level is a both bodily and active act.

A particular drug called KR-3, which appears in *Flow My Tears*, is the best instance that proves the arguments above. In the novel, the protagonist Jason experiences a reality shift caused by KR-3. The effect of KR-3 is explained below:

KR-3 is a major breakthrough. Anyone affected by it is forced to perceive unreal universes, whether they want to or not. As I said, trillions of possibilities are theoretically all of a sudden real; chance enters and the person's percept system chooses one possibility out of all those presented to it. It has to choose, because if it didn't, competing universes would overlap, and the concept of space itself would vanish. (841)

To be exact, Jason himself does not take KR-3, but the sister of the police general, Alys, does. However, KR-3 may affect the persons around the one who takes it; consequently, it affects Jason as well. Although it focuses on Jason, the effect of KR-3 itself is performed inside Alys' brain. In the explanation, KR-3 is described to have solely a chemical effect except for its specialty to act as another person takes it, which means that the effect works on the human body. Moreover, under the influence of KR-3, "the person's percept system chooses one possibility" to maintain the concept of space. The act of choosing is an active one even though it comes from necessity. This instance of KR-3 confirms the characteristics of the reality construction on the first level: physical and active.

In contrast to the normal perception of reality, external factors such as KR-3 cause a twist of perception that leads to a distortion of reality. It needs to affect either or both of the physical and active aspects to twist the perception. Although KR-3 is a fictional drug with

a unique, unrealistic effect, it does not need to be a special one to affect the physical aspect. Many actual drugs are found throughout Dick's works. In *Flow My Tears* alone, "Actozine" (711), "hash" (712), "Mescaline" (792), and "Darvon" (843) appear, to name a few. These drugs contain illegal ones, but some of them are the ones used in medical treatment.

The twist of perception caused by the interference with the bodily aspect can be seen in *Flow My Tears*. The one due to KR-3 is, of course, an example of a bodily twist, but there is another example, too. In the scene where Jason takes a capsule of mescaline, a well-known hallucinogen, he suspects the world in which he is not a TV star as the real one, while believing that the one with him as a TV star is a false, retrospective hallucination: "Maybe I only exist so long as I take the drug. That drug, whatever it is, that Alys gave me. Then my career, he thought, the whole twenty years, is nothing but a retroactive hallucination created by the drug" (815). Here, Jason perceives another reality exposed to him under the influence of drug as "reality," dismissing his original reality as a mere hallucination. This type of distortion caused by the physical aspect is not fictional and could be seen in real life because actual drugs can bring about the same effect.

The disturbance of the active aspect is also obvious in the novel. In the case of KR-3, though it is Alys who takes KR-3, people near Alys including Jason are exposed to the reality Alys has created. For Alys, the reality she is in is what she chooses, but for the other characters, the reality is not what they want, in fact, it is forced on them. This is evidently the interference with the active aspect of the reality construction on the individual level.

The fact that even the most fundamental level of reality is unstable and subject to change suggests the vulnerability of the reality that Dick depicts.

3. *Flow My Tears* and Post-truth

Michiko Kakutani, the former chief book critic of *The New York Times*, cites Dick's "The Electric Ant" (1969) for the epigraph of Chapter 4 titled "The Vanishing of Reality" in her book *The Death of Truth* (2018): "*Do I want to interfere with the reality tape? And if so, why? Because, he thought, if I control that, I control reality*" (qtd. in Kakutani 77: originally "The Electric Ant" 105; emphasis added by Kakutani). In this scene, the protagonist of the story, Poole, decides to tamper with the punched tape which controls his thoughts and

behavior. Initially, he only wants to “gain true homeostatic functioning” and “control over himself,” however, as he is aware that the tape can control the reality he perceives, eventually, he thinks of gaining “control over everything” (105).

This scene best describes what Kakutani raises the alarm on. Poole, by adjusting his perception system, wants to gain control over himself, then over everything, although in the end, he loses everything, and reality collapses. The reason Kakutani cites Dick’s short story even though it was published over 50 years before the publication of *The Death of Truth* is not solely because the situation of the story suits her argument. It is because the reality Dick depicts reflects the situation today—the Post-truth era.

Post-truth is defined in *OED* as “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (“Post-truth, Adj. 2”). This definition befits the reality shift depicted in Dick’s fiction. The realities in Dick’s fiction are rarely clear. There are always small gaps between realities, and even if they appear to gain clarity, there is always a pitfall. What appears to be the ultimate reality always has room for collapse just as Jason, a prominent TV star, undergoes the breakdown of his reality. In *The Death of Truth*, Kakutani warns us of the danger of Post-truth as follows:

The postmodernist argument that all truths are partial (and a function of one’s perspective) led to the related argument that there are many legitimate ways to understand or represent an event. This both encouraged a more egalitarian discourse and made it possible for the voices of the previously disenfranchised to be heard. But it’s also been exploited by those who want to make the case for offensive or debunked theories, or who want to equate things that cannot be equated. (Kakutani 73)

The reality in *Flow My Tears* is not shared with people by consent. Even though Alys does not have malicious intent to press her reality upon others, the result is exactly what Kakutani criticizes. This reality shift leaves characters in confusion, wondering which reality is true.

Dick himself had suffered the same dilemma, especially before 2-3-74. To solve the conflict of realities, Dick proposes a mutual reality test he practices with her wife Tessa:

Tessa and I started out with conflicting realities, found that when each of us reality-tested the other’s, it collapsed, But now, instead of mutually destroying

each other's realities, we are shaping a joint one between us. If two people dream the same dream, it ceases to be an illusion; the basic test that distinguishes reality from hallucination is the consensus gentium, that one other or several others see it too. (*Only Apparently Real* 169)

To share one's reality with each other and confirm mutually is the solution for building a reality that is not a hallucination. From this perspective, the reality forced by Alys is just an illusion, or a fake reality because it is not mutually agreed upon. To put it the other way around, since it is mutually consented to, the original reality in *Flow My Tears* keeps to be the true reality after returning from the reality shift. This solution could be applied to the problems of the Post-truth reality, too. While Dick anticipated and described the problems of Post-truth, he also offered a solution to them.

Conclusion

The concept of reality has been one of the most significant themes of Dick's fiction. Although the problem of reality is very salient in the novels, it is not easy to discern because of the complexity of its nature and process of construction. However, by focusing on the physical and active aspect of the reality on which Dick put emphasis in *Flow My Tears*, the process and the result of the reality shift in the novel have been made clear. What Dick insists, or in the words of Lem, "a certain message" Dick tries to convey in *Flow My Tears* is the danger of the fake reality that is imposed on people without mutual consent. This argument corresponds with the problems of the Post-truth era which Michiko Kakutani warns about in *The Death of Truth*. Dick foresaw the problem more than 50 years ago and at the same time, provided a solution to it. Reading *Flow My Tears* today will bring us the hint to deal with reality today.

Although this paper describes the benefit of reading Dick today, it could not attain its ultimate goal of answering the question that Dick had also sought. However, a certain step, I posit, has been made to answer the question "What is reality."

Notes

- 1 For instance, characters make contradictory accounts of the sterilizing act. In the novel, some character indicates that an African American couple are allowed to have just one child, however, an African American passerby tells the police general that he has three children. See *Flow My Tears* 689 and 853.
- 2 Link also defend *Flow My Tears* against the charge insisting that the novel depicts love and human relationship that is the only power to protect the world from decay and entropy.
- 3 The instance of the individual level is the reality distortion caused by a fictional drug called KR-3. The matter of the individual level and KR-3 will be discussed in detail in the latter part of this paper. The virtual level and the institutional level correspond with the grid (virtual sexual intercourse on network) and an intended TV show hosted by the protagonist where he would try to deceive the audience, respectively.

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