

**It was September of 1977. The city of Metz in northeastern France was hosting a science fiction festival. The guest of honor was Philip K. Dick.**

**Now today Philip K. Dick is considered one of the most important sci-fi writers ever. So far there have been two-dozen adaptations of his work including Blade Runner, Total Recall, Minority Report, A Scanner Darkly, Man in the High Caste. But when he was alive, only hard-core sci-fi writers and readers knew who he was. And like a lot of American artists that were ahead of their time, Philip K. Dick was appreciated first by the French. In fact, he said his career wouldn't have been possible if it weren't for his French readers and publishers.**

**So this conference in France meant a lot to him. And the room was packed. He walked wearing a silver button down shirt, and a wide yellow and brown tie. He had a robust beard that was white on the sides, and brown in the middle, making him look a little bit like Ernest Hemmingway. And he sat down at a table with a microphone.**

*CLIP: The subject of this speech is a topic, which has been discovered recently and may not exist at all; I may be talking about a topic, which does not exist.*

**He began to talk about parallel universes, past lives, artificial life coming from other planets – the kind of things you'd expect to hear about in a Philip K. Dick novel. But he wasn't talking about his writing.**

*CLIP: We are living in a computer programmed reality and the only clue we have to it is when some variable is changed and some alteration in our reality occurs, we would have the overwhelming impression that we are reliving the present, deja vu, hearing same words, I submit these impressions are valid and significant.*

**The audience was stunned. This was not a joke. He was serious. Then he came to this conclusion:**

*CLIP: Some of my fictional words were in a literal sense true.*

ERIK: It's a confused and rambling speech.

**That's Erik Davis. He teaches at UC Berkeley and he's an expert on Philip K. Dick.**

ERIK: And I think that the general reaction at least in France was confusion and a bit of rejection. It was it was not a homerun.

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**Today we're looking at one of the biggest mysteries in sci-fi history. What happened to Philip K. Dick? Did he lose his mind? Or had he discovered something about the universe, which is both very profound and disturbing?**

**Things are going to get very strange, after the break.**

**BREAK**

**This all began in the early 1970s. Philip K. Dick was living in Berkeley – he's from there. And his life was getting too intense. He had let his house become a hippie drug den -- although wasn't much of a user himself. And then someone broke into his house and tried to blow up his safe, which contained all of his writing.**

RICHARD: Dick was, its' safe to say, totally bewildered by this act.

**Richard Doyle teaches Philip K. Dick at Penn State. He says Dick kept wondering if it was drug dealers looking for cash? Or was the FBI?**

RICHARD: And his mind attempted to figure it out. And he just couldn't figure it out so he took a really rational move, which is that he moved.

**In fact, he completely left the Bay Area. And he was in his mid-40s, ready to settle down a bit more. So he moved to sunny, suburban Orange County. His life was stable again until February 1974, when he had to get oral surgery. He was in a lot of pain afterward. So called the pharmacy, which had a delivery service.**

**The pharmacy sent a young woman to his house.**

RICHARD: And the delivery woman showed up at the door with I imagine one of those neat folded stapled bags that came from pharmacies in the 1970s.

**He noticed the girl had a necklace with a fish symbol on it. He asked what it was, and she said it was a Christian symbol.**

RICHRAD: And when the light reflected off of that fish necklace Dick described in various terms being momentarily blinded by a flash of pink light. And he had the experience of what he later called and hypnosis or a deep remembering that he suddenly remembered enormous amounts of information about the world.

VICTORIA: And then as this continued on for a couple of weeks where he kept on having these visions where he was actually an apostle right after Christ had died.

**That's the writer Victoria Stewart. She wrote a play about Philip K. Dick and the existential crisis he went through at this time.**

VICTORIA: He was seeing visions of Rome superimposed on the street outside he would be walking by a school and he would see these children you know playing in the schoolyard. But he was seeing these Christian children were being persecuted.

RICHARD: And that in many ways, the empire never ended - that ancient Rome – we've adjusted the details in the mean time but structural truths of the human condition and stories we live within are remarkably similar.

**And Philip K. Dick wasn't thinking metaphorically, he thought the Roman Empire really never ended, that it was disguising itself as the American Empire. And he heard voices too, which didn't tell him to do crazy things. This one voice helped him realize that his publishers owed him a lot of money through back royalties.**

*CLIP: It fired my agent. It fired my publisher*

**Here he is talking about that voice in a 1979 interview:**

*CLIP: It was very practical, it decided the apartment hadn't been vacuumed adequately, it decided I should stop drinking wine entirely because it was sediment and it turns out I had an abundance of uric acid in my system and switched me to beer. It made elementary mistakes, it called the dog he and the cat she which annoyed my wife because she knew the dog was a female and the*

*cat was a male. It kept calling her ma'am and it lapsed into what turned out to be coinage Greek, when it would fall into a contemplative Greek – she recognized it because she had taken Greek because she had taken Greek in school. I didn't recognize it as a language, I thought it was just nonsense.*

**He's referring to Tessa – who was his fifth wife. And they had a young son.**

VICTORIA: At one point supposedly this voice that became known as Thomas was one of the people talking to him and he said there's something wrong with your son. There's something wrong with the stomach and gave him actually it was in Greek and he's like I don't know Greek and then they took his son who was a baby to the doctor and he had an undiagnosed hernia and they operated and that his son was fine. So he always took that as a piece of evidence that that somehow he was receiving some kind of information that he wouldn't normally have known that. Why would he know that his son had a hernia?

**His friends and his wife Tessa were deeply concerned about him. And he was concerned too, but for different reasons. He was obsessed with trying to understand what had happened to him in February and March of 1974, which he started calling 2-3-74.**

**And for the rest of his life, he wrote down all of his theories into a book called The Exegesis. Exegesis is a religious term for an interpretation of scripture. He didn't expect it to be published, but a version was published after he died. It had to be curated by a group of experts, including the novelist Jonathan Lethem, and Erik Davis.**

ERIK: Before we did the project there'd only been very small portions of the Exegesis that had been published so it's this massive amount of paper you know well over a million words you know sitting in a garage basically for a long period of time with people going what are we going to do with this thing. And so it took a long time for Jonathan to convince the Phil Dick's daughters to let us try to edit a portion of it and that big fat book that you can buy that is you know an abridgement of what a document that if it was published in full would be about ten times that long. So it's an enormous amount of writing and a great deal of it is bonkers is hard to read is impossible to read. Is pathological paranoid endlessly recursive, very difficult to grapple with.

**So what conclusions did Phil Dick come to about 2-3-74?**

**As Richard Doyle mentioned earlier – one option was reincarnation. He even thought maybe the spirit of his friend Bishop Pike was trying to contact him.**

**Option number two was like Cold War thriller. He wondered if the KGB was experimenting on him with brain wave technology. His “evidence” for this was that he saw visions of animated Kandinsky paintings, and Kandinsky was a Russian painter. Dick also got a strange letter in the mail, with certain words circled. He worried that they were trigger words, meant to activate him like a sleeper cell.**

RICHARD: And he was attempting to understand it and he said oh my gosh, this is some sort of attempt to enlist me into some sort of Soviet blackmail scheme.

**Richard Doyle says the flipside of this theory was that the FBI was trying to entrap him.**

RICHARD: He was worried, living in Berkeley in the 1970s he was worried that he had gone to some Communist Party meetings and he was worried variously that either that the FBI was tracking him because of his antiwar countercultural activities which was not an unreasonable concern for him to have.

**Option number three: aliens. Or more specifically artificial intelligence built by aliens.**

**And he invented a term for this life form: VALIS, which stands for Vast Active Living Intelligence System. And to make things even more meta – or more Philip K. Dickian – he fictionalized that theory in a novel called VALIS, where a character named Phil Dick and his doppelganger called Horselover Fat are writing an Exegesis of their own.**

**In fact, his obsession with trying to figure out what happened to him on 2-3-74 consumed his writing for the rest of his life. The professor Richard Doyle joked with me at one point that before 1974, all of Philip K. Dick’s stories were about malevolent conspiracies while after 1974, they were about benevolent conspiracies.**

**And Dick was aware his theories in the Exegesis resembled his fiction – which made him wonder if he really wrote those stories. Maybe this alien artificial intelligence had beamed them into his head.**

RICHARD: By the end, I think he arrives at the end that the idea that in fact he wasn't writing his own novels. He said it's not Ubik by Philip K. Dick. He writes in the Exegeis but Philip K. Dick by Ubik.

**He also came to the conclusion that if all these conspiracy theories resemble his own books, then, he was clearly inventing making it all up his own imagination. In other words, he thought he was going nuts.**

**Honestly, it's hard for me to dismiss that possibly because – well, he sounds nuts. But that really bothers Richard Doyle.**

RICHARD: When we feel this kind of and he's not well you know Van Gogh is nuts Whitman was nuts. Emerson was nuts. Steve Jobs was nuts. But I think what's concerning about is that it points to the present moment where it feels like not only are we becoming increasingly incapable of disagreeing with each other and kind of tolerating a wide variety of kind of viewpoints and experiences but that when something extraordinary has happened to another person we wish to discredit it through a kind of medical model.

**Erik Davis agrees, it's too easy to dismiss him as crazy.**

ERIK: He had been involved in psychotherapy from a young age, he was definitely not as we say today neuro typical. And so he was always involved with psychotherapy including drugs so he used his brain was always bathed with pharmaceuticals. He was very well informed at least from the 1950s, 1960s, not just with humor but also existential therapists and also a great deal about the neurological basis of psychosis and it actually at a time when most people in psychiatry were still thinking about psychosis as you know a product of personality of upbringing. People were still really looking at a lot of that sort of family dynamics. He was pretty also pretty early on saying no I think these things are our biochemical and they can be therefore treated with drugs so he had a very multilayered view of where symptoms and underlying conditions came from. He relentlessly diagnosed himself relentlessly so much so that he kind of burned through all the possibilities for everybody else. So when you get scholars or psychiatrists occasionally looking at his work and trying to diagnose him he's like ahead of the game.

**But there was one more possibility Philip K. Dick couldn't shake. He was having a religious experience. And he was an observant Episcopalian. He had been going to church regularly for decades.**

**And that theory inspired Victoria Stewart to write her play, "800 Words: The Transmigration of Philip K. Dick." Victoria sent me a recording of the play, and here is a scene where the character of Phil Dick talks to the audience.**

*CLIP: People make the case that the Bible was SF, that God is SF, that taking a rib from Adam and making Eve? Cloning. The angels who sing the heralds? Aliens. They fly and have knowledge of the future. They make a barren woman fertile, and Jesus has knowledge of his death! And if you don't think Revelations isn't the trippiest piece of SF? It's all mathematical information, you know?!*

**As Victoria delved further into Philip K. Dick's writing for inspiration, she realized the play had to be as surreal as one of his novels. His cat talks to him. His sister who died when he was a baby shows up as a mysterious dark haired woman – which happened a lot in his fiction. And at one point, an actress playing Victoria Stewart walks on stage and reveals to him that he's a character in her play.**

VICTORIA: There is this idea of maybe there is again someone else who's in control of the narrative. I mean that's one of the things that Philip K. Dick is always questioning is there's someone else in control of your narrative.

*CLIP: You have all these books where you appear as a character, I thought I should try it.*

*What do you think?*

*It's disorienting.*

*Do you ever get to like it?*

*No.*

*Why do you do it then? You do it a lot?*

*It gives me much needed objectivity in my autobiographical novels. If you're*

*Inside your work, how is that objective?*

*It works for me! So how's the play going?*

*I have problems with the ending. How does the play end? With your death.*

*Are you looking forward to Blade Runner?*

**The show is set on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1982 -- the day Philip K Dick would die of a stroke at the age of 53. The timing of his death is a key part of the drama**

**because he died seven months before Blade Runner came out. That movie was based on his novel, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep. And that movie brought his work to the attention of the rest of the world. For a guy whose career meant everything to him, who always felt like he was underappreciated and underpaid – it's a tragedy that he didn't live to see the Promised Land where his work would have a huge cultural impact.**

**And Victoria finds it very moving that Philip K. Dick went on this rigorous, tortuous journey to figure out what these visions meant all the way until he died.**

VICTORIA: And he said I can't decide between all these different possibilities and that infinite. And so therefore God is infinite so therefore I have found God that was his kind of where he landed and it actually did give him some comfort that he felt Oh it isn't complete chaos. He chose to believe and chose that that part of this doubt and this questioning was actually an act of faith as opposed to a negation of the faith. And I find that actually really refreshing and beautiful I think it's something where you know I don't like someone who doesn't question their faith. If I those people usually are a little scary for me personally.

***I feel like for me I feel like I'm glad he figured it out for himself but I don't feel like he figured it out for all of us too.***

VICTORIA: Yeah, yes I think he figured it out for himself and not necessarily for everybody else but you know that's why he's not the head of a religious movement. I don't think he felt the need to figure it out for everybody else. He just felt the need to tell you about his vision so that you could then make your decisions.

**Personally, I find the Exegesis compelling because we all struggle with these big questions in life, but very few people decide they have the genius or hubris to try and figure it out the whole universe.**

**But, I imagine some people listening may be thinking okay fine, Philip K. Dick was a genius, but he still sounds crazy. Why should I care about his far out there theories?**

**And I asked Richard, Erik and Victoria about that, and they all said the same thing.**

**Philip K. Dick may not have been a literal prophet, but he was a prophet of our age -- the information age. And for that reason, we should care about the way his mind worked.**

**Again Richard Doyle:**

RICHARD: On a daily basis, Eric, you and I are subjected to more flows of information by so many orders of magnitude than any human beings in the history of the planet that we would be puzzled if there weren't some symptoms that came out of that. So he seemed to be so sensitive to the changes that were about to be wrought technologically on the life world that we all find ourselves living in. And then when we read the novels, it feels very familiar to us to be not able to tell if someone is listening in on our information when all the information was shared with each other is immensely leaky and is about to manifest in a way we can't predict, and when we read a novel like *Ubix*, we think, that is so resonant not just in the content in the present but what I'm feeling.

**Erik Davis agrees.**

ERIK: This is captured in this wonderful scene in *Ubix* where Joe Chip tries to get out of his home, everything costs a little bit, your toaster, everything you got to use, you have to give it a little bit of cash, because it's demanding cash, he can't get out, he doesn't have the coin so he can't get out the front door so he can't get out of his own house. Like now we've got the chips in toaster, the toaster breaks you don't know what's wrong with it, you can't figure it out, everything licensed, not owned, and there are these corporate entities nibbling at little bits of every day transactions, and that creates a certain quality of unease, a sort of slightly paranoid sense, or a sense of being crowded by these incorporeal entities, and Dick captured the vibe of that incredibly well.

**Erik even thinks that VALIS – the alien artificial intelligence that beamed all that information into Philip K. Dick's head bears a striking resemblance to the Internet.**

**And as Victoria pointed out:**

VICTORIA: So much of pop culture now and so much of science fiction has in fact been influenced by him. You know *Westworld* would not exist without Philip K. Dick. You know obviously the *Blade Runner* and the things are actually

adaptations but then you know the Truman Show. Most people feel has you know Philip K. Dick had a thumbprint.

***In fact on Battlestar Galactica, they had to start referencing Blade Runner because it was just too obvious.***

VICTORIA: Yeah I mean I think a lot of his ideas about what is human what is reality. How is technology going to affect our everyday life? How can you know consumerism going to affect and technology and how that's going to infiltrate everything we do and how we're going to invite surveillance into our lives? I mean all those things are becoming more and more relevant.

**But what I find most endearing about Philip K. Dick is that even when he wasn't talking about the pink light, aliens, reincarnation, KGB mind control – he was talking about the number of issues his last book sold, the deals he wasn't getting, the agents who didn't get back to him. He sounds like a down-to-Earth guy trying to make a buck doing the one thing he's really good at doing.**

VICTORIA: I mean he's very much working class and he really had to worry about putting food on the table and I which I think is one of the great things about him as a writer is he's actually probably more grounded. You know it's always these working class guys who are dealing with these extraordinary worlds but they but they have to worry about making money and they're nagging wife and doing the laundry.

**And Erik Davis says that's the thing filmmakers often miss when they adapt his work.**

ERIK: If you hold up his wildest craziest science fiction books in the right light if you view angle them correctly you see that they're just filled with mundane domestic drama ordinary feelings of impotence and confusion -- the decay of our plans and all the objects in our life that we can barely keep together just to get it through the day. But then they're filled with all of these marvels and wonders and nightmares and humor and absurdism that's much more visible from the get go and that's the part that they want to make into you know a crazy Hollywood movie or whatever.

**I do think that in writing the Exegesis, Philip K. Dick basically turned himself into a character in one of his novels. But as the writers of his**

novels, he was the God of his own universe. He already knew what conspiracies his characters were going to uncover.

And towards the end, he did find comfort in realizing that some of the biggest questions – like “what is the meaning of life” -- are not going to have answers. They’re not supposed to.

Personally, I wish he had come to that realization sooner and been less consumed with this obsession. Then again, I wish a lot of things for him. I wish he had lived to see his works truly appreciated. But that was his life’s struggle and without it, he wouldn’t have been Philip K. Dick. He had an incessant drive to push forward without really knowing if he was on the right path. There’s another word for that: faith.

That’s it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Erik Davis, Richard Doyle, and Victoria Stewart. Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and Imagine worlds pod. My website is [imaginaryworldspodcast.org](http://imaginaryworldspodcast.org).