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Philip K. Dick, an uneasy spy inside 1970s suburbia

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PART 3: PHILIP K. DICK, THE LAST DECADE

*During the last years of his life, **Philip K. Dick** lived in, of all places, Orange County, a Southern California setting that made the life-battered sci-fi writer something of a stranger in a strange land (to borrow from **Robert Heinlein**). This is the third of a six-part series looking at those final years. The series is written by **Scott Timberg**, the L.A. freelance journalist who runs the West Coast culture blog **the Misread City**. He's also a longtime (albeit sometimes closeted) fan of science fiction.*

While in Orange County, Dick often fell back on the reflexes of Bay Area types who move to Southern California. He joked often about the artificiality of it all, the local slang. "He kept comparing Southern California to Disneyland," remembered wife **Tessa Dick**, "and said it was plastic, wasn't real. He was used to real cities like Berkeley and San Francisco and Vancouver."

To a writer whose primary subject was the slippage between the real and constructed, the place surely also fascinated him as well. "He loves fakes and simulacra as much as he fears them," novelist **Jonathan Lethem** wrote in the introduction to Dick's selected stories. He calls Dick very much a man of the 1950s, holding "a perfectly typical 1950s obsession with the images, the consumer, the bureaucrat, and with the plight of small men struggling under the imperatives of capitalism."



Dick, an unceasingly self-conscious and skeptical writer, was also aware of the Bay Area cliché he was falling into. In the novel "**Radio Free Albemuth**," written mostly in 1976, a narrator named **Phil Dick** spoke of the insularity of the Bay Area's coffeehouse-and-**Trotsky** community, describing "the isolation of the Berkeley radicals" as well as their caricature of the rest of the country.

Orange County, he wrote, was “far to the south of us, an area so reactionary to us that in Berkeley it seemed like a phantom land, made of the mists of dire nightmare... Orange County, which no one in Berkeley had ever actually seen, was the fantasy at the other end of the world, Berkeley’s opposite.”

Kidding aside, there were certainly times when suburban SoCal, and life as a married father, didn’t satisfy him. “I hadn’t realized before how [expletive] dumb and dull and futile and empty middle-class life is,” he wrote in a 1975 letter. “I have gone from the gutter (circa 1971) to the plastic container.”

Dick’s supposed paranoia didn’t wane during these years: As often happened, the culture – and American history – caught up with him. Dick was fond of pointing out that the Watergate trials validated his obsession with conspiracy. Tessa, who is hoping to run for Congress as a Libertarian, says that his distrust of the government and fear of the police state increased during his decade in Southern California.

Lethem, editor of Dick’s **Library of America** volumes, called this “a period where he seems less grounded in place.” From the evidence of Dick’s work, Lethem said, it’s a time “of very strong alienation from any real environment – it’s about Disneyland, about condos where you park your car under the building, where you barely get to know your neighbors. It was about **Nixon**. It’s almost like Dick was a spy in Orange County... a mole within the culture.”

(Here’s a photo of actor Shea Whigham in the [upcoming film adaptation](#) of “Radio Free Albemuth.”)



Of course, being far from any urban center or major attraction suited Dick just fine during this last decade. “He was home 24/7,” Tessa said. “He didn’t go out very much.” Besides **Big John’s**, his favorite pizza place, the nearest spot of interest was the **Cal State Fullerton** campus, where the author’s papers were held. (Some of them have recently been relocated, perhaps temporarily, to San Francisco.) Today the area is dominated by low-slung, pale stucco buildings and fast food chains, and back then it wasn’t much different.

The couple wasn't lonely, though. "People came to us," Tessa recalled. "Nearly every day we had visitors. One night for dinner we had two men from France, one from Germany, and one woman from Sweden. One of them was writing a PhD thesis on Phil." Dick flirted with the Swede, saying, "You are a pretty lady" in rough German.

During his last few years, when he became financially stable for one of the rare times in his life, his daughters visited him at the Santa Ana apartment he moved to after the implosion of his marriage. Dick's oldest child, daughter **Laura**, born in 1960, recalls his place full of Bibles, encyclopedias – Dick was a ferocious autodidact – and recordings of **Wagner** operas.

Phil's second daughter **Isolde**, now 42, visited enough during this period to get to know her father for the first time. She recalls him as working hard to be a good father and struggling to overcome his limitations, both with and without success.

During one visit, he got Isa excited about a trip to Disneyland, then open past midnight. "He said, 'We're gonna go and stay 'til it closes!' But in my mind we were there for only 20 or 30 minutes before he said, 'Honey, my back's really hurting.' I think he was just overwhelmed by all the crowds. I knew him, and knew he was uncomfortable moving outside his comfort zone."

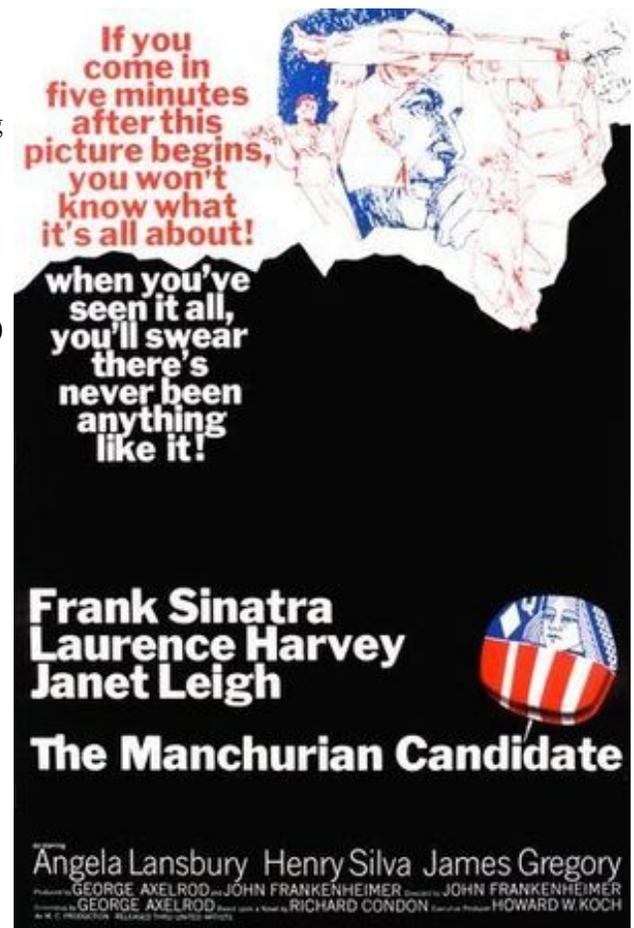
He spent more of his time walking from the apartment to a nearby **Trader Joe's** to get sandwiches, a park where he and **Isa** tried awkwardly to play kickball, and an Episcopalian church where he had running theological discussions with the clergy.

He'd bought himself a Fiat sports car, but almost never drove, telling Isa, "Honey, I'm just so excited to see you, I'm too excited to drive." She learned quickly to read her father's code, which seemed designed to protect her from ugly realities.

Sometimes he'd stay up all night, leaving his visitors laughing for hours as he spun idea after idea, or wrote, in a blaze, until dawn. "He could go from that really engaging personality to being withdrawn and closed off," Isa remembered, explaining that he would sometimes cancel visits at the last minute. "I could tell when we spoke on the phone his voice would go really low and flat. When he had that tone he was depressed. He'd say something like he had the flu. 'The flu' was usually his code."

Tessa recalls more acute eccentricities.

"He was obsessed with '**The Manchurian Candidate**,' which he had to see because of the **Kennedy** assassination," she said of the 1962 film in which a conspiracy is triggered by the Queen of Diamonds. "I didn't figure out until later why Phil wouldn't let me get out a deck of cards to play solitaire. And I really like to play cards."



Of course, to other residents of Dick's place – which became a condo, giving the author the opportunity to serve as chair of the Rules and Grievances Committee – the man was an enigma. "Grooming was *not* his priority," former neighbor **Catherine Cate** told **Patrick Kiger** of **Orange Coast** magazine. To these '80s suburbanites, the rambling, speculative quality of his conversation "was a little bewildering. You'd listen and look at him and think, 'Is this guy on the same planet?' And the answer was probably no."

– Scott Timberg

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PHOTOS: Philip K. Dick and his wife, Tessa, in the 1970s (Courtesy of Tessa Dick). A scene from "Radio Free Albemuth" (Open Pictures).

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<http://herocomplex.latimes.com/2010/01/27/philip-k-dick-an-uneasy-spy-inside-1970s-suburbia/> printed on January 1, 2012

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