

## Philip K. Dick on Film

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Gregg Rickman. *Philip K. Dick on Film*. Arrow Books, 2018. Paperback. 176 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 9780993306082.

GREGG Rickman is an established commentator on Philip K. Dick who occupies contradictory positions within the broad community of Dick fans and scholars. On the one hand, Rickman's retrospective psychoanalysis of Dick in *To the High Castle*, *Philip K. Dick: A Life, 1928-1962* (1989, repeated in truncated form on page 114 of this text) is treated with much suspicion within this community of fans and scholars. Yet he remains a trusted source of first-hand material and collector of Dick anecdotes. Furthermore, Rickman moves between the spheres of academic and non-academic publishing, a boundary that is traversed by only a select few Dickian commentators.

Rickman's liminality is relevant when approaching his recent monograph *Philip K. Dick on Film*, as there is some slipperiness when trying to establish the best contextual frame from which to review it. Even the title is suggestively ambiguous. Is this a book about Dick's attempts to make films and contribute to TV shows, Dick's own opinions of film as an art form, or the adaptation of Dick's work into film by third parties? Ultimately, all three of these positions are touched upon, though the latter represents the primary focus.

Rickman's text can be divided into two sections, with the first comprising chapters one through five and covering Dick's biography, a discussion of Dick's major themes and an insight into Dick's relationship with Hollywood and filmmaking more generally. These chapters offer a neat overview to the key debates in Dick studies as well as providing some keen insights from Rickman. The little over four pages dedicated to Dick's biography succinctly introduces the reader to Dick's biographical highlights as well as communicating the complexities and contradictions that make Dick's biography so exciting. For a casual fan of Dick who is interested in why media organisations keep returning to his literature as a source for film and TV adaptations, these early chapters are a helpful roadmap. While the more dedicated Dick scholar may fail to find anything new in these chapters, they will appreciate both the chapters' concision and the many suggested routes (trailheads) of further investigation.

However, chapters six through twelve discuss the direct adaptations of Dick's fiction into film and TV, and for those interested in Philip K. Dick, film studies, or adaptation studies, these chapters will disappoint. This is due to three problematic positions that inform Rickman's methodological approach. First, he engages in a comparative analysis that heavily favours Dick's fiction as an originary source. Following this form of analysis, any adaptations must strive, and ultimately fail, to "live up" to the original. This tautological argument is not uncommon in cycles of fandom, and therefore is not unheard of within SF studies; the "original" is always best at being the "original." The argument's circularity makes it uninteresting and provides no opportunity for serious discussion.

Second, Rickman purports to be offering readers a juxtaposition of his own comments and Dick's (hypothetical) opinions on the various film and TV adaptations. This interpretative strategy seeks to extrapolate the opinions of a deceased writer based on his extant commentary. As dangerous as this strategy is, and in the case of Dick it is fraught by added complications due to his well-documented capriciousness, one needs to ask whether it is at all interesting. This approach assumes the primacy of the star-author as a site of meaning-making and authority (at the expense of critics, scholars, readers, and fans) and by contemporary standards is an outmoded method of engaging with texts, adapted or otherwise.

Third, Rickman takes for granted that contemporary commercial filmmaking is in an "unhappy state" and he rests this reductive criticism on rather narrow shoulders (89). For Rickman, the formulaic nature of storytelling is the primary cause of a creeping mediocrity that has been developing within Hollywood since the 1980s. Rickman goes on to argue that, although there are many vectors via which these formulae have been disseminated, the primary method is via screenwriting manuals, and he reserves particular attention for the successful 2005 manual *Save the Cat!* by Blake Snyder.

There are many problems with this claim, and it reveals a writer who is not conversant in the history of film, the current debates in film studies, or the contemporary reality of commercial filmmaking. To tease out just one of these problems, it exposes a logocentrism that assumes films can be equated with their scripted antecedents, reducing the complexities of an audio-visual text to nothing more than its content or story. The irony here is that Dick's fiction has highly repetitive qualities that often follow a generic formula. A reduction of Dick's fictions

to their story and a map of their plot points (“beats”) will emphasize sameness while overlooking what distinguishes Dick from other SF writers or Dick’s stories from each other.

Turning to the formal qualities of this monograph, the publisher, Arrow Films, has not helped here, with poor editing, formatting, and design choices. For example, an error where the wrong film is referenced and inconsistent use of footnotes, that sees some tangential anecdotes footnoted and others left within the text, should have been picked up on and corrected before publishing. From a formatting perspective, inconsistency is again the watchword, with the footnote superscripts switching between grayscale and salmon. While throughout the body of the work the font oscillates between grayscale and black, sometimes within the same sentence. These inconsistencies are very distracting for the eye while also undermining the legitimacy of the work.

As part of the design, cover pages from Dick’s published fiction are interspaced throughout the text. As nice as these are to see, they bear no relevance to either the overall aims of this monograph or to the specific sections that they are included within. This is an odd design choice that stands in contrast to the book’s cover, which includes an arresting panoply of icons from the various Dick adaptations under discussion. These cover pages highlight the confused focus of a text that seems trapped between what it sought to talk about, the film and TV adaptations of Dick’s literature, and what it couldn’t help talking about, how much Rickman likes Dick’s literature.