

FEATURES

Dead 20 years, Philip K. Dick conquers Hollywood again

By Bobby Bryant
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Twenty years after dying, science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick is a big success. How very Dickian.

"Minority Report," Steven Spielberg and Tom Cruise's \$100 million summer blockbuster which opened Friday, was teased from Dick's humble 1956 short story of the same name. (The story was first published in a 35-cent magazine whose cover featured a man being attacked by what looks like a giant water flea. Eisenhower-era sci-fi artists were not subtle.)

Arnold Schwarzenegger's 1990 hit, "Total Recall," was based on another Dick story, this one from 1966. Ridley Scott's endlessly imitated "Blade Runner" (1982) was based on a Dick novel. Dick's stories also have inspired two other, less successful, movies: "Screamers" (1995) and "Impostor" (2002).

And the five-times-married author of 40 mind-bending novels and 128 short stories was dead from heart failure before any of these hit the screen.

It's a perfect Phil Dick tale: Corporate Hollywood's hot new writer is a dead man who, for a time in the 1970s, believed he was receiving messages from higher intelligences, either alien or heavenly.

Dick (1928-82) was a perfect "concept illustrator" for movies, Spielberg told Wired magazine. In the case of "Minority Report," Spielberg and his screenwriters took Dick's idea — of future cops who arrest people for murders they haven't yet committed — and expanded on it until they had a Cruise-worthy thriller.

In the film, Cruise is the chief of an experimental "Precrime" squad that relies on mutant psychics to foretell who's going to kill who, and when. (Think of it as a LaToya's Psychic Hotline that actually works.) Then the system fingers Cruise. He's being set up — or is he? That's the Dickian edge — he's innocent and guilty at the same time.

"Minority Report," the story, is considered fairly mild Phil Dick



Courtesy photo

Tom Cruise fights to prove his innocence in the Steven Spielberg directed movie version of Philip K. Dick's 1956 short story, "Minority Report."

— the author could, and did, conjure much weirder worlds. But always with recognizably human characters. "I love my characters," Dick once said. "They're my friends. When I finish a book, I go into post-partum (depression), never to hear them speak again, never to see them struggling and trying."

He's best remembered for injecting a jolting tone of paranoia, even schizophrenia, into the rational world of late-1950s and early-1960s science fiction. In many of Dick's tales, critic John Clute wrote, "Reality is a sham, a prop that can be whipped from under one's feet."

And after the success of the what's-real? drama "A Beautiful Mind," that's the kind of thing Hollywood is hungry for. Entertainment Weekly reports that Paramount Pictures has optioned the rights to one of Dick's 1952 short stories as part of a deal that could earn the author's estate \$2 million. (The story earned Dick only \$195.)

Some of Dick's major works: "Time Out of Joint" (1959) — A man discovers that his idyllic '50s


world is a sham and that he is a pawn in an interplanetary war. "The Truman Show" owed Dick a debt for this, his first hardback novel. ("Time Out of Joint" sold for \$750," Dick told an interviewer in 1974. "That was a long time ago, and we are still being paid about as much money as if we were standing on a street corner selling apples in the Depression.")

"The Man in the High Castle" (1962) — The father of all "alternate-history" novels. Dick creates a world in which the Allies lost World War II and the Axis divvied up the United States.


"Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" (1968) — In a rotting future, a hired gun hunts androids who are about as human as he is. (Except for the idea and the tone, little of the book survives in "Blade Runner.")

For more on Dick's books, visit philipkdick.com on the Web.

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