

# The Nonsensical Pink Light: A Lacanian Analysis of Philip K. Dick's *VALIS*

PARK Junghwan

## 1. Introduction

Philip K. Dick (1928-1982)'s late-career autobiographical novel *VALIS* (1981) continued to use his frequently explored themes of paranoia towards the very nature of reality itself, going beyond the material reality of the inhabitants of his novels. Partially due to its autobiographical nature, the author's well-documented bouts with mental illness, and the confusing structure of the novel, critical response towards *VALIS* was initially muted. However, when viewed through a Lacanian lens, *VALIS*'s contradictory and oft-frustrating qualities become much more intriguing than what can initially be gleaned from a cursory reading.

An issue that arises with analyzing *VALIS* and other Dick works is that criticism has the danger of falling into the trap of "diagnosing" Dick, which according to Roger Luckhurst, "is only to diagnose an understanding of subjectivity that is always in the process of making itself up, alert to the alluring promise of the next diagnostic nosology appearing on the horizon, offering the promise of a final authoritative self-definition" (Luckhurst 5). Using Luckhurst's argument as a springboard, this paper will argue that *VALIS* takes the format of the novel and autobiography to raise questions about what we take to be truth and un-truth, and through the unending search for the protagonist and author avatar, Horselover Fat, portrays the metonymic qualities of desire, and the constantly slipping object of desires, the *objet petit (a)*. This presentation seeks to argue that the novel's tendency to raise questions and proceed to either answer them with ambivalence or refuse to answer them all together is not a failing on the novel's part but rather a strong argument for Dick's self-awareness and the rationality behind the novel's surface madness.

## 2. The Nonsensical Pink Light

In the novel, Philip K. Dick is inexplicably shot by a "pink" light and split into two personas, Phil and Horselover Fat. The light is only referred to as pink, as to quote the novel, "normal light did not contain that color" (Dick 14) and is the only word he can use to describe it. Fat is obsessed with the light, and he is likened to a junkie who is looking for his next hit. Due to the nonsensical nature of the event, Fat begins tolling on a several-thousand-page-long exegesis, which becomes increasingly unhinged as the novel progresses. Fat's explanations of the event move from subject to subject wildly, but the one concept that quilts his thoughts is God. Still, God, as understood by Fat, is full of contradictions, and Fat's God takes on many forms, from being a God based on an eccentric understanding of theology such as early Christianity, Gnosticism, Buddhism, and other science fiction-tinged concepts that seem to be little more than a mad man's overactive imagination. The most notable depiction of God as Fat portrays it, though, is of God being a void. In his dreams, Fat describes God as a void that "extended and drifted and seemed totally empty and yet it possessed personality" (48). God as an empty void that takes on many contradictory forms and completely takes over the mind of the subject closely resembles the Lacanian concept of the master signifier, which is "devoid of meaning" (Fink 75) and "nonsensical" but "insists" (78), taking on a privileged position in the subject's mind which they would inevitably return to.

In response to Fat's ceaseless theorizing, the narrator's (ostensibly Phil, but the boundaries between him and Fat are unstable) attitude towards God oscillates wildly between belief and disbelief. A key moment in the novel is when Fat, who, after having attempted suicide, is institutionalized and talks to the eccentric Dr. Stone. Dr. Stone takes Fat's theories seriously and redeems Fat's faith in himself. The narrator depicts this passage as hopeful, and the narrator seems to view Fat as cured, albeit in a limited way. However, a few pages later, in the same chapter, the narration says something that directly opposes what he had been *speaking* about Fat's 'cure.'

In no sense had Dr. Stone cured Fat, when the motor driving Fat got later exposed. Fat homed in on death more rapidly and more expertly this time than he had ever done before. He had become a professional at seeking out pain; he had learned the rules of the game and now knew how to play. What Fat in his lunacy — acquired from a lunatic universe; branded so by Fat's own analysis — sought was to be dragged down along with someone who wanted to die. (Dick 75)

Contradictions of this nature are abundant in *VALIS*, and along with the many non-sequiturs and plot threads that seem to be abandoned as soon as they start, they can make for a frustrating reading experience. However, at the

novel's climax, *VALIS* seems to offer an explanation that ties up its confusion by introducing the film *Valis*, made by the Lamptons and their baby daughter Sophia, whom they purport to be the savior.

### 3. Melancholia

Fat's reaction to the film and the Lamptons is curious. Instead of being elated at the possibility that everything he had been theorizing may be right, he is depicted to be in pain at this possibility and displays "an expression of suffering" (165). Fat is not the only one to be apprehensive about the possibility of him having been right. The narration, far from being more hopeful at the possibility of the nature of the universe being revealed and Fat being healed, takes on a more anxious tone. Notably, after Horselover Fat, Phil, and their friends meet Sophia, during which she heals the split between Fat and Phil, turning them into Philip K. Dick again, Phil and his friends bicker and yell at each other after the meeting, and Phil wearily thinks: "The hell with it... I give up" (237).

While initially puzzling, the uncertainty and melancholia of the characters and the narration become clearer when looked through a Lacanian lens. Mainly, Lacan's theories on desire provide insights into the subject's relation with the object of desire and what happens when the subject obtains it. Desire, in Lacanian theory, is based on a perpetual lack. Desire in its very nature cannot be fulfilled; it can only be temporarily sated, which is why Lacan described the object-cause of desire (*objet petit (a)*) as a void, much like the void depicted in *VALIS*. The object of desire will shift constantly as an endless chain of signifiers and cannot be held in place (Schutter 68). If one does, perchance, find their *objet petit (a)*, their object and cause of desire, it immediately becomes worthless to the subject. Desire is metonymic, and as such, it cannot be fulfilled – it is the metonymy itself (Lacan 640). The subject constructs a fantasy to protect themselves from this perpetual lack. By having a fantasy, the subject can delude themselves into thinking that there is some fantastical object that may completely satisfy their desire (Lacan 637).

By coming closer to the truth and thus obtaining his object of desire, it loses its potency for Horselover Fat, and he becomes melancholic, as melancholia is characterized by possessing the *objet petit (a)* and being disappointed by it (Žižek 67). Furthermore, Fat's very existence, which is likened to a "wound" (Dick 144), is a manifestation of Philip K. Dick's desire for the truth. Horselover Fat ceases to exist by healing the wound, but the healing is temporary and incomplete. Even after the split is temporarily cured, Phil still cannot internalize Fat's thoughts and experiences and even refers to his son as Fat's son. Thus, when Phil gets the news from the Lamptons that Sophia has died in an accident, the wound is reopened, and Horselover Fat comes into existence again and begins his search for the savior once more at the conclusion of the novel. The fantasy of salvation sustains Fat as he craves a resolution to the pain he feels, even when that pain is his substance. This fantasy is why Horselover Fat cannot stop his search, even when it goes against all common sense.

### 4. Conclusion

The reluctance of *VALIS* to answer the many questions it raises, even going as far as taking away a possible conclusion through the savior character that it introduces, along with its many contradictions, may make it a frustrating experience. However, when interpreted through a Lacanian lens, the narrative can be read as a portrayal of the struggle of an individual attempting to impose an objective, conclusive worldview, which cannot be done, as one's reality is made of subjectivity. Furthermore, even when it seems that the protagonist comes tantalizingly close to reaching his goal, it immediately escapes his grasp; this goal of an objective conclusion cannot be fulfilled due to the ever-sliding, metonymic qualities of desire. This refusal to give a final, authoritative self-definition, rather than being a deficiency of a madman's ravings, is a powerful argument for the rationality that hides behind the surface madness of *VALIS*.

### Bibliography

Dick, Philip K. *VALIS*. Mariner Books, 2011.

Fink, Bruce. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton UP, 1995.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink. WW Norton, 2006.

Luckhurst, Roger. "Diagnosing Dick." *The World According to Philip K. Dick*, edited by Alexander Dunst and Stefan Schlensag, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 13-29

Schutter, Dirk De. "A Study of Metaphor and Metonymy in Lacan." *Auslegung: a journal of philosophy*, vol.10, no. 1-2, Spring/Summer 1983, pp. 65-74.

Žižek, Slavoj. *How to Read Lacan*. W. W. Norton, 2006.