

## Shades of Realism: the Dichotomy of Existence in Philip K. Dick's the Man in the High Castle

---

Pritam Mishra, Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English  
Ravenshaw University, Cuttack – 753003

---

Article Received: 13/11/2022,

Article Accepted: 25/12/2022,

Published Online: 29/12/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.12.22

---

### Abstract

There can only be a handful of novels, by and large within the domain of Alternate History that have aroused the public and drawn researchers' attention at once and that too equivocally like *The Man in the High Castle*. Since its publication, it has triggered an extensive and profound debate among scholars and critics as to its very nature and implications. While many consider it to be a reconstruction of history focusing on the constructed-ness of history and the role of the narrative in the process, others consider it simply as yet another piece of literary work. In *The Man in the High Castle* Dick envisions a world where history has taken a different course. The Allied forces have lost the war to the Axis powers. In an awe-inspiring exploration of the notion of truth, authenticity and the unreliable nature of 'reality' Dick tries to explore the idea of false realities and the value we place on objects, people, and events that we think of as being true. While most researchers have tried to explore the ramifications and aftermath of such a "Point of Divergence", this paper primarily tries to understand the different facets, dimensions, underlying sheaths of connotations, and the inherently relative nature of "reality" as limned by Dick.

**Keywords:** Reality, Realism, Dichotomy, Existence, Historicity, Authenticity, Relativity, Nazis

### Introduction

Philip K. Dick's Hugo award-winning novel *The Man in the High Castle* stirs up the already existing centuries-old ontological uncertainty about what is real and what is not? In response to this question, a variety of researchers have come up with different possible explanations. However two popular, at the same time contrasting sets of belief systems have absorbed most of the research attention. One possible answer to the question is to say that the physical world is what exists. Thus it can be said that the only sort of things that are real are physical entities, atoms, electrons, protons, etc. However it is also true that nobody has ever seen an electron or an atom directly or experienced what it feels like but according to this viewpoint, the electron is, in fact, more real than our experiences because it is the basic building block of the physical world.

It is at this point that some people often start to feel uncomfortable with this description of the ‘real’. If it is taken to its logical conclusion then consciousness, feelings or emotions are simply illusions arising from the physical manifestations of the objects surrounding us. And in fact, it is also true that we do not have the technical know-how to measure the discrete unit of consciousness in the physical world or even see how it could be described quantitatively, so it must be unreal. To counteract this many critics and researchers propose an alternative viewpoint which says that the only thing we can really be sure exists is our own experience—feelings of pain, our senses, feelings of consciousness, etc. In this view, our experience is what is real, how we feel from within is important to what happens outside. However at the same time what happens within is to a certain extent also dependent on what happens in the outside world.

Thus the two sets of opinions fail to provide a comprehensive explanation as to the true nature of ‘reality’ or it can be said that both viewpoints fail to answer what is really ‘real’. However, both the viewpoints successfully create a “passage from a truth-oriented philosophy to a meaning-oriented philosophy.” (Badiou 34) As a result of which, what is really ‘real’ is not more important than what we interpret of it. In *The Man in the High Castle* Dick very skillfully manages to present before his readers a set of different possibilities, and tries to befuddle the reader as to the authenticity of those events. He puts forward before the readers a set of alternate and contrasting realities which in turn questions the very foundation of human belief and the paradox of human existence.

### **Analysis**

The year is 1962, fifteen years after the end of the war in 1947 following an Axis victory in the Second World War, The United States is occupied by foreign powers. The eastern seaboard has fallen under the German control, while the west coast is under the Japanese occupation. The south is a Vichy-type puppet establishment with the strings pulled by the Nazi regime, whilst the Midwest and Rocky Mountain regions serve as a quasi-independent, no-man’s land acting as a buffer zone separating the two occupying forces.

Now the world portrayed in the novel at the very first instance is quite different from the world we live in. The references made to the west coast as the “Pacific States of America”, An American antique seller Robert Childan’s acquiescent and subservient behavior to the Japanese be it the Kasouras or Mr. Tagomi, and another major character “Frank Frink mentioning Nazi experiments in Africa or the German colonization of the Solar System lets the readers know that they have found themselves in a world where history has taken a different course by the end of the first chapter itself.” The very year, the entire context of the partition of the United States and the very geopolitical scenario exploited by Dick in his novel is not explicitly mentioned, but is rather in a way drawn and experienced with the help of Dick’s characters. (Daněk 23)

Now, the references made to the West coast as ‘the Japanese side of the settlement line’, and Robert Childan’s conversation with Mr. Tagomi; ‘a high official with the ranking Trade Mission’ on the Pacific Coast. In some way builds up the setting of the novel, wherein the alternate world is showcased to be dominated by the Japanese on the West or Pacific Coast and the Nazis on the East coast; the Atlantic side of the United States. These passages

in the opening chapters of the text also point out the differences between the two world powers:

While the Germans were busy bustling enormous robot construction systems across space, the Japs were still burning off the jungles in the interior of Brazil, erecting eight-floor clay apartment houses for ex-headhunters. By the time the Japs got their first spaceship off the ground the Germans would have the entire solar system sewed up tight. (Dick 08)

Frequent references have also been made to the Nazi achievements in Africa, turning barren, infertile landscapes into tillable farmland by bottling up the Mediterranean waters:

But Africa. They had simply let their enthusiasm get the better of them there, and you had to admire that, although more thoughtful advice would have cautioned them to perhaps let it wait a bit until, for instance, Project Farmland had been completed. Now there the Nazis had shown genius; the artist in them had truly emerged. The Mediterranean Sea bottled up, drained, made into tillable farmland, through the use of atomic power — what daring! ... (Dick 20)

Robert Childan's further reflection in the context, while he was on his way to the Nippon Times Building; a government building located in the Japanese Pacific States also throws some light as to the sort of dominance shown by the Germans with respect to the Japs, in almost every sphere of life concerned with the practical aspect, be it the use of science and technology, or the work ethics, and the love for perfection in terms of the work efficiency. Apart from that it also showcases the biases in the mind of Childan regarding the Orientals; or the Japanese in particular:

... what the Nazis have which we lack is — nobility. Admire them for their love of work or their efficiency . . . but it's the dream that stirs one. Space flights first to the moon, then to Mars; if that isn't the oldest yearning of mankind, our finest hope for glory. Now, the Japanese on the other hand. I know them pretty well; I do business with them, after all, day in and day out. They are — let's face it — Orientals. Yellow people. We whites have to bow to them because they hold the power. But we watch Germany; we see what can be done where whites have conquered, and it's quite different. (Dick 20-21)

Now, these sorts of references made by the author at the very outset, not only does help in the growth of the plot but also at the same time bewilders the reader's mind as to the milieu and the setting of the novel. The reader finds himself completely lost in a new alternate reality different from the one we live in. At this point, the reader's mind is befuddled with questions, as to, is it really possible to have a different world parallel to the existing world but moving away from its reality?

Gliding through the pages in the text, one might get trapped in an alternate reality questioning his own identity as well as the authenticity of the world he lives in. A completely different point of a narrative is sold in *The Man in the High Castle*, in the alternate world things have taken a different turn; the major point of divergence being revealed to be the assassination of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In this context, the conversation between Wyndam-Matson; owner of the W.M. Corporation, a factory that churns most of its profits from making fake antiques, and her young mistress Rita, an avid fan of a book by Abendsen *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* is of utmost importance. Rita while is referring to the plotline of the book, reveals quite a lot of facts regarding the way things have turned out in Dick's world:

At the bookcase she knelt. 'Did you read this?' she asked, taking a book out. Nearsightedly he peered. Lurid cover. Novel. 'No,' he said. 'My wife got that. She reads a lot.' 'You should read it.' Still feeling disappointed, he grabbed the book, glanced at it. *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*. 'Isn't this one of those banned-in-Boston books?' he said. (Dick 55)

"Isn't this book banned in Boston?" to this replies Rita, not only is it banned in Boston, but "Banned [throughout] the United States. And in Europe, of course." As the conversation proceeds, Wyndam-Matson mistakes the book by Abendsen to be that of a love story, "Another fad. Another mass craze." A popular fiction which "Secretaries, he thought acidly, read that junk, at home in bed at night." And businessmen like him don't have time to go through. (Dick 56) Rita tries to correct him and remarks:

'No,' she said. 'A story about war.' As they walked down the hall to the elevator she said, 'He says the same thing. As my mother and dad.'

'Who? That Abbotson?' 'That's his theory. If Joe Zangara had missed him, he would have pulled America out of the Depression and armed it so that - ' She broke off. They had arrived at the elevator, and other people were waiting. (56)

Now, following the conversation between Wyndam-Matson and Rita further, the place of assassination of President Roosevelt is also revealed, with the help of the plot of the book by Abendsen; *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*:

'Abendsen's theory is that Roosevelt would have been a terribly strong President. As strong as Lincoln. He showed it in the year he was President, all those measures he introduced. The book is fiction. I mean, it's in novel form. Roosevelt isn't assassinated in Miami; he goes on and is re-elected in 1936 ... (56)

Now, Roosevelt isn't assassinated in Miami, according to the book by Abendsen, in a way indicates that in Dick's world, Roosevelt is assassinated in Miami in fact and as referred to in the earlier passages, is assassinated by an Italian immigrant and naturalized United States citizen Giuseppe Zangara better known as Joe Zangara. In the reader's world however, Zangara had shot the Chicago Mayor, Antonin Cermak who was in Roosevelt's

close propinquity at the time of his public address in Miami. “Zangara raised a handgun and began shooting. He was aiming for Roosevelt, but he hit Cermak and four others.” (Kendall 2007) Dick adroitly manages to trap the readers in their own make-believe world by referring to the connection of Zangara with the assassination of President Roosevelt. However, the question is had he really attempted to assassinate FDR, or was his real target the Chicago Mayor. This remains a matter of debate and the truth has gone to the grave with Zangara himself.

Whatever it may be the assassination of Roosevelt however changes the entire political scenario in the novel – Roosevelt’s vice president soon assumes the office. Nevertheless, he fails to pull the United States out of the depression and “in 1940 is replaced by a Republican president John W. Bricker who supports the isolationist position of the US.” This “isolationist policy combined with weak economy fostered by the ongoing depression does not allow the US to back the Allies,” as a result of which, first Europe falls under the clutches of the Nazis. Then after the Japanese attack on the Pearl Harbor, the US is finally forced to capitulate to the Axis forces. (Daněk 23)

However, within the world dominated by the Axis-led front, yet another reality emerges in the form of a book titled *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* discussed earlier in the context of the conversation between Wyndam-Matson and her young mistress, which challenges the Axis hegemony right away. Although the book is banned in the United States, it is still accessible clandestinely, and also enjoys immense popularity. *The Grasshopper* is used as a point of reference throughout the novel contrasting the reality of *The Man in the High Castle* by providing an alternate narrative where the Axis forces had lost the war. “It also serves as a plot driving force exposing some of the character’s inclinations to corroborate racist tendencies or their fascination with the status quo.” (Daněk 24) Thus it is rightly said that “The Grasshopper lies heavy performs a role analogous to the Ed Frank jewelry within the world of *The Man in the High Castle*.” Thereby “offering its readers a creative salvation.” (Warrick 42)

The history presented in *The Grasshopper* is quite closer or even analogous to our so-called real past, but at the same time, it is also different. It represents yet another possible scenario of how things could have been or in fact how things are. In it, F.D. Roosevelt is not assassinated in 1933 and assumes the presidency, which is quite in accord with at the same time at odds with the reality. Odd in the sense that, “Roosevelt is reelected in 1936 and still holds the office when the war breaks out in Europe and prepares the US for a possible war threat.” Now, this is where things take a turn in *The Grasshopper*. In the 1940 US elections, a well known adviser to President Roosevelt and the brain behind the US’s economic revival after the Great Depression, Rexford Tugwell is elected as the president and continues the former President’s anti-Nazi policies and most notably avoids the Pearl Harbor incident by sending the US fleet out on the sea beforehand. The entire conflict thereby taking a different course ends with an Allied victory. However, again there is another divergence as the other world power which emerges alongside the USA is not the USSR but the British Empire. (Daněk 24)

Thus it can be said that the novel within the novel, apart from providing a text-internal point of reference against the narrative of *The Man in the High Castle* also presents a reality which in a way is paradoxically quite different from the reader's own perception of reality in his world. Aside from *The Grasshopper*, there is yet another instance of an alternate reality within the alternate history in the novel. In "the second twist in reality—Tagomi's venture into another San Francisco where something called the Embarcadero Freeway exists—strains our sense of grounding a bit more than the aforementioned history in a fictional book." (Campbell 191)

Now Mr. Tagomi as mentioned earlier is a high-ranking Japanese official, working for the Trade Mission in the Pacific States. Tagomi in depression after killing two Nazi officials or rather two SD men in defense tries to find his peace of mind and after concentrating on a silver squiggle, made by another important character Frank, which according to him had the "Body of yin, soul of yang" finds himself lost in a different world, more or less similar to the reader's world. Instead of pedecabs there are actual sporadic cars on the road, a freeway which does not exist in the world of the novel, exists as a "hideous misshapen thing on the skyline. Like nightmare of roller coaster suspended, blotting out view. Enormous construction of metal and cement in air." (Dick 203) and even the white Americans refuse to give up their seats for him in a dingy lunch counter.

All these sorts of references hint the reader in some way about the character simultaneously traversing in a United States which the readers are much familiar with, in fact, the real US. The Author has knowingly induced these illusions to throw some light as well as challenge the common belief of treating the physical dimensions of life as reality. He dives deep into the minds of readers, searching for a greater dimension of life and human existence.

In his attempt, thus, he puts forward several questions directly or indirectly for his readers to answer. In doing so he not only plays with the reader's belief system but also blurs up the distinction between what is real and what is not? In fact, as a fictional world, the story itself is not real, yet like all novels, it takes on its own sense of reality. The question of reality also arises in regard to well made fake antiques sold by Childan; if an item is authentic looking enough does it really matter if it lacks the patina of history. One can get enough shreds of evidence with reference to not only Childan and his American Artistic Handicrafts Inc., but also big corporations like W.M. Corporation which "turned out a constant flow of forgeries of pre-war American artifacts." (Dick 40) Now these forged pieces were quite adeptly mixed with genuine artifacts collected from around the globe and fed into the wholesale art object market.

Now the problem that arises here is that how can one really distinguish the authentic from the fake, the genuine from the in genuine and the real from the unreal. How can one really find out the historicity of a material first-hand without certain documented evidences? In fact, Matson himself claims at a point that, "This whole damn historicity business is nonsense." (Dick 53) In order to prove himself further to Rita. He shows her two Zippo lighters, one of which was in the pocket of FDR when he was assassinated and one of which was not. Now there is no way to tell, simply by looking, which object has the

connection to such a major historical event. One has historicity, and the other has nothing and it is quite a fact that one can't tell which is which, as certainly there is no "mystical plasmic presence", or aura around the object itself.

Now when Rita asks Matson further, if really, Roosevelt had one of those lighters in his pocket when he was assassinated, Wyndam remarks obliquely:

'Sure. And I know which it is. You see my point. It's all a big racket; they're playing it on themselves. I mean, a gun goes through a famous battle, like the Meuse-Argonne, and it's the same as if it hadn't, *unless you know*. It's in here.' He tapped his head. 'In the mind, not the gun ... (54)

Thus, Wyndam-Matson in a way asserts that historicity is in the eye of the beholder, and not a quality possessed by any particular object. Now, this symbolical reference furthers the confusion as to 'how can one judge the authenticity of an object?' objectively, without being a first-hand witness. One can be easily fooled, just like Rita, at the very first instance. However as evident through the text, if one has certain documented evidence, then it is possible to prove any sort of object to be authentic:

I don't believe either of those two lighters belonged to Franklin Roosevelt, the girl said.

Wyndam-Matson giggled. 'That's my point! I'd have to prove it to you with some sort of document. A paper of authenticity. And so it's all a fake, a mass delusion. The paper proves its worth, not the object itself!' (54)

Thus it is rightly said by Wyndam that these are simply nothing but a mass delusion. It all depends on a person's belief system. If we accept it as the reality, then it is real, and if we do not, then we go on asking questions forever without getting, in fact, a valid answer. It is a universal plight; we are all trapped in a *Maya*, in a false illusion, nothing is the way it seems to be.

Now, even the characters themselves; that are portrayed in the novel, not the ones they really represent. In such an unreal world as that of *The Man in the High Castle*, how can one really tell that people are who they claim they are? Frank has changed his last name and his appearance in order to hide his Jewish identity which in fact is revealed when Frank after having contentions with his boss Wyndam-Matson realizes he had to find out some alternate source of income and was even prepared to appear at the Laborer's Justification Commission for a revision of his work category and self-reflects in the context:

He would be facing four or five middle-aged plump white faces, on the order of Wyndam-Matson's. If he failed to get justification there, he would make his way to one of the Import-Export Trade Missions which operated out of Tokyo, and which had offices throughout California, Oregon, Washington, and the parts of Nevada included in the Pacific States of America. But if he failed successfully to plead there ... [Then What]

Plans roamed his mind ... He could for instance slip across into the Rocky Mountain States. But it was loosely banded to the PSA, and might extradite him. What about the South? His body recoiled. Ugh. Not that. As a white man he would have plenty of places, in fact more than he had here in the PSA. But . . . he did not want that kind of place. And, worse, the South had a cat's cradle of ties, economic, ideological, and god knew what, with the Reich. And Frank Frink was a Jew.

[And] His original name was Frank Fink ... (Dick 06)

Even Mr. Baynes, who presents himself as a Swedish businessman dealing in plastics, polyesters and resins in the course of time, is revealed to be a Nazi defector named Rudolph Wegner, who is on a secret mission to the Pacific states in order to pass on some secret information's regarding the Nazis secret program code-named 'Lowenzahn' or 'Operation Dandelion' which was designed carefully to wipe out the entire "Royal family, Home Defense Army, most of Imperial Navy, civil population, industries, resources," of Japan with the help of an "enormous nuclear attack on the Home Islands" (Dick 124) to a retired Japanese General Tedeki, who has arrived in the Pacific states with an assumed name Mr Yatabe. Further it is also revealed that he is a member of the dissident Abwehr faction; the German military intelligence service for the Reichswehr (authorized name of the German armed forces from 1919 to 1935) and Wehrmacht which in fact actually existed and unlike the Gestapo wasn't that motivated to the Nazi cause or even ideology. What is shocking however is the fact that he is a Jew, which is revealed in the context of his conversation with a young German Artist Alex Lotze while travelling from Tempelhof in the Greater German Reich to San Francisco in the Pacific States. Now, again one thing that is however to be kept in mind is that, Dick doesn't actually clarify anywhere in the text as to the truth as of Mr. Baynes identity explicitly or directly. Is he actually Jewish or is merely saying these in order to settle scores with the young German remains a mystery. Apart from Frank, and Baynes even the Italian truck driver, Joe Cinadella, with whom Juliana develops an abrupt sexual affair is in fact in reality not a truck driver from the East as he claims but rather a Nazi assassin. Juliana was not simply pleased with his made up stories, neither was she convinced he was a truck driver for sure, in this context she reflects further:

His account simply did not convince her. Perhaps he had not been in North Africa at all, had not even fought in the war on the Axis side, had not even fought. What hijackers? She wondered. No truck that she knew of had come through Canon City from the East Coast with an armed professional ex-soldier as guard. Maybe he had not even lived in the U.S.A., had made everything up from the start; a line to snare her, to get her interested, to appear romantic. (Dick 123)

Now, why was Joe interested in Juliana? Why did he try to show some interest in her? Did he actually like her? Now apart from these questions, one thing that Juliana failed to notice however is, Joe's understanding about the war, his awareness about Lieutenant-Colonel Haselden, referred to earlier by him who was in fact an actual real-life British officer, initially posted to the "Libyan Arab Force, from July 13th, 1940, later on even



served on the GR Staff Middle East, specializing in commando operations. Subsequently he was named Western Desert Liaison Officer at 8th Army HQ, working closely together with the Long Range Desert Group” as mentioned by Joe, when he narrated his scuffle with the colonel and four of his LRDG mates. (Boliijn) Later on however, it is revealed that, in reality, Joe is an assassin, a Nazi of course, who is sent to eliminate the author Hawthorne Abendsen, the ‘man’ in the High Castle himself, who in fact, is quite paradoxically not living in any kind of castle and is neither the creative genius he is supposed to present himself as. And he chooses Juliana, as a cover, in order to get to Abendsen.

The legitimacy of his second story in the context of the Afrika Korps, and his encounters with Lieutenant-Colonel John Edward Haselden and his Long Range Desert Group, is quite ambiguous. Dick never discloses and reveals things as they are; rather he prefers building up his plot around mystical and ambiguous elements assorted up with real-life characters. He skilfully manages to blend facts with fiction in order to create a narrative that questions the very way history is recorded; flushing out the historical possibilities and the chroniclers’ biases from the context, which in fact is a pretty dogmatic and insular approach. What Dick presents before the readers is a captivating plot that makes readers think twice about what is real and what is not? And he does so by introducing a complex plot structure and reducing factual information’s to a bare minimum thereby giving the characters a depth and multiplicity as well as allowing many varied interpretations of reality that are not blatantly obvious.

### **Conclusion**

In an effort to look for the signification of the complex and contradictory meanings within the text, this paper concludes that in the nature of our existence, things are always in a dichotomy, i.e. they are either real or unreal. However, as evident from the text, it is quite difficult to judge which is what. All the different possibilities, scenarios, and even characters for that matter posit a diverse set of realities, or one can say different shades of reality, whereby each possibility is somewhat of a different shade, neither completely similar nor dissimilar to the other but just a different version of it. That is to say, things are in a continuum, “in a continuous sequence in which adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other but at the same time the extremes are quite distinct.” (Hyman) Be it Baynes, Frank, or even Joe, we can’t understand them wholly, what we get instead are different shades of their true-self.

Consequently, it can be said that in his novel Dick tries to present a different kind of possibility rather than serving the same- old stereotyped vision of man’s infatuation with discovering the ultimate reality or truth. He dares to say reality is nothing but a relative term which varies from place to place, context to context, and person to person, as evident from his representation and reinterpretation of some of the major turning points in history and their not- so-obvious outcomes.

**References:**

Badiou, Alain, et al. *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

Bolijn, Lennard. "Haselden, John Edward 'Jock' Biography." *Haselden, John Edward "Jock" - Tracesofwar.com*, Traces Of War, <https://www.tracesofwar.com/persons/45647/Haselden-John-Edward-Jock.htm>.

Campbell, Laura E. "Dickian Time in The Man in the High Castle." *Extrapolation*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1992, pp. 190–201., <https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.1992.33.3.190>.

Daněk, Šimon. "Alternate History Novels - Comparison of Harris's Fatherland and Dick's The Man in a High Castle." *Charles University Digital Repository*, Charles University, [https://dspace.cuni.cz/bitstream/handle/20.500.11956/1817/BPTX\\_2014\\_1\\_11410\\_0\\_386882\\_0\\_158568.pdf?sequence=1](https://dspace.cuni.cz/bitstream/handle/20.500.11956/1817/BPTX_2014_1_11410_0_386882_0_158568.pdf?sequence=1).

Dick, Philip K., and Eric Brown. *The Man in the High Castle*. Penguin Books, 2017.

Hyman, Carol. "Agree to Disagree: Politics and Mindful Leadership." *Institute for Mindful Leadership*, 3 Apr. 2017, [instituteformindfulleadership.org/agree-to-disagree](http://instituteformindfulleadership.org/agree-to-disagree).

Kendall, Peter. "The Shooting of Anton Cermak." *Chicagotribune.com*, Chicago Tribune, 14 May 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/nation-world/chi-chicagodays-cermak-story-story.html>.

Warrick, Patricia S. *Mind in Motion: The Fiction of Philip K. Dick*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.