

## PRESENCE MACHINES:

Philip K. Dick's Roman Empire and "The Imaginary 20th Century"

A suspicion that the Roman Empire is still under construction arises in me while visiting Orange County's largest shopping mall, South Coast Plaza.

I stop at Orange County Museum of Art's satellite gallery, the Orange Lounge, in the Plaza to experience "The Imaginary 20th Century." It is an interactive science fiction novel that includes a database of more than 2,000 images amassed from various archives. The story focuses on the adventures of a woman who, in the year 1901, selects four suitors to seduce her, each with their own vision for the new century.

Inside a black-box gallery at the rear of the lounge, I stand at a pedestal and use a white mouse to navigate the database of images that are projected on the opposite wall, while a disembodied voice reads aloud from a selected chapter. The main character,

a progressive-thinking woman, touches on many social issues such as women suffrage. They would not be given the vote nationally in the U.S. until 1920, 19 years into her future.

The architectonics in the future makes an impression on me too. Their aesthetic consists mainly of a plethora of steel frames. This was a technique that would allow buildings to surpass the limits of load-bearing masonry and become skyscrapers, as we would come to know them after 1901. The limitations of an imagined future are portrayed in these late 19th-century images, as they are based on the knowledge of what was then present.

My interpretation of "The Imaginary 20th Century's" engineering images, along with the experience of viewing it in a mall within OC, resurrects in my mind the writings of famed sci-fi author Philip K. Dick. He moved to Fullerton in 1972. What manner of architecture surrounded Dick in OC when he died in 1982 from a heart-attack?

I leave South Coast Plaza and drive a few miles north to what I believe is his old condo building on Civic Center Drive. The building is what I would describe as quintessential

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California-Le Corbusier: stucco exterior, stacked floors, and a density of units.

The building's oblong stockiness reminds me of an experience that I had in Fresno two weeks earlier on 2-25-08. One evening I drove around the city and ended up at River Park Shopping Center. It was replete with Borders, Starbucks, Anne Taylor Loft, and most of the box stores that



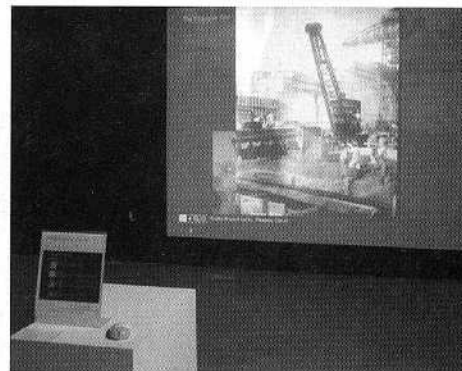
STILL GOING: A view of ruins from ancient Rome

form shopping islands throughout the western desert. Suddenly I was struck by an uncanny feeling while I navigated the open-air walkways. Had I ever left OC?

The familiarity of the stores, and their specific organization into an old-fashioned city-block shopping experience, like The Grove in Los Angeles or Victoria Gardens in Rancho Cucamonga, disconnected me from Fresno. For a few moments I could not recall that I had driven four hours north. I was in Fresno and Orange County simultaneously. But it was not in the sense of a double body, like one of Dick's stories, where the human and his android look-alike live separately. Rather, it was more like recognizing stasis, as if I had been born indeed, but had never moved out of my New Orleans hospital crib.

A current resident of Dick's old stucco condo building exits, walks across the street, and enters Saint Joseph Church. The security gate is left ajar. I walk into the inner cement courtyard, which is dreary. I can only guess which condo was PKD's.

I stand here for a bit trying to imagine what Dick would refer to as his 2-3-74 experience; 24 years after my own 2-25-08 experience in



IMAGINE: installation at Orange Lounge at South Coast Plaza

Fresno. Dick's story, as he has written about it, said that a girl delivering pain medication from a dentist was wearing a gold ichthys, the Christian emblem of two intersecting arcs that form the profile of a fish. Dick claimed that the symbol's impact on his mind, perhaps enhanced by his constant drug use, was anamnesis, that is, the lifting of amnesia, allowing him to see the world as it really was.

After this revelation, he believed that the progress of history stopped in the first century A.D., and that the Roman Empire never ended. For him, the empire represented the extreme view of a materialistic and unspiritual world. The result was that the world's population was enslaved by its possessions, along with other assorted emotional ailments.

Dick's cosmogony was akin to Gnosticism, a belief system that teaches that humans are souls trapped in a material world created by a defective spirit. However, the soul may be returned to the divine realm through a process of awakening. And God would gain complete knowledge again only after all humans achieved salvation, meaning a release from their pursuit of worldly goods — thus, the end of the Roman Empire.

My experience at South Coast Plaza perusing the images presented in "The Imaginary 20th Century" reminded me that no matter how hard people try, their ideas of the future tend to be situated in the present. And they may try in a manner like the Roman Empire's prophetic and psychic reach through the centuries, when they opt for the architectural bliss and false security of hyperreal stucco, shopping islands. I realize also, that when I was in Fresno, I grasped for a moment that the ancient, load-bearing masonry of an empire stretching from Italy to Britain and Germany to North Africa and the Persian Gulf is still being built. ■

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