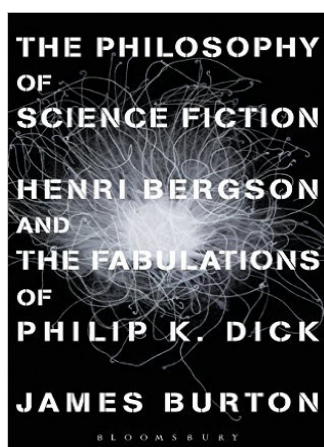




A Book Review: James Burton – *The Philosophy of Science Fiction. Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick.*

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James Burton: *The Philosophy of Science Fiction. Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick.* London: BLOOMSBURY, 2015. ISBN 978-1-47422-766-7.

There are many ways we can try to change the world through writing. For one thing, one might try to categorize natural and cultural phenomena by using the tools offered by philosophy. Another way is to write a story that affects the reader's minds and, thus, expands our knowledge of the world by creating stories of possible and impossible worlds. Moreover, a literature scholar may study how written expressions (fictional or scientific) explain the world and human behaviour. All of these ways are somehow present in James Burton's book *The Philosophy of Science Fiction. Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick*, published in 2015.

The book is constructed of many layers; each offering us insight into the writing (and of course thinking) processes behind science fiction stories. However, as Burton focuses merely in Philip K. Dick's literary production, the book is not (and is not supposed to be) an attempt to map the whole field of science fiction. Still, the fact that Burton studies a single author's writings, gives room to study not only literature but also Henri Bergson's philosophical theories. Burton nevertheless does not limit his analysis solely to Bergson and Dick, but reflects on the ideas of contemporary philosophers, such as Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze, as well.

Burton starts the first chapter by looking at Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). In this book Bergson defines fabulation as something that might save humanity from the mechanization of the modern era. The survival of humanity in the midst of vast and quick technological developments (and the urban environment that the human race lives in) is an issue that has, indeed, inspired many science fiction writers, as well, especially Philip K. Dick. Burton uses the term fabulation not referring to fabula and syuzhet know from the Russian formalists but to any act of fictionalizing. As he marks in the introduction part, fabulation could be translated as "the wisdom of mythopoetic love". He makes an interesting point here: stories reflect the way the

storytellers view the world they are living in. In other words, stories generate our individual and cultural knowledge in a narrative form. This is the knowledge that Burton is trying to get his hands on through the term of fabulation; generating ideas into the form of a story. From Bergson Burton continues to the reading of Dick's early novels: *Solar Lottery* (1955), *The World Jones Made* (1956), *Vulcan's Hammer* (1960), and *Time Out of Joint* (1959). His other objects of study from Dick's extensive body of work are *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), *Galactic Pot-Healer* (1969), *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), and obviously *Valis* (1981), which I do not think could be bypassed when talking of Dick, the experience of reality and philosophy together.

Why, then, mix science fiction and philosophy? One might say that science fiction is merely fiction, but as most science fiction fans know, the genre's stories are splendid in studying contemporary problems and issues, distancing them by situating them in other time, other dimensions and other possible worlds. Hence, in many ways, science fiction is a literary form that explores philosophical questions and, in many cases, tries to solve them – or at least bring something new to the discourse. This is how Burton justifies his choice of reading philosophy and literature side by side.

One cannot deny that Burton's book is ambitious. At first it feels like the author is trying to combine two quite different worlds together by force, but after the first part, filled with theory, the two worlds of the book start to harmonize. If the beginning is more about the theory of philosophy, the last part of the book focuses in analysing Philip K. Dick's stories. The theoretical framework continues to be utilized in the reading of Dick's fiction, but mostly the discussion with Bergson and the reading of Dick are differentiated into separate chapters. This way they both get their own space, which I find a practical decision – but this also makes the two parts of the book a bit uneven. Could there have been a way to construct the book more as a choir of two voices as now it resembles a duet where Dick and Bergson have their say in turns?

I consider Philip K. Dick an excellent choice to be studied with the terminology of philosophy, as it is common for his stories to explore the fine line between the real and the unreal. Burton's choice for the theoretical or philosophical framework of his study, Henri Bergson, is a good one, as well. According to Bergson, rationalistic thinking was not a good tool for understand our reality. Rather, he preferred intuition. This creates a connection between Dick and Bergson: they both refuse to make a clear separation between materialism and spiritualism, immanence and transcendence.

At times Burton's book might be a bit heavy to read because it requires the reader to have some kind of knowledge of the developments in the field of philosophy within the past hundred years or so. However, some readers might enjoy the way that Burton tickles the educated mind through his conversations with Bergson's philosophy. Others, on the contrary, may find the analysis of Dick's novels more intriguing. All in all, through the use of an ample amount of research materials, Burton succeeds to establish that science fiction can certainly be read as philosophy in a fabulated form.