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From a Botched Body without Organs to a Plastic Brain A Reading of P.K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*

Abstract

This article analyzes the 1977 science-fiction novel *A Scanner Darkly* by Philip K. Dick, and focuses on the split personalities of the main character: Bob/Fred/Bruce. The reading is supplemented by the use of the concepts of Line of Flight and Body without Organs introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* as well as Catherine Malabou's concept of brain plasticity. The article argues that the progressing deterioration of the protagonist's mental state caused by drug abuse and social environment may be seen as a representation of a "botched BwO" – a body that has lost its productive potential and cannot be reintegrated into a stable territory. At the same time, I contend that the final chapter of the novel depicts a reparative transformation in which, thanks to brain plasticity, he is integrated into an autopoietic system of his environment.

Keywords: Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly*, twentieth century science fiction, posthumanism, body without organs, brain plasticity

Introduction

In the post-script of his 1977 novel *A Scanner Darkly*, ostensibly a science-fiction story, Philip K. Dick openly admits that the work is a thinly veiled autobiographical account of the American drug users' culture and their antagonistic relationship with law enforcement. Much of the experiences described in *A Scanner Darkly* are based either on his own struggles with addiction or the events he witnessed in his community. Equally prominent to the depictions of the destructive consequences of drug dependence is the underlying feeling of paranoia and cognitive confusion stemming from the unstable ontology of the world dominated by oppressive and constant surveillance. The science-fiction elements serve to emphasize the themes of the novel by intensifying certain aspects of the drug culture presented in the novel. The fictional narcotic "substance D" combines the destructive potentials of various real amphetamines and opiates, while through the invention of the scramble suits and holographic scanners Dick extrapolates the



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technologies of surveillance employed by the state. The aim of this article is to analyze how the narrative of Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* depicts a variety of fragmentation of the human subject through intense movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization brought upon by those social and bio-chemical factors, and the subsequent formation of a posthuman autopoietic system as a form of prosthesis. The reading will make use of the concepts introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* as well as the idea of brain plasticity as presented by Catherine Malabou.

An Outline of Concepts

BwO and Movements of Deterritorialization

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* duology introduce the term “Body without Organs.” Such a construct is free to recreate itself and enter a new set of relations – to reorganize its organs into new assemblages. A schizophrenic represents a subjectivity in flux, produced by capitalism but capable of escaping the confines of bourgeois reality through the process named by the philosophers “deterritorialization.” As Adrian Parr puts it, “deterritorialisation can best be understood as a movement producing change... [D]eterritorialisation indicates the creative potential of an assemblage. So, to deterritorialise is to free up the fixed relations that contain a body all the while exposing it to new organisations” (67). A Body without Organs is a kind of transitory state between territories, wherein an organism is able to detach the capacities of its subordinate “machines” or organs (understood here for example as patterns of behavior, desires, codes of conduct) from the limitation of the functions, organizations and hierarchies imposed on the organism by the rules of a given territory. As Daniel Smith explains:

The body without organs is supposed to designate all of those things that an organic body could do, but that it is prevented from doing because of its homeostatic self-regulation processes. The body without organs is the full set of capacities or potentialities of a body prior to its being given the structure of an organism, which only limits and constrains what it can do: it is “what remains when you take everything away.” (106–107)

Therefore, an organism has a certain inherent potential to reinvent itself, to leave behind the stable structures and configurations of their organs. By casting off the former productive function the BwO can experiment and rearrange its organs to settle into a different territory, to create something new out of itself.

Next, Deleuze and Guattari introduce a model of reality based on the idea of a rhizome. In simplified terms, it is a non-hierarchical network of dynamic assemblages (relationships between objects, units of information or language) expanding unpredictably in many directions. This conception of reality is based on multiplicity and heterogeneity, since, as the authors argue, “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order” (*Plateaus* 7). In such a configuration no meaning is static, allowing signs, objects and subjects (as the previously mentioned Bodies without Organs) to flow freely through modes of deterritorialization. “Lines of flight” are those trajectories which allow for movements of total deconstruction or deterritorialization of the subject into a BwO. These are the paths of unrestrained creativity but also of detachment from any concrete points of reference for the subject.

Brain Plasticity

Catherine Malabou is a French philosopher who undertakes an interdisciplinary approach to the posthuman condition, combining the areas of biology, neurology and critical theory to propose an ontological model of what she calls “brain plasticity.” At the core of her theory there is the assessment that the model of a unitary human subject, whose identity remains constant, is false. Malabou goes against the claims of a “flexible brain,” that is a supposed construction of subjectivity which can return to its original organization by rebuilding itself following psychological or physical trauma or injury. Marc Jeannerod explains in the foreword to Malabou’s *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*: “plasticity is a mechanism for adapting, while flexibility is a mechanism for submitting” (xiv). What Jeannerod means is that the societal pressure under capitalism expects its subjects to undergo repeating cycles of mental strain without changing, so that the subject can be continuously exploited for their productive capacities. However, as Malabou states: “What flexibility lacks is the resource of giving form, the power to create, to invent or even erase an impression” (*What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 12). In contrast, plasticity has the capacity of “the modification of neuronal connection by means of modulation of synaptic efficacy... [I]t is at this level that plasticity imposes itself with the greatest clarity and force in ‘opening’ its meaning. In effect, there is a sort of neuronal creativity that depends on nothing but the individual’s experience, his life, and his interactions with the surroundings” (*What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 21–22). A plastic brain is therefore constantly changing and adapting to its interactions with the environment, circumstances and the subject’s own physicality. Plasticity allows the nervous system to make new connections, and to compensate for the damage not by the way of recreation but creativity. If the subject’s sense of self, their personality, is destroyed by the outside forces, chemical imbalance or severe trauma, plasticity offers a prospect for a new subjectivity to emerge.

Throughout this article both the Deleuzoguattarian framework as well as Malabou’s concept of brain plasticity will serve to uncover the complex transformations of subjectivity experienced by the characters of *A Scanner Darkly*.

Scramble Suit – Dismantling the Face

While the novel is heavily grounded in the realities of L.A.’s sixties’ and seventies’ drug culture, Dick opts to move the action into the near future and employs several science-fictional technologies, the most prominent of which is the invention of “the scramble suit”. It is a microelectronic membrane covering the entire body which displays on its surface “a million and a half physiognomic fraction representations of various people” (30) in a randomized sequence. The ultimate effect is that by projecting onto the body discontinuous, rapidly changing fragments of people’s faces and physiques, with the addition of a voice-altering device, the wearer becomes virtually anonymous. To any person perceiving them, they appear only as “a vague blur” (28). The device is utilized by the undercover narcotics agents from the Orange County Sheriff’s Department as a way of hiding their identity not only from the drug users, but also from the corrupted officials and drug traffickers who have apparently infiltrated the law enforcement.

The protagonist of the novel, Bob Arctor, is one such agent. On a day-to-day basis he lives as a jobless junkie, addicted to substance D. Once in a while, however, he hides himself inside the scramble suit and assumes the persona of Fred. As Fred, a narcotics agent, he informs and spies on Bob Arctor’s house, where scanning devices have been installed. Fred’s task is to survey and document the drug-users’ habitation in order to discover potential dealers. Absurdly, he is also required to snitch on Arctor – himself – since omitting his name would expose Fred’s identity to the corrupt agents within the Sheriff’s department. The scramble suit is therefore both a cause for

and a product of social paranoia. On the one hand, it provides anonymity to the agents of the state, thus creating distrust among the drug-users since anyone of them can be a potential “narc.” On the other, the narcotics agents fear that criminals may discover their identities.

It can be argued that the scramble suit and the broader state apparatus which utilizes it enact what Deleuze and Guattari would call a social and technical machine: a productive order which attempts to impose itself on the subject to keep it from achieving a Body without Organs. They condition and organize the subject to channel their creative force toward the production of capital. The philosophers use the example of a clock, which from different perspectives can function either as a technical machine, a simple tool for measuring time, or “as a social machine for reproducing canonic hours and for assuring order in the city” (*Anti-Oedipus* 141). The technical function of the novel’s imagined device is to anonymize the individual. As a social machine, it works to enforce order by producing a sense of surveillance. However, as we shall see, there also exists a potential for decoding and dismantling the identity of the wearer. This tension realizes itself as a deterritorializing force which in the Deleuzoguattarian framework is called “a line of flight”. It is a vector of movement between the nodes of an assemblage which enables a deterritorialization of a productive subject into a Body without Organs. As the authors claim in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change nature and connect with other multiplicities.... The line of flight marks: the reality of a finite number of dimensions that the multiplicity effectively fills; the impossibility of a supplementary dimension, unless the multiplicity is transformed by the line of flight. (9)

Multiplicities, diverse complex structures not subordinate to a dominant signifier or a prior unity (Parr 176; Young 213), have the ability to transform by following a line of flight, outside of the limited scope of a rigid social structure. This line creates new possibilities for the multiplicity, which are not constrained by a single territory. Once the organization of a multiplicity is dismantled, the restrictions of the previous territory are lifted. The body can conceptualize itself into a new multiplicity – reterritorialize and once again organize its organs to function in a productive process. In *A Scanner Darkly*, the anonymity and the morphing projections of multiple physiognomies granted by the scramble suit can be seen as a facilitation of that deterritorializing potential. The scramble suit – a machine that is designed as a tool of control becomes a potential site or catalyst of deterritorialization which, after all, is a movement away from authoritarian control over the individual.

In the novel, we can witness that moment of rupture in the organized body of the protagonist that releases the accumulated potentialities into a line of flight. In an instance of social anxiety, Bob desires to fall back to his Fred persona and starts to consider different alternative identities offered by the scramble suit:

What am I actually? he asked himself. He wished, momentarily, for his scramble suit. Then, he thought, I could go on being a vague blur and passers-by, street people in general, would applaud.... It could be somebody other than Fred inside, or another Fred, and they’d never know, not even when Fred opened his mouth and talked. They wouldn’t really know then. They’d never know. It could be AI pretending to be Fred, for example. It could be anyone in there, it could even be empty. (28)

Bob notices the deterritorializing potential of the scramble suit. He begins to understand that for an external observer the identity of the person behind the scramble suit is intrinsically undefinable, which feeds the possibility of a transformation, or a rearrangement of the self for the wearer. The line of flight which springs forth from the assemblage of technologically mediated anonymity can be articulated as a subject’s realization of his own capacity for making himself a Body without Organs. If this shift of perspective, or even an identification of a possible fluidity of identities can

be indeed called a line of flight, then the anonymity (and its consequences for the construction of identity) offered by the scramble suit would be a kind of line of flight located between the territories of the “straight” society, and the drug-users commune. The protagonist of the novel traverses this path each time he switches between the personas of Fred and Bob.

If the above is true, then it must also be concluded that the deconstruction of visibility as the marker of stable identity that serves as the basis for the scramble suit’s function is also indicative of the device’s role in destabilizing any concept of essentialist identity. The idea of dismantling the stability of facial features as a marker of stable identity is central to the acts of becoming sketched out by Deleuze and Guattari. They argue that “the face itself is redundancy... The face constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of” (*Plateaus* 168). This function of the face is to individualize; the face is what *makes* the subject. For D&G, the indeterminate potentiality of the body is constrained, weighted down by the linguistic signification that the listener/observer chooses to apply to the expressions, facial features and the overall physiognomy of their interlocutor. If an identity is legitimized by its performance and societal perception, then obscuring or getting rid of faciality may liberate the subject from the calcified lines of the former territory. To rid oneself of the face is therefore to renounce signification, or in D&G’s words: “If the face is a politics, dismantling the face is also politics involving real becomings, an entire becoming-clandestine. Dismantling the face is the same as breaking the wall of signifier and getting out of the black hole of subjectivity” (*Plateaus* 188).

What Bob/Fred experiences whenever he assumes one or the other persona is a series of movements between social frameworks, or territories. Each of them organizes the BwO into different sets of desires and ethics. He becomes a “schizo” in the Deleuzian sense, one who “carries along the decoded flows, makes them traverse the desert of the body without organs, where he installs his desiring-machines and produces a perpetual outflow of acting forces” (*Anti-Oedipus* 131). Bob and Fred are schizoid in that they are endowed with discrepant productive capacities. The two of them, physically different only in that one of them dons the scramble suit, are molecules in two assemblages, with distinct desires and traversing different territories.

However, as with all configurations considered by schizoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari warn that: “[d]ismantling the face is no mean affair. Madness is definite danger: Is it by chance that schizos lose their sense of the face, their own and others’... , the sense of language and its dominant significations all at the same time?” (*Plateaus* 188). As we shall see, this threat proves true for Bob/Fred. The signifying link between Fred and Bob weakens, as does the connection between Arctor and humanity as a whole. Jennifer Rhee, referring to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, claims that the scramble suit’s alienating qualities also lead to a detachment from the sphere of ethics: “Fred is deprived of face... De-faced, Fred is excluded from participating in the face-to-face encounter and thus not given entry into the intersubjective relation...” (138). By removing himself from the system of signification, Fred/Bob also inhibits his ability to form connections with other people. He becomes paralyzed, helpless to take any action or communicate his circumstances, since he is trapped between two frameworks of signs and ethics: that of a member of a commune, and that of a narcotics agent. The anonymity – the denial of a face – inhibits empathy and any sense of belonging, making him emotionally detached. The association between Fred/Bob’s autobiographical consciousness and identity diminishes. The process is additionally intensified by the effects of substance D (which will be scrutinized in the next section). In short, the scramble suit puts Fred/Bob in a situation in which he lacks the means to recognize his own reflection in a mirror. The dangerous experiments with identity undertaken by him may prove to resolve in the annihilation of selfhood.

Destruction of the *Self* – Failed BwO

As the plot of the novel progresses, so does the mental instability of Bob Arctor. In his desperate, drug-fueled struggle to operate between two territories, his personality splits. Shifting back and forth in a nervous movement between emulating two incomparable modes traps Bob/Fred in a limbo outside of social structures. The narration unveils how the protagonist sees himself in different positions at the same time: “To himself, Bob Arctor thought, *How many Bob Arctors are there?* ... Two that I can think of, he thought. The one called Fred, who will be watching the other one, called Bob. The same person. Or is it? Is Fred actually the same as Bob? ... *But*, he thought, *who am I? Which of them is me?*” (99). Fred/Bob falls into an existential crisis when he stops entirely to recognize the other persona as himself.

A major component of this confusion comes from the overwhelming tension between identities imposed on the subject. In the Deleuzian framework, to escape such a productive force one must make themselves a Body without Organs and experiment with fluid configurations of assemblages. However, Bob/Fred seeks the means for this maneuver in a hallucinogenic drug: substance D. At first, Bob excuses his growing addiction by rationalizing it as a way for a narcotics agent to blend into the commune. Later, the act of consuming the substance becomes a coping mechanism against the looming realization of his neurological damage. He claims: “I know, if I just had another hit, that my brain would repair itself” (67). Bob is already dealing with a mental crisis of identities. The drug adds to that a disturbance in the perception of reality, overriding outside stimuli with mental projections. At various points in the novel he experiences olfactory hallucinations overpowering his cognizance in a moment of stress, seemingly isolating him from the reality of the situation; the drug disturbs passage of time and it inhibits his rational faculties. All these psychological phenomena, compounded with Bob/Fred personality split, are revealed to be effects of the drug wreaking havoc on the protagonist’s brain. During a check-up, a medical deputy diagnoses Fred with neurological damage:

In many of those taking Substance D, a split between the right hemisphere and the left hemisphere of the brain occurs. There is a loss of proper gestalting, which is a defect within both the percept and cognitive systems, although *apparently* the cognitive system continues to function normally ... It’s a toxic brain psychosis affecting the percept system by splitting it. (115)

If the effects of the drug are so severe, then what, aside from chemical dependency, pushes Bob further down the spiral of addiction and schizophrenia? While Dick constructs this phenomenon based on a 1968 neurological study¹, if we approach this diagnosis through the Deleuzoguattarian framework, it can be seen as the effects of “a botched BwO.”

In his attempt to produce a Body without Organs, Bob/Fred fails at what Deleuze and Guattari point to be “a very delicate experimentation since there must not be any stagnation of the modes or slippage in type: the masochist and the drug user court these ever present dangers that empty their BwO’s instead of filling them” (*Plateaus* 152). Firstly, in the case of the protagonist of *A Scanner Darkly* this “stagnating mode” of being as a BwO is the deadly drive towards escapism into a hallucinatory state. However, while the addict strives to disengage from the order of production imposed by society, he does not realize that he is immediately pulled back into it by the process of signification as the mold of shunned drug user. Those repeated attempts are stagnant in that they do not get him any further from the state machine, while the body and mind deteriorate.

¹ Bogen, Joseph E. “The other side of the brain: An appositional mind.” *Bulletin of the Los Angeles Neurological Society* 34 (1968): 135–162.

The combination of drug abuse and juggling identities dislodges the trajectory from a single line of flight and into a state of limbo. As D&G warn: “If you free [BwO] with too violent an action, if you blow apart the strata without taking precautions, then instead of drawing the plane you will be killed, plunged into a black hole, or even dragged toward catastrophe” (*Plateaus* 161). If a “filled” BwO is one that transforms its organs along a controlled, deliberate trajectory, or line of flight, then an empty BwO has wasted its transformative energy and cannot resist outside signifying forces, and is essentially “drifting” between territories until it falls into the gravity well of the dominant territory.

The black scenario presented here is what Bob/Fred experiences when he is torn asunder between two states of being, and thus throws himself into the unreality governed only by intensities of his desires. The most prominent instance of such a collapse of subjective reality can be distinguished in the moment of the novel when Fred, at that point already dissociated from Bob, reviews the holographic projection of a surveillance recording taken in Bob’s bedroom. Earlier, a fellow drug user, Donna, had rejected Bob’s sexual advances. To console himself, Bob slept with another junkie, Connie. When Fred watches the intercourse captured by the scanners, he notices that Connie’s face is replaced with Donna’s. Believing he imagined the anomaly, he rewinds the tape, only to discover that Donna’s likeness is apparently grafted onto the recording. Fred experiences a hallucination so strong that it becomes implanted onto the physical reality distorting the digital information. Interestingly, the ontological confusion is mediated or even amplified by technology. Fred utilizes the scanner as a prosthesis to validate his hallucinatory perception. In combination with his scanner, he inadvertently makes himself, a schizoid machine through which desire produces a reality.

At first glance, this could be considered a successful creation of a Body without Organs and its subsequent reterritorialization, through “a schizophrenic experience of intensive qualities in their pure states.... These are often described as hallucination or delirium” (*Anti-Oedipus* 18). In their reinterpretation of Judge Schreber’s account,² Deleuze and Guattari argue that

Delirium and hallucination are secondary in relation to the really primary emotion, which in the beginning only experiences intensities, becomings, transitions. Where do these pure intensities come from? They come from two preceding forces, repulsion and attraction, and from the opposition of these two forces.... Further, if we are to believe Judge Schreber’s doctrine, *attraction and repulsion* produce intense *nervous states* that fill up the body without organs to varying degrees... following an endless circle of eternal return (*Anti-Oedipus* 18–19).

Since the present persona, Fred, is disconnected from Bob, so are his desires and emotions. Because of that, the hallucination does not become a positive force. The preceding forces, which are supposed to initiate the flight, are divided between two subjects. Therefore the BwO becomes “empty”, that is, it loses the ability to reconfigure its organs back to any productive functions. Or, as Eugene B. Young defines it, it is “a poorly constructed BwO, or failed experiment, whose flows or intensities are interrupted, blocked, or stratified, and thus do not produce anything” (56). With no clear vector of escape, Bob/Fred is left with an impotent intensity. The accumulated

² Deleuze and Guattari analyze the famous personal account of schizophrenia of a German judge, Daniel Paul Schreber, previously interpreted by Sigmund Freud, as a way of critiquing Freudian psychoanalysis. Deleuze and Guattari find Freud’s concepts such as oedipal complex as reactionary and reductive. They deem that the modern configurations of the human psyche cannot be adequately expressed as merely a culmination of libidinal and traumatic drives. As they claim, Freud “doesn’t like schizophrenics. He doesn’t like their resistance to being oedipalized” (*Anti-Oedipus* 23). They point out, on the basis on the case of dr Schreber, that Freud ignores the aspects of divergent mental states which do not fit his psychoanalytical model.

energies cannot be transferred into an appropriate line of flight since Fred does not recognize Bob's desire emerging from the latter's mind, bringing to the former only shock and confusion. In a violent movement, the protagonist is flung away from any coherent territory allowing the holographic/hallucinogenic vision of Donna to usurp his reality as a sort of interference, cross-wiring of two identities which overloads the system. The BwO cannot reterritorialize, to reform a coherent organism. The hallucination confirms that Bob/Fred is permanently stuck between two incongruous assemblages. The desiring functions of organs of one seep into the other, at which point their interaction with reality breaks down. The intensities dissipate transforming a potential BwO into the empty BwO of a drug user.

Arctor's experimentation with drugs and identities eventually leads to brain-tissue necrosis. According to the medical deputies, the damage in his left hemisphere causes the right one to attempt to compensate for the impairment. This compensation can be seen as the beginning of a process of repair that will be analyzed in the next section. However, because the brain is not adjusted to that change, Bob/Fred perceives "the world as reflected in a mirror... *pulled through infinity*" (170). Fred finally realizes the extent of his mental deterioration through that metaphor: "that reflection that returns to you: it is you, it is your face, but it isn't... I have seen myself backward" (170). The catastrophic disconnection of identities is complete, to the point where Bob/Fred cannot identify his autobiographical self even without the barrier of a scramble suit. When the identities of both personas collapse, Arctor, in a final desperate act seeks help in an addiction treatment facility called the New Path, where he is given yet another name: Bruce.

Bruce – the Prosthesis/Reflex Machine

Desperate to recover, Arctor is brought by Donna to the New Path drug rehabilitation clinic. There, under a regime of physical strain and psychological abuse the protagonist transforms for a final time into Bruce. This is where the reader is met with two revelations. First, New Path is a cover for a criminal organization manufacturing substance D and the patients are brain-washed into becoming mindless slaves working on producing the drug. Second, Donna is secretly a federal narcotics agent who deliberately primes and sends Arctor to retrieve evidence of New Path's criminal role.

When cautioning against the danger of botching a BwO, Deleuze and Guattari note that "[s]taying stratified – organized, signified, subjected – is not the worst that can happen: the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which brings them back on us heavier than ever" (*Plateaus* 161). This danger – the violent return of organizing forces – is realized at the end of the novel. On one side, the machine of capitalism reabsorbs the empty BwO that used to be Bob Arctor. He is reintroduced into the same productive territory that caused his destructive deterritorialization – Bruce is now making the drug that created him. On the other side, the state apparatus that initiated Bob's/Fred's confusion of identities now capitalizes on his damaged body to extend its scope of surveillance. During a short fragment when the narration moves away from Arctor's point of view, the reader gets a glimpse at the thought process of another narcotic's agent, Mike:

Substance D, like heroin, was organic. Not the product of a lab. So he meant quite a bit when he thought, as he frequently did, that all those profits could well keep New Path solvent – *and growing*. The living, he thought, should never be used to serve the purposes of the dead. But the dead – he glanced at Bruce, the empty shape beside him – should, if possible, serve the purposes of the living... The dead, Mike thought... they are our camera. (266)

Arctor – Bruce – is reified into the state apparatus as a camera, a scanner. The reprogramming suffered at New Path assimilates him into a recorder. This quality is emphasized by the fact that Bruce suffers echolalia: he automatically repeats whatever is said to him. Emptied from his potential intensities, he is instrumentalized as a reflexive organ, stripped of agency, prior personality. In the words of David Murakami Wood, “this is the organ without a body rather than the body without organs. Fred/Bob/Bruce has become by this stage in his view, not exactly a machine, not exactly a human, but only the mechanical watching components of a human being” (51). Any other organs – the protagonist’s mental capacities to return to full consciousness, to reterritorialize on his own terms – are obliterated. However, there is still hope. The destruction is not final. A trace of the transformative potential still remains in the form of a biological prosthesis. Bruce’s brain can be framed as an autopoietic system which rebuilds itself, circumventing the ruination.

The realization of that potential may be seen in the final chapter of the novel, when Bruce is sent to a farm to tend to the New Path’s crops. The mental conditioning applied in the facility is supposed to put an epistemological block, preventing the workers from perceiving the actual crops: little blue flowers, *mors ontologica* – the organic source of substance D. However, for just a moment Bruce overcomes that cognitive barrier, whereupon the New Path’s director covers his eyes:

“You’re seeing the flower of the future,” Donald, the Executive Director of New Path, said. “But not for you.”

“Why not for me?” Bruce said.

“You’ve had too much of a good thing already,” the Executive Director said. He chuckled.

“...A transcendent vision, is that what you see growing here? You look as if it is.” He tapped Bruce firmly on the shoulder, and then, reaching down his hand, he cut the sight off from the frozen eyes.

“Gone,” Bruce said. “Flowers of spring gone.”

“No, you simply can’t see them. That’s a philosophical problem you wouldn’t comprehend. Epistemology – the theory of knowledge.”

Bruce saw only the flat of Donald’s hand barring the light, and he stared at it a thousand years. (284)

This scene may be read as an illustration of a complex process wherein a body with greatly diminished, if not completely destroyed, self-reflexive capacities becomes reorganized as an instrument of perception for a broader network of its environment. As I will explain further, this organization may be facilitated by the plastic quality of the brain, but first I want to outline the relation of this new body-as-perceptual-apparatus to its environment.

The narration and dialogue, such as the mention of “a transcendent vision” and the revelation that “there was nothing [Bruce] did not know,” suggest that in this configuration, the resultant perspective is somehow broader or more receptive to the material complexity of this new assemblage. Posthumanist scholar Cary Wolfe proposes that “[u]nder pressure to adapt to a complex and changing environment, systems increase their selectivity – they make their environmental filters more finely woven, if you like – by building up their own internal complexity by means of self-referential closure” (14–15). If this understanding of self-reference is to be applied to the human, then consciousness emerges as such a selective filter, ordering the constant flow of stimuli. A conscious human subject, in the process of self-organizing constructs a subjective reality, and a boundary between themselves and the “outside.” Once this mechanism is disabled, as is the case with Bruce’s brain damage in *A Scanner Darkly*, the environmental complexity floods in, the system/environment distinction collapses, and the body becomes an organ of the environment. If individual consciousness is the result of a reduction of material complexity so that the subject may conceptualize or signify reality, then with the loss of the self that complexity reveals itself. Bruce changes from an observer equipped with a faulty instrument into an instrument of observation for a broader system.

When Arctor becomes “a camera,” he no longer has to rely on his consciousness – which produces reality distorted by conflicting territories – and can instead be positioned as an organ in the network that is his environment. This is what allows him to notice the flowers, hidden beneath the crops and obscured by New Path’s brainwashing. When the Executive Director puts his palm over the eyes,³ he effectively turns off the camera/scanner: he deprives the perceptive organ – literal: the eyes, and metaphorical: Bruce himself – of its only function. This may be why time itself seems to momentarily stop for the protagonist; with the individualized self annihilated “there was nothing left to happen” – no subjective temporalization or thought – without the connection to the rest of the assemblage.

The process of Bruce becoming such a reflexive system may be explained by the idea of brain plasticity as presented by Catherine Malabou. She asserts that “the idea of cellular renewal, repair, and resourcefulness as auxiliaries of synaptic plasticity brings to light the power of *healing* – treatment, scarring, compensation, regeneration, and the capacity of the brain to build natural prostheses... the affected structures or functions try to modify themselves so as to compensate for the new deficit” (*What Should We Do with Our Brain* 27–28). The new personalities that Arctor adapts in his struggle against the pressures of society and the biological damage of drug abuse can be interpreted as forms of those natural prostheses. The progressing trauma is compensated for with whatever new, temporary formulation of identity can be built upon his experiences and surroundings.

However, the shift into Bruce is certainly more radical than shuffling between the personas of Bob and Fred, since the latter were, at least to a degree, a) self-aware, and b) interacting and influencing each other. Bruce, on the other hand marks a definite detachment not only from the previous identities, but also from a functioning, conscious subjectivity. In a later work, *The New Wounded*, Malabou analyzes the possibility of a trauma so severe that the brain’s compensating plastic processes have to erase the previous, damaged personality and construct a new subject, often with diminished or completely lacking emotional and self-recognizing affects. She assesses:

If the wound, as the determining cause of the transformation of the psyche, has a plastic power, it can only be understood in terms of the third sense of plasticity: explosion and annihilation. If brain damage creates a new identity, this creation can be only *creation through the destruction of form*. The plasticity at stake here is thus destructive plasticity. (17)

Bruce certainly fits that mold; Malabou acknowledges that even in this sort of negative, destructive plasticity, there remains a trace of the previous subjectivity, if only as the origin point, the facilitator of its self-destruction or replacement:

[I]t would be necessary to consider that, in order to think the work of negative plasticity – that is, evacuation of identity, absence from self, or absence to oneself – one must also postulate the existence of an internal, endogenous, process of destruction that responds to the traumatic stimulus and welcomes it, in a sense, facilitating its work of annihilation. (*The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage* 70)

Perhaps in Bob/Fred there existed a certain internal assessment, an anxiety that the only line of flight which had not collapsed was this destruction of self. In that case, Bruce would be a product of a negative plasticity that has been molded from a desperate desire to escape the trauma suffered by his preceding subjectivity.

³ Crucially, the narration repeatedly describes them not as “Bruce’s eyes” but “the frozen eyes” or “the dead eyes” – as if these organs were somehow separate from the subject.

Fred/Bob engaged in the surveillance apparatus as an undercover agent in the hope of contributing to the disruption of the manufacturing and trade of substance D. In the final scene of the novel, Bruce hides the flower of *mors ontologica* in his shoe in the hope of showing it to his “friends” (narcotics agents) at a later opportunity. Physical evidence such as this, provided by Bruce, would instigate an investigation into the New Path as the manufacturer of Slow Death. The narration leaves it ambiguous whether Bruce is aware that he is helping to bring down the drug production. Yet, if we follow Malabou’s theory of plasticity, we can come to the conclusion that the question of *what (or who) exactly* does the thinking here is moot. An agency is on display here, even if it is not the agency of the narcotics agent Bob, but rather a plastic brain’s prosthesis. It is a Deleuzoguattarian organ that reformed; it adjusted its function in a new territory and took the place of the destroyed *self*. The consciousnesses of Bob and Fred did not survive until the finale of the novel, nevertheless their goal – to bring down the drug trade – has been reached by that which replaced them.

It is important here to make a distinction between Bob Arctor’s personal ambition to end the drug trade stemming from his experience within the community, and the drug war perpetuated by the control apparatus of the state, for which Bob Arctor (as Fred) was a tool. While Bruce’s final action indeed contributes to the goal of the state, thus confirming his reterritorialization, ultimately it does not register as such, since the final sentence of the novel reveals that he treats the smuggled flower as “a present for my friends” (286). Bruce’s agency is not so much an extension of the state’s power but a residual echo of a personal, subjective effort on Bob’s part to contribute to the betterment of life of his community – the friends. It is the sentiment first expressed at the beginning of the novel, when Arctor goes off-script in his speech to a group of politicians (arranged by the sheriff’s office): “Don’t kick their asses after they’re on it. The users, the addicts... Just try to keep them, the people, any of us, from getting on it” (26).

When the personas of Bob and Fred spiral into decay, Bruce usurps the primary spot in the brain, operating on those parts on the brain, which have not been destroyed. In fact, for Malabou the default mode of being in the contemporary society is for “the individual ... to occupy the midpoint between the taking on of form and the annihilation of form – between the possibility of occupying a territory and accepting the rules of deterritorialization. ... We live in an epoch in which identity is defined no longer as a permanent essence but as a process of autoconstruction” (*What Should We Do with Our Brain* 70–71). Where Bob/Fred errs in this endeavor is that navigating this midpoint requires a delicate balance, whereas he moves intensely and violently between territories, pulled by the forceful tides of the apparatus of surveillance from one side, and substance abuse from the other. The price he pays is the overwhelming trauma, repairable only through “negative” plasticity. The destruction is not final since the plasticity creates a new autopoietic system, Bruce. What he regains is the availability of lines of flight, which have been denied to Bob/Fred. Combining the posthumanist philosophy with Deleuzian vocabulary, David Roden defines a line of flight as “an abstract potential for the transformation of a non-unified and one heterogeneous system or »multiplicity« into a new state or new mode of functioning” (31). Bruce is one such posthuman machine, inducted into an autopoietic system as a scanner, an eye for a broader assemblage. He is unable to see the whole picture on his own, but through interaction with the other nodes of the multiplicity, a clearer interpretation of reality is produced. Bruce is not burdened by either ego or desire. Without personality, without the ability to look inward, to create an idea of self, there is nothing which can be projected outward. With the outside/inside barrier obliterated, Bruce becomes a part of an autopoietic system of his environment, a true node in the network, capable only of receiving stimuli and outputting unfiltered information of reality.

The deconstruction of a human being as a set of informational processes embodied into a biological physicality is what scholars such as N.K. Hayles argue for as a model of the posthuman. For Malabou, too, the consciousness is a secondary phenomenon, preceded by what she calls the “proto-self,” “a form of *organic representation of the organism itself* that maintains its coherence” (*What Should We Do with Our Brain* 59). It is a nonconscious process organizing the biological stimuli into a coherent signal which only then emerges as the autobiographical self. However, once the *self* has been annihilated, the signal has to move along a different continuity. The plasticity alters the neural pathway of information to something other than consciousness.

For Bruce this becomes the de facto state of being. He can be seen as the sort of posthuman distributed intelligence that Pramod Nayar describes as “the posthumanist vision of human embodied intelligence that draws its ‘selfhood’... from the sum total of the interactions of its part within an environment. In place of the self-contained consciousness, we now have a consciousness that can only emerge within an environment and through distributed, beyond-the-brain networks” (58). If we consider this statement in relation to Bruce and the idea of plasticity, he could be considered as a posthuman being whose ontology is extended beyond the body and outside of identity. Instead of trying to bring back the neural arrangement that constituted personality, the neural plasticity engages in an autopoietic process of repair that, for a lack of any individual subjectivity on which to rebuild consciousness, reaches to the parts of the network beyond the body. It draws stimuli from components working in the world to produce a *distributed self*. Bruce becomes something altogether different than human: a perceiving machine, unbound by temporality and synthesizing information through reflexive brain processes. Bruce’s final prosthesis turns him into a posthuman camera: one with a comprehensive perspective on the inter-connectivity of reality, yet comprehending none of it. Without a subjectivity, a way of looking inward, the thresholds of human dissolve completely, and the being can immerse itself, become an integral organ in the body of reality, reflexive and sensitive to all its facets.

Conclusions

On the surface, the fate of Bruce presented in the novel appears to be solely negative. The intense experimentation with drugs and changing identities has left him a husk of the former self, an empty BwO. However, under a careful scrutiny, equipped with the posthumanist framework, one can notice the positive, reparative aspects of those circumstances. Every movement of the subject towards annihilation is met with a counter-movement towards regeneration and healing. Yet, it is not a movement in an opposite direction – a return to the humanistic subjectivity – but a construction of a new line of flight. As Malabou stresses, the brain is not flexible – it will not spring back to some predetermined configuration – but plastic, constantly adapting and compensating for the damage. Bruce’s plastic brain adapts and subverts the role of a reflexive organ. The inner workings of the nervous system surface to the pulverized consciousness as epiphenomena, loose connotations that do not form a bigger picture for Bruce, but which are nevertheless consistent. The empty BwO is still able to produce a vestigial organ, independent of the damage done to the organism.

In *A Scanner Darkly*, Dick paints a vision of a posthuman reality far removed from the techno-utopian dreams of humanity transcended through technology. Instead, the author, in one of his darkest, and at the same time, most personal novels, writes of survival at all cost in a world imbalanced by the aftershocks of rampant capitalism. The posthuman cyborg emergent in these circumstances is the result of irreparable trauma. However, thanks to the autopoietic qualities of a plastic brain, this new being can still find new pathways of becoming, alternative ways of

experiencing the world. In the novel, Dick scrutinizes and deconstructs the human by framing identity as a prosthesis, malleable and supplementary to perception. When taken away, the network is forced to search for alternative modes of being, which in turn brings it closer to other elements of the environment. The self-creation following the ultimate deterritorialization in Dick's account is bleak for a human: the consciousness is annihilated, leaving behind a shell: an empty BwO. However, for a posthuman it is just another movement along the flat plain of modes of experiencing the world.

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