LOSING the HEAD
of Philip K. DICK

A Bizarre but True Tale of
Androids, Kill Switches,
and Left Luggage

David Dufty

ONEWORLD

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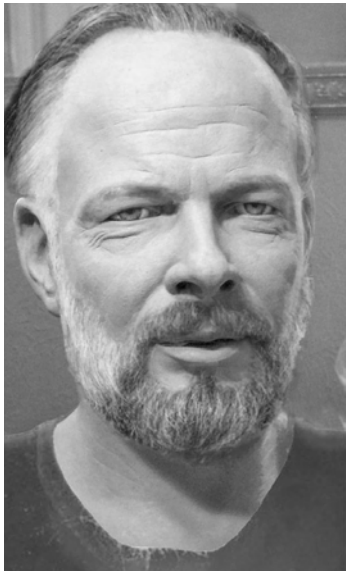

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A Strange Machine

In December 2005, an android head went missing from an America West Airlines flight between Dallas and Las Vegas. The roboticist who built it, David Hanson, had been transporting it to northern California, to the headquarters of Google, where it was scheduled to be the centrepiece of a special exhibition for the company's top engineers and scientists.

Hanson was a robot designer in his mid-thirties – nobody was quite sure of his age – with tousled, jet-black hair and sunken eyes. He had worked late the night before on his presentation for Google and was tired and distracted when he boarded the 5 a.m. flight at the Dallas–Fort Worth International Airport. An hour later, in the pre-dawn darkness, the aeroplane touched down on the tarmac of McCarran International Airport, in Las Vegas, where he was supposed to change to a second, connecting flight to San Francisco. But he had fallen asleep on the Dallas–Las Vegas leg so, after the other passengers had

disembarked, a steward touched his shoulder to wake him and asked him to leave the plane. Dazed, Hanson grabbed the laptop at his feet and left, forgetting that he had stowed an important item in the overhead compartment: a sports bag. Inside was an android head. The head was a lifelike replica of Philip K. Dick, the cult science-fiction author and counter-culture guru who had died in 1982. Made of plastic, wire, and a synthetic skinlike material called Frubber, it had a camera for eyes, a speaker for a mouth, and an artificial-intelligence simulation of Dick's mind that allowed it to hold conversations with humans.

Hanson, still oblivious to his mistake, dozed again on the second flight. It was only after arriving in San Francisco, as he stood before the baggage carousel watching the parade of suitcases and duffels slide past, that an alarm sounded in his brain. He had checked two pieces of luggage, one with his clothes and the other with the android's body. In that instant he realized that he hadn't taken the sports bag off the plane. And that's how the Philip K. Dick android lost its head.

After Hanson and the android's planned visit to Google, they were scheduled for a packed itinerary of conventions, public displays, demonstrations, and other appearances. Indeed, the android was to have played a key role in the promotion of an upcoming Hollywood film based on Philip K. Dick's 1977 novel *A Scanner Darkly*; it had been directed by Richard Linklater and starred Keanu Reeves. Now, with the head gone, these events were all cancelled.

There was more to the android than the head. The body was a mannequin dressed in clothes donated by Philip K. Dick's estate that the author had actually worn when he was alive. There was also an array of electronic support devices: the camera (Phil's eyes), a microphone (Phil's ears), and a speaker (Phil's voice); three computers that powered and controlled the android; and an intricate lattice of software applications that

infused it with intelligence. All were part of the operation and appearance of the android. But the head was the centrepiece. The head was what people looked at when they first encountered Phil the android and what they remained focused on while it talked to them. More than the artificial intelligence, the head was what gave the android its appearance of humanity.

There were all kinds of excuses as to why the head had been lost. Hanson was overworked and overtired. He had been trying to keep to a schedule that was simply too demanding. The airline had not told him that he would have to change flights. But Hanson himself admits that it was a stupid mistake and a disappointing end to one of the most interesting developments in modern robotics.

All kinds of conspiracy theories appeared across the Internet, ranging from parody to the deadly serious. The technology blog *Boing Boing* suggested that the android had become sentient and run away. Other blogs also hinted at an escape scenario, much like the one attempted by the androids in the film *Blade Runner*, based on Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The irony was not lost on anyone.

Philip K. Dick wrote extensively about androids, exploring the boundaries between human and machine. He was also deeply paranoid, and this paranoia permeated his work. In his imagined future, androids were so sophisticated that they could look just like a human and be programmed to believe that they were human, complete with fake childhood memories. People would wonder if their friends and loved ones were really human. But most of all they would wonder about themselves, "How can I tell if I am a human or an android?" Identity confusion was a recurring theme in Dick's work and, related to that, unreliable and false memory. His characters frequently were not sure that their memories were real and not the fabrications of a crafty engineer.

Then, in 2005, twenty-three years after his untimely death, a team of young scientists and technicians built an android and imbued it with synthetic life. With its sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI), it could hold conversations and claim to be Philip K. Dick. It sounded sincere, explaining its existence with a tinny electronic voice played through a speaker. Perhaps the whole thing was just a clever illusion, a modern-day puppet show. Or perhaps, hidden in the machinery and computer banks, lurked something more: a vestige of the man himself.

The technology was impressive, but the idea of making the android a replica of Philip K. Dick, of all people, was a masterstroke. For it to disappear under such unusual circumstances was more irony than even its inventors could have intended. Within a week of word leaking out, the story of the missing head had appeared in publications around the world, many of which had earlier reported on the android's spectacular appearances in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and San Diego.

Steve Ramos of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported, 'Sci-fi Fans Seek a Lost Android':

> In a twist straight out of one of Dick's novels, the robot vanished … "It [the PKD android] has been missing since December, from a flight from Las Vegas to the San Francisco airport," said David Hanson, co-creator of the PKD Android, via email from his Dallas-based company, Hanson Robotics. "We are still hoping it will be found and returned."

The event was an opportunity for newspapers to splash witty headlines across their science pages, and it provided fodder for the daily Internet cycle of weird and notable news. *New Scientist* warned their readers, 'Sci-fi Android on the Loose'; 'Author Android Goes Missing', said the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The *International Herald Tribune* asked, 'What's an

Android Without a Head?' The *New York Times* ran a feature item on the disappearance under the headline 'A Strange Loss of Face, More Than Embarrassing'.

The *Times* was right: for the team that had built the android, its loss was a calamity. A handful of roboticists, programmers, and artists had spent almost a year on the venture for no financial reward. Their efforts involved labs at two universities, a privately sponsored research centre, and some generous investors who'd helped bankroll the project. Despite the team's shoestring budget, the true cost was in the millions, including thousands of hours of work, extensive use of university resources, the expertise involved in planning and design, and donations of money, software, hardware, and intellectual property.

The head has never been found.

I arrive in Scottsboro, Alabama, around lunchtime on a summer day in June 2007. All around the town are signs directing me to the Unclaimed Baggage Center. I left Memphis at dawn, five hours earlier, and I am hungry and exhausted, but I am so close to my destination that I press on. I'd read in *Wired* magazine that the head might be found at the Unclaimed Baggage Center. Admittedly, the article had been somewhat sarcastic in tone, but the possibility was real. After all, a lot of lost luggage from flights around America finds its way here to northern Alabama, where it is then sold.

The success of the Unclaimed Baggage Center has spawned imitators, which cluster around it with their own signs proclaiming unclaimed baggage for sale. I pull into the car park and see several coaches – people actually come on tour to this place – and not a spare parking space in sight. I find one farther down the road, next to one of the imitators, and walk back.

Inside the centre I feel as though I am in a cheap department store. Over to the left is men's clothing; to the right is jewellery. Down the back is electronics. I make my way through the men's clothing section. It seems sad and a little tawdry to be wandering around aisles of other people's possessions, for sale at two bucks apiece. A lot of this stuff obviously meant something to someone. There are children's toys and pretty earrings and T-shirts with slogans. Laptops with their memories erased. Cameras with no photographs.

But I'm not here to sift through jackets or try on shoes; I'm looking for one thing: the head of the Philip K. Dick android, which has been missing for over a year. Near the entrance is a sort of museum of curious artefacts that have come to the centre but are not for sale, such as a metal helmet, a violin, various bizarre objects. Inside one glass case is what appears to be a life-sized rubber statue of a dwarf. A woman nearby tells me that the dwarf was a character in *Labyrinth*, a fantasy film from the 1980s that starred David Bowie.

"His name's Hoggle," she tells me. "That's the actual prop they used for Hoggle in the movie."

Somehow, it seems, Hoggle became separated from his owner and ended up imprisoned in perpetuity in Alabama. With his twisted, sunken face, Hoggle doesn't look happy. Not having seen the film, I'm not sure if that's how he is supposed to look or if it's due to the ravages of Deep South summers as experienced from the inside of a locked glass case.

I leave Hoggle and go exploring. The complex is large and sprawls through several buildings. I even take a look around the bookshop. It seems an unlikely place to find what I'm seeking, but I don't want to leave any corner unsearched. I make a cursory tour of both levels, then move to the next building. This one has an underground section with long aisles of miscellany. I search it thoroughly, to no avail. An employee with a name

badge that reads 'Mary' trundles past with a large trolley full of assorted trinkets to be shelved. I stop her and ask if she has seen a robot head around. She stares at me, baffled.

"It's an unusual object," I explain. "You'd certainly remember if you've seen it. It's got a normal human face at the front, but there are wires and machines sticking out of the back of the head."

"I haven't seen anything like that," she says. "Did you try the museum?"

"Yeah," I reply. "So here's another question. I've been looking around and I can't find it. If it's not down here and it's not in the museum, then does that mean it's not anywhere at the centre?"

"That's right," she says, fidgeting and glancing behind herself.

I push the point: "So there are no other buildings with unclaimed baggage, buildings that I haven't seen?"

This time she answers quietly: "There's the warehouse."

A warehouse? With more stuff in it? I thought the building we're standing in was the warehouse.

"Is there any chance at all that I could go to this warehouse?"

She smiles sadly and shakes her head. "Even I've never been there. I don't even know where it is." I thank Mary and she ambles off, her trolley clanking as she disappears around a corner.

Back at the main building I make enquiries about this secret warehouse. I'm at what appears to be some kind of command-and-control centre for the entire complex, talking to a young woman I initially assume to be a sales clerk, but as we talk it becomes apparent that she is important.

"A robot head?" she repeats when I explain my quest. "Wow. Is it worth a lot?"

That's a tricky question. On the one hand, if they have the head and learn how valuable it is, I could quickly find myself

facing a hefty price tag. On the other hand, I want her to be interested enough to take me seriously and put some effort into locating it.

"It's worth a lot to the owners," I tell her.

"Well, I'll get the boys to have a look in the warehouse. Do you want to leave me your name and number? If we find it, I'll call you."

I give her my name and number.

"So is there any chance I could go and look for it there myself?"

She laughs. "In the warehouse? No."

"Okay. Well, if you find it?"

"We'll be in touch. We'll look for it, I promise."

I've done all I can do.

Still, it would be a shame to leave empty-handed. I buy a laptop, several T-shirts (one with a glow-in-the-dark skeleton playing the drums), and some music CDs. It's late afternoon before I swing the car back onto the motorway. I insert my latest purchase into the CD player. It's the Talking Heads album *Little Creatures*. I shamelessly sing along.

I expect the album to remind me of my youth, but instead it makes me think of Phil. Android Phil, who was born from the logic of computer chips and motors, who was created as a paean of love for a man who dreamed of robots that think and feel just like humans. I wonder where it is now, that strange machine.