

THE RECONFIGURATION OF PHILIP K. DICK’S UCHRONIA: FRANK SPOTNITZ ON *THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE*¹

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How do literary adaptations get into screen format? In recent years, a growing tendency to adapt literary works into audiovisual systems has emerged across artistic fields. Media studies have evolved to examine how cinematic formats reinterpret elements of different narrative forms. In this framework, a broad space for reconfiguration of artistic works opens up, often depending on the semiotic systems of each medium, which allow central motifs and cultural-ideological dimensions to be reframed within contemporary settings. During the research conducted for my doctoral thesis on the audiovisual adaptation of *The Man in the High Castle*, I interviewed Frank Spotnitz on 10 July 2025. The conversation addresses how producers determine which central questions must be preserved to maintain the essence of original works, focusing on the reconfiguration of Philip K. Dick’s novel in its Prime Video series. It leads to the central question Spotnitz highlights during the interview: How does one remain humane in an inhuman world? His creative vision, shaped by series including *The Twilight Zone*, *Star Trek*, and his work on *X-Files*, informs his approach to adaptation. **Frank Spotnitz**, screenwriter and producer, is the founder of Big Light Productions, an independent London-based company. He has produced Amazon Prime Video’s *Leonardo* (2021) and Netflix’s *Medici* (2016).

Paula del Carmen García González: My research examines the narrative, visual aesthetic, and cultural-ideological dimensions² of your adaptation. To begin with the visual aspect, in what ways did you use recurring audiovisual elements -props, gestures, sound design, or custom choices- to reinforce the novel’s underlying themes and symbolic layers?

Frank Spotnitz: Imagining a world that never existed was a fascinating challenge. We developed three distinct visual identities: Nazi-occupied America, Japanese-occupied America, and the Neutral Zone. We deliberately avoided the real late-1950s American

¹ Recommended Citation: Surname, Name. “Title.” *Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* X, no. X, 2025, pp. X-Y: <https://reunido.uniovi.es/index.php/jaclr/index>

² This analysis follows Rick Altman’s theory of film genre and narrative construction (1999) and Linda Hutcheon’s approach to transmedial adaptation and culturally situated practice (2006), together with Arteaga-Botello’s (2018) work on serial icons and Hudelet’s (2020) close aesthetic readings of audiovisual texts. These frameworks collectively frame the connection between formal strategies and cultural-ideological conventions.

optimist aesthetic. Instead, New York appears orderly and efficient, reflecting Nazi ideology and prosperity. San Francisco, under Japanese control, is more chaotic, suggesting an overloaded empire, while the Neutral Zone resembles a ruthless frontier. Every object and costume was designed to support world-building and reinforce each territory's political and cultural atmosphere.

García González: This is precisely why I dedicate a section of my analysis to the visual dimension, since each object and design choice contributes to the narrative and symbolic structure of the adaptation. Moving to narrative construction, how did you approach adapting key scenes, such as characters' journeys into the alternative reality presented through the films within the series?

Spotnitz: One of the major changes was transforming the alternate-history book into films, which allowed a more literal representation of another possible world. I was especially interested in the unsettling proximity between our world and the Nazi world, - the "uncanny valley". When adapting the novel, I focused on its themes rather than its plot, particularly the question of how individuals preserve their humanity within an inhumane society. This guided many narrative changes, including the introduction of John Smith and Inspector Kido. Although these changes significantly altered the narrative structure, I aimed to remain faithful to the spirit of Philip K. Dick's work, which reviewers ultimately recognised.

García González: From my perspective, your adaptation remains faithful to the central motifs Dick aims to explore, especially the humanistic dimension concerning how individuals navigate a world shaped by totalitarian forces. With this in mind, I would like to open the cultural-ideological section: how did you approach the representation of political geography and urban space in the series, and what role do these elements play in shaping the viewer's understanding of global power structures?

Spotnitz: I relied on visual storytelling rather than on dialogue. For instance, combining the swastika with the American flag in Nazi insignia conveyed how the Reich had absorbed American culture. John Smith became central to the idea that ordinary people can embrace brutal ideologies: he is a devoted father and an effective professional, yet he upholds a violent system. I wanted to show that these traits can coexist and that most people, under a totalitarian regime, would conform rather than resist.

García González: In this vein, do you think the series resonated differently across international audiences due to their specific social and historical contexts?

Spotnitz: Absolutely. Given the current global political climate, I believe the series resonates differently today than it did at the time of its release.

García González: Besides Philip K. Dick's novel, what other literary, historical, or cinematic references inspired your version of *The Man in the High Castle*?

Spotnitz: I read extensively about the Second World War, since Dick wrote the novel in the early 1960s, when historical understanding was different from today. I also consulted historians, although it was not easy to discuss hypothetical scenarios. Eventually, we found consultants who helped evaluate the plausibility of certain choices.

García González: To conclude, why do you think Philip K. Dick's work, particularly *The Man in the High Castle*, continues to speak so powerfully to contemporary audiences?

Spotnitz: I hope it does. That is ultimately what we can offer as storytellers: narratives that may help audiences find meaning or perspective. Given the current global situation, *The Man in the High Castle* increasingly feels like a cautionary tale.

This conversation helps to contextualise many of the reflections within Frank Spotnitz's broader personal and professional trajectory. His years living outside the United States, particularly his experience teaching in Germany, have shaped the way he understands how different societies negotiate meaning through their own historical narratives. His observations about younger generations, those who inherit traumatic pasts and those who imagine themselves as "heroes" of events they never lived, resonate strongly with the central concerns of *The Man in the High Castle*. At the same time, his creative background reveals how speculative science fiction has long served as a framework through which he examines contemporary political anxieties. In this vein, both versions of *The Man in the High Castle* continue to deserve scholarly attention, not only for their cultural relevance, but also for the complex process of translating meaning across different semiotic systems. This has been the guiding motivation behind this research.

Overall, *The Man in the High Castle* enables a contemporary reading that evolves from Philip K. Dick's original vision into Frank Spotnitz's reconfiguration of the narrative. The discussion highlights how the adaptation opens new avenues for research within adaptation studies, particularly within the broader cultural tendency to revisit

classic literary works through present sociohistorical contexts. Spotnitz's reflections emphasise the role of screenwriters in determining which elements of an original text become central in a new medium, especially through visual codes and situational development. His comments on audience reception further reveal how each generation negotiates meaning differently, shaped by its own collective historical memory. In this vein, the uchronian framework becomes a powerful tool for recontextualising contemporary realities, reinforcing the genre's connection to historical consciousness and its capacity to illuminate the political tensions of the present.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the interviewee for generously agreeing to this conversation and its potential publication. I am also grateful to a colleague at the Fundación Juan Negrín in Gran Canaria, whose suggestion to contact the producer during my doctoral research stay was essential for the development of this project. I additionally thank my academic supervisor for her guidance during the research process.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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