



Second Variety

Philip K. Dick, John Brunner (Introduction)

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Klaus took a look at them, leaning over Hendricks' broad shoulder. "You can see what we're up against. There's another type. Maybe it was abandoned. Maybe it didn't work. But there must be a Second Variety. There's One and Three."

Second Variety Details

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From Reader Review Second Variety for online ebook

Jacques Bezuidenhout says

Read as part of Minority Report and Other Stories.

First published in 1953. With the movie *Screamers* based on it.

Not one of the best ones so far.

I had to main problems with the book:

1. I found the plot fairly predictable
2. The communication between soldier/robot is pretty stupid. The fact that they couldn't figure out it wasn't human.

Ângelo says

One of the best and scarier books I've ever read in one hour thirty. *The second variety.*

The Soviet's are being soviets and bombing stuff. This leading to a too grand scale war where most of humanity gets decimated, and yet it continues, with the Russians on the winning side. Taken by desperation the Americans take refuge on the moon and create robots to fight their war.

The consequences of it are made clear as we follow an American Major down on Earth.

Maruf Hossain says

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berthamason says

An ok short story by Philip K. Dick; definitely not among his best work. It suffers from a overly conventional narrative structure and a predictable twist at the end.

Kimber Silver says

Set in a post-apocalyptic world, the Russians and the Americans have bombed the globe into a near-uninhabitable wasteland. They continue to fight, though there isn't much left to scrap over and the Russians are winning until America invents the claws: robotic balls of whirling blades that attack and kill any warm-blooded being not wearing a particular patch designed to shut them down. The tide of the war turns, and the Russians send a message that they want to talk.

Philip K. Dick's narrative is thought-provoking, leading the reader to contemplate man's inventions and how they might prove to be humanity's ultimate undoing.

Though the ending was predictable, the tale is well written and engaging. I would recommend this short-story to any sci-fi lover.

Another big thanks to Apatt for his recommendation!

Riju Ganguly says

The story began spectacularly, and unfolded breaking all the conventions of Asimov's Robotics, while painting a grim picture of warmongering humanity. Unfortunately it ended in a rather pessimistic note, whereas it could have been ended in a far more upbeat manner.

Perhaps, that's the speciality of Dick's vision.

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

This is a classic 1953 SF short story, free online at Baen (and at Gutenberg.org). Review first posted on Fantasy Literature:

For a classic SF blast from the past, we have Philip K. Dick's "Second Variety," a gripping tale set in a post-apocalyptic world where a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the American bloc has turned the earth into an uninhabitable wasteland. The two sides are still fighting, though there is little left to fight over. The West, which was losing the war, have developed lethal, self-replicating robots that they call "claws," spinning spheres of blades that ambush and kill any living thing, except those people carrying radiation-emitting tabs that temporarily turn off the robot claws (yes, you can tell this was written in the 1950's).

The Western forces receive a written message from the Russians, urgently requesting a meeting. Major Hendricks travels by foot to the meeting. On the way, Hendricks meets a vulnerable-looking young boy, David, who carries a teddy bear. David tags along with Hendricks to the meeting ? where Hendricks gets the shock of his life. But it's only the first of several shocks for him. The West's robots have taken self-replication to a whole new level. Some of their new varieties are known, but the second variety hasn't yet been identified. And that could be lethal to all humans.

"Second Variety" is a fine example of classic science fiction, one in which there's actually a strong and intriguing woman character. It managed to remind me of both the Alien and Terminator movies. It's an action-filled story that nevertheless asks important questions of humankind, questions that remain relevant in our day, when the countries warring have shifted somewhat, but armed conflicts continue and have become

increasingly high-tech.

“Second Variety” was loosely adapted into the movie *Screamers* in 1995. If you click on one of the Gutenberg links to this story, I strongly recommend that you skip the versions that include images, since the original illustrations show up too early in the text and spoil some of the surprises

Rajiv says

Published in 1953, this story was fresh and groundbreaking with a you-won't-see-this-coming-twist. However, it's 2017, and the story feels archaic, boring, and utterly predictable. That's because the twist has been done to death.

But Dick's trademark style shines through. Even though I could predict what would happen, I was hooked and invested in the characters. The setting was also quite interesting, indicative of what might happen if we do have a World War 3.

It's a quick read you won't regret.

Tristram says

“*I hate the damn things I wish we'd never invented them. [...]*
‘*If we hadn't invented them, the Ivans would have.*’”

This conversation between two American soldiers sitting inside their bunker reveals one of the mechanisms leading people to dedicate their creativity and knowledge to the development of weapons that will prove more destructive and insidious even than the weapons humanity already knows. The paranoid pattern underlying this way of reasoning reminds you of that used by two young children sitting in a sandbox and hitting each other, and yet, outside the world of pacifist dreamers, there is a devilish logic behind it.

PKD's story *Second Variety* takes us into a post-apocalyptic future in which the Earth, as we know it, no longer exists but has turned into landscapes of ashes and nuclear rubble. It all started when the Soviet Union launched a nuclear attack on the U.S., and Washington retaliated:

”The disks began sailing down all over Russia within hours after Washington got it. But that hadn't helped Washington.”

Although the Russians had the first strike, the Americans soon managed to tip the scales of warfare in their favour by developing little robots, the so-called “claws”, that are programmed to kill anything that is human (and does not wear a certain radiation-emitting tab like the American soldiers do). These “claws” are highly intelligent killer-machines that actually repair themselves and develop later and “better” versions of themselves in underground factories left alone by any human – so that even the American side no longer really knows what kind of robots are out there roaming the land in search of flesh. Whereas the Earth is turning more and more into a post-apocalyptic graveyard, the U.S. government and the military high

command have escaped to the Moon Base, while the rank and file are continuing to do their duty in the immediate vicinity of danger and destruction. When the Russians finally realize that they cannot win the war anymore, they send an emissary to Major Hendricks's bunker, and although the emissary is sliced to pieces by the "claws", the Americans can still retrieve the message he was carrying. Now it is up to major Hendricks to fight his way through the nuclear, and "claw"-ridden, wasteland in order to talk terms with the Russians. He soon finds out, however, that the "claws" have designed android forms of robots – in various varieties – in order to get into the bunkers and destroy the soldiers, and that it is no longer easy for him to decide whom to trust.

The story was written in 1953 and, obviously, after more than 60 years of science fiction novels and movies, its final twist is no longer as fresh as the morning dew. However, that does not make *Second Variety* any less worth reading since PKD manages to conjure up an atmosphere of paranoia that keeps your hair standing on end even if you wear it very long. We soon find ourselves immersed in an enervating guessing game about who is a human being and who is a machine.

”It's strange, machines so much like people that you can be fooled. Almost alive. I wonder where it'll end.”

Apart from contributing to the suspense of the story, the idea of human-like robots created by other robots also has an eerie quality of its own. Is it really so far-fetched to think that one day, artificial intelligence will at least be on a par with human intelligence and even enable machines to create new technology? What attitude will these intelligent machines have towards their old, human, creators? In the story, the robots leave no doubt that they intend to annihilate the human race, but even the androids in *Second Variety* cannot completely deny their human creators a certain kind of admiration, which does not prevent them from following their plans to the end:

”A beautiful ship, Major. Well built. I admire your workmanship. You people have always done good work. You build fine things. Your work, your creations, are your greatest achievement.”

Coming to think of it, even though there are no androids walking down our streets yet and though we can be pretty sure our next-door-neighbour is a human being, the situation is already different on the Internet. So, in a way, PKD's story *Second Variety* may be not too far away from the truth after all.

A last question, maybe a hopeful one, also remains: Since these intelligent machines were first created by human beings, will they – if, as in *Second Variety*, they start a new race and civilization – continue life with the same mental flaws and shortcomings of their original creators, or will they overcome the spirit of competition and aggression that helped spawn them? PKD's own answer is given at the end of the story:

”They were already beginning to design weapons to use against each other.”

PS: The story has got a companion piece: *Jon's World*.

Aloke says

1953!

Raeden Zen says

A Spind-Tingling, Post-Apocalyptic Novelette

"The claws were bad enough in the first place - nasty, crawling little death-robots. But when they began to imitate their creators, it was time for the human race to make peace - if it could!"

In "Second Variety," a PKD post-apocalyptic tale, the world has been destroyed in a nuclear war. Humanity has been relegated to bunkers. But that doesn't stop the fighting. The brilliant Americans have invented "claws," robots capable of roaming and killing the Russians. Of course, the claws evolve on their own and so-called varieties, the "Davids" and "Wounded Soldiers," trojan horses in human skin, conjure images congruent with Terminator and T2. Could this story have served as inspiration to James Cameron? Possibly. The prose is addictive, the world building is frightening and the protagonist, Major Hendricks, is drawn as well as could be in limited space.

The bottom line: I grew goose skin page after page of this tale and couldn't imagine reading it during the Cold War (a time when global nuclear winter was a genuine possibility). (Note that the novelette is available for free on the Kindle and can be finished in about an hour.)

Filipe Lemos says

To the 2000's reader, this story is predictable.

It wouldn't be published today.

But, in the 1950's, this was probably mind blowing.

Sometimes it's hard to force oneself to read in light of that not so distant past (maybe 1700's France would be easier), but it's worth reading these classics to understand how you've got to where we are.

Kevin Ansbro says

"Much of the wisdom of one age is the folly of the next."

—Charles Simmons

"Transformers: Robots in disguise."

—TV ad

In the ashes of a post-atomic war where the U.S.A. has been blown off the face of the Earth (this was the 1950s, so Putin is blameless for once), a Soviet soldier is headed right towards an American bunker and is attacked from all angles by a colony of murderous spheres who butcher him with robotic efficiency.

In this chilling short story, Philip K. Dick explores the oft-mooted hypothesis that robots will one day turn against their creators.

America has the edge in this futile war (because of the killer robots they've invented) and word arrives that Russia, who've since realised that these machines have become a threat to both sides, want a powwow to discuss a way they can work together for the sake of humankind.

Designed to hunt and destroy non-American human life, the robots (view spoiler)

Considering the story was written in the 50s, this was remarkably prescient. It's also shadowed by a dark cloud of fatalism (I guess Philip K. Dick was trying to warn us of the consequences of man's folly).

This was an engaging and thought-provoking read; one which I thoroughly enjoyed, although the poignant ending was entirely foreseeable.

I preferred his *Ubik*, but this was a real cracker of a short story, nonetheless.

Big thanks to my sci-fi sensei, @apatt, for another great recommendation!

Apatt says

"It only takes one of them. Once the first one gets in it admits the others. Hundreds of them, all alike. You should have seen them. Identical. Like ants."

Second Variety was first published in 1953, but halt! Please stay tuned, this oldie is not mouldy! *Second Variety*, like a lot of PKD's fiction, still holds up well today, which is why they are still being adapted into movies and TV shows. However, stylistically *Second Variety* is a little different from PKD's more famous works like *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *Ubik*, and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

Nobody uses or even mention hallucinogenic drugs in this story. Having said that, there are some surreal hallucinatory scenes in this story which depict actual events rather than drug-fueled trips.

Second Variety is set in a post-apocalypse Earth that has been mostly reduced to ashes by a war between the US and Russia. Conditions are so terrible on Earth that the US government has relocated to the moon to direct the military action from there. The war was going badly for the US until they turned the tide by introducing robots to the warfare. These robots are constantly developed and improved until they reach the point where they are able to repair and improve themselves, and so true AI is born. The primary function, perhaps the *only* function, of these robots is simply to destroy all human lives they come across, except American human lives. The Americans can be distinguished by a device they carry, a tab that emits a short hard radiation which neutralises the robots. The robots are developed and assembled in underground factories which are, of course, autonomously operated by the robots themselves. They are so effective in the performance of their job that the Russians eventually contact the Americans to discuss terms of surrender. This would have been great news for the US if not for the fact that the robots have become so sophisticated that they are no longer content to operate within the purview of destroying only Russian humans.

I suspect that *Second Variety* may be the inspiration for the Terminator movies, certainly, it is the best “robot uprising” story I have ever read, far superior to the clumsily written Robopocalypse. It is also a cautionary tale about letting technology go out of control, not to mention the ultimate futility of war. In fact, this would have been a depressing read if it was not so much fun! I was riveted by *Second Variety* from beginning to end. While it is not wonderfully trippy and mind-bending like *Ubik* etc. it is furiously paced and has a humdinger of an ending. Better still, *Second Variety* is in the public domain and can be read online for free or download as e-books (see links below).

So, given that it is great, not long (about 60 pages) and free to read, I can heartily recommend it for everybody (except people who dislike sci-fi but then these people don't read my reviews).

Notes :

- Download e-book or read online at Project Gutenberg
- Free audiobook version also available from Librivox.
- Robot uprising is not as ridiculous as you think, see video clip below.

You Boston eggheads stop it!

Joe says

A quick, simplistic story that succeeds mostly as a relic of an earlier time for SF. It is worth the small investment of time.
