HUMANIT
TIDSKRIFT FÖR STUDIER AV IT UR ETT HUMANVETENSKAPLIGT PERSPEKTIV

**ITH - Centrum för studier av IT ur ett humanvetenskapligt perspektiv
vid Högskolan i Borås**

2-3/2001

Ergodic Nightmare
- The world of choices in Philip K. Dick's The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch[1]

by Johan Svedjedal

All literary fiction can be construed as simulations in the readers' minds, as enactments of imagined worlds. In science fiction, this device is laid bare since the genre often consists in thought experiments without normal "realist" pretensions – not least since many science fiction works also describe interrelated, alternative realities, and depict travels between them.

In this respect, Philip K. Dick is a paradigmatic writer of science fiction, writing about alternative worlds and jumps between different strata of reality. At the same time, the successful author Dick was trying hard to find a new narrative form, beyond the confinements of the printed codex book. Metaphorically, he described his novels as at least two novels superimposed in a sort of 3-D novel.

The subject of this article is Dick's novel The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch *(1965), in which the protagonists use drugs to relive parts of their earlier lives and to alter choices they have made. The novel is mainly a study in existential frustration and the protagonists' growing insights into the precariousness and irreversibility of human choices. The structure of choices in the novel is analyzed with the help of the concept of "ergodicity", i.e. the necessity for the reader to choose between various alternatives in multi-forked narrative structures. In this sense, Dick's narrative technique in* The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch *(published in the same year the concept of "hypertext" was introduced by Ted Nelson) depicts the predicament of mankind trapped in a world of links.*

Literature is the simulation of possible worlds, thought experiments in which events and problems can be developed as hypotheses, and unfolded into fictions about what people do, think and say. These simulations are played out in the reader's imagination, in the theater of the mind – a miracle of the brain and of language that occurs whenever someone takes in a work, be it through reading a text, hearing it read, or through recollection. The Swedish literary critic Olof Lagercrantz has described this as a greater wonder than that a grain of corn from the Pharaohs' tombs can be made to grow.[2]

To read a printed book is to let the eyes follow rows of black letters on white paper. It is an extremely complicated cognitive process in which the eyes read off lines with so-called saccadic movements (sweeping, step-by-step motions) and convey signals to the brain (an organ weighing a kilogram), the rear language center grasps the form of the letters and words, and the other language centers interpret the content of what is read.[3] And suddenly faces, houses and cities appear before the reader's inner eye. The inner ear hears conversations, the rattling of carriages and the growling of dogs. Odors are perceived by the inner sense of smell. If the narrative is sufficiently convincing, the reader may begin to shudder from the cold, sense the wind blow against his face, or feel a fever coming on. In such cases, literature's capacity to simulate a new world has a resemblance to multimedia, that is, the work speaks to all the senses simultaneously. And these simulations can be set inside each other in an almost endless series, as each story in turn contains its own simulations: memories, interposed narratives, characters who describe other events, lies, depictions of dreams and of hopes for the future. In the most complex narratives, the fictive reality has so many layers that it seems to transmogrify into a city in which "reality" is just one room in one of the houses, but where the reader enjoys free access to all the rooms in all the houses. Such narratives seem to contain within themselves an infinity of lives.

Nonetheless, the reader's imagination has evident limitations. In a traditional novel, the simulations must exclude each other on what might be called the fundamental level of reality. Raskolnikov cannot at one and the same time be a murderer and one who never lifts the ax; Anna Karenina cannot at one and the same time be unfaithful to her husband and monogamous. Governed by this rule, the novel simulates the actual mutually exclusive choices contained in a human life. Thus novels become strictly logical environments in which mutually contradictory states of affairs cannot exist simultaneously. What does Raskolnikov's deed entail? What course of action shall Anna Karenina choose?

Literary narrative likes to dwell upon those occasions in which different levels of simulation are mingled. As a rule, fictional characters can distinguish between "imagination" and "reality," the two most common levels of simulation in novels. But they do, at times, flow into each other. The result can be comical, as when, for example, Don Quixote sees everything around him distorted through the memory of all the novels he has read. Or it can be tragic, as in *The Great*

Gatsby, where Jay Gatsby confuses his memories and dreams of Daisy Buchanan with the real woman.

Appearance and reality, simulation and reality: the possibilities for variation are almost endless, and are built into the very modus operandi of literature. It is not strange that writers are captivated by the theme. Emma Bovary's tragedy in Gustave Flaubert's novel is that her reading of novels deprives her of the personality she had outside of the world of fiction; her imagination flows over into the real world, first as a trickle, then as a violent surge. Fascinated by the glamorous and passionate life simulated in the world of novels, she makes her own life a simulation of her imagination. The man in her love letters is a dream figure, and her life is a masquerade, a habitual lie. The narrative technique is thus to allow a simulation to go on within a simulation, and to allow the two to come into conflict with one another. Emma Bovary's fall is a fabrication about a fabrication. But the novel moves because the narrative builds upon a reprogramming that brings out the experience of borders which is the eternal riddle of the art of the novel, the zigzagging over the border between the reader's imagination and his reality. Where is the reader in *Madame Bovary* – in the text, in the imagination, or in her own world? Perhaps at times as lost as Madame Bovary in her fantasies?

Thus "imagination" and "reality" drift into one another in certain novels. But the reader takes them in accordance with the rules that say that a narrative shall be read from beginning to end, that the text shall unravel as a long, uncut ribbon. The author's way is the Only Way, a path on which the simulation of the imagined world unwinds in a distinct order, without crossings or side roads. The task of the reader is to follow that road. Signposts indicating the distance covered abound, but no compass is necessary since the road is enclosed by fencing. The pagination serves as the reader's signposts. And the lines, pages and chapters are the interface of the program that guides the reading. The pages rustle when they are turned, one after the other; that is, the reading follows a simple program – a praxis which dictates that the reader begin by reading the first page and then continue reading the following pages in the order given. In short, one reads a book in the manner one learned to read already in early childhood. One reads it according to the program governing the reading of printed fiction. Of course, the reader can violate the program: steal a peek at the end, read the book backwards, read every other chapter, or abandon the book half-read. But all that means is that the reader investigates what happens if the program is altered.

A printed novel is a peculiar thing. It materializes a limitless freedom of the imagination contained in a medium in which the reader is not allowed to move freely or even allowed the possibility to choose. From its pages emerge beauty, pleasure, grief, and suspense. Human beings are born, develop, love, and die. Houses are built up and fall apart, rivers dry up, and machines explode. Thermometers crack from the cold, and sand melts from the heat. But everything happens within the same sort of fences.

Science Fiction is the literary form that most palpably exposes literature's technique of simulating worlds. Here worlds are not simulated according to a pact between the writer and the reader that says that they shall be "realistic" or "recognizable;" on the contrary, the regulations state that the world can appear any which way, as long as it is logically consistent (and preferably, at once both self-evident and surprising). That science fiction is often considered a "low" form of literature is due, perhaps, to its baring of this device, accompanied by rather paltry attention to other literary devices such as psychological complexity or stylistic creativity.[4]

Beyond science fiction, there are other forms of futurist literature. The literary hypertext is like a science fiction of narrative technique, a dizzying future of the novel form. In hypertext, one finds a collection of devices that foretell an aesthetic brave new world. Here we catch glimpses of literary devices that may influence the future world of fiction as deeply as the technology of spaceships and advanced computers will change the future world, according to science fiction. In this new narrative world, the novel becomes a network through which the reader navigates by way of link options, as easily as spaceships travel between planets in the colonized universe of the future.

It is unlikely that this will be the case until most reading of fiction is done by means of handheld computers rather than by means of printed books. And that this should occur within the near future seems no more likely than that people will start flying around in space-cars, armed with lasers. But hypertext is connected with science fiction in other ways, namely, in its fascination with the problem of reality. Some science fiction is concerned with the question of simultaneous alternative realities in a manner similar to that of certain hypertexts. Can a human being live several different lives simultaneously? Can a person navigate freely in time in order to make different choices in his life? How many different distinct personalities can be contained in a single individual?

Science fiction formulates, in the medium of the traditional printed book, questions posed by hypertext through its form. In the network of hypertext, the theme of alternative realities is transformed into a new literary genre. Every path through the work creates a new life, a new combination of events, experiences and attitudes. The form of the hyperwork creates the multiple realities described by so much science fiction.

The literary device in science fiction is often to bring together two incompatible worlds. The familiar is set against the unfamiliar, life on earth against other forms of life. In the simplest variation, this is accomplished with space travel. Either human beings are sent off into space (*The Martian Chronicles*), or creatures from outer space arrive on Tellus (*War of the Worlds*). Space travel opens up almost endless possibilities with regard to psychology and course of events, from the curious and polite meeting between two amicably inclined civilizations to the bitter struggle between two incompatible forms of life. The latter variation accommodates the most spectacular effects. This is where we find the shoot-'em-up

versions of science fiction, crawling with evil aliens with tentacles, jellyfish monsters from outer space, battles with ray guns, detonating spaceships and exploding planets – in short, all the special effects imaginable in images and words. Another form of travel adventure is time travel, such as when someone visits the future and sees how the human race develops, mutates, and perhaps perishes (*The Time Machine*).

In other variations, a strange world is mixed with the human world. The technique is often to let the space creatures invade human bodies or minds in different ways (*The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). Suddenly, more and more of the main character's neighbors begin to behave oddly, with minor deviations in behavior that make them resemble robots or indoctrinated automata, while retaining their normal appearance. In this more paranoid version of the war of the worlds, however, the different worlds are actually kept as distinct as in any of the travel stories. After the final battle, fought out with weapons, germs, psychology or other means, humanity is freed from the foreign presence. The creatures from outer space lie dead, vaporize, or flee to the skies. The world is united and cleansed.[5]

Other types of science fiction are more philosophically radical than the elementary forms described above. The boundaries between different kinds of "realities" are dissolved, so that it becomes impossible to determine what is "reality" and what is "dream". When the border between "reality" and "illusion" disappears, the writers make use of a narrative technique that can be called "ontolepsis", seepage between different levels of reality.[6] Thus they make room for alternative lives to exist side by side as simultaneously occurring simulations, joined to each other in a network of possibilities. Here, life is a dream from which there is no awakening; the human being is the prisoner of his consciousness. Such stories are like hypertextual nightmares, conveyed by the monosequential narrative of the printed book or film.

Tales such as these resemble the novel imagined by Jorge Luis Borges in the short story "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941), where a novel written by the mysterious Ts'ui Pen is described:

> *In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses – simultaneously – all of them.* He creates*, thereby, "several futures," several* times*, which themselves proliferate and fork. That is the explanation for the novel's contradictions. Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger knocks at his door; Fang decides to kill him. Naturally, there are various possible outcomes – Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they can both live, they can both be killed, and so on. In Ts'ui Pen's novel,* all *the outcomes in fact occur; each is the starting point for further bifurcations.*[7]

Borges' description has been thought by many (with rather good reason) to foretell how digital hypertexts work.[8] But despite its audacity, the story described is for the most part like a traditionally structured novel. The keeper of Ts'ui Pen's literary remains speaks of "chaotic manuscripts" that are transformed into a "book", from which he reads aloud "two versions of a single epic chapter".[9] The reader reasonably imagines a thick volume in which the chapters follow upon each other. The passageways that branch off are a metaphor for how it feels to read the story, not a description of how the reader actually navigates in it. Ts'ui Pen's novel lacks one dimension, namely, the hypertextual. It lacks the possibility for the reader to choose his own pathway through the work.

In a similar manner, hypertexts seem to be wrapped into Philip K. Dick's SF-novels. Many of his works contain artistic patterns that almost seem to ask to be liberated from the monosequential form of narrative. (The same is true, of course, for SF-novels about alternate realities by other writers. Dick will thus serve as an illustration of a complex of problems and a series of techniques prevalent in the genre.) One of Dick's recurring themes is what might be termed "double reality," that is, the discovery that the human world is actually just a facade concealing something else. Beneath appearances there lurks another world, another time, another sequence of events, another truth. He himself summarized this theme in the following way:

> *The message reads "Don't believe what you see; it's an enthralling – & destructive, evil snare.* Under *it is a totally different world, even placed differently along the linear time axis. & your memories are faked to jibe with the faked world (inner and outer congruency)."*[10]

With respect to literary technique, this led him to search for a new form for the novel. In a letter, he described this form thus:

> *Every novel of mine is at least two novels superimposed. This is the origin; this is why they are full of loose ends, but also, it is impossible to predict the outcome, since there is no linear plot as such. It is two novels in a sort of 3-D novel.*[11]

Three-dimensional narratives about false worlds: in vertiginous novels, Dick describes how people are pitched back and forth between alternative horizons, how life is transposed into illusion until the two are indistinguishable. In the words of Stanislaw Lem, Dick's novels are "space-time labyrinths".[12] Dick often makes use of the form of the corporate thriller (the "little guy" who is drawn into a grand scheme he does not really understand and must combat in order to survive), but he is also fascinated by the metaphysical and epistemological precipice opened up by the method. What is a human being? What is reality? What is truth? Where can the observer find a fixed point?

In Dick's work, the theme of the rending of the world can take the form of the motif of doubles, often found together with questions concerning the difficulty of distinguishing between man and machine.[13] In the short story "Impostor" (1953), the original (human being) and copy (machine) are found side by side without either one of them knowing which is genuine. The machine is programmed to feel like a human being, not merely act like one. In the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), on which the 1974 film *Blade Runner* was based, androids also live among human beings, and even artificial animals live among real ones. A nuclear war has made all animals nearly extinct on Earth. A living animal has become the ultimate status symbol and source of gratification for human beings. People are prepared to do just about anything to obtain one, but most must content themselves with sophisticated robots, which they nonetheless pretend are living animals. The difference between biological life and mechanical simulation is almost impossible to discern.

In other novels, the rending occurs in consciousness itself, in the same manner as in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The protagonist in Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* (1977) is narcotics detective Fred, who masquerades as drug dealer Bob Arctor. Fred keeps the two identities distinct with the aid of a sort of personality-creating machine. His personality is gradually split, and he becomes schizophrenic: Fred and Bob are two different persons who just happen to inhabit the same body. Another variation on the theme of a double life is found in *Ubik* (1969), where medical science has developed a way of keeping seriously ill patients frozen until a cure is found. The psyches of these semi-living human beings are united in a dream world in which they live seemingly normal lives, although these lives are entirely different from the ones they actually lived. At the same time, they can be momentarily awakened in order to talk with the living, which can also effect, to some extent, the dream world of the half-lifers. The two levels gradually merge, until the end of the novel, when the reader cannot be certain what is a "dream" and what is "reality."

A further variation on the theme of rending is found in *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), where Dick experiments with the question of how the world would have looked if Germany and Japan had won the second world war. The result, according to the novel, was that the US was divided between the two conquering nations, and that American culture survived mostly as collector's items for wealthy Japanese. A story, written by Hawthorne Abendsen, plays an important role in the novel. It is called *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, and describes what would have happened if the Allied had won the war. In Abendsen's vision, however, the world does not appear exactly as it does in our history books (the name of the president of the United States during the war, for example, is Rexford Tugwell, not Franklin D. Roosevelt). It is just one possibility among many.

Dick's extensive production is replete with similar examples. His world is dualistic, schizoid, and often paranoid, a hall of mirrors in which all that is left in the end is an infinite series of juxtaposed mirror images. Such visions are not uncommon in science fiction, but in Dick's case they have an unusually complex psychological background, consisting primarily of his lifelong bereavement after the death of his twin sister, an addiction to amphetamines and other drugs that lasted several decades, fantasies that he was being pursued by the FBI and the CIA, religious brooding and Gnostic ideas, and perhaps a mild form of epilepsy.[14] For Dick, the depiction of multiple realities was apparently not merely a literary device, but rather an expression of how he experienced the world. And although he was a skilled and successful SF-writer, he never really felt at home in the genre. On the contrary, he had a rather condescending attitude towards it. His appraisal of SF enthusiasts is typical: "The early fans were just trolls and wackos. They were terribly ignorant and weird people."[15]

Dick's portrayal of multiple realities opens up for an almost infinite array of interpretations (biographical, religious, psychoanalytic, philosophical, medical, meta-literary, etc.), which has made him something of a postmodern entertainer, an illusionist who plays with the future, putting the notions of humanity and reality at stake. His works are at times rambling and filled with inconsistencies, written hurriedly as they were for an impatient market, but this hardly makes him less interesting for interpreters. The uncertainty increases the ambiguity, and the ambiguity increases the interpretations. The diffuse features of Dick's novels create new markets for them. They become raw materials for the industry of literary interpretation.

The idea of alternative realities as large-scale nightmare is developed in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), which in the pages that follow will serve to illustrate Dick's artistic technique.[16] The novel takes place around the year 2016, in a future when several planets have been colonized and the earth is threatened with death by overheating: the temperature in New York City is 80° C, people have to wear cooling devices when they go out, and Alaska and Antarctica have been settled and built up. The colonized planets are so inhospitable that inhabitants have to be drafted (by a lottery system reminiscent of the one used to send soldiers to Vietnam); once there, people keep up their spirits with the aid of sex and drugs. The most popular drug is one called Can-D, a hallucinogenic drug that makes its users believe that they find themselves in a cozy American suburban existence on the West Coast. When people chew on this drug, they are "translated" for a couple of hours to other characters: men become Walt and women become Perky Pat. Once inside this fantasy world, one can do whatever one likes: no one is held legally accountable for his or her actions. To complicate matters even more, whoever takes the drug arrives in the same world. Men's psyches are mixed with other men's, and women's psyches with other women's. All of Walt's and Pat's deeds must be decided by majority vote.

One of the main characters, Barney Mayerson, has an important job at a company that manufactures the layouts used as scenery for Perky Pat's world. They resemble Barbie-doll toys, and they are a multi-million dollar industry; in actuality, however, they are a cover for the far more profitable sales of Can-D. Mayerson is a "precog," which means that

he has the capacity to see into the future. He can thus determine which business decisions are best, or at least most rational.

The plot of the novel is that a competing company wants to introduce a new drug, Chew-Z. It is much more potent than Can-D. Chew-Z allows you to spend as much time as you wish in your fantasy world. And that world can be just about anything: the user can move freely between different worlds and spend as much time as he or she likes in each. When the user awakens, however, no real time at all has passed. The drug is marketed with the arrogant slogan, "GOD PROMISES ETERNAL LIFE. WE CAN DELIVER IT." (p. 150)

Behind Chew-Z is the tough-minded businessman Palmer Eldritch, who has recently returned to Earth from another solar system. He wants to drive Can-D out of business and take over the infrastructure of the drug trade: its channels of distribution, advertizing and dealing. Eldritch traps both Barney Mayerson and his boss, Leo Bulero, by tricking them into taking Chew-Z. They both experience astounding metamorphoses, and are tossed from world to world. But afterwards, they understand that each and every one of these worlds is controlled by Palmer Eldritch. He can produce whatever transformations he sees fit, both within the worlds and between them. Eventually, Eldritch's image flashes before other people, not only those who are "drugged," but even those who are "awake." Even more frightening is the partial replacement of Eldritch's body with machine parts. After a series of accidents, he has been equipped with a shiny mechanical arm, gleaming steel teeth and mechanical eyes. Seemingly irrevocably trapped in the universe of this cyborg, Mayerson and Bulero do not know what the reader learns at the end of the novel, namely, that "recovery from the drug is excessively retarded and gradual; it's a series of levels, each progressively less an induced illusion and more compounded of authentic reality" (p. 196). They believe themselves to be eternal prisoners of Palmer Eldritch, and their psyches are slowly crushed under the weight of this misconception. The depiction of their psychological disintegration has such an intense mood of creeping uncertainty that it is not at all surprising that Dick claims to have been reading Kafka at the time he was writing the novel.[17] Like Kafka's heroes, Mayerson and Bulero live in a world in which the rules are incomprehensible and constantly changing.

The entire story can easily be read as an anti-capitalist satire of the dangers of consumer society (where the drugs stand for coca-colonization, and Palmer Eldritch for an oppressive consciousness industry).[18] But the story is at the same time garnished with metaphysical discussions in which the drug is likened to transubstantiation or the corporeal death that makes possible a spiritual awakening to a new and better world. It turns out, however, that Chew-Z is more destructive for humanity than Can-D. While the old drug brought people together, the new one leads to their being closed up in their own universe. The situation is made more complicated still; Palmer Eldritch has actually been captured by an extraterrestrial who is using Chew-Z-fantasies to propagate itself throughout our solar system, something like a protoplasm or a computer virus. The battle between the drugs is thus not about two corporations, but about the future of the human soul.[19]

The last chapters of the novel weave together elements of the thriller with metaphysical discussion. Will Palmer Eldritch avoid being killed (his murder would seem to be predestined, to judge from Mayerson and Bulero's visions)? What kind of creature is he? Will he achieve world domination? The thriller plot is developed so that Eldritch decides at the last minute to meet his own death. Dick later described Palmer Eldritch as a symbol for pure evil.[20] And his function in the narrative is to mislead, threaten and destroy. In contrast to Palmer Eldritch's mechanical attributes, Dick places a passage which stands as a motto for the novel, an excerpt from a memorandum dictated by Leo Bulero, immediately after the last scene in the story:

> *I mean, after all; you have to consider we're only made out of dust. That's admittedly not much to go on and we shouldn't forget that. But even considering, I mean it's a sort of bad beginning, we're not doing too bad. So I personally have faith that even in this lousy situation we're faced with we can make it. You get me?*

Dust against metal, human being against automaton – the opposition would appear to be absolute. But at the same time as Eldritch becomes a threat, paradoxically enough, he also becomes a representative for humanity. His three stigmata can also be seen as signs of human shortcomings. The arm, eyes and teeth are associated at the end of the novel with "the evil, negative trinity of alienation, blurred reality, and despair," (p. 229) which Eldritch perhaps took with him from space, but which also characterize human life. These human failings are, for Barney Mayerson, "absolute reality. The essence beyond the mere appearance" (p. 219). They seem to be comparable to original sin.

At the same time, the deficiencies resemble an ethics for art. The failings personified by Eldritch are the starting point and subject matter of art. And the universe of fictions Eldritch unpacks before the eyes of the spectator functions just like the world of fictions the writer unfolds on the pages of a book. The reader feels free to wander about in these literary simulations of imagined worlds. But in reality – the one outside the simulation – he or she is trapped in the scenes the writer has presented, trapped within the confines of the already given.

The aesthetic device in this novel (and that which conceals that it is a narrative about how narratives operate) is that the main characters are consistently being faced with choices, which seems to mean that they can form and reform their lives, that is, that they can escape the enclosure. With a radical narrative device, Dick makes this possibility extend not only over the future within the story, but also over the past. With the help of Chew-Z, people can be transported back in time and revise their life choices, rewrite the tale of regret in which they live. With the aid of the drug, life appears to be a series of possibilities unfettered by time.

The entire world offered by Palmer Eldritch seems to be imbued with something similar to what the textual theorist Espen Aarseth has called "ergodicity," the reader's opportunity and duty to make non-trivial choices between different possibilities when he is navigating his way through the text. This ergodicity characterizes how the reader orients himself in forms of fiction such as literary hyperworks and computer games, narrated worlds in which the user must constantly choose (this and, therewith, *not* that). Clicking on the door of a certain screen image in a computer game opens another path than clicking on the letter or the well; clicking on the word "guilt" on a certain screen image in a hypernovel opens another path for the reader than clicking on "yes" or "night." The user chooses a path and moves on, but he is always conscious that there are other and unchosen paths, other possibilities in life.[21]

This is how ergodicity functions as a principle of narrative technique. Illustrating this principle was, of course, not Dick's purpose, nor do his novels include any possibility of ergodic choice, since the reader is never invited to choose paths through the work. But they do give shape to the feeling of living in a world permeated by one of the principles of ergodicity: the duty to choose (this and *not* that), the possibility to go back and revise a decision, and the feeling of living in a system of parallel realities.

Read in such a double exposure (in the parallel reality of the act of interpretation, one could say), the tale of Palmer Eldritch demonstrates the double game actually entailed by ergodicity. On the one hand, it seems to offer extraordinary freedom for the individual – a freedom that is both immense and frightening. On the other hand, the scope of this freedom is determined by its creator, and thus strictly delimited by rules and frameworks over which the individual exerts no control.

Palmer Eldritch evokes a promise of freedom that he constantly kills. The living is mixed with the dead, the human with the mechanical, given conditions with simulation. All are oppositions illustrating how art works.

Beyond the struggle between Eldritch/extraterrestrial and human beings, this is a novel about choice and regret. Leo Bulero (the successful businessman) learns that he has no choice. And Barney Mayerson (who fails at just about everything) makes the same discovery. He is accompanied for a while by a religious woman, Anne Hawthorne, who also becomes disillusioned. She moves to Mars to Christianize the planet, but soon loses her faith and is drawn into the colonizers' life of sex and drugs.

Mayerson's anxiety over his choices gives the novel its narrative energy. He is constantly faced with choices, which form nodes in the net of possibilities that constitutes the future. And not even his precognitive capacity is enough to make him choose correctly. Part of the narrative device in the novel is the limited purview of the faculty of precognition. Precogs see the future as a system of probabilities in which any scenario may be more or less likely, but no outcome is certain. "Everything of course was blurred, and alternates presented themselves in a chaos of profusion" (p. 57). The chaos in Mayerson's soul is such that he often makes bad choices. The basic tone of the novel is set in his remorse over his divorce from Emily. He broke up from the relationship for reasons of status, but has come to recognize that he actually cannot be happy without her. The story develops into a kind of ergodic nightmare in which Mayerson tries to correct his first choice, but without success.

The novel begins with one of Mayerson's attempts to use his precognitive faculty constructively. He wakes up next to a woman, Roni Fugate, with whom he has gone to bed after only a daylong acquaintance. Why? Mayerson's portable computerized psychoanalyst, Dr. Smile, explains to him: "Well, you're both precogs. You previewed that you'd eventually hit it off, become erotically involved. So you both decided – after a few drinks – that why should you wait?" (p. 5) Later in the novel, however, Mayerson has little use for his capacity to see into the future. He chooses not to save Leo Bulero from Eldritch's violence, because he predicts that neither one of them will come back alive. Mayerson survives by staying put. But the course of events demonstrates that Mayerson can misinterpret the future. Just as Mayerson's egotism prevailed over his empathy in his marriage with Emily, to his own disadvantage, so it turns out that Bulero survives, and fires Mayerson for his passivity. When Mayerson follows what he takes to be the right path, it inevitably leads him amiss.

Later in the novel, Mayerson makes a third catastrophic choice when, in a vote in the colony on Mars, he chooses Chew-Z over the much less dangerous Can-D. He thus opens the door to Palmer Eldritch's hallucinatory hell.

Chew-Z gives the user the possibility to change the flow of time, and to choose which existence they want (which is why they are called *choosers*). Mayerson chooses to accept his conscription to Mars (which he could easily have avoided) in order to get a hold of Chew-Z. With the help of the drug, he is re-united with Emily. But what follows is an increasingly despairing insight into the mechanisms of human life. Thus the narrative displays again and again its own operation – the main characters believe themselves to be free, but they actually have no opportunities to choose.

When Mayerson has taken the drug, he chooses to be transported back in time to the beginning of his marriage with Emily in order to save it. He recalls these years as a time when life was simple, years "When I had my career, knew what I wanted from the future, knew even in my heart what I was willing to abandon, turn again[st], sacrifice – and what for" (p. 113). But most of all, the trip makes him remember how he yearned to get out of the marriage. Transported back in time, he sees Emily's artistic activity as bizarre (although she was in reality extremely successful), and dreams, himself, of a brilliant career (the position that he actually later got).

> *If he could snare the position of New York Pre-Fash consultant – my life would mean something, he realized. I'd be happy because I'd be doing a job that made full use of my ability. What the hell else would*

I need? Nothing else; that's all I ask. (p. 169)

The whole scene is, of course, an ironic commentary on the thought of changing the past.

Later in the novel, Mayerson returns to his own time, still in a Chew-Z intoxication. He declares his love to Emily, and proposes to her again so that she will leave her new husband, Richard Hnatt. When she says no, Mayerson realizes that he is facing the consequences of his own choices:

> *He thought, I cut her down, once, cut her off, lopped her, with thorough knowledge of what I was doing, and this is the result; I am seeing the bread as they say which was cast on the water drifting back to choke me, water-soaked bread that will lodge in my throat, never to be swallowed or disgorged, either one. It's precisely what I deserve, he said to himself; I* made *this situation.* (p. 172)

Mayerson is prepared to give up, but events have an ironic surprise in store for him. Richard Hnatt is transformed into Palmer Eldritch, who starts to give Mayerson advice about how to win back Emily. But the world will not be changed so easily. When Mayerson takes Chew-Z again, he winds up in the future (rather than the past that he was aiming for). There, the odds are stacked against him. For various complicated reasons (due in part to Mayerson's own actions), he cannot be reunited with Emily. To make matters worse, she has undergone a failed modern brain therapy, which has made her slightly mentally retarded.

For tactical reasons, Palmer Eldritch pretends that the future and the past are impossible to alter (he wants to persuade Barney Mayerson to die in his place). But a scene that does more justice to the novel is one towards the end where Mayerson tries to describe a being with which he made acquaintance, and the conditions under which it lives. This creature is almost as unfree as human beings: "Should I tell you how it tried to help me, in its own way? And yet – how fettered it was, too, by the forces of fate, which seem to transcend all that live, including it as much as ourselves." (pp. 213–14)

This idea of the imprisonment in matter of a higher power is an expression of Dick's Gnostic worldview (which would become all the more explicit in religious visions in the 1970s), but it is also obviously the novel's way of avoiding the possibility for human beings to construct their dreamed realities entirely freely. The eternal life promised by Chew-Z is not necessarily a happy one. Thus the search for new fantasy worlds has no end. The people who populate Palmer Eldritch's visions are hounded, forced to choose, but without the possibility of choosing correctly. The recurrence of various kinds of traps in the novel is no accident. They symbolize the worldview of the novel. Barney Mayerson puts his bet on the trap in a wager on whether it or the animal will win: "I've got a great respect for traps, he reflected. In other words a situation in which none of the doors lead out. No matter how they happen to be marked." (p. 160) And in the end, he too is caught in the trap. In the last scene with Mayerson, he comes to realize that "There was such a thing as salvation. But – Not for everyone." (p. 225) With that insight, he is left alone and helpless on Mars – abandoned by God, Emily and Anne Hawthorne.

In short, he is like an ordinary character in any novel – abandoned by his author. Or, like an ordinary reader – a prisoner of the author's imagined world.

According to the customary pact between author and reader, "reality" and "fiction" are to be kept apart in the narrated world. When Dick makes use of the device of ontolepsis (seepage between different levels of reality), he breaks the contract. Suddenly, several alternative realities are placed beside one another, evidently on the same level of narration. Thus Dick's novels illustrate narrative forms more contemporary than his own.

The tale of Palmer Eldritch, this novel of illusions and choices, is an intricate system of intermingled narratives. The main characters and the reader are tossed between different stories, different realities. To be transported from one reality to another is similar to following a link from one field of meaning to another in a hypertext. Dick excels at different kinds of descriptions of how such translations can operate.

At times, they occur very slowly, such as when Leo Bulero meanders about in one of Eldritch's hallucinations and, after several hours, returns to the future. At times, they are abrupt, such as the scenes in which people take drugs (between two sentences, the scene changes from their room to a fantasy world), or the scene where Barney Mayerson (transformed into Palmer Eldritch) appears to face certain death:

> *Beyond his ship Leo Bulero's UN-model trim fighter maneuvered for the placing of a second, final bolt. He could see, on the pilot's view-screen, the flash of its exhausts. It was very close indeed.*
> *Lying there he waited to die.*
> *And then Leo Bulero walked across the central room of his compartment toward him.* (p. 208)

What has happened is that Bulero has arrived on Mars and awakened Mayerson from his drugged trance – thus the rapid transition between two levels. At other times, the transition can be more brutal, such as when Palmer Eldritch jostles Barney Mayerson out of his life with Emily and into something that is a repetition of the opening scene of the novel, where Mayerson wakes up next to Roni Fugate:

"What the hell," Barney said, "is Chew-Z?"
The artificial hand lifted; with enormous force Palmer Eldritch shoved him and he toppled.
"Hey," Barney said weakly, trying to fight back, to nullify the pressure of the man's immense strength. "What –"
And then he was flat on his back. His head rang, ached; with difficulty he managed to open his eyes and focus on the room around him. He was waking up; he had on, he discovered, his pajamas, but they were unfamiliar: he had never seen them before. Was he in someone else's conapt, wearing their clothes? Some other man …
In panic he examined the bed, the covers. Beside him –
He saw an unfamiliar girl who slept on, breathing lightly through her mouth, her hair a tumble of cottonlike white, shoulders bare and smooth. (p. 170)

On a few occasions, the transition between two worlds is portrayed as a continuous change, so that one world emerges out of another. In one scene, Palmer Eldritch has transported Leo Bulero to an office, where Bulero is subjected to a series of horrid visions that make him want to run away:

Leo said, "Hey, Palmer." His voice was uncontrolled, babylike with fear. "Hey, you know what? I give up; I really do."
The carpet of the office beneath his feet rotted, became mushy, and then sprouted, grew, alive, into green fibers; he saw that it was becoming grass. And then the walls and the ceiling caved in, collapsed into fine dust; the particles rained noiselessly down like ashes. And the blue, cool sky appeared, untouched, above. (pp. 96–7)

The scene is like being hyperlinked in nightmarish slow motion. In this way, the novel makes an inventory of different kinds of experiences of being transported between different levels of reality. And here lies its real aesthetic challenge to novels that do not depict the future. The reason why Philip K. Dick's images of the future are so dizzying is not so much that they are filled with the relevant props (such as flying cars, space travel and colonies on Mars), but because that future entails that human beings' perception of reality is linked to pieces into a network of parallel realities.

But even if Dick loved to depict those moments when one reality glides into another (more or less as in an ergodic hypertext), he had a firm faith in the traditional printed book as a medium, and in monosequentiality as a form. The printed book becomes a reassuring presence in a world of new technologies. In Dick's novels, people ride around in spaceships and travel in fully automatic, flying and talking taxis. They have mechanical house pets, talking refrigerators and machines that can control their states of mind. They communicate with video-telephones, read homeopapers (newspapers that are delivered as printouts at home), and have portable personal assistants that resemble talking computers. In *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, they also test a new invention, a Great Books Animator, which seems to be a competitor to the printed book. It is a machine in which one places a famous book and then sets a series of controls (long or short; funny, same-as-book, or sad) and a style-indicator, depending upon which classic Great Artist is to render the book (Dalí, Bacon, Picasso, etc.): "the medium-priced Great Books animator is set up to render in cartoon form the styles of a dozen system-famous artists; you specify which ones you want when you originally buy the thing" (p. 138). But in Dick's novels, the old media still exist side by side with such inventions. The mailman still delivers the mail, people listen to music on LP-records or ferric oxide tapes, and they read printed books, on earth, on space voyages and on other planets. Often books are perceived as so dangerous (due to their potential for social criticism) that the authorities try to ban them.

Reading Philip K. Dick is as disconcerting as reading a digital hypernovel for the first time, having previously only read printed novels. The rapid links between narrative worlds lend a new dimension to the narrative, an experience of a new way of navigating oneself through the world. The story of Palmer Eldritch was published the same year as Ted Nelson launched the term "hypertext."[22] But the multi-sequential ergodic hypertext that this novel (and Dick's other narratives) would appear to be in search for does not seem to be conceivable in his narrative world. This is ironic, not only given the structure of the novel, but also because Barney Mayerson's fate instantiates the dilemma of ergodicity – the risk of choosing incorrectly.

Dick's literary technique is strangely divided in another sense. In plot and theme, his narratives are often extremely complicated, with sudden and unexpected turns and bold strides between different levels of consciousness. Yet his language is almost frustratingly clear and conventional, with the exception, of course, of the genre's requisite neologisms (new words for new technological inventions). The narratives surprise in what they say, rather than in how they say it. They lack unexpected metaphors and other sorts of stylistic audacity. Their linguistic world is safe, without unexpected associations between words and spheres of meaning. Dick refuses to let his thoughts flash linguistically by connecting opposite poles.[23]

One could say that the form of Dick's novels is schizophrenic. It is as if the thematic and the stylistic, the one wild and the other tame, had no intercourse. And it is as if the novels seek a new dimension of narrative technique, a new way for the reader to navigate his way through the story. The reason is, of course, that Dick followed the stylistic conventions governing science fiction that, like his, was written for the mass market. Such novels must be clear, easy to read, and easy to consume. But what astounding novels Dick could have written if he had allowed the thematic and the stylistic to

meet, and if he had found his new dimension of narrative technique!

Thus, these counterfactual narratives evoke the desire to see their form counterfactually. They tempt the reader to transform them into something else, to unpack them from the form in which they have been stored.

[To the top]

About the Author

Johan Svedjedal is Professor of Comparative Literature and holds a chair at Uppsala University, where he is also head of the Section for the Sociology of Literature and leader of the research project "IT, Narrative Fiction, and the Literary System," funded by the Johnson Foundation. His books include The Literary Web: Literature and Publishing in the Age of Digital Production. A Study in the Sociology of Literature *(2000).*
E-mail: Johan.Svedjedal@littvet.uu.se

[To the top]

Notes

1. An earlier version of this essay was published in Swedish as "Ergodisk mardröm. Philip K. Dicks flerdubbla verkligheter," in the author's *Den sista boken (The Last Book)*. Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 2001, pp. 89-125. The essay was written as a part of "IT, Narrative Fiction, and the Literary System," a research project conducted by the Section for the Sociology of Literature at the Department of Literature, Uppsala University with the present author as project leader, and funded by the Johnson Foundation. (http://www.littvet.uu.se/lsoc/itlit). The essay was translated by Sharon Rider. [Return to the text]

2. Olof Lagercrantz, *Om konsten att läsa och skriva* (*On the Art of Reading and Writing*). Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1985, p. 7. [Return to the text]

3. On the complexity of reading as a cognitive process, see David H. Ingvar & Åke Hallberg, *Hjärnan, bokstaven, ordet* (*The Brain, the Letter, the Word*). Halmstad: Spektra, 1989, pp. 9-48. [Return to the text]

4. The notion of "baring the device" was central to the Russian Formalists. See, for example, Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History – Doctrine*. 2 rev. ed. (Slavistic Printings and Reprintings; IV). London: Mouton & Co., 1965, especially pp. 63, 190 and 192-193. [Return to the text]

5. The references are to the following works: Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (1950); H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and *The Time Machine: An Invention* (1895); Jack Finney, *The Body Snatchers* (1955, filmed as *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* by Don Siegel in 1956 and by Philip Kaufman in 1978). [Return to the text]

6. The term "ontolepsis" was introduced in Raine Koskimaa's doctoral dissertation, *Digital Literature: From Text to Hypertext and Beyond*. Juväskylä, 2000. URL: http://www.cc.jyu.fi/~koskimaa/thesis/. See especially chapter 4, "Ontolepsis – from a violation to a central device," in which Philip K. Dick's *Ubik,* among other works, is used as an illustration. [Return to the text]

7. Jorge Luis Borges, The Garden of Forking Paths. In: *Collected Fictions*, transl. Andrew Hurley. New York & London: Penguin, 1998, p. 125. Originally published as *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941). [Return to the text]

8. For an example of an analysis of Borges' short story as prescient of hypertexts, see Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York: The Free Press, 1997, pp. 30-32. [Return to the text]

9. Borges 1998, pp. 124 ("chaotic manuscripts"), 124 ("book"), and 125 ("two versions"). [Return to the text]

10. Quoted in Lawrence Sutin, *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick*. New York: Harmony Books, 1989, p. 244. The quote is taken from Dick's manuscript *Exegis* 029, 1977. [Return to the text]

11. Quoted in Sutin 1989, p. 256 (Philip K. Dick to Claudia Bush, 25 February, 1975; *Exegis* 004, 1974-1975). [Return to the text]

12. Stanislaw Lem, Science Fiction: A Hopeless Case – With Exceptions. In: Franz Rottensteiner, ed. *Microworlds: Writing on Science Fiction and Fantasy*. San Diego: Harvest, 1984, 45-105, p. 73. [Return to the text]

13. On the rending of the world as a theme in Dick's narratives, see Neil Easterbrook, Dianoia/Paranoia: Dick's Double "Impostor". In: Samuel J. Umland, ed. *Philip K. Dick: Contemporary Critical Interpretations*. (Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy; 63). Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995, 19-41. On *A Scanner Darkly*, see Sutin 1989, p. 82. [Return to the text]

14. The biographical data is from Sutin 1989. [Return to the text]

15. Dick, quoted in Sutin 1989, p. 82. [Return to the text]

16. All quotations below are taken from Philip K. Dick, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. Page numbers are given in parentheses in the body of the text. [Return to the text]

17. On Dick's reading of Kafka when writing the novel, see Gregg Rickman, *To the High Castle: Philip K. Dick: A Life, 1928-1962*. Long Beach, Ca.: Fragments West/Valentine Press, 1989, p. 210. [Return to the text]

18. For an example of an interpretation of the novel as anti-capitalist satire, see David Golumbia, Resisting 'the World': Philip K. Dick, Cultural Studies, and Metaphysical Realism. *Science-Fiction Studies* vol. 23, 1996, 83-102. [Return to the text]

19. For the novel as a story about the future of the human soul, see Brian W. Aldiss & David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. London: Gollancz, 1986, pp. 332-333. [Return to the text]

20. For examples of Dick's descriptions of Palmer Eldritch as a symbol of pure evil, see two articles in Philip K. Dick, *The Shifting Realities of*

Philip K. Dick: Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings, ed. and intr. by Law rence Sutin. New York: Vintage Books, 1995: Self Portrait, (1968), 11-17, p. 17 and The Android and the Human, (1972), 183-210, p. 206. [Return to the text]

21. For the definition of the term "ergodicity," see Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997, pp. 1 and 179. [Return to the text]

22. T[heodor] H. Nelson, A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing and the Indeterminate. In: *Proceedings of the ACM 20th National Conference 1965*. New York: ACM Press, 84-100, p. 96. [Return to the text]

23. Carl Freedman has recently argued that Dick is an original stylist. His line of reasoning, how ever, focuses primarily on Dick's choice of subject matter and his abrupt style, not his use of metaphors and such. See Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*. Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan UP, 2000, pp. 30-43. [Return to the text]

[To the top]

Högskolan i Borås
Human IT / ITH
501 90 Borås
Tfn. 033-16 43 20 (redaktör)
Fax. 033-16 40 05
E-post. human.it@hb.se
ISSN (tryckt version) 1402-1501
ISSN (elektronisk version) 1402-150X

University College of Borås
Human IT / ITH
SE-501 90 Borås, Sw eden
Phone. +46 33 16 43 20 (editor)
Fax. +46 33 16 40 05
E-mail. human.it@hb.se
ISSN (print) 1402-1501
ISSN (elektronic) 1402-150X

Senast uppdaterad: 2002-10-28
Helena Francke