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Paranoid Imaginaries and Megatextual Utopianism

Abstract: The article explores the hypothesis that Utopian and Paranoid SF, both of which produced some of their most influential texts in the 1970s, co-evolved under structurally similar pressures and developed analogous conceptual instruments to engage with the question of totality. It proposes a theoretical model that situates the two subgenres in a network of conceptual positions regarding fundamental categories such as space, time and subjectivity. The model is then applied in readings of key novels of Paranoid SF: Robert Shea and Robert Wilson's *Illuminatus! Trilogy*, Philip Dick's *Ubik*, *A Scanner Darkly* and *VALIS*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Keywords: Paranoia; Utopian Studies; Meganovel; Megatext; Philip K. Dick; Thomas Pynchon.

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The late 1960s and the 1970s are frequently referred to as one of the most innovative periods in the development of science fiction (SF). It saw the efflorescence of New Wave SF, influenced by formal experimentation in fields such as French cinema and surrealism, and by political struggles for human rights. While "New Wave" is a designation for a generalized artistic sensibility, the period was in fact highly productive in terms of the speciation of subgenres, which elaborated their own tropes, audiences and critical apparatuses. This article is interested in two of these imaginative tendencies within SF, and argues that there are deep-running historical and conceptual factors for their co-evolution. I will call them Utopian and Paranoid SF.

That these two imaginaries came into their form in the 60s and 70s is demonstrable by identifying some key texts. Utopian SF was essentially rehabilitated as a viable genre in this period by a bevy of powerful politically-engaged novels that remain amongst its most influential. This is the mini-canon of critical utopias identified by Tom Moylan: Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974), Joanna Russ' *The Female*

Man (1975), Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975), Samuel Delany's *Trouble on Triton* (1976), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976).¹ Critical utopias are broadly defined as narratives in which a better, *eutopian* world has been actualized, but which preserve traces of dystopian threat and/or the potential for anti-utopian slippage into a perversion of the utopian project. These novels shift attention from perfect models to ongoing dialectical processes in which progress is not guaranteed, nor are definitions set in stone. They differ from earlier literary utopias in that their characters are not mere tourists in static worlds, but active participants in historical change. These differences have made the genre attractive and useful for thinking about ongoing change in lived life, at a time when the mainstream political and cultural systems were undergoing volatile transformation.

Similarly for Paranoid SF, the period witnessed the publication of its most influential texts: Philip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), *Ubik* (1969) and *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson's *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (1975). The paranoid style of the imagination, described by Richard Hofstadter, stems out of a belief in "the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network"². Crucially, these conspiratorial networks do not simply exist, but are "*the motive force* in historical events"³. The paranoid style had been an important feature of the American political imagination for many decades, as Hofstadter shows. What makes the 1960s and 1970s different is, on the one hand, the significantly

increased cultural currency of the idea of "conspiracy theory", following the JFK assassination and the Warren Commission report,⁴ and on the other, the technological, cultural and institutional intensification of the "network society"⁵. The latter was being increasingly felt with the globalization of the economy and the increasing penetration of media technologies in everyday life. The human individual was becoming a nodal point in a network of agencies, many of which not graspable, or following Fredric Jameson, "cognitively mappable"⁶. The node registers, faintly, the convergence of forces which vie impersonally for it and the more politically unrepresented it feels, the more "[t]he paranoid tendency is aroused by a confrontation of opposed interests which are (or are felt to be) totally irreconcilable"⁷. The novels by Dick, Shea, Wilson and Pynchon did to a significant extent represent the world as controlled by alienating (or alien) forces, frequently caught in fractional struggles to which humans are mere addendums. This dystopian vision contains, however, a surprising utopian core, which is my object of study.

A Tale of Two Trees (and One Rhizome)

Consider a metaphorical image: the 1960s and 1970s as a garden of spiritual possibilities, and in it two trees – of Utopia and Paranoia. They stand at distant corners of the garden, seemingly unrelated to each other and spawning their own countercultural microcosms. Tasting the fruit of the two trees can send you on very different paths through the world. Yet, under the surface of the earth, a vast rhizome connects them. So, far down those roads

of discovery, there is the distinct, albeit admittedly slight, possibility that the trees have been a single organism all along.

The rhizomatic connections between Utopian and Paranoid SF are biographical, historical, related to literary influence, conceptual, economic. I provide a sampling of the most obvious kind – the direct “links” between authors from the two genres, which is sufficient to provide a sense of the ubiquity of these connections. The most trivial type is that of geographical accident: most of the writers mentioned have lived for significant periods of their lives in California (Dick, Le Guin, Wilson, Pynchon) and/or New York (Wilson, Pynchon, Delany, Russ) – not an especially surprising fact, but one that highlights the important correlation between these cultural currents and hyperdense network clusters. More interesting is the fact that Le Guin and Dick attended the same high school in California and even graduated in the same year, although Le Guin did not remember meeting him then⁸. In 1971 she published a novel in homage to Dick, the reality-bending and paranoia-laced *The Lathe of Heaven*, whose central question is how to wish for a universally good world. Delany’s novel *Dhalgren* (1975), drenched in a specific strain of paranoia, was famously called “trash” by Philip Dick, while Pynchon has praised both Delany⁹ and Dick¹⁰. William Gibson, who wrote his first stories in the 70s and subsequently became the star of the cyberpunk movement – perhaps the truest heir to 70s paranoia, has admitted the deep influence of both Delany and Pynchon on his work; conversely, he has denied any influence by Dick^{11,12}. Gibson’s novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003) seems to be strongly influenced by Pynchon’s texts, most notably

by *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) and Oedipa Maas’ quest to uncover a mysterious object at the center of a vast conspiracy; and curiously enough, Pynchon’s novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013) displays strong thematic and structural similarities with *Pattern Recognition* – a feedback loop of literary influence highlighting the highly networked character of this field of cultural transmission. Kim Stanley Robinson, who became a reader, scholar and aspiring writer of SF in the 70s and was a student of Le Guin, Delany and Jameson, wrote his doctoral dissertation on the novels of Dick.¹³ A contemporary of Gibson, Robinson’s work was at times contrasted with that of the cyberpunks as an example of “humanist SF” – an opposition echoing that between Paranoid and Utopian SF and suggesting the juxtaposition was as relevant in subsequent decades as in the 70s. We can detect this tension between paranoia and utopia in *The Matrix* (1999), a film profoundly influenced by Dick (and to a lesser extent by Gibson). Timothy Leary, a friend and collaborator of Robert Anton Wilson, was closely involved in the development of a video game adaptation of Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), and he named *Gravity’s Rainbow* the “Old Testament” of cyberpunk¹⁴. Wilson’s work is tangentially tied to Gibson’s via another writer of paranoid speculative fiction, William Burroughs, who is referenced multiple times in *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* and appears fleetingly in it. Burroughs’ influence on Gibson is documented in many interviews¹⁵ and his novels have had a strong overall influence on cyberpunk¹⁶. In the end of the 70s Burroughs wrote a paranoid utopia in *Cities of the Red Night* (1981). Capping off this list are the parallel “visionary” experiences of

Wilson and Dick – respectively in 1973–4 and 1974 – in which they were purportedly contacted and temporarily guided by higher intelligences, the accounts of which can be found in Wilson’s *Cosmic Trigger* (1977)¹⁷ and Dick’s *VALIS* (1981)¹⁸.

This pile of examples, certainly just the tip of a larger network, suggests that these writers were operating in a field of technological and political transformation, one where countercultural thinkers were trying to adumbrate from diverse vantage points the shape of what Erik Davis calls “absent totalities” – the absent presence of a constitutive Real (per Lacan), or what has been otherwise called “the outside” (Foucault) and “the virtual” (Deleuze). Paranoid SF writers were implicated in an emerging “network consciousness”, a technologically-mediated psycho-cultural space of weird resonances¹⁹. Most of them described encounters with weird, disembodied and (semi-)omniscient entities and often the narrators they employed shared these characteristics²⁰. The communication signals flowing in all directions along the rhizomatic pathways assured a state of intensive “mutual contagion”, but as Davis notes, “none of these influences are precisely *linear*”²¹. While a metaphysical explanation might be more alluring to the reader of Paranoid SF, a material-semiotic one is more amenable to analysis within an academic framework, and perhaps more capable of motivating the parallel developments in Paranoid and Utopian SF. The totalities that both subgeneric tendencies have been trying to capture were barely making themselves visible in the 1960s and 1970s, but today their absence is felt on an everyday basis: the *planetization* of the world under technological regimes

within which information is becoming increasingly autonomous²²; the hyperobject of climate change and the disappearance of wild nature; the emergence of a new, third nature that merges the organic and the cybernetic; the continuing threat of human-caused apocalypse.

Theorizing this convergence can start from an obvious question: what representational strategies do Paranoid and Utopian SF rely on? The concept of utopia has enjoyed ample theoretical treatment, but a basic definition will suffice for the present purposes, following Darko Suvin’s paradigmatic 1970s study of utopia and SF. Suvin adapted Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of utopia to the study of SF, defining the latter as a genre characterized by “the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition” and literary utopia as a “verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community [...] organized according to a more perfect principle than the author’s community”, with utopianism “overstepping the boundaries given to man, hence a quality inherent to all creative thought and action”²³. The second key concept Suvin takes from Bloch is that of *the novum* – the SF element in the narrative, the new thing, material or semiotic, which exerts “hegemonic” influence and “determines the whole narrative logic”²⁴. In SF the presence of a novum forces the narrative to reconstruct a world which can organically accommodate the new thing. This is, in the ideal case, a total reorganization of the known reality according to “cognitive” (i.e. rational) principles, in order to make room for a concept that did not exist previously. Utopian SF is after “total” representations which can capture the sense of a truly utopian novum, such as a new relation

between humans and technology, technology and nature, life and labor, etc. While Suvin's definition has been too strict in insisting on the scientificity of the cognition principle²⁵, the centrifugal counterforce of estrangement guarantees that there always remains at least a nugget of unrepresentability – the palpable absence of the Real. Or as Jameson puts it, “the unique value of the Utopian text also lies in its function as a memory trace, but as a message from the future, something foreshadowed in distorted form”²⁶.

What is the corresponding strategy of Paranoid SF? Carl Freedman writes that a paranoiac's being-in-the-world is a search after totality, whereby she engages in intense hermeneutic procedures, which in their infinite resignification produce new ontological systems:

There is [...] a privileged relationship between paranoiac ideology and the genre of SF in general. For SF, far more than mundane fiction, requires what seems to be the fictional creation of a new world, one whose assumptions are radically at variance with those of everyday life. Yet [...] *creation* in this context can only mean an ideological interpretation of the actual world. The radical novelty of SF interpretations [...] tends to require a rather thorough and totalizing presentation [...] In both estranging “content” and realist “form,” then, SF closely corresponds to the weird and coherent interpretative systems of the paranoiac²⁷.

One might argue that while Utopian SF attempts to fashion a cognitive

mapping to grasp the absent totality in a politically generative way, conspiracy theory enacts a cognitive *dimming*, providing ideological cover for the totality. Paranoid SF does something else, however – it shows the underlying workings of the world that interpellate individuals as paranoid subjects in the first place. It uncovers a principle that generates paranoia as an interpretative strategy: the world might be run by actual conspiracies, but they themselves are the result of this new principle – variously identified by scholars and artists as capitalism, commodification, mass media. This absent totality is only obliquely glimpsed in social hieroglyphics – material objects or spiritual conjunctions – that Paranoid SF arranges in deeply estranging configurations. How does one think, then, about the connection between the hidden principle that organizes the world *as-is* and the virtual one that brings about the world *as-if*?

Toward a Theory of Utopian and Paranoid SF

I will use a model of the utopian genres based on Jameson's application of Greimas' semiotic square and the observation that we can plot the genre tendencies of *utopia*, *dystopia*, *anti-utopia* on it, along the axes of contrariness and contradiction²⁸. This application yields the term “anti-anti-utopia”, defined as a narrative about a world in which there is a strong imperative against the actualization of dystopia and the categorical rejection of utopia (i.e. anti-utopia). One can then try to map the “synthetic” terms in the square, that is, the dialectical amalgamations of the primary terms, with this operation yielding the following syntheses (see figure. 1): *critical*

utopia/dystopia, *heterotopia*, *ecotopia* and *atopia*. For the purpose of theorizing Paranoid SF, I will focus only on atopia and heterotopia.

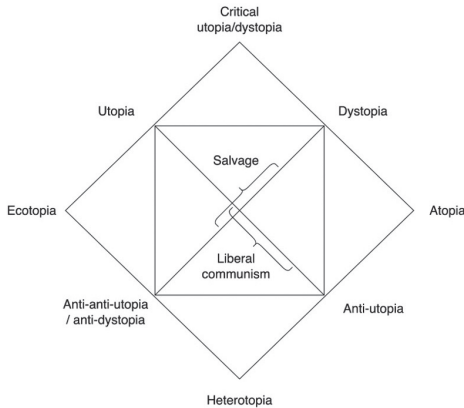


Figure 1: The synthetic utopian genres, as located in respect to the primary ones²⁹

Heterotopia is the investment of the “neutral” term, a form that is neither utopia, nor dystopia, that makes the distinction between “good” and “bad” impossible. It is “a scandal for the mind”, sabotaging the modeling effort of utopias and dystopias³⁰. In heterotopias things cannot achieve coherence, since there can be “no common locus beneath them all”³¹. In his discussion of ship heterotopias, Cesare Casarino describes their language as “gravitat[ing] toward the nether world of the nonrepresentational”³²: by making the impossibility apparent, heterotopias bring the Real closer compared to other forms or writing or spatial organization. Just as use value is “the radical outside of exchange value *tout court*”³³, never to be fully subsumed under it, heterotopias dramatize the impossibility of utopian or dystopian closure, of the exhaustion of the virtual. The consummate

examples of SF heterotopias are found in the works of Samuel Delany: “Aye, and Gomorrah” (1967), *Dhalgren* (1975), *Trouble on Triton* (1976), *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984).

Atopia normalizes the dystopian condition and excludes the possibility of utopia, effectively folding subjectivity in such a way that human agency is hollowed out and dispersed within a complex of nested algorithmic operations, it is dissolved in a self-regulating system in which human beings function merely as endpoints. This system is supposedly more efficient and rational than human behavior, hence the proposed solution to anti-utopia: dystopia is a distinct possibility and utopia is a mirage, therefore the least bad option is to minimize the role of human nature in organic and social reproduction, subordinating it to an impersonal system, more predictable and efficient. “There is no alternative,” goes the slogan of capitalist realism³⁴. The market will figure things out and the individual will follow in the groove of rationality; space will be optimized so that you know what to do wherever you are – at the subway station, airport, hotel, supermarket, Starbucks. Ultimately all will be readable as data on a map of connections that no human will be able to parse, which is what Gibson provided a figure for with his invention of cyberspace³⁵.

It is possible to extract the synthetic genres and plot them along their oppositions in a new square – one where these points are not the result of folding a conception of the human which is finite and amenable to rational modeling, but of infinite, almost theological unfolding approaching Foucault’s God-form, “the world of infinite representation”³⁶. In that

second square the cognitive mapping of the primary utopian square, anchored in finding new forms of the finitely human, gives way to hyperbolic forms which push modalities – desire, ability, emotion, knowing – to their limits³⁷. The synthesis of heterotopia and atopia combines algorithmic processes and abstract, placeless space, on the one hand, and carnivalesque, irreconcilable and nonrepresentable forces, on the other. In Paranoid SF, space is Cartesian, homogeneous and mechanically reconfigurable (atopia), but there is no possibility for reconciling subjective timescapes (heterotopia). The world is organized by an impersonal logic of pure externalities beyond human mapping capacity. But that world is also being punctured by heteropsychic intrusions from the Outside, and so it is continually shown as some frail shell over a much deeper reality. Thus: paranoia as the paradoxical obsession to read the world as totally transparent, and yet incomprehensible, as deeply mysterious, and yet narratable in what are, in essence, religious terms. The pragmatic rationality of the utopian genres is displaced by a metaphysical opportunism, but the two tendencies remain connected through their relations to the central issues of space, time and subjectivity.

Thermoplastic Reality in *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*

Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson's trilogy – *The Eye in the Pyramid*, *The Golden Apple* and *Leviathan* – describes itself as “a fairy tale for paranoids”³⁸. There is truth in this, as the novels do not merely provide a compendium of conspiracy theories, they put them together in narrative structures much like a chemist works with

compounds or a structuralist analyzes folk tales into a common grammar. The trilogy is an especially interesting glimpse into 70s paranoia, as it is very much influenced by reality: Shea and Wilson, who were working for *Playboy* and were replying to readers' letters to the Playboy Forum, decided to write a story where every conspiracy theory imagined by *Playboy* readers turned out true³⁹. *Illuminatus!* is an interminable carnival, or perhaps a war zone, of secret societies: the Bavarian Illuminati, the Legion of Dynamic Discord, the Erisian Liberation Front, the Justified Ancients of Mummu, Blowhard's Unreformed Gangsters, Goons, and Espionage Renegades (BUGGER), and on, and on. But it is no mere enumeration of fantasies, rather it is like an alchemical formula of transfiguration, whereby seemingly every conspiracy is proven by turns wrong and right and reality is exposed as “thermoplastic”⁴⁰, “a matter of merging multiverses”⁴¹ rather than of an ultimate being beneath it all.

The books eschew certainty. In the spirit of William Burroughs, they drive home the point that “nothing is true and everything is permissible”⁴². Reality is a game of multiplicities where one can be endlessly transformed through mastering the art of reality programming⁴³. Following this logic, there should be no identity, as everything should be convertible into everything else – atopia par excellence. Yet, the various conspiratorial forces do not ultimately dissolve into one another but maintain their dance, a heterotopian carnival where masks and identities may be exchanged but there is always some unrepresentability in the translation. The Real in *Illuminatus!* is perhaps the act of switching between reality representations, the

persistence in playing the game of maps, ever more creatively.

The game may offer infinite possibilities, but it has clearly defined rules. While no version of reality and perspective is assumed to have precedence, the trilogy adopts cybernetics as its grounding metaphor, with an almost religious zeal. *Illuminatus!* includes many plot points preoccupied with ecological themes, which were becoming increasingly popular at the time, such as the legal fight to protect Native American home lands, discourses with a nation of environmentally-aware dolphins, anarchist gorillas. But even those are refracted through the language of cybernetics:

Wait, Joe says. Part of you is like a robot. But part of you is alive, like a growing thing, a tree or a plant... [...] Do you think that might be a good poetic shorthand: that part of me is mechanical, like a robot, and part of me is organic, like a rosebush? And what's the difference between the mechanical and the organic? Isn't a rosebush a kind of machine used by the DNA code to produce more rosebushes?

No, Joe says. Everything is mechanical, but people are different. A cat has a grace that we've lost, or partly lost⁴⁴.

That the universe is built of rationally definable and manipulable units – even chaos itself is measured in “chao” units⁴⁵ – is a recurrent motif in all of Wilson’s writing. What is ineffable about reality has to do rather with the possible interpretation of the transformations it can undergo, the metaprogrammable part. Multiple plot points support this reading, such as when

the supercomputer of Hagbard Celine – a Captain-Nemo-inspired libertarian submarine owner, smuggler, lawyer, engineer and mystic⁴⁶ – uses the stochasticity of its circuits to “throw” and interpret I Ching hexagrams, supposedly reading reality itself; or when the vibrations picked up by the supercomputer invade the dreams of a certain doctor, who translates them into the structure of DNA; or calling our planet “Spaceship Earth”, per Buckminster Fuller. The “mechanical” epithet, however, is used in a positive sense, as opposed to the pejorative use of the word “robot” to describe the majority of mindless humans blundering about the world. “Mechanical”, or cybernetic, subsumes robotic and organic and allows for a possible synthesis, such as in Hagbard’s dystopian vision of a humanity linked via radio transceiver implants, and the accompanying network programming languages ranging from the purely formal to the bio-linguistic, in the sense of Orwell’s 1984⁴⁷.

The trilogy is therefore profoundly ambiguous, it “simultaneously exposes a hidden order of control while initiating the seer into a heretical counter-cabal of ostracized knowers”⁴⁸. Paranoid SF puts the reader in a state of permanent and recursive meta-awareness: there is a multiplicity of possible worlds under the cover of consensual reality, and there is a system to (de)constructing them, which is subject to technologies of control; but there is also the figure of the metaprogrammer, whose being-in-the-world is to hack those material-semiotic codes and to navigate between the heterotopian forces pressing on reality from the outside of the thinkable.

This “psychologically trying and intellectually taxing labyrinth of ambiguity”⁴⁹

is ultimately without exit – there is an alchemical transformation that provides a new perspective to any situation. What is important is the metaprogramming perspective which the reader is invited to inhabit. This is done explicitly on the level of content, but also formally. One formal technique is the use of a partially omniscient, paranoid narrator able to hop between multiple points of view (including his own limited one). The trilogy reads almost like stream of consciousness, its transitions not being explicitly signaled. Another formal technique is its radical intertextuality, with references to texts by James Joyce, H. P. Lovecraft, Joseph Heller, Franz Kafka, Herman Melville, William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, J. R. R. Tolkien, Norman Mailer, Ayn Rand and many others. Some of these authors appear in the story itself, as well as some of their fictional creations. This hyperdense literary connective tissue sustains an illusion that the trilogy contains the world itself, and then contains itself as an object in that world, that there is no real inside-outside distinction. This technique will be further explored as important to a type of paranoid postmodernist novel, called “maximalist”, or “meganovel”.

Homeostatic Machinery and Heteropsychic Infusions in the Novels of Philip Dick

The SF scholar Damien Broderick adapted the term *megatext* to name the tendency of SF to create shared encyclopedic knowledge of “imaginary worlds, tropes, tools, lexicons, even grammatical innovations”, a set of readerly practices and affordances that simultaneously set it

apart from non-SF literature and facilitate its interpretation⁵⁰. SF become more easily readable in time not just because the reader becomes more familiar with its techniques, but also because she gradually becomes more adept at navigating the megatextual encyclopedia. Meganovels, such as *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, endeavor mightily to construct a singular megatext within their own textual body. In his corpus of writing, Philip Dick did something in between those two strategies for constructing a megatext. His stories, though fully part of the SF canon, do not rely very heavily on background genre knowledge; if anything, Dick is a creator of SF concepts *around which* the megatext subsequently weaves itself – such as the case of cyberpunk and Dick's tremendous influence on it via *Blade Runner* (1982). This is not to say that Dick was not influenced by the SF megatext, merely to acknowledge that his work often exerted a significantly greater gravitational pull. There is an unbridgeable distance between Dick and Pynchon when comparing their situatedness in SF genre protocols. However, it could be said that Dick constructed his own megatext, which, though not hermetically sealed off, is so singular as to exist apart in the larger SF genre space, like a meganovel's total fictional universe.

Dick's novels rarely reference each other directly, but they share so much in terms of themes, technical and social objects, even generalized vibe, that it is difficult for the reader to resist reading them as part of a large, if diffused and unconscious, project to provide a total interpretation of the nature of reality and humanity's place in it. This hypothesis was indirectly supported by the publication of Dick's *Exegesis*

– a selection of his notebooks, itself running to almost a thousand pages, in which he attempted to make sense of the visionary experience he had had in 1974⁵¹. Even before this event, however, his fiction had always been characterized by the paradoxical combination of atopian and heterotopian imaginaries, generating semi-compatible worlds that usually worked around the concept of planetization, achieved through the intensification of media technologies and capitalistic social relations. The event of 1974 only imbued the megatextual project with further coherence.

We can read *Ubik* as the paradigmatic case of Paranoid SF. It presents a world where information has become a thing-in-itself. The world is under a “tyranny by the homeostatic machine”⁵²: objects take on animacy and control over human lives, such as the door knob of Joe Chip’s apartment that threatens to sue him; surveillance and personal privacy are turned into publicly available commodities, as anyone can hire telepathic spies to uncover the thoughts of others, and anti-telepaths to protect their own; death is commodified too, as dead people can be preserved cryogenically in *half-life*, where their minds remain accessible for contact. All of information, society and culture has been planetized; nothing of much significance depends on human choice. Yet, the planetized homeostatic machinery does not run in a totally smooth fashion. It is shown to be vulnerable to “heteropsychic infusion[s]”⁵³ from various forces that vie to mold the atopian reality, now completely reconfigurable. Such is the sinister character of Pat Conley, an *anti-precog* who can counter precognition by rendering wholesale changes to precognized realities, and the even more sinister

half-lifer Jory, who devours the minds of the others like him by regressing their mental representations of the capitalist world into more “archaic forms”⁵⁴, meaning archaic commodities, which in turn makes money obsolete, breaking the underlying organizing code of the atopian system. Curiously, the backward temporal regression of forms is halted in the year 1939, the beginning of WW2, supposedly the inflection point that marks the takeover of humanity by techno-capitalism.

Like *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, *Ubik* inhabits a profound ambiguity. As in other novels, Dick invents a thinly veiled allegorical figure, certainly polyvalent in its possible meanings and just as certainly interpretable as a stand-in for exchange value⁵⁵. *Ubik* is the brand name of the multiple products which appear in half-life as a manifestation of a god-like force that counters Jory, himself described as “a malignant rather than a purposeful force”⁵⁶. It is a fundamentally atopian process which holds the world together against the entropy of the outside. The end reveals that *Ubik* was created by a group of half-lifers to do precisely that, but other plot points suggest that it is literally God, Logos, or information as a thing-in-itself – something that predates ostensible reality. The atopian forces of capitalism, media and surveillance technology are therefore figured in two contrary ways: as an inhuman instrument of control and as a benign cosmogonic power.

This ambiguity runs through Dick’s texts of the 70s. In *VALIS*, a somewhat fictionalized account of Dick’s own experience in 1974, the main character Horselover Fat (a Greco-German translation of “Philip Dick”) comes to believe

that Zebra, the higher intelligence he has come in contact with, originates from a benign and rational universe attempting to heal our own corrupted universe: hyperuniverses I and II, respectively⁵⁷. Dick adopts a Hegelian stance in describing the corrupted universe as “mechanical, driven by blind, efficient cause, deterministic and without intelligence” and the healthy one as “sentient and volitional”⁵⁸. The mechanical universe is captured in a state of frozen time, in the “Black Iron Prison” of “the Empire”⁵⁹, a mindless, robotic existence. Hyperuniverse I, in contrast, is described as the slumbering “single rational element in our world [...] *noös*” which “persuades the irrational [...] into cosmos”⁶⁰. Its rational agent in hyperuniverse II is on many occasions described as a cybernetic entity, a disembodied AI voice, or the satellite Vast Active Living Intelligence System of the title. As in *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, cybernetic entities as a natural continuation of organic life manifest supposedly benevolent actors, but again, this is only the case when the manifestations embody heterotopian forces from the outside of the current, corrupted, control-obsessed world.

A similar atopian regime of blind conformity, replication, consumerism, addiction and almost total surveillance is depicted in *A Scanner Darkly*, referenced explicitly several times in *VALIS*, suggesting an increased coherence of Dick’s megatextual universe at that point in his career. In it the world seems completely invaded by the logic of information as a thing-in-itself: “normal” people live completely bland and interchangeable lives; Substance D addicts – what is described as a “lifelong horror film”⁶¹; and federal agents are easy prey to a creeping schizophrenia rooted in the

requirement for total anonymity. Contra *VALIS*, these homogenizing forces are relatively unopposed, there remains only the human detritus in the ruins of capitalism, exploited by the pushers of Substance D. Even so, a glimmer of hope is suggested in the discourses around the split-personality disorder that the main character Bob Arcator develops. Bob is a federal agent (known as “Fred” to his co-workers) implanted in a household of drug addicts, where he becomes addicted to Substance D and gradually completely dissociates his two lives – an instance of the total surveillance system struggling to become blind to itself, so as to unsee its own contradictions. When tested for his disorder Bob/Fred is told that such a condition could lead to perceiving “faulty forms”, to a loss of capacity for “propositional thought” in the leading brain hemisphere and a preponderance of “appositional” or “synthetic” thought in the “mute” one⁶². Escape from the atopian mechanism can only come from its reworking in a creative synthesis of contradictory concepts, a Hegelian sublation into a truer universe.

The Illuminatus! Trilogy too invokes dialectical thinking, not merely when it refers to “the world created by the god Hegel”⁶³, but also in the cryptic self-appellation of one character to “unify the forces”⁶⁴, or in John Dillinger’s message to a certain professor of physics: “Two universes flowing in opposite directions [...] together form a third entity which is synergetically more than the sum of its two parts”⁶⁵. Without this capacity, humanity is lost to the heteropsychic infusions from the outside, as a character discovers by following the clues left by H. P. Lovecraft:

Dimensions keep shifting, whenever it gets a fix on me [...] they don’t really

participate in the same space-time as us. That's what Alhazred meant when he wrote, "Their hand is at your throat but you see them not. They walk serene and unsuspected, not in the spaces we know, but between them."⁶⁶

Creative Paranoia in *Gravity's Rainbow*

It is the question of synthesis that sits at the heart of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's seminal work has been analyzed as a "maximalist" novel, or alternatively as a "meganovel" – a text distinguished not only by its inordinate volume, but also by its fractal-like structure, which continually, manically and paranoidly generates novel pieces of an unfamiliar world growing out of consensual historical reality. This capacity of a text to construct a complete alternative world hypothesis can be captured under an extended rubric of "megatextuality" as a world-sized outgrowth from a single novel. The presence of paranoid imagination is a hallmark of the maximalist novel – its hermeneutics is a powerful megatextual instrument for capturing the absent totality. The heterotopian tendency in it works centrifugally, against the centripetal, totalizing motion of atopia – introducing polyphony, fragmentation, hybridity into the maximalist text⁶⁷.

Megatextuality unfolds in Pynchon's novel with staggering intensity – the pleating of crypto-histories, crypto-science and crypto-desires; there can be no doubt that its world is not our own, but an uncanny, virtual double. It is a treatise on the nature of possibility and on the inhuman conditions that determine what "human" means, that "something in me which is

more interior in myself than me" in Jean-François Lyotard's words⁶⁸. The rocket and its *Brennschluss* ("end of burning") is an "interface between one order of things and another"⁶⁹, a conjunction between possible worlds, desire and death, cause and effect; a topological point of thermoplastic reality. Like Moby Dick, the mythical *Schwarzgerät* and its carrier rocket, are symbols of a world system, perhaps the consolidating "They-system":

Once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of being connected one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good. The word has ceased to have meaning.⁷⁰

Paranoia of the all-pervading presence of the heteropsychic They/Them is countered by alternative kinds, such as "anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything"⁷¹ and "[c]reative paranoia [, which] means developing at least as thorough a We-system as a They-system"⁷², a total system that synthesizes reality anew. Perhaps one might call such creative, megatextual paranoia "Utopia".

I end with a quotation that encapsulates the utopian and heterotopian tendencies and their umbilical connection. In this famous scene a group of Nazi industrialists have organized a seance to invoke the spirit of the late foreign minister Walter Ratenau. This is the end of his address:

"These signs are real. They are also symptoms of a process. The process follows the same form, the same structure. To apprehend it you will follow the signs. All talk of cause and effect

is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic. [...] If you want the truth – I know I presume – you must look into the technology of these matters. [...]

“You must ask two questions. First, what is the real nature of synthesis? And then: what is the real nature of control?”⁷³

The questions of theology and technology form a Möbius strip: technology can be “an esoteric power”, not a merely mechanical one. To understand it people must

understand what it means “to fuse heterogeneous materials into figures of the real, to forge simulacra, to connect *this* and *that*”⁷⁴, and then – what it means to subordinate these forces to the control of an algorithmic, alien and alienating system. What is the power that creates the world? Utopian SF attempts an answer by creating a positive alternative world hypothesis. Paranoid SF intensifies and fractures the current world, saturating it in megatext and transforming it alchemically into a somewhat truer version of itself, so that the pathways between dimensions may become possible.

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