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Allan, Bouarib  
九州大学大学院比較社会文化学府

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# The Precession of Palmer Eldritch: A Baudrillardian Reading of Philip K. Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*

Allan Bouarib

## 1. Introduction

In "A Misreading Gone Too Far? Baudrillard Meets Philip K. Dick" (2008), Jorge Martins Rosa questions the relevance of the connection Jean Baudrillard himself establishes between his concept of hyperreality and Philip K. Dick's constant reference to simulacra. Rosa formulates doubts about the alleged similarity of Baudrillard and Dick's depiction of the simulacrum by analyzing the evolution of Baudrillard's thought between *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* (1975) and *Le Crime parfait* (1995). By providing an interpretation of Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965) based on the notion of hyperreality as it is developed in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), the purpose of this essay is to reconsider the possibility of a Baudrillardian reading of some of Dick's novels.

Several scholars<sup>1</sup> of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (abbr. *PE*) interpret the novel in terms of criticism of capitalism. However, without disputing the relevance of these approaches, it seems to me that they understate the depth of the novel's ontological dimension. Crucial elements such as the Eucharist or Palmer Eldritch's stigmata as well as the abundance of religious references are not convincingly addressed by the "subjectivity under capitalism" (Hayles 170) reading. I would therefore like to offer an ontological interpretation of the two drugs – Can-D and Chew-Z – by discussing their nature in terms of Baudrillard's semiotic philosophy. It is my contention that while Can-D is treated as a conventional drug whose consequences concern illusion, Chew-Z affects the very texture of reality, transforming it into hyperreality. The novel associates each drug with its signs: Can-D is linked to Perky Pat Layouts and Chew-Z to Palmer Eldritch's stigmata. Baudrillard's reflection on the successive phases of the image in "Precession of Simulacra"

is used to understand how these signs differ from each other and how they can be seen to illustrate successive orders of representation. It is my conclusion that the novel bears witness to what Baudrillard describes as "the transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing" (*Simulacra and simulation* 6).

## 2. An outline of the novel

In the twenty-first century, colonists of Mars use a hallucinogenic drug called Can-D to escape their depressing daily routine. The drug is used, together with a miniature set of dolls (a Barbie-like bimbo named Pat and her Ken-like boyfriend Walt) and accessories called Perky Pat Layouts, in order to experience a collective hallucination – called *translation* in the novel – in the form of an idealized reconstruction of life on earth. The novel starts with the return to our Solar System of the adventurer Palmer Eldritch, coming back from the star Proxima with a new hallucinogenic drug called Chew-Z, whose effects are much more striking than those of Can-D. After a decade spent in the void of space, Eldritch bears three stigmata – a prosthetic right hand, artificial eyes and steel teeth – which ominously suggest that he is no longer a human being.

## 3. Can-D: Fake Eucharist and Illusion

While some colonists regard Can-D only as a way to escape reality and access an illusory artificial paradise, others have developed a religious doctrine according to which the collective use of Can-D can be related to the Eucharist, a Christian sacrament during which bread and wine are said to be transubstantiated into the body of Christ. For these "believers," the translation is not an illusion because it functions as a real ontological

change:

He himself was a believer; he affirmed the miracle of translation – the near-sacred moment in which the miniature artifacts of the layout no longer merely represented Earth but *became* Earth. (*PE* 37)

For the believers, the P.P Layout becomes the Earth and the participants become Pat and Walt *in essence*. While they are in the world of Perky Pat, the colonists assume the appearance of Pat and Walt but are alleged to remain “essentially” identical:

“I used to be Fran,” she said over her shoulder, “but that doesn’t matter now. I could have been anyone before, Fran or Helen or Mary, and it wouldn’t matter now. Right?”

“No,” he disagreed. . . . “it’s important that you’re Fran. In essence.” (*PE* 46)

Two figures comprising the essences of six persons. Two in six, Sam Regan thought. The mystery repeated; How is it accomplished? The old question again. (*PE* 48)

Such a conception is similar to the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation which stipulates that the sacramental bread and wine are changed *essentially* into the body of Christ even though their appearance remains the same.

Although the “translation” induced by Can-D is compared by various characters to the Eucharist several times, a closer look at the novel reveals major differences. The first crucial difference lies in the fact that the P.P Layout is not necessary for the translation: “It was established, now; the props were no longer necessary as foci” (*PE* 142). How can there be any transubstantiation if there are no objects to be transubstantiated? The truth is that P.P Layouts are symbols which only *represent* Pat and Walt’s Edenic life on Earth, and since they veil reality behind illusion (the artificial paradise) they belong to Baudrillard’s first order of simulacra. In contrast, if we are to follow the doctrine of the Real Presence, the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist cannot be considered as mere symbols because the divinity appears in them, in essence. Moreover, the conception that views “translation” as related to transubstantiation is challenged by the choice of narrative standpoint. Indeed on several occasions<sup>2</sup>, the

narration seems to assume an objective stance towards the hallucination: the inert bodies of the colonists – who are in the world of Perky Pat – are described by a character who is no longer under the influence of the drug, thus located *outside* the illusion. The partition of reality – into one inside the world of Perky Pat and one outside – can lead some readers to regard the latter as an *elsewhere* whose existence stems from the former. The existence of a distinction between inside and outside is crucial to understand the radical difference between illusion and hyperreality. The next section will point out characteristics of the drug Chew-Z which invite a connection to hyperreality.

#### 4. Chew-Z: Inverted Eucharist and Hyperreality

Dick’s treatment of Chew-Z is ambiguous in that he appears to conceive the drug both as generating a solipsistic series of universes, as well as superseding the intersubjective reality. While Chew-Z is sometimes criticized for its “solipsistic quality” (*PE* 94), other parts of the novel hint at the profoundly disruptive character of the drug:

“When you grabbed me, to take that bundle of chew-Z; you know what I saw? I mean actually *saw*, not just believed.”

“An artificial hand. And a distortion of my jaw. And my eyes–”

“Yes,” she said tightly. “The mechanical, slitted eyes. . . .”

He said, “I saw the same thing in you, dear. At that instant. You fought me off with fingers decidedly not those you were born with.” (*PE* 219)

In the preceding dialogue, Barney and Anne remark that each of them saw the other one manifest Eldritch’s stigmata although only Barney has taken the drug. This observation is at odds with the solipsistic characterization of Eldritch’s product and suggests that its effects concern the “objective” reality (or at least the intersubjective reality).

When we compare the hallucinations provoked by Can-D and Chew-Z with regard to the narrative structure, a major difference appears immediately. In the previous part, we have already remarked that Dick sometimes places the narrative standpoint in an ob-

jective relationship with regard to the colonists when they are under the influence of Can-D. In contrast, Chew-Z's diegesis is never observed from an external viewpoint. The narrative viewpoint remains constantly surrounded by the Chew-Z world (signaled by Eldritch's stigmata), which seems to *arise* or *emerge* from the very texture of reality:

Symbols of its inhabitation, he thought. In our midst. But not asked for. Not intentionally summoned. And – we have no mediating sacraments through which to protect ourselves; we can't compel it, by our careful, time-honored, clever, painstaking rituals, to confine itself to specific elements such as bread and water or bread and wine. It is out in the open, ranging in every direction. It looks into our eyes; and it looks *out* of our eyes. (*PE* 219)

This crucial passage reveals two important properties of the hallucination: 1) it is an inverted Eucharist, and 2) it is immanent.

Firstly, while in the Eucharist the bread and the wine become respectively the body and the blood of Christ, the consumption of Chew-Z is shown as an anti-Eucharist, through which Palmer Eldritch (or the god-like creature that assumes the appearance of Eldritch) consumes reality. Katherine Hayles describes the ingestion of Chew-Z as an inverted Eucharist when she points out that “rather than taking the product inside him, [the consumer] has been imprisoned inside the product” (*How We Became Posthuman* 170).

Secondly, Baudrillard's distinction between elsewhere and everywhere is useful to distinguish between Can-D's illusion and Chew-Z's simulation. The hallucination induced by Chew-Z is not an *elsewhere* because there is no distance separating the hallucination and the “real.” When someone takes the drug, it becomes impossible for them to escape (“get out” does not seem appropriate) the hallucination which seems to devour reality from the inside. Even if Palmer Eldritch's stigmata appear at first to testify to the presence of Chew-Z, the author soon introduces elements that contradict this easy characterization and erase the difference between real and hyperreal. Chew-Z's hyperreality is an *everywhere*, “impassable. . . without exteriority” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 123). Until the end of the novel, the characters continue to manifest Eldritch's stigmata,

suggesting that reality has been irremediably tainted by the ingestion of Chew-Z and will never return to its original state: “Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself again” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 2).

## 5. P.P Layouts and Stigmata: From Representation to Simulation

In the first chapter of *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard addresses the issue of images, offering an insightful explanation to account for iconoclasm:

This is precisely because [The Iconoclasts] predicted this omnipotence of simulacra, the faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the destructive, annihilating truth that they allow to appear – that deep down God never existed, that only the simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum – from this came their urge to destroy the images. If they could have believed that these images only obfuscated or masked the Platonic Idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the images didn't conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination. (*Simulacra and Simulation* 5)

The Iconoclasts tolerated only one image, the consecrated bread and wine, embodiment of Christ during the Eucharist. This was granted such an exemption due to the fact that it was considered to manifest Christ *in essence*, and therefore was not to be addressed as a mere *representation*. If we are to follow Baudrillard, the Iconoclasts feared that the images would emancipate themselves from their referent, becoming “murderers of their own model. . . of divine identity” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 5). The consecrated bread and wine – because they were not a representation of Christ but embodied Christ without the mediation of signs – were spared during the Iconoclastic Controversy.

As we have seen in the third section, Dick's P.P Layouts are eventually denied the capacity to actually em-

body the Earth or Perky Pat : they are deceitful signs, thus falling under the jurisdiction of the Council of Hieria (754 AD). As one of the characters remarks : "Iconoclasm. . . I want to smash their idols, and that's what Perky Pat and Walt are" (*PE* 142). However, the Second Council of Nicaea (787 AD) condemned iconoclasm and restored the legitimacy of representing God<sup>3</sup> :

For the honor accorded to the image passes over to its prototype, and whoever adores the image adores in it the reality of what is there represented. (*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* 158)

Within Baudrillard's semiotics, the Council's decision can be interpreted as a return to the first order of representation – the symbolic or sacramental order – and to the first phase of the image where "a sign could be exchanged for meaning" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 5) and where the image is "the reflection of a profound reality. . . [it] is a *good* appearance – representation is of the sacramental order" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6).

While P.P Layouts are signs associated with Can-D, Palmer Eldritch's stigmata –the prosthetic right hand, artificial eyes and steel teeth – mark the pollution of reality by Chew-Z. Victims of Chew-Z manifest Eldritch's stigmata in a way reminiscent of historical stigmatics (such as Saint Francis of Assisi) who were alleged to have born the wounds that were inflicted on Jesus during his crucifixion. Stigmata are generally regarded as the sign of a divine election and refer to the suffering of Christ. In that sense, the stigmatic is chosen by God to become another Christ who shares his Passion so as to redeem humanity. Unlike the stigmata of Christ which are amenable to the sacramental order, the stigmata of Palmer Eldritch correspond to the third and fourth phases in Baudrillard's genealogy of images : they refer to nothing beyond themselves. They constitute a sort of gratuitous contamination deprived of any symbolic content. In a language that makes large use of religious terminology, Dick describes Eldritch's stigmata as "symbols of [Eldritch's] inhabitation" (*PE* 219) in other characters; however, while the stigmata imposed on stigmatics signify the redeeming of humanity, Eldritch's stigmata only refer to themselves and the omnipresence of Eldritch. Baudrillard

explains that only God could guarantee the exchange of a sign for meaning *i.e* guarantee representation. During this first phase, God legitimates the ontological asymmetry between referents and representations. The real is still considered to be the court where images are judged based upon their faithfulness to the objects they represent. When Katherine Hayles writes that Dick's strategy to preserve ontological stability is to "construct an outside, authorized with the name of God and made invulnerable by continuing to infinity," (*How We Became Posthuman* 190) , she describes the solution that was originally adopted as a defense against radical skepticism.<sup>4</sup> However, "if God himself can be simulated, that is to say reduced to the signs that constitute faith" then the whole system "is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 5 – 6). And this is precisely what happens in the novel where Eldritch is described in turn as a fake divinity, an alien having eaten the original human being Palmer Eldritch, an Antichrist figure whose return from Proxima duplicates the Second Coming of Christ (*parousia*) or a sort of gnostic demiurge whose inauthenticity can no longer guarantee the exchange of signs for meaning. The world of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* cannot regain stability and remains a hyperreality where stigmata testify to "the transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing" (*Simulacra and simulation* 6) .

## 6. Conclusion

As Jorge Martins Rosa shows in his paper, the link between the notion of the hyperreal and Dick's simulacrum is never convincingly developed by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, and at first, appears to be simply based on a similarity of terms. Moreover, Dick's acquaintance with skepticism and the fact that his novels and short stories involve many arguments that belong to this venerable philosophical school may suggest a more classical interpretation of his works. For instance, instead of calling upon Baudrillard's hyperreality, why not simply construe *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* using Descartes' Evil Genius hypothesis in which a demoniac being is able to make us believe that there is a reality independent of us, although there is nothing beyond our experience? How-

ever, it seems to me that *PE* (as well as works such as "The Electric Ant" or "Small Town") presents a very unique dynamic (absent from the skeptics' hypothesis) by which reality is devoured from the inside and progressively derealized by simulacra. In such works, characters are not only faced with doubts regarding their belief in reality but also are witnesses to the progressive erosion of their environment. In this paper I have construed the different phases (exemplified by Can-D and Chew-Z) of this dynamic as comparable to the successive steps within Baudrillard semiotics. Together with the transformation of reality into hyperreality, the novel bears witness to the mutation of signs from the merely deceitful P.P. Layouts to the frightening void of Palmer Eldritch's stigmata.

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## Notes

- 1 For example Darko Suvin, Katherine Hayles and David Columbia. Suvin famously writes of Eldritch: "this Eldritch Palmer or uncanny pilgrim towards the goal of universal market domination is clearly a "mad capitalist"" ("P.K. Dick's Opus: Artifice as Refuge and World View (Introductory Reflections)").
- 2 See *PE*, pp 48, 139 and 147.
- 3 Provided the adoration of God is distinguished from the adoration of images: While a God may receive adoration (*latría*), images can only be venerated (*proskynesis*).
- 4 Descartes' assumption that God exists, in order to go beyond the hyperbolic doubt of the Evil Genius hypothesis, is part of a similar strategy.

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