

Jumpstarting the Future with Fredric Jameson:  
Reflections on Capitalism, Science Fiction and Utopia

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**Abstract**

This paper turns around the key concern that it has become almost impossible to imagine a form of the future that is neither a prolongation of what already exists nor its apocalyptic demise. In trying to find ways of reconceiving the future in a more productive fashion, the paper relies heavily on Fredric Jameson's work. Jameson worries that the traditional realist novel, which has featured so prominently in discussions of 'literature' in the field of organization studies, has committed itself far too readily to what he terms 'ontological realism': the deliberate confusion of that which is meaningful with that which exists. He therefore explores the potential of Science Fiction (SF), and in particular radical SF from the 1960s and 1970s, for figuring a break with a hollowed-out present. This is achieved, for example, by transforming our own present into the past of something yet to come. It is as if Walter Benjamin's angel of history would stand in an imaginary future with its face turned back towards our present. Such revelatory time-slips find their clearest expression in the novels of Philip K Dick, and it is to them that this paper will turn when working through some concrete examples.

## **Jumpstarting the Future with Fredric Jameson: Reflections on Realism, Science Fiction and Utopia**

“This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing... Its theory is intimately related to that of montage” (Benjamin, 2002, Convolute N1,10, p.458).

### **Montage 1: History**

*“History is finished. It’s all over! Even Deng said it’s glorious to be rich. Capitalist democracy has won and the rest is mopping up. That Jap guy was right.”*

*“Bullshit. You need to read more science fiction. Nobody who reads SF comes out with this crap about the end of history.” (a conversation in Banks, 2007, p.49)*

*Who could ever believe that this is the end of history as Fukuyama pronounced in 1989, as though to say things are as good as they can get? Utopia only comes into its own when we treat it as ‘non-fiction’, or in Deleuze’s terms as a ‘virtuality’ (i.e., real without being actual) – only then do we see utopia is not some dreamt-up fantasy place where everything is miraculously ‘better’, but rather a cognitive procedure of determining what it is about our present world that must be changed to release us from its many known and unknown unfreedoms. (Buchanan, 2006, p.118)*

*But I think it would be better to characterize all this in terms of History, a History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems to be nothing but a monotonous repetition of what is already here. The problem is then how to locate radical difference; how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it begins again to transmit feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia. The problem to be solved is that of breaking out of the windless present of the postmodern back into real historical time, and a history made by human beings. (Jameson, 2003, p.76)*

*All the indicators in which Durkheim taught us to read the signs of anomie have been on the increase since the second half of the 1970s. This may be interpreted not only as a mechanical result of the growth in job insecurity and poverty, but also as the mark of an*

*elimination of the purchase that people can have on their social environment, with a consequent fading of their belief in the future as a vanishing point which can orientate action and thus retrospectively confer meaning on the present. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p.421)*

### **Dialectical Criticism, Literature and History**

Jameson is known as a Marxist literary theorist (although I prefer his self-designation of ‘dialectical materialist’<sup>i</sup>). He sees Marxism as an economic rather than a political doctrine, insisting on the primacy of the economic system and on capitalism itself as the ultimate horizon of the political, social, and cultural situation. For Jameson, capitalism is the first socioeconomic order which de-totalizes meaning: it is not global at the level of meaning (there is no global ‘capitalist world-view’); its global dimension can be formulated only at the level of the ‘Real’ of the global market mechanism. In Jameson’s oeuvre, ‘History’ plays the same role as Althusser’s ‘Absent Cause’ or Lacan’s ‘Real’: it is fundamentally non-narrative and non-representational and detectable only in its effect. Our approach to History and to the ‘Real’ itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the ‘Political Unconscious’(Jameson, 1981). The reason why Jameson considers it so crucial to attend to the novel is that he sees in this material one of the most crucial forms of mediation in society; it offers a particular formal structure, involving what can be called ‘the space of a community’, which embraces what individuals cannot directly perceive (cf. Culler, 2007). Jameson considers the production of narrative form in the novel as an ideological act “with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions” (Jameson, 1981, p.64)<sup>ii</sup>. For him, dialectical criticism offers the proper mediation between our individual perception of society as fractured and fragmented on the one hand, and the ‘real’ state of affairs of social totality on the other. Whilst this social totality is always unrepresentable, it can sometimes be mapped (e.g. in a novel) and allow a small-scale model to be constructed on which the fundamental tendencies and the lines of flight can more clearly be read. At other times, this representational process becomes impossible, and people face history and the social totality as a bewildering chaos, whose forces are indiscernible. It is the latter situation we presently find ourselves in, according

to Jameson. And if we cannot represent the world to ourselves how are we to understand it, much less change it?

Dialectical criticism's twofold purpose lies in uncovering the ways in which 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism disguises its strategic interests while simultaneously keeping alive thoughts of the future, thus undermining the '*pensée unique*' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) or 'Washington consensus' (Buchanan, 2006) that there is only one way of thinking about the world. It is fundamental in applying the dialectic method that we grasp its critical negativity as a conceptual instrument designed, not to produce some full representation, but rather to discredit and demystify the claims to full representation of the dominant thinking of the day. As Žižek (2006, p.127) put it: "To present the deadlock in all its radicality is much more pertinent than simple progressist solutions". Jameson elucidated his 'method' in a recent interview as follows (Buchanan, 2006, p.130):

"My own method, which has seemed to many people to be frustrating and pessimistic, is to concentrate on ways in which we cannot imagine the future. It has seemed to me that something would be achieved if we began to realize how firmly we are locked into a present without a future and to get a sense of all the things that limit our imagination of the future. I suppose this is a Brechtian device in the sense that Brecht always wanted us to understand that the things that we consider to be natural and eternal are really only historical and constructed and thereby can be changed".

What we thus must try and do is somehow triangulate what is missing, or more specifically imagine that which cannot be said or written in our time because somehow it is out of step with history. Our analyses need to begin with the taboos buried in the recesses of the 'political unconscious' (Jameson, 2002). One concrete application following from his injunction to determine the culturally impossible is Jameson's passion for Greimas's semiotic squares which very much signals a return to formalism. Jameson uses these squares as maps of the 'logic of closure' any concept or formal device inevitably conceals within its make-up. The problem, Jameson (2005, p.179) suggests, is how to invent a formalism that doesn't create spurious syntheses or the ironic superposition of opposites, but rather one that "goes all the way through that

contradictory content and emerges on the other side. It is precisely this possibility which the semiotic square seems to promise”.

### **The Novel: an Ideological Reading**

In his more recent work Jameson has become increasingly pessimistic about the potential of the traditional novel to productively fulfil its mediating role. Our conception of the novel has its roots in 19th-century realism (and perhaps early 20th-century modernism). This was an historical period when the economic, political, and cultural realms remained semi-autonomous, enabling contradictions within and among them to act like mental wedges, thus preserving the ability to imagine change. The classical novel then, presupposed the relative intelligibility and self-sufficiency of experience from within, and a coherence in social life such that the narrative of the destinies of individuals could be expected to achieve formal completeness. The most influential version of this argument was formulated by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957/2001), who found in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century novel a radical preoccupation with the here-and-now. The name Watt gave this preoccupation was ‘formal realism’. It was characterized by the primary convention that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, expressed in a referential use of language. As Trotter (2007, p.31) suggested in his review of Moretti’s monumental (close to 2,000 pages in two volumes) homage to the novel:

“Britain, the story goes, developed an extensive middle-class readership earlier than other countries. These new consumers of print wanted to read about themselves, in intricate circumstantial detail, and to know that all over the nation others like them were doing the same. The novel thus became at once the instrument and the expression of middle-class cultural hegemony. Only since around 1740, we might say, has it been possible to live in a novelised society”.

Whilst one has to be wary of adopting too much of a Eurocentric view of the novel, there seems to be an emerging consensus that narrative fiction underwent passage through the generic equivalent of a population bottleneck in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, during which the novel took decisive shape as a genre, while other varieties of long narrative fiction fell away (Trotter, 2007). Frow (2008, p.144), in another review of Moretti’s edited

collection, elaborates that it is the transformation of 'fiction' in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century from an older meaning of 'deceit' to a semantic force which stands in relation to both the real and imaginary which makes the 'novel' form "epistemologically innovative"<sup>iii</sup>. In establishing fiction as its epistemological ground, the novel gained in social centrality as it specified the pathways which relate literary and social forms. When Fielding wrote *Tom Jones* in 1749 he could call himself with some justification "the founder of a new province of writing..."(quoted in Kundera, 2007, p. 6). Fielding thus set out to provide "a quick and sagacious penetration into the true essence of all the objects of our contemplation" (ibid. p.8). Whilst Fielding felt he could very much make up his own laws in this 'new province of writing'; the novel quickly established itself as an indispensable tool to explore the various realms of reality. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the (even newer) discipline of sociology might be able to reveal the general laws by which human societies evolved, but the novel, it was claimed, was able to do this *and* show how these laws were fleshed out in human passion, psychology, and lived experience, thus yielding something more than a purely abstract or theoretical picture of society. This perspective, which Eagleton (2005) attributes to the period of George Eliot, seems to have underpinned much of the interest of organizational scholars in the novel as a tool to explore organisational realities (e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Knights and Wilmott, 1999).

Whilst not exactly stating it in these terms, Jameson would have little problem with the proposition put forward by theorists such as Moretti and Reid that the great realist novel was in effect a response to the French Revolution. As Reid (1993, p.3) suggested: "prose fiction had a particularly powerful role to play as social actor in constructing a discourse that rewrote the social body and cast social relations of post-revolutionary France into a language of family and sexuality." The realist novel can thus be seen as a cultural solution to a political problem: "In its thickness of social texture, it portrays a world so substantial - so richly, irresistibly *there* - that the idea that it could ever be radically altered becomes almost unthinkable" (Eagleton, 2005, p.99). Its espoused liberal ideals presuppose the possibility of some ultimate collective harmony and reconciliation as the operative goal or end of political action. This is in opposition to utopian thinking, which

presupposes a violent rupture with the current social system (for an elaboration see Böhm and De Cock, 2005).

Jameson worries that the traditional novel has committed itself far too readily to what he terms 'ontological realism': the deliberate confusion of that which is meaningful with that which exists. It hasn't imagined adequately what is meaningful precisely because it does not yet exist. How then, given our limited representational means, can we represent the world to ourselves in its state of late capitalism is the question Jameson asks himself. The pursuit of this question guides him in the direction of the Science Fiction novel, and more questions – "We can begin with a fairly crude way of formulating the problem: What can be said or shown in the figural (SF) narrative which it is impossible to encode in the psychological language of the realistic one? (Jameson, 2005, p.304)" For Jameson, the historical opportunities of SF as a literary form are intimately related to the paralysis of 'realist' literature. One of the most significant potentialities of SF as a form is precisely this capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our own empirical universe. The officially 'non-serious' or pulp character of SF is an indispensable feature in its capacity to relax the 'reality principle' which characterizes the traditional novel and makes that the SF novel can give us alternate versions of a world that elsewhere seems to resist even imagined change. Precisely because we can tinker with reality and take it apart like a radio set or a car engine, we enter "the realm of at least symbolic political praxis and change" (Jameson, 2005, p.308).

If we jump ahead a little and explore briefly the novels of PK Dick, we see that the very homemade, easy-to-read qualities and amateurishness of his fiction are supplementary to whatever they set forth to do on the level of content with respect to existing human conditions and institutions. His novels escape the requirements of coherence and consistency because they are 'out-there'; whatever they enact is not taken to be 'real'. Out of the glaring clichés of trash Dick makes for himself a set of messages, i.e. a language, just like somebody who puts together from separate coloured flags a language of signals according to his own judgement (Lem, 1984). In novel after novel he questions the reality of the world that his characters' percept systems report. Thus his readers are



left facing the question of what to do “with the bits and pieces of meaningless, puzzling, disappointing, even cruel and crushing fragments all around us that seem to be pieces left over, discarded, from another world entirely that did, maybe, make sense. The world of the future... is a construct in which there is no author and no readers but a great many characters in search of a plot” (Dick, 1995a, p.205-206).

## **Montage 2: The Future**

*The SF writer senses many stories from the clues of tangible reality around him, and does the rest; he talks for the objects, the clues... He places them in the future only for convenience; it is the placing of the story mostly in an imaginary world, but bound by small actual clues to this world, that drives him into expression... His story or novel is... a protest against concrete reality in an unusual way...He wishes to get down on paper all possibilities that seem important enough to him to be recorded and then at once communicate to others... The SF writer is able to dissolve the normal absolute quality that the objects (our actual environment, our daily routine) have; he has cut us loose enough to put us in a third space, neither the concrete nor the abstract, but something unique, something connected to both and hence relevant... (Dick, 1995b, p.72-76)*

*Everything now turns on the problem of the future... it will be clear in a moment how this problem sets vibrating the deepest existential concerns of Being and Nothingness at the same time that it generates its most dramatic language, its most eloquent pathos: my project is ‘a temporal form where I await myself in the future, where I make an appointment with myself on the other side of that hour, of that day, of that month. Anxiety is the fear of not finding myself at that appointment, of no longer even wishing to be there in the first place’. (Jameson, 2004, p. xxx)*

*For it is the very principle of the radical break as such, its possibility, which is reinforced by the Utopian form, which insists that its radical difference is possible and that a break is necessary. The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this*

*by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break.” (Jameson, 2005, p.233)*

*‘You plan the future, you lose yourselves in reveries of economical systems derived from what is; whereas what’s wanted is a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life. That sort of future will take care of itself if you will only make room for it’. (The Professor in Conrad, 1907)<sup>iv</sup>*

### **Making a Break**

What seizes Jameson’s attention in Science Fiction<sup>v</sup> is the sheer possibility it offers of trying to figure a radical break with the present. In terms of figuration (i.e. images of a real future), Jameson believes, this attempt is bound to fail; but the very act of attempting such figuration makes us aware of the limitations of the present, and thus acts as a negative critique of it. This theoretical point is echoed in a somewhat rambling diary entry by PK Dick (1991, p.162):

“What I have shown – like the Michelson-Morley experiment – *is that our entire world view is false; but, unlike Einstein, I can provide no new theory that will replace it.* However viewed this way, what I have done is extraordinarily valuable, if you can endure the strain of not knowing, & *knowing you do not know.* My attempt to know (VALIS) is a failure qua explanation. But, as further exploration & presentation of the problem, it is priceless. &, to repeat, my absolute failure to concoct a workable explanation is highly significant - i.e., that in this I have failed. It indicates that we are collectively still far from the truth. Emotionally, this is useless. But epistemologically it is priceless”.

For Jameson, the vocation of utopia is precisely to confront us with our incapacity to imagine it. This idea is worked out in great detail in his magnum opus *Archaeologies of the Future*, a book which had a gestation period of some 32 years (Buchanan, 2006, p.114), and which Eagleton (2006, p.26) in his review hailed as “among the most stunning studies of utopia and science fiction ever produced”.

Once a dialectical materialist has identified those contradictions in the present which might eventually lead to its negation there cannot be much left to say. We cannot give the future realm of freedom a positive, determinate content since freedom has by definition no predictable shape. We cannot imagine an absolutely original future, since any imaginable future must be fashioned out of the tainted materials of the present. We can indicate what kind of political arrangements it would take to get history off the ground again; but we cannot predetermine what that history will look like once it is launched. This is then the fundamental anxiety of utopia: the fear of losing that familiar world in which all our vices and virtues are rooted (very much including the very longing for utopia itself) in exchange for a world in which all these things and experiences – positive as well as negative – will have been obliterated. Jameson (2005) suggests that all authentic utopias have felt (sometimes unconsciously) this deeper figural difficulty and fundamental anxiety and have tended to respond to its demands by avoiding representations of utopian life and by concentrating on explicating the particular utopia's essential enabling mechanism. Yet, this 'unknowability thesis' whereby a radically different society cannot even be imagined is a rather different proposition from the (liberal) anti-utopian one, according to which attempts to realize utopia necessarily end up in violence and totalitarianism (De Cock and Böhm, 2007). For Jameson, visions of happy worlds, spaces of fulfilment and cooperation, are simply representations which correspond generically to the idyll or the pastoral rather than the utopia. As he puts in bluntly: "The vacuous evocation [of utopia] as the image of a perfect society or even the blueprint of a better one are best set aside from the outset without further comment" (Jameson, 2005, p.72). The need for complete transformation renders utopia inconceivable (Borojerdi, 2007). Yet, the point of utopia is to force us "to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break" (Jameson, 2005, p.233), whilst acknowledging there is something fundamentally unrepresentable about such moments of radical structural change, of the break or the transition, in the first place.

Jameson's notion of utopia is close to that of Žižek's. Both insist we must imagine some form of gratification in the confrontation with the impossible and both advocate a passage

from impossibility to contingency, “that is, what appeared impossible, what did not belong to the domain of possibilities, all of a sudden – contingently – takes place, and thus transforms the coordinates of the entire field” (Žižek, 2006, p.77). We should thus conceive of ‘progress’ as a move of restoring the dimension of potentiality to mere actuality, of unearthing, at the very heart of actuality, a secret striving toward potentiality. Or, to put it in Deleuze’s terms, treat utopia as a ‘virtuality’, i.e. real without being actual (Buchanan, 2006). Žižek gives us a hint of how this dimension of the Real can manifest itself in immediate everyday reality. What matters in the example is the *appearance* of reality to the people and the hopes it awakened, not the temporal dimension of empirical history:

“During the shooting of David Lean’s *Doctor Zhivago* in a Madrid suburb in 1964, a crowd of Spanish statists had to sing the “Internationale” in a scene involving a mass demonstration. The movie team was astonished to discover that they all knew the song and were singing it with such a passion that the Francoist police intervened, thinking that they were dealing with a real political manifestation. Even more, when, late in the evening... people living in the nearby houses heard the echoes of the song, they opened up bottles and started to dance in the street, wrongly presuming that Franco had died and the Socialists had taken power... This book is dedicated to those magic moments of illusory freedom (which, in a way, were precisely not simply illusory) and to the hopes thwarted by the return to ‘normal’ reality”. (Žižek, 2004, p.xii)

The ‘method’ of radical SF, if there is such a thing, is to confront the ontological gap on account of which ‘reality’ is never a complete, self-enclosed, positive order of being. It allows the subjunctive to shine through the indicative by suggesting in the very representation of events how they could have been, or might still be, different. How better to explore this further in the final part of the paper, than by turning to the writing of Philip K Dick which occupies three chapters of *Archaeologies*, and whom Jameson (2005, p.345) lauded as “the Shakespeare of Science Fiction”.

## Language and Reality in PK Dick

“The greatest incentive to write is that you can’t figure out the universe. And you keep trying to do it by writing about it. You can coerce it into making sense by writing a book that makes sense, but what happens is, your books don’t make any sense either” (Dick in an interview with Williams, 1986, p.98).

Philip K Dick’s writing embodies what Jameson sees as the supreme function of SF, the estrangement effect it creates “of our culture and institutions - a shocked renewal of our vision such that once again, and as though for the first time, we are able to perceive their historicity and their arbitrariness” (Jameson, 2005, p. 255). His novels are structured as a series of reversals designed to defeat the reader’s expectation that it is possible to discover what the situation ‘really’ is (Hayles, 1999). Dick summarized his approach thus in an essay, “I will reveal a secret to you: I like to build universes which do fall apart. I like to see them come unglued, and I like to see how the characters in the novels cope with this problem (Dick, 1986, p.2)”. In the midst of the many shifts in reality his characters experience, Dick awakens our fears, shaking our complacent acceptance of the commonplace world as we think we know it. For example, in the novel *Ubik* (Dick, 1962) information spontaneously intrudes into the world of the characters, indicating that their world is not what they think it is; in fact, it indicates that their world is not even there at all – some kind of world is there, but not the one they are experiencing. The characters never stop trying to make sense of a reality that grows progressively harder to grasp, but their efforts are doomed to failure. In novel after novel we are confronted with this ontological vertigo. As Burt (2008, p.24) explained in a review of re-issues of Dick’s novels by the Library of America: “If you accept the Official Version, you will never know what’s really going on; once you step outside it, you will never know either, since nothing can falsify the hypothesis that everything is fake”.

Although for Dick there can be no single, final reality, there is little pessimism in the endings of his novels when compared to the facile pessimism of the literature of despair. They always hold the promise of a different, unknowable future. Dick’s worlds are worlds in motion where destinations are never reached, where utopia is never achieved, but somehow a space is created for new possibilities (Warrick, 1983). He rips open the

fabric of society and reality, dissolving them into grotesque configurations, so that anything seems possible but nothing seems quite right (Best and Kellner, 2003). Badiou (2006, p.55) could have been describing what is at stake in Dick's project when he suggested: "Instead of differing over the conditions of realizing a possible, what is at stake now is the very creation of a possible. This can only be created, it must be admitted, with the resources of that which is generally not admitted into the realm of the possible".

Dick, if anything, was a seeker who searched not for definitive answers to dilemmas but for ever expanding possibilities, and the materials allowing him to do this often came from both other worlds and other times. Throughout his novels there is an awareness of collected parts that are building up to something never reached, because to reach it would be to deny the transitory nature of the work and impose a fixed view. Not surprisingly then, his novels are notorious for lacking proper endings. Nothing can be said to be really concluded: having laid out the essentials and presented them to us, Dick "concerns himself with wrapping up his production as expeditiously as possible. The action... can hardly be said to be complete... but the book has somehow been ended" (Jameson, 2005, p.312). Dick very much felt the impossibility of the novel as form, because it aims at a linear representation of a reality which to him did not seem linear at all: "I really didn't think much of the conventional novel structure... that you have the viewpoint character that must subsume all others... (Dick in Williams, 1986, p.74)." What Dick wanted to represent in his work was the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities which make up reality.

### **Against the Day?**

"As nights went on and nothing happened and the phenomenon slowly faded to the accustomed deeper violets again, most had difficulty remembering the earlier rise of heart, the sense of overture and possibility, and went back again to seeking only orgasm, hallucination, stupor, sleep, to fetch them through the night and prepare them against the day" (Pynchon, 2006, p.805).

One of Dick's most important stylistic innovations, that of a 'nostalgia for the present' (where the present "is transformed into a distant past by a future perspective whose true function and reason for being is merely and precisely to be the operator of just such a shift in tense perspectives"; Jameson, 2005, p. 382) is a particularly useful way of thinking by form, of thinking in and through narrative, in this respect. It does not mean to suggest we are simply nostalgic for our own present time; rather, it suggests we are nostalgic for the 'presentness' of lived time which seemed to be 'present' in our past. This is of course a theme taken up by various thinkers in recent years (cf. Rehn & Vachhani, 2006). Taussig (2006) emphasizes in his work the strange doubling of being part of something yet distant from it too; of being immersed in an experiential reality and being outside that experience: "the mark of modernity is made up of a consciousness so prone to rapid processing of stimuli that it undermines both memory itself and the ability to experience" (p.63). Our present time is one of unending anticipation where "what-is-to-be-gained empties what-is" (Berger, 1980, p.108). Badiou (2006, p.36) elaborates: "This is our problem in a nutshell: how are we to identify, inside and beyond ourselves, the infinity of a present? For what we are given by way of a present is only a perpetual instant of absence, of purchasable enjoyment measured out in millimetres". The switch of perception to our present as the past of a determinate, albeit fantasized future, gives us back a literal history of the present. This defamiliarizes and potentially restructures our perceptions of our present which, in important ways, has somehow become curiously inaccessible to us. PK Dick thus offers us a perverse and timely instrument for grasping the present as history in a situation in which we also suffer from the hollowness of our own present. Dick hoped that he somehow could fulfil a role analogous to that of Abendsen, a character in his counterfactual novel *The Man in the High Castle* (Dick, 1962), for his readers: to alert them that the consensual reality that grimly governed their daily lives might not be as impregnable as it seemed (Sutin, 1995). To do this he had to struggle with the stubborn structure of language while believing in its ability ultimately to achieve some change or to affect some awakening from the capitalist dream (Pierce, 1983). As Dick makes reality fade out into the range of its own possibilities, the reader of Dick's novels may thus begin to uncover what hitherto had remained concealed in the very world now refracted in the mirror of possibilities, thus exposing it as a trap. Both in

terms of purpose (help us to think in a way that allows us to believe another world is possible) and method (a ‘history from below’ in which every detail of life counts, nothing is to be forgotten) we can trace significant similarities here to Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades* project<sup>vi</sup>.

In short, we can say that Dick in his science-fictional world-building has rendered monstrous aspects of the contemporary world. He thus very much gives us homeopathy (‘treating like with like’)<sup>vii</sup> rather than antidote. His writing evokes Benjamin’s (1940/1999) *Angel of History*<sup>viii</sup>, only the angel now stands in an imaginary future and its face is turned back towards the present (the angel’s history). Whilst we see in our present chains of events with their own logic and explanations, the angel sees catastrophe, a pile of debris that grows incessantly (Lucero-Montano, 2004). Dick very much believed that we can (re-)discover the ‘presentness’ of our present in the insignificant and the debris; the unknown/forgotten side of reality that can rise when viewed from the future. As he put it: “We must search particulars, the weeds & debris of the alley; the answer is *there* (1991, p.162)”. It is the unfulfilled potential in our fictional ‘past-present’ (the present as recollected from an imaginary future) that give us insight into the possibilities of our historical present – possibilities which often seem to be lacking altogether. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p.325) argued persuasively in this context that it is precisely such a perspective – “the possibility of projecting a point in time in the future and taking up position there, in a kind of thought-experiment” – that is the precondition for the macro-descriptions of sociology, which they conceive of as “a history of the present”. The PK Dick reader’s experience of the ‘present’ from a future perspective can be thus seen as the condition of insight into the historical present as one that does not exhaust the potential of reality. This constellation of present and future in Dick, again, mirrors Benjamin’s constellation of past and present. Hope becomes historically actual in a “time filled by the presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*)” (Benjamin, 1940/1999, Thesis XIV, p.252-253). Dick’s ‘nostalgia for the present’ then is precisely what might expose the febrile sterility of our world and help us think that all important break that concerns Jameson. Rather than conclude the paper, I would like to ‘wrap up’ by giving Fredric Jameson one last opportunity to wax lyrically about the power of Science Fiction:



“No way to burst through into the future, to reconquer difference, let alone Utopia, except by writing yourself into it, but without turning back. It is the writing that is the battering ram, the delirious repetition that hammers away at this sameness running through all the forms of our existence (space, parking, shopping, working, eating, building) and pummels them into admitting their own standardized identity with each other, beyond colour, beyond texture, the formless blandness that is no longer even the plastic, vinyl or rubber of yesteryear. The sentences are the boom of this repetitive insistence, this pounding on the hollowness of space itself; and their energy now foretells the rush and the fresh air, the euphoria of a relief, an orgasmic breaking through into time and history again, into a concrete future” (Jameson, 2003, p.77).

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## NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> Jameson completed a PhD on Sartre at Yale in 1959 and he wrote the foreword to Sartre's (1976/2004) recently re-published *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.
- <sup>ii</sup> One should be careful not to conceive of literature as simply providing us with some documentary access to ideology. As Eagleton (1976, p.185) eloquently argued: "Literature is a peculiar mode of linguistic organisation which, by a particular 'disturbance' of conventional modes of signification, so foregrounds certain modes of sense-making as to allow us to perceive the ideology in which they inhere... It is because its 'unreality' licenses a more-than-'natural' flexing and compacting of senses that we are made to see (and tempted to accept) the versions of historical reality it offers".
- <sup>iii</sup> The exploration of this relation would later become the aim of Iser's (1993) work. As he succinctly put it: "The literary text is a mixture of reality and fictions, and as such it brings about an interaction between the given and the imagined. Because this interaction produces far more than just a contrast between the two, we might do better to discard the old opposition of fiction and reality altogether, and to replace this duality with a triad: the real, the fictive and what we shall henceforth call the imaginary (p.1)". For a further discussion of Iser's work in the context of OS, I refer the reader to De Cock and Land's (2006) essay.
- <sup>iv</sup> Quoted in Chapter 4, of Conrad's (1907) *The Secret Agent*:  
<http://www.bibliomania.com/0/0/15/27/frameset.html>
- <sup>v</sup> Perhaps I should clarify at this point that the SF texts that Jameson concentrates on (and which underpin the argument of this paper) come within a narrow band of fiction from 1960 to 1975, "an exceptionally creative period for radical utopian SF," as Borojerdi (2007) points out in his review of *Archaeologies*.
- <sup>vi</sup> Coetzee (2007, p.58-64) provides an excellent summary in his review of the English edition: "The great innovation of the Arcades project would be its form... it would work on the principle of montage, juxtaposing textual fragments from past and present in the expectation that they would strike sparks from and illuminate each other... The Arcades book, whatever our verdict on it – ruin, failure, impossible project – suggests a new way

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of writing about civilisation, using its rubbish as materials rather than its artworks: history from below rather than from above”.

<sup>vii</sup> In 1796 the German doctor Samuel Hahnemann introduced a different approach to healthcare which he labelled ‘homeopathy’ (from the Greek words meaning ‘similar suffering’). The homeopathic way is to give the patient a minute dose of a substance , such as for example coffee, which in large doses causes negative effects (e.g. sleeplessness) in a healthy person.

<sup>viii</sup> “This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Benjamin 1940/1999, Thesis IX, p.249). The Angel denounces the establishment of a continuity in history, because the only evidence of that continuity is that of horror, and the Angel has to do with salvation and redemption (Tiedemann, 2002). This notion of redemption also applies to Dick’s oeuvre (cf. De Cock, 2001). Particularly in his later novels such as, for example, *VALIS* (1981/1992 – VALIS is a mysterious intelligence which is the source of divine revelations), Dick indeed “establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of now’ [Jetztzeit] which is shot through with chips of Messianic time” (Benjamin, 1940/1999, Thesis XVIII A, p.255).