



## **THE ALTERNATE HISTORY OR EARTH AS IT MIGHT BE, MIGHT HAVE BEEN OR SHOULD HAVE BEEN**

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To a broader extent, science consists not only in a set of laws and procedures based on a certain epistemology but also in a belief in the unchangeability of accepted fact. That is why, by deviating from the historical fact or by deliberately denying it – which leads to a different world – the science fiction author creates an alternate history.

### **History vs. alternate history**

In a study devoted to geological time, Stephen Jay Gould states that history uses an essential concept – “time’s arrow”, according to which “history is an irreversible sequence of unrepeatable events” with “linked events moving in a direction” (Gould, 1987:10-11). When writing history, historians find the connections between the events using the cause-effect relationship, often structuring the events according to the literary pattern, as Hayden White suggests:

[...] the historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle, and end (White, 1973: 7)

In the same way as fiction does, history requires imagination and ingenuity from the one who writes it. The historian cannot be thoroughly objective because, just like the author, he gives the events he analyses his own interpretation. The past and the present are different but linked together since the present is the result of everything that has happened so far. Obviously, the best way to discover the true nature of the connection between the past and the present would be travelling to the past and alternate histories rely on this very urge to know firsthand the events that have marked the evolution of humankind.

Alternative histories are an original way to rewrite history. Their authors resort to a combination of real and invented history, starting from an event known from eyewitness accounts, letters, and other primary sources, and adding fictional characters and events to it. The difference between what really happened and the alternate history is the one that creates tension and keeps the reader’s attention focused.

Of the four broad models of history - eschatological, genetic, entropic, and teleological (Hellekson, 1998: 3), it is the genetic one that alternate histories particularly explore, being concerned with the genesis of history, its origin and development. They change the present by changing the past, rewriting history and reality, influencing our way of understanding them. Alternate histories speculate on the nature of history and causality, the nature and linearity of time, the individual’s role in shaping history, and rephrase the

traditional concepts of time and space, questioning the classical notions that history works with.

### **Historical novels vs. alternate histories**

Although both historical novels and alternate histories strive to recreate the atmosphere of a certain era, being extensively populated by characters that belong to that time, alternate histories can include a time traveller who goes back in time to witness a crucial event.

While historical novels attempt to describe the events as they really happened, alternate histories change the historic truth, allowing the reader to organize by himself the past, the present, and the future by constantly resorting to real history. Thus, the cause-effect relationship will be suspended until the author has decided to reveal the moment which has determined the rewriting of history. Therefore, historical novels describe the world as it is; alternate histories describes the world as it might be, as it might have been, or as it should have been, answering the question, “If all things are possible, if all gates stand open, what sort of world will we have?” (Silverberg, 1973: 6)

### **Types of alternate history**

According to William Joseph Collins, there are four types of alternate histories: the pure “uchronia”, which implies an alternate history alone without allowing for any other reality; the “plural uchronia”, which places the alternate reality next to that of the reader’s; “infinite presents”, or parallel worlds stories; and “time-travel alteration,” which has travellers moving from their present to the past to change events (Collins, 1990: 85-6). On the other hand, Karen Hellekson divides alternate histories into three categories: the nexus story, which includes time travel/time policing stories and battle stories; the true alternate history, which can include alternate histories that posit different physical laws; and the parallel worlds story (Hellekson, 1998: 7).

As one can easily see, Collins conceives his taxonomy starting from the subject’s position, while Hellekson takes into account the moment of the break. To her, nexus stories occur at the moment of the break, the true alternate history occurs after the break, while the parallel worlds story implies that there was no break. Since alternate histories query historic concerns about time, including the notion of sequence that is characteristic of the concept of time, we find Hellekson’s division much more appropriate for its approach.

The **nexus story** is an alternate history that focuses on a crucial moment in history, such as a battle or assassination. This crucial moment is radically changed by time travellers who are sent to the past by a chronocracy which controls time to its own advantage or to the advantage of the people it rules. The chronocracy is placed somewhere in the distant future, when humankind is supposed to have discovered how to gain control of time, and alters key events, often pinpointed by a computer, in order to bring about the desired result. One example is Isaac Asimov’s *The End of Eternity* (1955), in which Earth is ruled by a chronocracy that carefully structures events in order to avoid loss of life, only to discover that the people so ruled can no longer evolve.

Sometimes the chronocracy is made up of representative of the clergy, as in John Brunner’s *Times without Number* (1969), in which history is controlled by a Society of Time, or in Nancy Kress’s “And Wild for to Hold” (1991), in which the main role is played by the Church of the Holy Hostage, a body charged with removing key figures from time and holding them hostage in order to reduce loss of life.

All these narratives, as well as many others of the same type, foresee the downfall of chronocracy, a self-destructive mechanism after all, coming to the conclusion that it is much better to leave history to its own devices. On the other hand, nexus stories which

start from a decisive battle centre on military strategy and warfare and are influenced by the theory of the elites, the few chosen to influence the destiny of the planet. The characters are often taken from real history, as in Harry Turtledove's *The Guns of the South*, in which General Robert E. Lee changes the course of the Civil War in the States.

The **true alternate history** describes Earth after a hypothetical alteration of history and claims that such an alteration causes a chain reaction which culminates in a world which is completely different from the one we know. Brian Aldiss's *The Malacia Tapestry* (1976) imagines an Earth populated by intelligent humanoid dinosaurs, while Harry Harrison's Eden trilogy (*West of Eden*, 1984, *Winter in Eden*, 1986, *Return to Eden*, 1988) posits humanity living in a world dominated by dinosaurs which are well-acquainted with the secrets of biotechnology.

A variant of this type is the one that suggests an alternate science. In Philip José Farmer's "Sail On! Sail On" (1952), for instance, Roger Bacon is embraced by a Church that sponsors scientific research, their cooperation resulting in an order of scientific religion called the Rogerians. Similarly, the world in Richard Garfinkle's *Celestial Matters* (1996) has a radically different scientific understanding of reality. Ptolemy's conception of the universe as a series of concentric crystal spheres is a fact, as is the music the spheres generate, and Aristotle's ideas regarding biology and physics are also true (doctors inject characters with different sorts of humours in order to stabilize their bodies).

**Parallel worlds stories** describe a number of alternate histories that exist at the same time. In general, protagonists can move between these parallel worlds or at least find a way to communicate with the inhabitants of these worlds. When they are in a parallel world, they can find love or fulfil the dreams that were denied in their own world. But when someone from another world visits them, their life is jeopardized or even destroyed. The existence of parallel worlds assumes that history can change at almost any point, no matter how apparently insignificant. Given the linearity of time, all events in parallel world stories are simultaneous and the worlds contain absolutely all their consequences. In some cases, the parallel worlds are almost identical, as in Robert Silverberg's "Travellers" (1974). In other cases, two parallel worlds occupy the same space, as in Gordon R. Dickson's "The World of Illusions" (1955), or two eras in Earth's history are placed next to each other (Fred Hoyle's *October the First Is Too Late*, 1966).

The puzzles of quantum physics are also explored in stories about an infinite number of parallel worlds which include Earth's all possible histories and all physical universes. The idea that the universe as we perceive it is just one of the manifestations of a multiverse can be found in Richard C. Meredith's *At the Narrow Passage* (1973) and Frederick Pohl's *The Coming of the Quantum Cats* (1986), in which the versions of the same characters go along different time lines.

### **The Man in the High Castle**

The most celebrated of alternate histories (Malmgren, 1991:149), Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) describes a 1960s United States which, losing World War II to the Axis powers, has been partitioned into two rival zones, the West Coast under the comparatively benign occupation of the Japanese (the Pacific States of America) and the East Coast under the brutal domination of pathological Germans, with a buffer zone between them. The USA has come to look like this because of several radical political and military changes of history: on the one hand, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was assassinated in 1933 (the bullet that missed him in February 1933 in Miami did no longer miss the target) and so he could not put an end to the economic crisis spreading throughout the country, which allowed the Axis powers to invent the atom bomb before the Americans

did and win the war; on the other hand, during the Battle for Britain in 1940, Hitler ordered the German Air Force to bomb the British radar stations and not the British cities, as it happened in reality, and thus the Germans won the famous battle.

The inhabitants of the America in Dick's novel, those living in the Japanese sector in particular, seem to be influenced by two books, a Chinese one (*I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*), by which its reader can understand the present, anticipate the future, and act accordingly, and an underground best seller written by a certain Hawthorne Abendsen – *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* – which one of the characters describes as “an interesting form of fiction possibly within the genre of science fiction”, adding, “Many well known science fiction novels” deal with an “alternate present”. (Dick, 1962:103-104)

In the alternate present of Abendsen's book, the Axis powers have lost the war to the Allies and, at first sight, the world described by Abendsen seems to be the one that Dick's readers know very well. There are, however, significant differences such as the race issue. “In the USA,” Abendsen writes, “the colour problem had by 1950 been solved ... World War Two had ended discrimination.” (Dick, 1962:149) Also technological information is given away to the whole world, the less privileged inhabitants of the planet benefiting from a real post-war Pax Americana.

Abendsen's America is not perfect but it is somewhat closer to utopia than Dick's, acting as the “mirror imagine” (Robinson, 1984:43) of the latter. As the author of a subversive book, Abendsen realizes the danger he is in and, according to rumours, he has surrounded his hilltop house (lying in the buffer-zone), or “high castle,” with defensive fortifications. He is, then, “the man in the high castle.”

Dick's novel has four major characters (Mr. Tagomi, Robert Childan, Frank Frink, and Juliana Frink), each of them the protagonist of their own plot, each of them placed on a different level of power in the political system of San Francisco, as Darko Suvin points out: Mr. Tagomi, a representative at the Japanese Trade Mission, is on the highest administration level; Robert Childan, the owner of a store that sells antique Americana to collectors, is on an intermediate level occupied by Americans collaborating with the Axis government; Frank Frink, who has just been fired from a company specializing in fake Americana, is on the lowest level, of powerless Americans who have no dealing with the Japanese rulers; Juliana Fink, who has separated from her husband, is outside the system. (Suvin, 1975:10)

Mr. Tagomi is a man of solid ethical principles, well-mannered, devoted to Japanese values but also interested in American civilization. Allergic to everything that means Nazism, Mr. Tagomi is saddened by the American collaborationists' aping fascist attitudes and, generally, by the Americans' giving up their traditional values too easily, never opposing the occupation. More than that, Mr. Tagomi takes the responsibility of defending American symbols in front of the Germans.

Mr. Tagomi, however, is not a singular case within the caste that runs the Japanese sector. The Japanese regime is more concerned with stimulating trade, its functionaries being famous for not accepting any kind of bribery, treating the Americans more like partners than anything else. On the other hand, now the yellow skin has become a sign of power, the white Americans being forced to survive without the racial privilege they have grown accustomed to.

Despite the rigours of diplomacy, Mr. Tagomi and his colleagues despise their German counterparts deeply, an attitude which is more than justified when they find out the true intentions of the Nazi leaders in Berlin: “Operation Dandelion,” that is launching a nuclear attack on the Japanese islands and the Reich's subsequent take-over of the possessions of the Japanese Empire.

The contrast between Japan and Germany plays a very important part in Dick's novel. While Japan has left behind its sanguinary militarism and has created a semi-liberal

commercial capitalism that in many ways resembles that of 1962 America, the post-Hitler Nazi hierarchy has remained intact and preserved its terrorist nature. The mass murder of the Jews has been nearly completed, other projects (massively reducing the Slavs, depopulating Africa, etc.) being under way. Germany is also pursuing a very ambitious space program and is widely admired as the world's technological leader in both military and civil matters. Although Dick does not describe the German sector of the USA directly, the reader learns from the characters that the Americans who live on the East Coast are the victims of a totalitarian regime in which the will of the secret police is almost absolute.

The social and political differences between Japan and Germany come, according to Carl Freedman, from a "cultural and ideological opposition: an opposition in which Germany and Japan function, at least in large part, as instances of the Western and Eastern value systems generally." (Freedman, 2000:170) The Eastern way, with its stress on fate and non-utilitarian wisdom, found in *I Ching*, the book which the Japanese and the sympathetic American characters frequently consult, but not the Germans, is moderate and humane. The Western way relies on the principle of will and domination (a principle that the very name of Operation Dandelion alludes to, the dandelion being the flower that constantly expands its dominion), of expansion and imperialism, fatally choosing the verb "to do" and leaving the verb "to be" to the Easterners. (Freedman, 2000:171)

Geographically lying between the East and the West, between Asia and Europe, and thus belonging irrevocably to neither of them, America is part of the Western civilization and in the early 1960s it was the most powerful nation of the West, having about the same position as Germany in Dick's alternate history. Besides, at that time the USA started its long war against Vietnam, a more than obvious manifestation of its expansionist tendencies. In this context, Dick's novel can be seen as a plea for the author's country to abandon the principle of will and domination and take up the Eastern one, that of tolerance and understanding. The terrifying picture of a divided America thus makes *The Man in the High Castle* a "petition not only against genocide but against national suicide too." (Freedman, 2000:173)

A character like Robert Childan, after all, a collaborationist and Nazi in the making, does support Dick's warning, showing that America has its own extremists. Living at his compatriots' expense, mean, stingy, and vulgar, Childan goes so far as to speak English the Japanese way. Anti-American and anti-Semitic, he slowly loses his identity and changes into an instrument meant to sap the identity of his own people.

One cannot say the same thing about Frank Frink, an anti-hero and a victim of economic and political forces that he cannot understand. He is the average American, honest, anti-racist, whose attempt to open a small handicraft store is the first sign of a "new American renaissance, of a movement toward new creativity and moral health." (Freedman, 2000:177) What he does proves that the population of America is not completely enslaved and feeds the hope that changing the current value system is still possible.

The popularity of Abendsen's book is also hope-inspiring, the more so as toward the end the reader learns that this alternate history was written with the assistance of the *I Ching*. Having affinities with the "values of balance and wise passiveness" (Freedman, 2000:178), this best seller regenerates the Americans, awakening them to the possibility of an alternative to the Reich's hegemony.

The most impressive characters of *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* is Juliana Frink, though. Frank's ex-wife realizes that the world in Abendsen's novel is, in fact, the world that she belongs to: "He wants us to see it for what it is. And I do, and more so each moment." (Dick, 1962:238) Obsessed with the possibility of a "way out" (Dick, 1962:244)

of the status-quo, Juliana not only kills her Nazi lover before he can assassinate Abendsen, but then herself pays a visit to the author of the fascinating book.

Abendsen's house is not the legendary fortified castle. It is an ordinary middle-class dwelling whose owner, a follower of Oriental philosophy, does not want to carry a gun. Abendsen tells Juliana that his novel is based on the prophecies in the *Book of Changes* and Juliana, intrigued, finds from its pages that all the events in *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* are true because the Allies did win World War II.

If *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, the alternate history within the alternate history, describes "our own world" and, more than that, suggests a "way beyond the status quo", it is obvious that, as Freedman states, the "genre in which Abendsen writes may be more intellectually and politically serious than those wont to scorn it as cheap popular fiction could suspect." (Freedman, 2000:179) Seen erroneously by some as a genre focused only on a future that belongs exclusively to science and technology, science fiction proves by Dick's novel that the fundamental conceptual structure of the genre can also be preserved when the author provides an alternative to the present and a status-quo which are almost unbearable.

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### **Rezumat**

*Istoria alternativă este o specie a genului literar science fiction care răspunde la întrebarea „Ce s-ar fi întâmplat dacă istoria ar fi urmat un alt curs?” Spre deosebire de istoric sau de autorul unui roman istoric, cel care scrie o istorie alternativă modifică rezultatul unui eveniment real care a influențat decisiv istoria și analizează consecințele sociale, geopolitice sau industriale ale unei astfel de schimbări. În funcție de modul în care autorul se raportează la acest moment crucial, istoriile alternative se împart în mai multe categorii: istoria alternativă nexus, istoria alternativă propriu-zisă, istoria alternativă despre lumi paralele. Exemplul clasic de istorie alternativă îl constituie romanul Omul din castelul înalt (1962) al americanului Philip K. Dick.*

### **Résumé**

*L'histoire alternative est une catégorie du genre littéraire de la science fiction qui répond à la question : « Qu'aurait-il arrivé si l'histoire avait suivi un autre parcours ? » Par opposition à l'historien ou à l'auteur d'un roman historique, celui qui écrit une histoire alternative modifie le*

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*résultat d'un événement réel qui a influencé d'une manière décisive l'histoire et analyse les conséquences sociales, géopolitiques ou industrielles d'un tel changement. En fonction du mode par lequel l'auteur se rapporte à cet événement crucial, on distingue plusieurs catégories des histoires alternatives : histoire alternative nexus, histoire alternative proprement dite, histoire alternative des mondes parallèles. Le roman de l'américain Philip K. Dick, *Le Maître du Haut Château* (1962), offre l'exemple classique d'histoire alternative.*

### **Abstract**

*Alternate history is the species of science fiction which answers the question "What would have happened if history had taken another road?" Unlike historians or authors of historical novels, authors of alternate history modify the result of a real event which has decisively influenced history and analyses the social, geopolitical or industrial consequences of such a modification. Alternate histories fall into several categories, depending on the authors' relating to this crucial moment: nexus alternate history, true alternate history and parallel worlds stories.*

*The novel **The Man in the High Castle** (1962) by the American Philip K. Dick represents the classic example of alternate history.*