

Negotiating Subjectivity within Simulation: The Posthuman in Philip K. Dick's *Ubik*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to offer a reading of P. K. Dick's *Ubik* which investigates the possibility for a representation of posthuman subjectivity in the novel. The forming of a sustainable posthuman subjectivity occurs in the novel against the backdrop of what might be described in Baudrillardian terms as hyperreality. The use of Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality may not only guide the analysis towards uncovering the circumstances facilitating the emergence of posthuman subjects in *Ubik*, but also reveal an illustration of the dialogue between the postmodern and the posthuman positions. Ultimately, I contend that Dick's novel depicts the emergence of posthuman modes of subjectivity in a process which is facilitated by the context of hyperreality. This unexpected coincidence occurs through a positive, constructive interaction with the environment, bestowing, through symbolic exchange, sustainability to the inhabitants of unstable reality.

Keywords: Philip K. Dick, *Ubik*, posthumanism, hyperreality, subjectivity

Introduction

In Philip K. Dick's 1969 novel *Ubik*, the protagonist, stuck in a virtual reality and trying to make sense of it, is at one point described as "an ineffectual moth, fluttering at the windowpane of reality, dimly seeing it from outside" (ch. 10). This metaphor encapsulates one of the struggles central to Dick's works: to glimpse a reality always occluded by some seemingly insurmountable barrier. What are the means of crossing this boundary? What kind of observer has the capacity to see beyond the veil or recognize an illusion? The answer may lie in the creation of a new mode of subjectivity. If the *human* is a moth incapable of perceiving an authentic reality, then possibly a *posthuman* can—a being that is able to extend themselves onto the adjacent environment, gaining a multitude of diverse perspectives.

Katherine Hayles assesses the potential of Dick's novels to illustrate the involvement of cybernetics in the posthuman discourse:

Dick's narratives extend the scope of inquiry by staging connections between cybernetics and a wide range of concerns, including a devastating critique of capitalism, a view of gender relations that ties together females and androids, an idiosyncratic connection between entropy and schizophrenic delusion, and a persistent suspicion that the objects surrounding us—and indeed reality itself—are fakes. (161)

Ubik seems especially saturated with the theme of scrutinizing reality, however, as I will argue, the authenticity is not the ultimate point of investigation in the novel. Instead, it sets the stage for a broader question of what, if any, authentic subjectivity may arise in this virtual world of commodified objects.

In this paper, I shall embark on a posthumanist reading of Dick's *Ubik* supplemented with Jean Baudrillard's works. These frameworks help interrogate the presence and the characteristics of subjectivities which may arise in the novel's virtual world. While examining the construction of the simulation presented in the novel, I will be referring to the idea of hyperreality outlined by Baudrillard as it can guide the analysis towards uncovering the circumstances facilitating the emergence of posthuman subjects in *Ubik*.

The first step of the analysis will concern the perception of a virtual world as experienced by the protagonist, Joe Chip. His own transformation may reveal the shifting modes of subjectivity emerging from the virtual reality of the novel. A closer attention will be given to the objects themselves, as experienced by Joe Chip. Their status as real is interrogated throughout the novel's narrative, and, as I will argue, they reveal themselves as a part of a broader phenomenon of simulation analogous to Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. On this basis, I will try to identify modes of posthuman subjectivity emerging in this setting.

The final focus of my analysis will involve juxtaposing two characters in *Ubik*, Ella Runciter and Jory Miller, in a posthumanist framework. They represent consciousnesses which attempt to establish new modes of subjectivity, unbound by the self-perpetuating artifice of the simulation. By comparing their enterprises, I hope to demonstrate how they may serve as attempts at constructing posthuman subjectivity represented in Dick's work.

Terms

a) Hyperreality

In his earliest publications, Baudrillard focuses on the critical analysis of capitalism. Among other things, he claims that Marx misattributes the power of capital to production and that it is consumption instead. The capital is not generated by utility of the product or the labor but by "sign value"—a network of arbitrary social and political constructs inscribed onto the commodified objects that create an illusion of value. In turn these commodities generate the desire and thus a consumer. In a perversion of Kantian principles, people have become the means for the goal of consumption (*The System of Objects* 56). Thus, Baudrillard positions the human subject as subordinate to the objects—products of a commodified world. People are seduced and manipulated by their manufactured value. In this process "the individual is nothing but the subject thought in economic terms, rethought, simplified and abstracted by the economy" (*Critique* 133). The system of objects governed by signification reduces the subject itself to a sign.

In his later works, and especially in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard extends this process of signification to the whole of reality. In the essay "Simulacra and Science Fiction" he positions it as the third order simulacra, or "simulation simulacra: based on information, the model, cybernetic play. Their aim is maximum operationality, hyperreality, total control" (309). In this scenario, the whole of reality experienced by the subject and any object within it are saturated with the *sign value*. The network of signs can no longer refer to any materiality, but only to previous signs.

The signs become self-referential and self-generating. The subject which becomes enveloped in this system experiences what Baudrillard calls *hyperreality*. In these circumstances, Baudrillard sees the futility of any attempts at realizing the classical (western) notion of discerning reality. An objective material reality and freedom from the commodity are untraceable from the perspective of a human subject navigating through the network of signs.

Through the lenses of Baudrillard's hyperreality, a parallel can be drawn between his ontological model and the world depicted in *Ubik*. A significant portion of the novel takes place in a technologically induced virtual reality experienced by the inhabitants of machines designed to prolong the brain functions of the deceased. However upon their revitalization these individuals do not retain the awareness of their situation. They have to gradually come to the realization that what they perceive is not the physical reality but a substitute, organized as a self-perpetuating chain of references and signs. The world depicted in the novel, as I will be arguing, bears the characteristics of Baudrillardian hyperreality.

b) Posthuman subject

Baudrillardian ideas expand upon the postmodern school of thought in 20th-century philosophy. One of the facets of postmodernism deals with diagnosing issues of subjects acquiring ontological knowledge and practicing signification in a world wherein the great narratives of the past and humanistic ideals of modernism are obsolete. They are substituted with power structures in which the autonomous subject is ensnared and dissolved. This crisis of truth is illustrated in Baudrillard's writings. However, he falls short of negotiating productive solutions to this issue. As Best and Kellner argue, in his later works Baudrillard moves toward "nihilistic cynicism" (112) and "aligns himself with a conservative tradition of passive and apologetic thought that envisages no alternatives to the existing order of society" (135). They further argue that the postmodern projects accurately discern a number of social issues but fail to find the solutions. This inadequacy generated a number of new critical movements, one of which was the concept of posthumanism. Similarly to how postmodernism arose as a critique of modernity, posthumanism aims to contribute to the discourse a response to the issues of subjectivity identified by the poststructuralists and postmodernists. It ventures to accomplish this by negotiating new models of subjectivity, based neither on the humanistic, autonomous individual, nor on the postmodern subject, pulverized by the system of signs. Instead, posthumanists strive for a move towards a dynamic, open subject. As such, posthumanism could be understood as both a critique and a continuation of the postmodern discourse.

Rosi Braidotti defines subjectivity from a standpoint of critical posthumanism as "a structural relational capacity, coupled with the specific degree of force or power that any one entity is endowed with" (*Posthuman Knowledge* ch. 2). This power should be understood as a dialectical negotiation with the other resulting in accumulation of knowledge. The entire environment surrounding the posthuman subject is both susceptible to being modified as well as capable of modifying the subject. This balance necessitates a sort of invitation towards the other; a willful immersion into the interconnected space. Whereas Baudrillard imagines the individual as enslaved

by the politicized environment, the posthuman thought outlines a dynamic, mutual relationship between the nodes of the network:

The posthuman subject is a radically new mode of subjectivity, characterized by heterogeneity, openness and variation... a cluster of complex and intensive... assemblages which connect and interrelate in a variety of ways. (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 16)

Instead of being limited by its bounded organism-barrier, it is open to its surroundings, indeed, it is its relationality with “what would be considered the bounded organism’s ‘outside’ or ‘other’ that constitutes this ex-centric, non-anthropocentric posthuman subject” (Sharon 152).

Therefore, the consciousness involved in these conditions is outside of the humanistic sphere and by extension, outside of the commodified system that would endanger it.

Toffoletti postulates that a posthuman subject can emerge “at the collapse of the relation between representation and reality” (3), referring to Baudrillard’s model of simulation. She describes “new formulations of the subject and fresh means of experiencing our surrounds through posthuman figurations. These entities are neither real nor imaginary, but products of a simulation order where dichotomies of value implode as the sign/origin relationship collapses” (2-3). Therefore, the third-order simulacra would provide ideal conditions for the emergence of such a subject, but at the same time it would not be bound by its rules. The arbitrariness of signs saturating the hyperreality would hold no power over a consciousness which rejects the entire taxonomy of real/signified. If, as Baudrillard models it, the third order simulacrum is not originating in materiality but in the sign-order, then such construction of subjectivity would be able to navigate through the hyperreality without falling prey to its illusion.

Following Toffoletti’s thesis that “to be posthuman is to construct a notion of self within a culture of simulation, virtuality and the digital,” and that “It is a new mode of existence by which the subject comes into being, as distinctions collapse between nature and artifice, self and computer, virtual and real” (28), one could argue that the world of *Ubik* is exactly the kind of environment that could facilitate the emergence of posthuman consciousness. Although Toffoletti states that “science fiction is no longer a legitimate mode of explaining the posthuman moment,” because, as she argues further, “the gap between the real and the imaginary is eroding, and along with it, the genre of science fiction founded on fantasy” (Toffoletti 32), this critique is not entirely accurate in the case of Dick’s fiction, because while his novels deal with the search for some authentic reality, they operate mostly on the narratives of clashing, conflicting and transforming simulations or hallucinations. In fact, it can be argued that *Ubik* especially concerns the question of how a posthuman subjectivity can realize itself and achieve agency over a simulacrum.

Joe Chip and the Simulacra

The plot of *Ubik* begins in a distant future of 1992. The novel follows Joe Chip, an “inertial” in a prudence organization run by Glen Runciter. Inertials are people able to negate psychic powers of telepaths. Runciter Associates employs people like Chip to

protect their clients from corporate espionage. Another piece of world-building revealed at the start of the novel is the institution of cold-pacs, where the deceased, frozen into a state of “half-life” may, in a limited capacity, communicate with the living.

Joe Chip, his partner Pat Conolly, Runciter, and a group of inertials are ambushed during an assignment on the Moon. A bomb explodes, apparently killing Runciter. However, as the team returns to Earth, a series of anomalous transformations of reality occurs: everyday items—like money, technology or consumables—begin to revert into older variants of the same objects. Soon, the entire reality shifts further and further back in time, while the members of the team spontaneously age rapidly and die one by one. Chip eventually discovers that it was Glen Runciter who survived the assassination, and the rest of the inertials, himself included, are kept in half-life, surrounded by a virtual universe that continuously degrades. To arrest that entropy, Joe attempts to acquire a mysterious product called *Ubik*. He is ultimately assisted by the consciousness of Ella Runciter, Glen’s wife, who is also a half-lifer. Together they uncover an entity who has been aging and destroying the other members of Joe Chip’s team—a half-lifer Jory Miller who tried to prolong his existence by feeding on the vitality of other inhabitants of the virtual world.

The half-life reality is related in the third person from Joe Chip’s point of view. His interactions with the simulated environment and his gradual transformation within it may be read as insights into the possible modes of relationships between the objects and the subject, as well as an investigation into what kind of subjectivity may emerge from this system.

After Joe’s transference into the virtual half-life, a strange process occurs in his immediate vicinity. Everyday objects begin to transform into older version of themselves. Cigarettes, electronics, buildings and vehicles are randomly replaced with their counterparts from previous decades. Eventually, this phenomenon encapsulates the entirety of Joe Chip’s surroundings.

Joe Chip tries to rationalize the process by referring to Plato’s theory of forms while observing one such disintegration, when a television set transforms into an antique AM radio: “But why hadn’t the TV set reverted instead to formless metals and plastics?.... Perhaps this weirdly verified a discarded ancient philosophy, that of Plato’s ideal objects, the universals which, in each class, were real. The form TV set had been a template imposed as a successor to other templates, like the procession of frames in a movie sequence” (ch. 10). Yet, it cannot be said that the cold-pac reality ever achieves those “universals,” since the regression gradually approaches the 1939,¹ and at times reaches 19th century. The nature of Plato’s ideal forms is supposed to be beyond time, but Dick seems to argue that the historical and cultural genealogy, or signification, is nondetachable from an object. This is why the TV set does not return into its base components. The physical reality does not matter in a world based on sign value. Even if it did, the ideal forms, in their abstraction, do not relate to any objective truths but to the human perspective: a person sees a TV set, and not its material composition. The

1 It is worth noting here that for the most part, with minor exceptions, the regression slows down on the 31st of August, 1939. Perhaps Dick tries to signal that the stable points of reference of reality were somehow destroyed by the World War 2, and everything after that—the post-war modernity—is already a self-accelerating illusion.

entire process of attaching a conceptual “ideal form” to an object is yet another layer of signification, further entangling it into the hyperreality.

One could see this description of a “template” as being in line with Baudrillard’s precession of simulacra: a hyperreality in which the sign is not generated by reality, but by yet another sign (Baudrillard, *Precession of Simulacra*). By that logic, the objects occupying the simulated world are of the third order of simulacra: they were constructed without labor and as such are signs that relate to nothing but themselves. Perhaps this is why they “revert”—falling ever deeper into their genealogical network of prior signs, looking for a stable, traceable origin and never finding it, surrendering the search at a distant, apparently arbitrary point in the past.

Trifonova provides one possible explanation of Baudrillard’s views which might be helpful in comparing *Ubik*’s world to the idea of simulacrum. She argues that the model of hyperreality does not operate on the basis of virtuality or the imaginary, as these would be “forces of negation whereas the pathological involution of the real in the hyperreal puts an end to negation.... The virtual/hyperreal results from a reversal of causality, the introduction of the finality of things at their origin, the accomplishment of things even before their appearance” (Trifonova). This “reversal of causality” is exactly the behavior exhibited by the cold-pac world in the novel: objects reverting, in their entropy, to their historical predecessors, previous forms, instead, as it would be the case within a more temporally logical change, into aged, deteriorated versions of themselves.

However, there is one element of the virtual world that runs against the principle of gradual decay. Throughout the novel, the human characters are stalked and killed, one by one, by a shape-shifting being, later revealed to be Jory Miller, who feeds on the vitality of his victims. While the objects undergo the aforementioned temporal reversals on the grounds of being a part of a decaying virtual world, the negative effects of Jory’s attacks on the persons trapped in there do not conform to the same pattern. People attacked by Jory age rapidly, become weak until perishing of old age, only then to be brought to the status of objects. They do not turn into their ancestors, or de-age, which suggests that in this simulation there exists some fundamental distinction between people and objects. Only the approaching death of consciousness begins to transpose the realm of the object onto them. The reader gets a glimpse at this process when Joe Chip is close to death:

It isn’t the universe which is being entombed by layers of wind, cold darkness and ice; all this is going on within me, and yet I seem to see it outside... Is the whole world inside me? Engulfed by my body? It must be a manifestation of dying, he said to himself. The uncertainty which I feel, the slowing down into entropy—that’s the process.... When I blink out, he thought, the whole universe will disappear. (ch. 9)

Joe Chip experiences a slow dissolution; annexation into the environment as impending death brings upon him the process of reification. Perhaps he considers the world to be disappearing with him based on the psychological notion that it is only the subject that can “experience” such disappearance. This would suggest that within the *Ubik*’s version of hyperreality, despite Baudrillard’s assessment of the dissolution of

the subject into the system of signs, there survives a vestige of subjectivity, revealed at the moment of death. Again, Trifonova notices that such a possibility exists in Baudrillard's model of simulacrum:

The de-realization of reality is the destruction of subjectivity but, as Baudrillard notes, the crime is never perfect. If the real is still preserved... as the trace of what has been murdered.... [I]ts destiny passes into the object. By subjectivizing or de-realizing the world, the subject has revealed its ability to appear and disappear... which is, in fact, the strongest proof that there is still a subject.... By disappearing, by eliminating itself as a point of view, the subject has proven itself even stronger and more real than Baudrillard might have expected. Subjectivity includes its own annihilation. (Trifonova)

Therefore the distinction between the world of objects and the subject can still exist in hyperreality, albeit hidden deep beneath layers of signification. The unfortunate thing is that for Jory's victims in the novel, this becomes apparent only after their life had been extinguished. However, there is still a chance for sustainable subjectivity in the simulation, but it necessitates a radical transformation away from the humanistic subject. If it were to be reformed into a posthuman consciousness, this subjectivity should be able to grow, emerge and plant itself *throughout* the hyperreality, overcoming it. This process is depicted in the novel as Ella's and Joe Chip's survival against Jory, and will be explored further in the next sections of this paper. However, even before that, the reader can distinguish an important change in Joe Chip's attitude towards his surroundings, when he attempts to stabilize the objects in front of him, acting against the process of regression: "'You are a spray can,' Joe said to the pasteboard container which he held in his hand. 'This is 1992,' he said, and tried to exert everything; he put entirety of himself into the effort" (ch. 16).

In what the narration calls "his final transcendental attempt" (ch. 16), Joe transforms from a passive observer, being led deeper into the world of reversed causal chains, to an active agent working to stabilize the simulacrum by extending and embedding his subjective perception onto the environment. He ostensibly establishes a transversal relation between the subject and the object, using the pronoun "you" to refer to objects, as if his will made it possible for him to transgress the ontological barrier between the human organism and a piece of matter. Joe Chip, in this state approaches a form of a relational, posthuman subject as outlined by Braidotti in *The Posthuman*: "a subject that works across differences... but still grounded and accountable" (49). However, Joe Chip cannot accomplish his goal in separation from the system of signs, so the object of his agency also becomes the catalyst facilitating this generation of reality. It is the eponymous substance—Ubik; a commodity which also undergoes a transformation of its own.

Ubik—Commodity/God

Already at the beginning of the novel, before the characters even enter the cold-pac virtual reality, Dick paints a picture of a world that is ostensibly commodified in a fashion reminiscent of Baudrillard's characteristics of hyperreality. The line between

the subject and the object is blurred as everyday items in Joe Chip's life actively urge him to spend money. Coffee machines, news dispensers, even his apartment door, refuse to operate without compensation:

‘The door refused to open. It said, ‘Five cents, please.’
 He searched his pockets [...] ‘I don’t have to pay you.’
 ‘I think otherwise,’ the door said. ‘Look in the purchase contract.’
Sure enough; payment to his door for opening and shutting
 constituted a mandatory fee[.]
 ‘You discover I’ m right,’ the door said. It sounded smug.” (ch. 3)

A maintenance person reveals the value system of the 1992 reality through a judgment of Joe Chip's character: “Our department—in fact this entire conapt building—is now programmed against an extension of services and/or credit to such pathetic anomalies as yourself, sir” (ch. 3). The worth of a person, their status as *normal*, is defined by their credit capacity. In a manner closely resembling Baudrillard's evaluation of capitalism, the line between an active agent and an object is vanishing. Joe, even before his half death is exposed to a reality in which objects usurp a primary place in the societal hierarchy. This inversion of power echoes the already mentioned metaphor constructed by Baudrillard in which “[objects’] emphatic goal-directedness has very nearly turned them into the actors in a global process” (*System* 56). The agency of the objects in the real world of the novel foreshadows the hegemony of hyperreality in the half-life virtual world.

Moreover, the only goal of this mechanism is to further its saturation, by ensnaring the entire social dynamic into a mode of endless, empty transactions. Daniel Wyman may help us to connect this dynamic to the Baudrillardian simulacra, by noticing that it is the commodification of reality that initially strips Joe of his agency: “In *Ubik* Dick characterizes Chip by his inability to keep money, and opens with him arguing with his door, which threatens to sue if Chip won't pay for its services.... In this way, Chip's ability to act is constricted by money, and he is commoditized” (19). Capitalist system of value is in control, permitting only a degree of autonomy to the subject measured by financial wealth while at the same time generating autonomy of the objects. Commodities in Dick's novel invade spheres of life which are, in the western tradition of philosophy, excursively human. They appropriate language, agency, and finally, invert the order of the system: they become more autonomous while people such as Joe are commoditized.

After the explosion, when Joe becomes a part of the cold-pac virtual world, this mechanism is still present, although it assumes a different form within the narrative. The already established, decaying objects which populate the environment are also marked by the quality of a commodity. Especially so is a substance called *Ubik*. Glen Runciter, contacting Joe from the living world through a television screen, urges him to buy a spray can of *Ubik*, because it apparently serves as a deterrent against the all-consuming decay. His monologue takes the form of a TV commercial wherein he explains: “You see, world deterioration of this regressive type is a normal experience of many half-lifers.... A sort of lingering universe is retained as a residual charge, experienced as a pseudo environment but highly unstable and unsupported by any

ergic substructure.... But with today's new, more-powerful-than-ever Ubik, all this is changed!" (ch. 10). Runciter not only confirms the nature of the half-life world as an unstable facsimile of reality, but also presents a possible solution. However, he cannot explain how this "magic" product works, except for "by making use of the most advanced techniques of present-day science" (ch. 10). This advertorial mode of description accompanies Ubik almost every time it is mentioned. Four of the five epigrams presenting this substance in the novel are commercials praising, in vague terms, the virtues of the spray. As Poster notices, through these instances, "we are confronted with a culture permeated by commercials such that reality is sustained by them. People... are able to maintain their sense of reality only by imbibing commodity culture" (260). Therefore, presenting Ubik in this way makes it just as counterfeit as the objects it is claiming to stabilize. The only apparent value is bestowed upon it by the language of advertisement. This way of introducing this object into the world automatically bonds it to the realm of commodities and thus to the system of signs. At the same time, the vague, empty descriptors of Ubik do not position it in the realms of utility nor materiality. Its origins, or indeed essence are completely obscured if not nonexistent—a part of the same hyperreality that Ubik is somehow supposed to keep at bay. The commercialized Ubik promises only an illusion of salvation from the hyperreality. Poster sees in this process a reflection of a movement towards the posthuman:

With the multiplication and dissemination of increasingly advanced information machines, the earth has entered a posthuman era. Our society has done so under the general regime of commodity, which, at the cultural level, disseminates itself in the discourse of advertising. Dick's novel explores the Ubiquity of the ad and its relation to the formation of a humanity that is synthesized with information machines. (251)

In this view, the commodification of life is a factor (perhaps even a facilitating circumstance) in the emergence of the posthuman. However, while this hyperreality is the setting of the posthuman transformation, I argue that this transition may occur as a response to the "regime of commodity," and not in line with it. If we were to perceive Ubik as a synonym of a vital and positive—reintegrative—force, a force belonging to a post-humanist reality, even though it is presented as a commodity, this would suggest that Dick positions capitalism as an environment facilitating posthumanism while being critical of its artificiality. In the novel, this conflict does not go unaddressed.

Joe repeatedly fails to acquire Ubik through commerce. The substance is either too expensive, unavailable, expired, or taken away. Glen Runciter's commercialized salvation is fleeting if not downright unobtainable. Joe Chip, as an individual, is unable to overcome the simulacra while submitting to their capital-triggered structures. Then, when all hope seems lost, Ubik, the substance itself, undergoes a transformation negotiated by Ella Runciter, another half-lifer who assists Joe Chip.

Ella, at that point in the novel already being engaged in a posthuman mode of subjectivity (as I will explain in the next sections), helps the protagonist. She provides Joe Chip with a "lifetime" supply of the substance free of charge (ch.13). With this act she distances Ubik-substance from Ubik-product, thus severing the aspect of

commodity from the object. Hayles proposes that this transformation stands for Dick's admission of the failure of capitalist economy of signs, as the substance can only be understood in the context of what it stands against: the egotistical, exploitative actions of Jory Miller. Jory *consumes* his surroundings, and the now transformed Ubik deters his murderous spree. The critic writes: "Only after acknowledging this appetite (which must be understood as operating on the multiple levels signified by 'consuming') can the author discern, among the trashy surfaces of capitalist excess, the divine within the world" (Hayles 187). This reframing in the narrative pulls Ubik from the hyperreal feedback loop of signs, giving it a potential to create authentic points of reference.

By referring to an earlier work of Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, one can see this process as analogous to what he calls "Symbolic Exchange." It is a phenomenon in which a subject, through their own sacrifice, gifts an object to another person and through that exchange the object is detached from the system of signs. Baudrillard explains how in a symbolic exchange "object is not an object: it is inseparable from the transferential pact that is sealed between two persons... once it has been given—and *because* of this—it is *this* object and not another. The gift is unique" (64). In this process the arbitrary value of the object (stemming not from any material qualities or labor but from a general political economy) is invalidated. The network of signs that have been entangling the object is severed since "[w]hat is neither sold or taken, but only given and returned, no one 'needs'.... This is the metabolism of exchange.... In this domain, value isn't even recognized. *And desire is not fulfilled there in the phantasm of value*" (207). Symbolic exchange therefore becomes an abolition of "need" and leads to the destruction of the illusion of value.

Through this framework, one can initially position the Ubik spray as an object of consumption exemplifying the sign value (realized through the language of advertisement). However, the act of symbolic exchange initiated by Ella transforms Ubik by destroying its attachment to the commodified sign economy. With that transition, the manner in which Ubik is referred to also changes, from a register of advertisement to that of religious speech. No longer capable of expressing itself as a commodity, Ubik assumes a new voice in the final chapter of the novel: "I am Ubik. Before the universe was, I am... I am the word and my name is never spoken, the name which no one knows. I am called Ubik, but that is not my name. I am. I shall always be" (ch. 17). The substance becomes a god, no longer a purchasable product, but a divine, central being. It establishes itself as a narrative resurrection of what Baudrillard deems the lost "strong referential" (*Simulacra*), perhaps not yet "authentic," but symbolic in its counterfeit, capable of creating a reality that is not subservient to hyperreality. This shift outside of the value does not automatically make Ubik itself real, but according to Boon, Dick exposes in it the arbitrariness of commodities, thus stripping them of their illusory power over the subject: "For Dick, it is precisely the most obviously 'counterfeit' objects in the world that have potential ontological import, because their inauthenticity already contains a negation of conventional notions of authenticity and, as such, they are closer to the truth than those objects which human beings consider real or authentic" (73).

Through the adaptation of religious language, Ubik discards the pretense of value that the other, counterfeit objects in the simulation try to uphold, therefore

paradoxically becoming more authentic than any of them. Boon continues: “the pathos of Dick’s work lies in the way he is able to narrativize the struggle of any particular object—human or nonhuman—to overcome its status as a counterfeit in search of its own hidden truth” (81). This subversion of the perception of authenticity, opens up a possibility of creating *new* modes of being for a posthuman subject, establishing an independent perspective instead of relying on humanistic conventions.

Figurations of the Posthuman

The need for a departure from the conventional model of the subject has been one of the main goals of postmodern thinkers. Best and Kellner describe their aim to “decentre and liquidate the modern bourgeois, humanist subject which they interpret as a construct of modern discourses and institutions” (283). However, as they continue, “all postmodern theory lacks an adequate theory of agency, of an active self, mediated by social institutions, discourses, and other people” (283). Posthumanism attempts to construct ontologies surpassing the postmodern impasse by employing open, affirmative and dynamic ways of interacting with the world.

It may be the case that in reading *Ubik* one may find a representation of the discourse between postmodernism and posthumanism. In this section, two characters from the novel will be analyzed in order to evaluate their potential of representing a posthuman subject in hyperreality. Those will be Jory Miller and Ella Runciter, both of which exhibit a capacity to modify the simulated reality.

a) Jory

Throughout the novel Joe Chip is pursued by a malevolent entity, identified by the end as Jory Miller. He has been in the half-life state longer than any other character. He keeps himself alive by invading the cold-pac realities and consuming the vitality of other inhabitants. This antagonist exhibits some control over the simulated environment. Lacking a body, he becomes an ever present, invisible form, only revealing himself as a shape-shifter assuming the visages of his victims. His predatory drive towards immortality at the cost of others positions Jory as a being still enslaved to a desire for autonomy from others, yet interfering with their capacity to both live and die. As MacCormack notices: “posthumanities experiment with infinite life has led to some very irrational reasonings.... Virtual universes are corroded for the unconscious sublimation of alterity as annexed, incorporated and consumed as part of the hysteric drive for posthumanity” (136).

Therefore, Jory can be seen, in his selfish form of self-realization and attempts at immortality, as a being in a self-perpetuating loop of isolation which the simulacrum forces upon him. It can be argued that Dick created here a figure analogous to Baudrillard’s jogger: “[jogging] it is the pleasure not of pure physical exertion but of a dematerialization, of an endless functioning.... Making the body run soon gives way... to letting the body run: the body is hypnotized by its own performance and goes on running on its own, in the absence of a subject” (*Transparency* 47).

Jory institutes his subjectivity only as a means of egotistic gain, turning every interaction with another human into a vampiric exploit. Just like the jogger, his own

compulsion for survival makes his consciousness subordinate to that compulsion. He spirals into a vacuum of his own making and becomes a subject in relation to nothingness—since he devours any stable point of reference he encounters, leaving only a pre-world war facsimile of history—and an object, a vessel for his own self-perpetuating need for consumption. Ironically, this isolating, aggressive attempt at retaining subjectivity is what allows the simulation to gradually destroy it.

Joe Chip realizes that the regression of the universe is not entirely a result of Jory's will. While he struggles to stabilize the simulation for his own benefit, his power over the objects within it begins to wane: "He had constructed—not this world—but the world, or rather its phantasmagoric counterpart, of their own time. Decomposition back to these forms was not of his doing; they happened despite his efforts.... As the boy says, it's an enormous effort" (ch. 16).

Jory only maintains the *appearance* of being in control when in fact his power over the simulation is as fabricated as the objects he conjures. Despite his veneer of omniscience over the simulacra, he is as much subservient to the structures of hyperreality as his victims. By exerting energy to sustain a simulation without an authentic reference point, he becomes trapped in a prison of his own making.

b) Ella

The force opposing Jory, and guiding Joe Chip, is Ella Runciter, Glen's wife. While she coyly claims that the reasons for her assistance were "selfish, practical" (ch. 16), as she wants Joe Chip to take her place as an adviser to her husband, she also invites him to take up the mantle of the protector against Jory's predatory influence.

She, just like Jory, has the capacity to alter the virtual reality. However, while he utilizes it to manipulate and destroy its inhabitants, Ella partakes in a more productive form of creation. She moves against the capitalistic construction of *Ubik* in an affirmative direction, by providing the other inhabitants of un-dead virtual reality with the spray can for free, without engaging in its commercial mechanisms—something which her husband failed to accomplish or even conceive of, instead repeatedly urging Joe to buy *Ubik*.

Unlike Jory, Ella chooses to embrace death, believing it to be a way for reintroduction to reality through reincarnation: "Fairly soon I'll be reborn into another womb, I think" (ch. 16). This too may be seen as an expression of her becoming posthuman, when compared to Braidotti's observations: "in a posthuman perspective, the emphasis on the impersonality of life is echoed by an analogous reflection on death. Because humans are mortal, death, or the transience of life, is written at our core: it is the event that structures our time-lines... not as a limit, but as a porous threshold" (131). Instead of clinging to her half-life, Ella accepts death, however instead of seeing it as a dissolution of the subject, she uses it to *affirm* her subjectivity, claiming: "I don't think of myself as an 'entity,' I usually think of myself as Ella Runciter" (ch. 16). The "threshold," as Braidotti calls it, allows Ella to leave behind the commodified web of signs, and become a posthuman creative force. She establishes herself as capable of generating a new mode of existence in the simulation. She is conscious of her physical limitations, yet able to overcome the cold-pac prison. Thus proving herself a posthuman cyborg—embodied, female and adaptive.

If, as Hayles proposes, “in the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation” (3), then Ella and Jory would qualify as posthuman beings. They permeate the entire simulation, free to assume different avatars and to modify their surroundings, while their bodies inform their outlook towards death. In Jory’s case, it is a will to survive, realized by assimilating other inhabitants of the simulation and feeding of their vitality. For Ella, this interaction is reversed: she displays an emphatic motivation to save the other inhabitants connected to her in the virtual reality, while fully accepting death. She engages in the collective of half-livers, as well as the objects in the simulation (through *Ubik*).

In that sense, Ella is closer to a true posthuman subject, as outlined by Hayles to be “an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3). This stands as a radical departure from the liberal humanist subject, characterized by Hayles by following Macpherson’s analysis of possessive individualism as “owning nothing to society” and exhibiting “the human essence [that is] freedom from the wills of others” (3). Jory’s predatory, egocentric acts of destruction are done in order to make him self-reliant in the simulation, whereas Ella understands the futility of that solitary undertaking, and opens herself up to a mutually beneficial inter-connectivity with the whole of the simulation, stabilizing the world; offering *herself* as a point of reference from which a reality can be reconstructed. Ella is the embodiment of what Hayles sees as “a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being” (5).

The process in which *Ubik* becomes transformed occurs thanks to the symbolic exchange facilitated by Ella’s sacrifice or gift. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* Baudrillard expands on the implications of this phenomenon. According to him, the fundamental driving force behind the political economy is “the will to abolish death” (167), which is antithetical to the mechanics of symbolic exchange that necessitates or even embodies death or sacrifice. Baudrillard equates the idea of symbolic exchange to death as these two phenomena sever the connection of the object or subject respectively from the value assigned to them by the consumerist system. Therefore such an exchange is impossible within “this process of spiralling hoarding” (167). Because Jory creates the simulacra to feed and prolong his life, guided by an obsession over deferring death, he is only in control as long as his hyperreality stays impenetrable. However, the symbolic exchange between Joe Chip and Ella ‘breaks his spell’. By shedding the sign value of *Ubik*, and, as Hayles proposes, celebrating finitude, they overcome the impossible and are able to see through the realm of simulacra.

Conclusions

Hayles notes the capital-oriented dissolution of stable distinctions between the subject and the commodity in Dick’s mid-sixties novels: “Typically these are highly commercialized spaces in which the boundaries between autonomous individual and technological artifact have become increasingly permeable.... Given this dynamic,

it is no surprise that the struggle for freedom often expresses itself as an attempt to get ‘outside’ this corporate encapsulation” (162). The lines between the subject and its environment are dissolved in hyperreality, granting it the power to reshape it, but also opening them up to be consumed or transformed by the environment. Since the simulacra operate on abstractions, a subject embedded into this world faces the danger of being denied autonomous physicality, reduced to the same abstraction that surrounds them.

Dick utilizes an artificial labyrinth of white noise made of commodified signs and copies—the simulacra—leaving his characters with two options: either to stay lost, trying to navigate a space without an authentic point of reference, or explore a perspective that allows them to influence the environment and carve out their own exit. While it may not be possible to entirely escape hyperreality, the posthuman perspective may grant them the ability to recognize it for what it is, bestowing on them a capacity to overwrite the system of signs with emergent reference points.

However, it is important to make a distinction: this capacity is *not* a mastery over the world the posthuman subject inhabits, it does not come from an “illusion of control” which, in Hayles’s view would come from “ignorance about the nature of emergent processes through which consciousness... and the environment are constituted.” Rather, it is a “dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines” (288). Indeed, Joe, as a fully *human* subject is defenseless against the distorting, decentralized world of the half-live. Only the involvement of subjects permeating the simulation, such as Ella, facilitates his agency. By opening himself up to the transformative qualities of the Ubik spray—and negotiating a mode of existence outside of commodified sign system with Ella’s help—Joe is establishing this kind of partnership.

In the novel, the individualized beings are plunged into a (third-order) simulation. However, while for Baudrillard these are rather grim circumstances, inevitably leading to a dissolution of subjectivity in a temporally unstable oblivion, Dick goes a step further and proposes solutions to that crisis. As Sue Short states in her critique in *Cyborg Cinema*: “Baudrillard... appears to combine deterministic explanations of media power with SF fears about human identity being threatened by external forces, yet his work is notably devoid of any response other than resignation and apathy, asserting that ‘only fiction of a political universe remains’” (162).

Critical and philosophical posthumanism, in contrast, searches for alternative modes of subjectivity capable of overcoming this hopelessness. Similarly, Dick’s fiction does indeed focus on the internal and replicated, rather than exploration of the unknown, but within those simulated spaces, a new subjectivity *can* be discovered, formed as a posthuman, overcoming the simulation, emerging as new, despite the closed loop of self-reference. *Ubik* is an experiment in pushing the characters past the humanistic perception of (un)reality. The product of this reaction is a synthesis of a posthuman subject for whom the hyperreality is just as much an obstacle, as it is a catalyst for transformation.

Baudrillard proposes that a simulacrum is “never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (*Simulation 6*), and that “never again will the real have a chance to produce itself” (2).

In contrast to this grim synopsis, the posthuman ontological shift, as embodied by Ella Runciter, has the potential to ultimately overcome these limits, finding the “reference” through interconnectivity with other beings, and returning to the real by embracing death.

Yet, through Jory’s character, Dick warns: this transformation is not a given. Stirred into a vortex of desperate, consumerist preservation, it can just as well doom the undertaking. The transformation, then, cannot be done in a vacuum of ego. Dick seems to succeed at conveying the posthuman modes of perceiving and interacting with reality, as not equivalent to those of a classically understood liberal subject. Ella Runciter asserts her subjectivity through a positive, constructive interaction with the environment, bestowing, through symbolic exchange, sustainability to the inhabitants of unstable reality. Posthuman subjectivity necessitates an openness to the environment; a positive-sum game. The equation in Dick’s experiment is then alchemical: a posthuman, affirmative something, out of a postmodern, unreal nothing.

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