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# The Virtual Reality of Half-life in Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* as a Timeless Intermediate Possible World

## Introduction

Deliberating on Dick's 1969 novel *Ubik*, science fiction author and critic Stanislaw Lem states in "Philip K. Dick: A Visionary among the Charlatans" that Dick's fiction "throw[s] many readers accustomed to standard SF into abiding confusion", giving rise to complaints, "that Dick, instead of providing 'precise explanations' (…) sweeps things under the rug" (62). Another complaint is that Dick does not "play the part of a guide through his fantasmagoric worlds as he gives the impression of one lost in their labyrinth" (62). A scholar who criticizes *Ubik* on similar grounds is Darko Suvin. In "P.K. Dick's Opus: Artifice as Refuge and World View", Suvin sees *Ubik* as "a turning from a fruitful tension between public and private concerns toward (…) a corresponding concern with unexplainable ontological puzzles" (8). Suvin interprets *Ubik* as Dick's turning away from the natural, science-fictional horizons, to the fantastic and supernatural. Phenomena such as precognition, telepathy or half-life open the door to interpreting *Ubik* as a work of fantasy. Half-life is a virtual reality created for the deceased in cryonic suspension. Its purpose is to stave off the psychological degeneration of the mind in the absence of external stimuli by providing a reality surrogate. The novel is often criticized for venturing out of the accepted science-fictional tropes, seemingly abandoning real-world logic. Lem disagrees with such views stating that Dick's novels "in some measure violate the convention of SF", but this should be "*accounted to him as* merit; because they thereby acquire broadened meanings having allegorical import" (57). *Ubik* is a work of fiction. Suvin's demand that to be science-

fictional it should conform to the laws of the real world in full is too much to expect. Rather, it should strive for the highest level of logical coherence. Consequently, any explanation of seemingly inexplicable phenomena should be sought within the boundaries of its fictional world, as the following reading intends to show.

## Fictional realities of SF as natural possible worlds

Since this paper aims to ascertain whether *Ubik* is science-fictional or fantastic, Doležel's possible worlds theory is a good choice to achieve that end. To do so, the alethic modalities which govern the existence of fictional entities and objects within fictional worlds must be examined. Doležel explains their importance in *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*: "The alethic modalities of possibility, impossibility and necessity determine the fundamental conditions of fictional worlds, especially causality, time-space parameters, and the action capacity of persons" (115)[1]. Doležel lists two sets of alethic modalities. Codexal alethic modalities are "restrictions imposed on a world as a whole" (118). Unlike the previous, subjective alethic modalities are "[t]he sum of a person's physical, instrumental, and mental capacities"; often referred to as their "alethic endowment" (118). A character's alethic endowment is "normal when it corresponds to the human standard" or "hyponormal if the person suffers some deprivation" (118). If "a person's endowment, while not transcending the alethic conditions of the natural world, is above the standard", then it is "hypernormal" (118). Based on the analysis of alethic modalities, Doležel differentiates between two sets of possible worlds, the natural and the

supernatural: "If the modalities of the actual world determine what is possible, impossible, and necessary in the fictional world, then a natural fictional world is formed" (115). Realistic fiction is the most noteworthy example of fictional texts constructing natural possible worlds, generating "stories of the human condition" (117). However, if the alethic modalities "violate the laws of the actual world", then such texts construct "physically impossible, supernatural worlds" (115). Between the two opposites, there exists another type, the intermediate world bridging "[t]he alethic contrast between the natural and the supernatural" (117). These worlds are constructed by texts describing fictional experiences such as "[d]reams, hallucination, madness [or] drug-induced altered states" (117). As otherworldly as these experiences may seem, they are still "natural human experiences" although "physically impossible persons, objects, and events appear in these frames" (117). Much of the action in *Ubik* takes place in half-life, a technological simulation that can be recognized as an example of intermediate possible worlds.

Suvin defines science fiction as "*a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment*" (*Metamorphoses* 7-8)[2]. He argues for "an understanding of SF as the *literature of cognitive estrangement*" (4). It is estrangement which "differentiates SF from

the 'realistic' literary mainstream", whereas "[c]ognition differentiates it not only from myth, but also from the folk (fairy) tale, and the fantasy" (8)[3]. The worlds of science fiction are modelled by analogy to empirical reality: "The objects, figures, and (…) the relationships from which this indirectly modelled world starts can be quite fantastic (in the sense of empirically unverifiable) as long as they are logically, philosophically and mutually consistent" (29). Since both realistic and science-fictional texts construct natural possible worlds, one of the characteristics of realistic literature present in science fiction is the category of inventiveness. Kvas and Petrović use this category to explain how fantastic elements function in natural worlds: "[I]f a fictional world still functions the way we assume the real-world functions, and if this assumption is supported by natural laws, then the existence of fictional entities and events that are alien to the real world does not violate its coherence" (*The Boundaries of Realism* 17)[4]. If this demand is met, fantastic elements in either realistic or science-fictional texts cannot undermine their logical coherence and verisimilitude.

The "novum of cognitive innovation", the premise alternative to our reality any science fiction story is based on, is "a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's or implied reader's norm of reality" (Suvin, *Metamorphoses* 64)[5]. The effect this novelty has on the reader's reconstruction of the science-fictional world is "cognitive estrangement". The verisimilitude of a work of science fiction, because it is fictional, cannot depend on any concrete and purely scientific justification. The displaced reality of a science fiction work, since its purpose is to comment on our world, can only be

interpreted within the same "cognitive or scientific horizon" as the empirical reality (67). A similar novelty occurs in fantastic literature. The two genres differ because it is "impossible for SF to acknowledge any metaphysical agency, in the literal sense of an agency going beyond *physis* (nature)" (66). The world constructed by a science-fictional text is an "alternate reality, one that possesses *a different historical* time corresponding to different human relationships and sociocultural norms actualized by the narration" (Suvin, *Defined by a Hollow* 76). Warrick argues that constructing an alternative chronotope is a technique science fiction authors utilize to dislocate the readers. To facilitate cognitive estrangement, it is necessary to destroy "the reader's commonplace view of reality" (*The Cybernetic Imagination* 82-83). For his part, Jameson questions the human capacity to "imagine anything that is not *prius in sensu*, that is not already (…) derived from sensory knowledge" (*Archeologies of the Future* 120). Science fiction as an analogy to our reality should not be taken literally. It is impossible for every element of a science-fictional world to fully correspond to the real one. Even realistic literature cannot provide such a faithful representation of the actual world. The realia of science fiction "can only signify human relationships" as they exist or could exist in our reality (Suvin, *Defined by a Hollow* 76). Nevertheless, there are multitudes of works in science fiction incorporating supernatural impurities. This is possible due to the permeability of the boundaries separating the neighbouring types of possible worlds. The narrative is science-fictional as long as its novum determines "the overriding narrative logic" of the work "regardless of any impurities" (75). It is "this allegorical dimension", which connects science fiction with the

real world in a displaced fashion, that fantastic literature lacks, for its "medieval imaginary seems primarily organized around the omnipresence of magic" (Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future* 63). Jameson's words emphasize the fundamental predetermination in supernatural worlds, populated by supernatural beings and hybrid characters superior to humans. Jameson points out that cognitive estrangement enables science fiction "to continue a long tradition of critical emphasis on verisimilitude from Aristotle on" (63)[6].

## *Ubik*, the natural possible reality of SF or a supernatural timeless possible world

To determine whether *Ubik* belongs to the possible worlds of science fiction, its alethic reality must be examined. Suvin's definition of science fiction equates such fictional worlds with Doležel's natural possible worlds. However, in actual narratives, impurities can always be detected, e.g. supernatural elements in possible worlds of science fiction. The most fundamental codexal alethic constraint in *Ubik* is entropy. The second definition in the online edition of Merriam-Webster Dictionary is the most relevant for this paper. Entropy is "the degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity" (Entropy). In this natural process, Doležel's "never-ceasing movement of nature (…) due to an operative form of the laws of nature, which our semantics denotes as nature force (N-force)" (*Heterocosmica* 59) can be recognized. N-force is an unavoidable "constituent of all narrative worlds, but the degree of its intervention varies from central to marginal" (59). In *Ubik*, it is of central importance.

The codexal alethic constraints in *Ubik* function on several fictional planes. The first is the natural possible world of the novel's primary reality. The second is half-life, a virtual reality. Since half-life is an illusion, it possesses the characteristics of Doležel's intermediate possible worlds.

In *Ubik's* primary reality, the text constructs the characters' environment as the fictional Earth and Moon of the late twentieth century. It is an alternative world in which alethically normally endowed people live alongside the psychically, telepathically, and precognitively hypernormally endowed. In contrast to the influence of persons with hypernormal psychic talents, there exist hypernormally endowed individuals, *inertials*, whose ability consists in annulling the capabilities of the previous ones: "[Y]ou're a life form preying on the Psis, and the Psis are life forms preying on the Norms" (Dick 31). Jakovljević points out that the existence of half-life blurs the line between life and death because the deceased "remain temporarily in contact with the world of the living" (*The Alternative Realities* 148)[7]. Both the dead and the living exist in an undefined space in which the state of half-life spills over into the world of the living. Without turning to the future, living people become those who, at least partially, exist in a half-life of their own. Seemingly different from the real one, the novel's primary reality remains grounded in empirical reality in several ways, expounded upon in the following paragraphs.

First, the environmental conditions on the fictional Earth are identical to the real ones. The Moon is another fictional environment based on real-world knowledge. Its

fictional inhabitants reside in domes and passages isolated from the vacuum. Although such colonies do not exist outside fiction, the possibility of their existence is logically based both on the real world's scientific thought and works of science fiction dealing with the subject. Even the social environment of liberal capitalism we encounter in the novel's primary reality is a logical extrapolation of the possible developments in the actual world's economic system, and its consequences for human society. Such a fictional society becomes stratified into a smaller class of the extremely rich and a larger class of those who spend their lives in a greater or lesser degree of scarcity. An example of the former is Runciter, the owner of the prudence organization that employs the inertials whose destinies the reader follows in the narrative. An example of the latter is his technician Chip, "a little, debt-stricken, ineffective bureaucrat who can't even scrape together enough coins to pay his door to let him out of his apt" (Dick 36). *Ubik* incorporates fictional elements not found in the real world. The most prominent examples are hypernormally endowed individuals such as precogs, possessing the ability to see future possibilities, and telepaths, who can communicate with their minds. These are the elements responsible for the reader's fictional re-centring. However, the estrangement would not be cognitive if the reader were unable to recognize elements of the real world in the fictional one. Therefore, every plane of *Ubik's* fictional reality is grounded not only in physical laws but also in cultural and social patterns the reader is familiar with. As Jakovljević notices, much like our own, *Ubik's* primary reality is based on capitalist principles: "Everything is paid for, be it the news, cleaning robots, the shower, the refrigerator, even opening the front door of the

apartment, which is no longer private, but a contractually regulated space called a consumer apartment" (147-148). The principles of marketability penetrate every pore of *Ubik's* society. The conversion of the private space of an apartment, tailored to each person's measure, into public space, tailored to the measure of a uniform consumer, facilitates the process of consumer production: "[E]verything is marketable, including life after death and psychic powers, which become just one in a series of profitable products on the market" (Jakovljević, *The Alternative Realities* 148). Cryonic technology is yet another product for which the living must pay. In this way, the principles of marketability encompass both life and death. The reader finds these fictional circumstances familiar because both the reader and the author are partially the product of the real world's capitalist society which functions on the same principles of marketability as the fictional one in *Ubik*. The similarity between this feature of the fictional reality and the actual world's social arrangements is not immediately obvious because, in Dick's fiction, these principles are amplified and laid completely bare. They overtly shape every aspect of the fictional characters' existence.

Whereas in our reality, such phenomena remain somewhat obscured, in *Ubik*, the monetary system works openly. These imaginary social relations do not truly differ from their counterparts in the real world, for anyone granted a bank loan is not immediately the legal owner of what they have purchased. One is free to use whatever the loan has paid for as long as one can finance the debt. The only difference between Chip and real-world consumers is that Chip finances his obligations directly, not in instalments, free from the

illusion that he is the master of his destiny. The situation Chip finds himself in is a fictional representation of the circumstances in which countless of his real counterparts live. As Freedman notices, *Ubik's* characters "live in a world dominated by commodities and conspiracies; which is to say, a world not wholly unlike our own" ("Towards a Theory of Paranoia" 19). Accordingly, the act of creating a science-fictional reality, both in Dick's novel and generally in science fiction, becomes "an ideological interpretation of the actual world" (20). The characters in *Ubik* remain the fictional counterparts of actual human beings because, as Butler perceives, "[t]he characters' relationship to their perceived (fictional) conditional environment is analogous to the individual human being's relationship to their perceived (non-fictional) consensus environment" (*Ontology and Ethics* 46).

Analyzing the alethic endowment of *Ubik's* characters in the primary reality, their normal alethic endowment can be taken as the primary reality's standard. The individual (anti)precognitive and (anti)telepathic abilities constitute the exceptions. These abilities are functionally and analogically connected to the actual world's consumer society. Akin to real-world circumstances, individual talents are commercialized. Fitting points out that such commercialized abilities serve "not to free but to enslave; to maintain and secure an exploitative and unjust system – a clear analogy, moreover to the trivialization and debasement of the 'artists' who today work in the advertising industry" ("Reality as Ideological Construct" 228). This trivialization is another reason that allows *Ubik* to function as an estranged reflection of the actual world's negative trends. According to

Lem, the result is the social environment in which "[t]elepathic phenomena, having been mastered in the context of capitalistic society, have undergone commercialization like every other technological innovation" (57). Due to these circumstances of the novel's reality, Suvin observes that "[w]hen Dick satirically dramatizes a world of ubiquitous simulacra in *Ubik*, he is identifying some new experiences of the 'little man' in mass-consumption capitalism" (*Positions* 48). As Žikić, Milenković and Sinani argue, analogically founding his novel on the actual world's socio-economic circumstances, Dick indicates "the meaning of the existence of different realities within one superstructural unit in [his] novels should be sought in their resolution, more precisely in the cultural message contained in it" ("The Socio-ontological Solipsism" 112)[8].

The psychic abilities in the narrative are alethically hypernormal, and as a result, surpass real-world human endowment. Nevertheless, the author has taken care to describe these abilities as not fundamentally violating the physically possible. The precog's ability to peer into the possible outcomes of future events is not depicted as prophetic. It lacks the determinism of supernatural worlds: "The precog sees a variety of futures, laid out side by side like cells in a beehive. For him one has greater luminosity, and this he picks" (Dick 31-32). The greater luminosity marks the timeline with the highest probability of being actualized. The precognitive abilities in *Ubik* do not provide insight into the inevitable future. Since the text constructs its primary reality as a natural possible world, the outcomes of future events cannot be predetermined. The existence of anti-precognitive abilities that suppress the previous and reassert the state of natural balance

confirms the naturalness of that world: "The anti-precog makes all futures seem equally real to the precog; he aborts his talent to choose at all" (Dick 40). Not even Pat Conley's ability to alter a precog's choices transcends the natural alethic constraints: "I can change the past but I don't *go* into the past; I don't time-travel" (Dick 33). From the perspective of both our empirical and *Ubik's* fictional reality, time travel is impossible; cause-and-effect works in a single direction, toward the entropic end.

The second fictional plane the codexal alethic constraints of *Ubik* operate on is the intermediate fictional reality of half-life. As Fitting observes, unlike the second plane, the primary plane of the novel's universe is not a simulation: "The events which lead up to the explosion [on the Moon] take place primarily on a single reality plane (…) Then, following the explosion and death of Runciter, reality begins to lose its consistency and integrity" ("*Ubik*: The Deconstruction of Bourgeois SF" 47-48).

Lem points out that "[t]he world which they experience is not part of reality, but a fiction created by appropriate methods" (58). Since half-life is fictive, the characteristics of Doležel's intermediate possible worlds can be attributed to it. It is a simulation almost indistinguishable from the primary reality. However, the source of the knowledge necessary to fill the gaps in that reality is the mind of each cryonically frozen individual. The process resembles the way the reader reconstructs a fictional world, filling its gaps with the knowledge of the real world. Since half-life is rooted in real-world knowledge, the inhabitants cannot violate its natural alethic constraints. Although spurious, half-life is

subject to the same alethic constraints as the primary reality. If the circumstances around the characters are examined from the estranged point of view of a science fiction narrative, the tendency towards the homogenization of the characters with the creator of that pseudo-world, Jory Miller, can be interpreted as a distorted reflection of the actual world's corporate reality. Half-lifers are food meant to sustain Jory's pseudo-existence. Figuratively speaking, they feed the existing social order. The power relations between Jory and the characters he traps are asymmetrical in Jory's favour. The asymmetry stems from his hypernormal endowment, the ability to create a spurious reality and feed on the energy of others. Moreover, the alethic endowment of all characters but Jory in that intermediate reality is standard. The case of Pat Conley, one of the inertials, proves this point. In the primary reality, her alethic endowment is hypernormal, enabling her to alternate between different timelines at will. Once she finds herself in a timeless simulation, temporally displaced, her ability ceases to function: "[H]er time-travelling talent no longer functions. This is not really 1939, and we are outside of time entirely" (Dick 167). All hypernormal endowments cease to function once the primary/intermediate world boundary is crossed. Although it is not explicitly mentioned, we do not encounter a single character but Jory using their hypernormal endowment in half-life. However, one fact limits Jory's omnipotence. Much like all *Ubik's* characters, Jory inhabits his creation. Consequently, he is subject to its alethic constraints. Powerless to transcend the limitations of his (pseudo)existence, Jory is shown as only seemingly omnipotent. He remains a powerful obstacle, but not insurmountable.

In *Ubik*, marketability is fundamental. Therefore, half-life is a logical extension of the characters' primary reality. Half-lifers are not placed in cryonic suspension due to the concern for their well-being. As Bubanja sees it, the moratoria are "profit-oriented institutions, as well as the entire narrative world of *Ubik* " ("Pseudo-cemetery" 61)[9]. Death becomes a controlled process because "medicine (…) has moved the *locus* of death to the cessation of brain function, thus laying the groundwork for considering the extension of life by loading the contents of consciousness into other carriers" (62). Cryonic technology becomes a tool of the market system which has "prolonged death and commodified the body", focusing on the brain as "the only irreplaceable organ" (62). The possibility of communication ensures that the families of the deceased fund the moratoria. In this way, half-life becomes yet another means of control. While the deceased are offered as commodities, the inhabitants of that fictional reality are transformed into their consumers.

## Conclusion

While the reader may initially find the events in half-life incomprehensible, the verisimilitude and logical coherence of the plot are not undermined. Being a simulation, the half-life of *Ubik's* characters displays characteristics of a technologically induced hallucination. Although Chip and Runciter are the sources of the reader's perspective, they are outsiders within the construct. *Ubik's* characters are trapped inside the creation of a seemingly superior being. They move through Jory's pseudo-reality in the way they are

accustomed to in their primary reality. As Lem notices, "distinguishing between waking reality and visions proves to be impossible" (59).

The discussion of the use of Doležel's category of alethic constraints to determine the naturalness of a potentially science-fictional reality leads to the conclusion that this category unmistakably shows if a fictional reality is a natural possible world. Although the naturalness of a possible world is not the only characteristic that makes it science-fictional, it is nevertheless fundamental. The other characteristics are but an extension of this property. If the alethic world is not natural, it cannot incorporate a science-fictional novum. Consequently, a fictional world thus constructed can hardly be deemed science-fictional for it can function neither as an estranged reflection of real-world problems nor as an implicit commentary on existing social relations. Of course, literature cannot be ideally categorized. Fantastic elements belonging to supernatural possible worlds may find their way into the natural possible worlds. The fact that the naturalness of the fictional world is a characteristic science fiction shares with realistic literature, allows it to appropriate some of its categories. One of them is the category of inventiveness, which explains the presence of supernatural elements in natural possible worlds. If these elements are well integrated into the narrative, their presence will not undermine the narrative's logical coherence and verisimilitude. Such a world will remain physically possible. An excellent example is the intermediate reality of half-life in *Ubik* with its timelessness, i.e., existing outside of time. Nevertheless, neither the transformed time horizons and the intentionality of the apparent environment, nor the other impurities, such as the presence of precognition and telepathy,

can make the reality of the novel supernatural. The altered temporal horizons and the intentionality of the environment are limited to half-life. Unlike *Ubik's* primary reality, alethically natural and modally homogeneous, half-life bears the characteristics of an intermediate reality. Its deviation from the alethic constraints which apply both in our empirical and the novel's primary reality does not result in the reader abandoning the contract with the author that the possible world constructed by the text is natural and science-fictional. Illusions and hallucinations are comparable to dreams, the difference being that the characters in *Ubik* cannot wake up. Moreover, dreams are part of the natural human experience although dream worlds are not subject to the alethic constraints analogous to the actual world's physical laws (Doležel, *Heterocosmica* 117). Nevertheless, dreams rest on our real-world experiences. There are natural laws, such as entropy, that even dreams cannot escape. This characteristic presents itself in the retrograde movement of Jory's pseudo-world. Illusory experiences in the intermediate plane can be caused in the narrative in various ways, but they cannot affect the naturalness of the (science)fictional world if they do not disrupt the logical coherence of its narrative.

## End Notes

[1] See also ("Kafka's Fictional World" 62; *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History* 32)
[2] See also (*On the Poetics* 375; *Positions and Presuppositions* 37, 66).
[3] See also (*On the Poetics* 375).
[4] Published in Serbia in 2011, by Zavod za udžbenike, Beograd, as *Granice realizma*.
[5] See also (*Defined by a Hollow* 68).
[6] Jameson also adds that Aristotle "famously explained that history only describes what did happen, while 'poetry' – in the larger sense – describes happenings probable or believable" (63).
[7] All subsequent translations from the source are mine, unless stated otherwise.
[8] All subsequent translations from the source are mine, unless otherwise stated.
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