Canon Unbound

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Ontology, simulacra and hyperreality. Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* and the question of postmodernist canon

If a bird looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck.

"Duck test" 1

Any reflection on the unbinding of the canon requires that the question of a literary canon as such should be addressed first before advancing a case for revising or supplementing any particular canon, an American canon, a historically determined canon (e.g. the postmodernist canon), or any other conceivable canon. The traditional view of a literary canon sees it simply "as a body of texts having the authority of perennial classics" (Krupat 1989:23). This formulation suggests that canonical literary texts are those that have simply persisted, that are still widely read and debated. However, the test of time is not sufficient because it begs the question: "why have certain texts and authors persevered across time and cultural differences and continued to be regarded with awe and esteem?" (Waugh 2006:73) There are two possible answers to this, which reveal two fundamentally approaches to a literary canon, the aesthetic one and the pragmatic-instrumental one. The pragmatic-instrumental view derives from the so-called "hermeneutics of suspicion" and perceives a canon as an ideological construct: "that body of texts which best performs in the sphere of culture the work of legitimating the prevailing social order" (Krupat 1989:23). The extreme version of this approach to a literary canon, represented for instance by Terry Eagleton or Patrick Williams, sees it merely as "an instrument of social power" (Eagleton in Waugh 2006:71) or "the selective tradition", where tradition may be understood as an "an aspect of contemporary social and cultural organization in the interest of the domination of a specific class", as "a version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present" (Williams in Krupat

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1 "The test implies that a person can figure out the true nature of an unknown subject by observing this subject's readily identifiable traits. It is sometimes used to counter abstruse arguments that something is not what it appears to be." Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duck_test, 12.09.2008
 Needless to say, under such an understanding, canonical texts have little intrinsic authority or value.

On the other hand, the aesthetic approach specifies that a canon is composed of texts possessing immanent and autonomous aesthetic value (Waugh 2006:71). This value is not easy to isolate and resists precise formulation or translation into a rational or scientific discourse; it belongs to a different, more intuitive, but equally valid intellectual order. As Patricia Waugh argues, for such theoreticians of literary value as David Hume and F.R. Leavis:

> the realm of value is an intersubjective and shared domain, and
> a literary tradition is the crystallization over time of a cultural expression of a more tacit or precognitive kind of understanding than the kind of explicit knowledge which is available to science.

(Waugh 2006:76)

A canon as an expression of the "precognitive kind of understanding", as a repository of "intersubjective and shared" values, is here identified with a literary tradition, where the very notion of a literary text already seem to be bound with an aesthetic judgment, with evaluation: "literariness" in itself is seen as a value, a value which is by necessity denied to non-literary texts, regarded as mere cultural products. This division roughly corresponds to the distinction between "high" and "low" literature, between the "mainstream", "elitist", "canonical" works and genres on the one hand, and "marginal", "popular", "non-canonical" ones on the other.

However, the boundary between these two strands in literature is not fixed. At times it becomes permeable and the interpenetration of the two realms, the "crossing" over emerges as an important factor contributing to the development of literature. Victor Shklovsky even proposed a law, one of the mechanisms driving the process of literary evolution, whose central principle was the "canonization of the junior branch". In order to renew itself, "literature periodically redraws its own boundaries, so as to include from time to time elements, motifs, and devices regarded until then as 'peripheral' or 'junior' in relation to the 'mainstream' of literary endeavour" (Hawkes 1985:72). Consequently, previously marginalized or peripheral genres would rise to a higher position in the genre hierarchy, and the works themselves would enter the literary canon. This process is important when discussing the relation between the postmodernist canon and the novels of Philip K. Dick, usually placed firmly in the science-fiction corpus, and as such considered inferior, non-artistic, and non-canonical.

Before advancing the thesis that Dick's novel *Ubik* displays a remarkable resemblance to and affinity with postmodernist fiction, and as such should be included in the postmodernist canon, some attention must be paid to the no
rious, not to say nebulous, concept of literary postmodernism and the postmodernist canon itself. As Matei Calinescu observes:

> [t]he more comprehensive presentations of the issues of postmodernism sometimes include references to epistemological problems and concepts, such as the crisis of determinism, the place of chance and disorder in natural processes, Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy, the question of time and particularly irreversible time (whose recognition has displaced the powerful classical clockwork model of the universe), Karl Popper's view of scientific theories in terms of "falsifiability" rather than mere "verifiability", and Thomas Kuhn's "paradigm" and "scientific revolutions".

(1987:269)

Susan Strehle emphasizes especially the role of the new physics in changing concepts of the world in fiction: the new physics "has transformed twentieth-century thought, including philosophy, linguistics, and literature" (1992:7). She even coins her own term to denote the particular stream within postmodernist fiction, "actualistic fiction", which contrary to openly self-contained, metafictional postmodernist works (e.g. by Raymond Federman, William H. Gass or Ronald Sukenick), expresses

a literary version of the reality constituted by fundamentally new physical theories in the first half of the twentieth century. [...] actualism abandons and even subverts the narrative conventions of realism. It does so, however, not to replace reality with the purified aesthetics of self-reflexivity, but rather, selfconsciously and theoretically, to renew art's readiness for its perennial project: the human interpretation of a nonhuman reality. (Strehle 1992:6-7)

As for the literary application of the term "postmodernism", Calinescu traces it back to such American poets as Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, or Charles Olson, who "in order to distance themselves from the symbolist kind of poetry of modernism represented by T.S. Eliot" (1987:297), coined such terms as "postmodernist" or "antimodernist", and "gave the word a certain limited currency in the discussion of the 'new poetry' of the late 1940s and the 1950s" (1987:267). However, it is Ihab Hassan who must be credited with giving the term its wide and lasting international currency. As Calinescu argues,

Hassan's writings, especially since The Dismemberment of Orpheus (1971), constitute perhaps the single most impressive attempt to build a philosophical-literary concept of postmodernism in America. With Hassan, in short, postmodernism begins to have
a more discernible identity, and it is through him that some Europeans (Lyotard for instance) may have discovered the term. (1987:280)

Although postmodernist fiction originated in the USA in the late 1950s, with the publications by such diverse writers as William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth, its scope has been broadened over the years by the retroactive inclusion of Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, and Samuel Beckett as its noble precursors as well as by extending its geographical boundaries and making it really an international phenomenon. The concept of literary postmodernism, as Calinescu observes, "offers a convenient frame for discovering or inventing more or less interesting affinities among a great many contemporary writers" (1987:301). He cautiously avoids using the term "postmodernist canon" replacing it with the designation "postmodernist corpus", which is apparently non-judgmental and free from considerations of value. However, when he claims that the works of such authors as, for instance, Julio Cortazar, Italo Calvino, John Fowles, Alain Robbe-Grillet or Milan Kundera serve as "credible examples of postmodernism" (1987:301), he suggests that the writers selected by him best embody the characteristics of this literary trend. But if this is so, they belong to the historically determined canon of postmodernist fiction as its representative texts. Interestingly, by saying that postmodernism offers a convenient frame for inventing affinities between various contemporary writers, he playfully suggests that the postmodernist canon may be just a critical construct and its composition may differ depending on what model of postmodernism has been adopted by a critic. However, he asserts that:

once such a model is selected or assembled, the works in question will reveal that they do have certain things in common after all. [...]To arrive at a sensitive model of literary postmodernism one should then accept as a working hypothesis that postmodernist texts make a distinctive use of certain conventions, techniques, and recurrent structural and stylistic devices, even though individually their intentions, implications, and aesthetic results may be widely different. (1987:302)

For Calinescu, the more obvious postmodernist devices include:

a new existential or "ontological" use of narrative perspectivism, different from the mainly psychological one found in modernism [...]; duplication and multiplication of beginnings, endings, and narrated actions [...] the parodic thematization of the author (the reappearance of the intrusive or manipulative author, but now in
a distinctively self-ironic vein); the no less parodic but more puzzling thematization of the reader [...] the treatment on an equal footing of fact and fiction, reality and myth, truth and lying, original and imitation, as a means to emphasize undecidability; self-referentiality and "metafiction" as means to dramatize inescapable circularity [...] extreme versions of the "unreliable narrator," sometimes used, paradoxically, for purposes of a rigorous construction [...]". (1987:302-303)

Although it may come as a surprise, accounts or models of postmodernist fiction that treat it as a literary phenomenon are far fewer than analyses of postmodernist literature that see it merely as the reflection of the notorious "postmodern condition", thereby reducing it to the status of a cultural phenomenon. Consider, for instance, Christopher Palmer's opening assertion in his study of Philip K. Dick's fiction, which is symptomatic of this widespread critical practice:

Today we live in the epoch of the postmodern, and are subject to the condition of post modernity. This book concerns the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick (1928-1982), whose fiction gives a sometimes frightening, often funny rendition of the condition of humanist ethics. (2003:3)

Therefore, Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* presents itself not only as a remarkable exception but emerges over the time - it was first published in 1983 - as the seminal work in this field. It is praiseworthy for its coherence, and its model of postmodernist fiction is both interesting and productive, even though at times it seems too exclusive, placing some postmodernist novels, by many considered "canonical", outside his "construction" of postmodernist fiction. However, according to McHale, the advantage of his model is that it enables him to show the underlying principle that gives unity to what otherwise seems a set of separate features; in other words, it allows for "systematicity". In order to bring out this underlying systematicity, McHale resorts to Roman Jakobson's concept of "dominant". The founding premise of his critical construction of postmodernist fiction is what he calls the "ontological dominant", which he contrasts with the "epistemological dominant" of modernism:

2 "I will formulate it as a general thesis about modernist fiction: the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as those mentioned by Dick Higgins in my epigraph: "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" Oth-
postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls "post-cognitive": "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (1996:10)

For McHale, who adopts Thomas Pavel's understanding of the term, ontology "is a theoretical description of a universe", however, a postmodernist literary ontology "is a description of a universe, not of the universe; that is, it may describe any universe, potentially a plurality of universes" (1996:27). He argues that the foregrounding of ontological concerns is common to all postmodernist writers, and that in order to accomplish this foregrounding these writers draw on the same repertoire of strategies and devices. However, he observes that:

if postmodernist poetics foregrounds ontological issues of text and world, it can only do so by exploiting general ontological characteristics shared by all literary texts and fictional worlds, and it is only against the background of general theories of literary ontology that specific postmodernist practices can be identified and understood. (McHale 1996:27)

Following Roman Ingarden and his insights into the mode of being of a literary text, McHale emphasizes that fictional texts do more than carry information in articulated chains of signifiers and signifieds - they also project objects and worlds (1996:31). What seems especially relevant for postmodernist fiction is the cumulative effect of ambiguity on the level of what Ingarden calls "the stratum of presented objects":

Ambiguous sentences may project ambiguous objects, objects which are not temporarily but permanently and irresolvably am-

er typical modernist questions might be added: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on" (McHale 1996: 9).
Ontology, simulacra and hyperreality. Philip K. Dick's Ubik...

biguous. This is not a matter, in other words, of choosing between alternative states of affairs, but rather of an ontological oscillation, a flickering effect, or, to use Ingarden's own metaphor, an effect of "iridescence" or "opalescence." And "opalescence" is not restricted to single objects; entire worlds may flicker. (McHale 1996:32)

The resulting "ontological oscillation" or "flickering effect", according to McHale, is one of the constitutive features of postmodernist fiction. But this oscillation or flickering may be replaced by a straightforward and sharp confrontation of two worlds within the fictional reality, and the projection of "worlds in collision" as well as the ontological dominant bring postmodernist fiction, McHale observes, close to science-fiction and the literature of the fantastic (he does not make a clear-cut distinction between the two, however):

Science fiction, like postmodernist fiction, is governed by the ontological dominant\(^3\). Indeed, it is perhaps the ontological genre par excellence. We can think of science fiction as postmodernism's noncanonized or "low art" double, its sister-genre in the same sense that the popular detective thriller is modernist fiction's sister-genre. [...] Science fiction, by staging "close encounters" between different worlds, placing them in confrontation, foregrounds their respective structures and the disparities between them. It thus obeys the same underlying principles of ontological poetics as postmodernist fiction. (1996:59-60)

Let us recall at this point Shklovsky's concept of the "canonization of the junior branch" as one of the principles driving literary evolution. In order to renew itself, mainstream literature periodically redraws its own boundaries, so as to include elements, motifs, and devices from "low", "popular" literature. McHale's observation regarding the significance of the detective story for modernist fiction suggests a similar mechanism at work. McHale seems to argue that what modernist fiction borrows from the detective story is principally its central puzzle-solving thematics and - projected mostly on the level of reception - the twin processes of "interpreting the textual clues" and "filling in the gaps" in the plot by the implied reader. Modernist fiction's appropriation of detective fiction would represent its attempt to renew itself, at the same time leading to the "ca-

\(^3\) At this point McHale's methodological precision is at risk, since he implicitly questions his own central premise that postmodernist fiction is distinguished by its ontological dominant. It would appear that the same dominant, "ontological" in this case, cannot be a distinctive feature of both postmodernist fiction and science-fiction.
nonization" of detective fiction. Perhaps then, one may speculate, an analogous process occurred with regard to science fiction and literary postmodernism. McHale admits that there is "ample evidence of postmodernist writing's indebtedness to the science fiction genre", and that "postmodernism has borrowed ontological motifs from science fiction". This clearly suggests the incorporation of science fiction into the literary mainstream, in other word the canonization of what had been so far its junior branch. It does seem reasonable to conclude that the development of science fiction contributed to postmodernist fiction, and we have here a clear case of fruitful exchange (the "postmodernisation" of science fiction did occur with the emergence of the so-called "new wave" in the 1960s, but according to McHale, principally with Ballard and Delany). Therefore, it may come as a surprise that McHale, rather unexpectedly and with little justification, offers the following conclusion:

Invasions from outer space, visits to other planets, Utopian or dystopian futures, time-travel, parallel or lost worlds—all of these science-fiction topoi serve the purposes of an ontological poetics, but one that has developed almost entirely independently [emphasis added] of postmodernism's ontological poetics. Science fiction and postmodernist fiction, it would appear, have advanced along parallel [emphasis added] literary-historical tracks. (1996:62)

His insistence on keeping apart the "literary-historical tracks" along which science fiction and postmodernist fiction have evolved is hardly intelligible, especially so that he does allow "crossing over" in individual cases, for instance in the case of Kurt Vonnegut, who, according to McHale, accomplished this transition in the course of his literary career (1996:72). Unfortunately, such a bias or perhaps prejudice against science fiction as the "low", "uncanonized" sister of postmodernism prevents McHale from treating such writers as Philip Dick seriously and consequently mars his discussion of Ubik, denying it depth and complexity. True, McHale notices "the similarities between Philip K. Dick's science-fiction novel Ubik (1969) and Muriel Spark's postmodernist text The Hothouse by the East River (1973), both of which construct equivocal afterlifes, variants on the 'world' to come" (1996:64). However, he insists, striking the familiar note again, that "the parallelisms are striking", but they "arise independently":

Dick plays variations on a set of familiar science-fiction topoi, such as suspended animation, and uses a number of devices drawn from the repertoire of popular fiction to organize his plot [...] Spark's death-world, so similar to Dick's, nevertheless derives not from science-fiction conventions but from developments within
postmodernist fiction itself. It derives, in particular, from the postmodernist preoccupation with death as the ultimate ontological boundary. (1996:64-65)

Taking issue with McHale, one may argue that the preoccupation with death as the ultimate ontological boundary is neither necessarily or exclusively postmodernist, and contrary to McHale's allegations, the premise of the fictional world of *Ubik* is the very violation of the ontological boundary in question.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the multi-level, confusing nature of the fictional world created in the novel, it will be helpful to introduce two terms of description, "simulation" and "hyperreality", the concepts advanced by Jean Baudrillard with reference to the culture of the late Western capitalism, but which seem relevant to Dick's fictional creations, so much so as to suggest a possible influence of Dick on the conceptual framework of Baudrillard. According to Richard Lane, Baudrillard is not only one of the most famous writers on the subject of postmodernism, but "he somehow seems to embody postmodernism itself" (2001:1). The Western world, following the publication of a series of his works in English in the early 1980s, was bombarded by his phrases such as "simulation", "simulacra", the "hyperreal" and the "implosion of meaning" (Lane 2001:2). Any random search on the Internet will testify to the currency of these terms and their near-synonymity with the "postmodern condition". Designed originally for the devastating attack on Western capitalism, and American society in particular, two of Baudrillard's concepts, "simulation" and "hyperreality", offer a surprising insight into the complex nature of the fictional reality created not only in *Ubik* but in many other novels by Dick.

It seems reasonable at this point to summarize the conceptual framework underlying these two terms. At the heart of Baudrillard's concept of simulation and simulacra lies the theory of the successive phases of the image:

1) it is the reflection of a basic reality;
2) it masks and perverts a basic reality;
3) it masks the absence of a basic reality;
4) it bears no relation to reality whatsoever; such an image is its own pure simulacrum, it belongs to the order of simulation. Baudrillard even speaks of "the murderous capacity of images", and refers to images as "murderers of the real". To advance his argument, he discusses the rage of the Iconoclasts directed against icons as images, or perhaps simulacra, of the divine. He ponders on "the omnipotence of simulacra, this facility they have of erasing God from the consciousness of people". He speculates that despair may have been the underlying impulse of the Iconoclasts, the realization that the images had no original model and in fact, perversely, proclaimed "the death of the divine referential". According to Baudrillard, the present age of simulation is characterized by the "liquidation of all referentials", and by the substitution of *signs of the real* for the real itself. Simulation is pretending to have something that one does not have, and it is marked by an absence. Simulation is opposed to representation in many crucial respects: while
Before turning to the analysis of *Ubik*, it is worthwhile presenting at length McHale's summary of its plot:

Dick projects his characters into a bizarrely deteriorating world, one in which the material culture seems to suffer a temporal regression, degenerating from the high technology of 1992 to a quaint 1939, while the eleven [sic!]{protagonists themselves die off one by one in a highly gothic manner, aging and decaying before their companions' eyes [sic!] like Rider Haggard's Ayesha or Wilde's Dorian Gray. This world, it turns out, has all along been a state of death, or half-death: the eleven, killed at the outset [sic!] by a terrorist bomb, have been kept in a state of suspended animation, and the world they have experienced has only been a kind of shared dream or hallucination. Their spectacular deaths by instantaneous aging represent, in fact, a second and "true" death, as the suspended-animation system fails. (1996:64)

McHale's summary distorts or inaccurately describes many fictional facts, to give just a few examples: the twelve or even thirteen - if we include Glen Runciter - characters are killed, and they are not killed at the outset - the explosion of the bomb does not occur until Chapter 6, and what the characters experience collectively following the blast cannot be called "dream or hallucination" but rather "simulation" or "hyperreality". In addition, the summary overlooks the complexity of the fictional world and its dynamic character, its "variable reality". Characteristically, McHale limits the "strategy of variable reality" to postmodernist texts exclusively:

representation, as a visible and intelligible mediation of the real, relies on the assumption that the sign and the real are, as he puts it, "equivalent", in the sense that the sign can be "exchanged" for meaning, simulation is based on the radical negation of the sign as value. However, it is not false representation, rather the whole concept of representation is here negated, simulacra can never be exchanged for the real, they do not point to any reality; rather simulacra are signs or images which dissimulate (conceal) the fact that there is nothing. Simulation produces what he calls a "hyperreality" - "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality". In hyperreality, we find the reversal of the order, the model precedes the real, the model in fact *generates* the real. Hyperreality is produced algorithmically or via mathematical formulae, like the virtual reality of computer code. Consequently, hyperreality is characterized by detachment from both reality and representation, and is measured only in terms of its performativity. In hyperreality, it is no longer possible to negotiate the difference between a true and false state of affairs. Hyperreality is characterized by: 1) the projections and simulations of what might be, to make sure that a particular outcome does come about; 2) the events unfolding according to the program; 3) the production of virtual reality and the "counterfeit".
Typically, such deliberate "mystification" is followed by "demystification," in which the true ontological status of the supposed "reality" is revealed and the entire ontological structure of the text consequently laid bare. In short, trompe-l'ceil functions in the postmodernist context as another device for foregrounding the ontological dimension. Jean Ricardou has called this the strategy of "variable reality," that is, the strategy whereby a supposedly "real" representation is revealed to have been merely "virtual" - an illusion or secondary representation, a representation within the representation - or vice versa, a supposedly virtual representation is shown to have been "really real" after all. (1996:115-116)

It is the thesis of the present article that the principle of "variable reality" perfectly applies to *Ubik*, thereby aligning it with representative works of literary postmodernism. The plot of Dick's novel abounds in "reality twists", owing to which the ontological status of the fictional reality undergoes constant reversals. The characters' perception and assessment of their experience wavers, producing the "ontological flicker", the characteristic irresolvable tension between "reality" and simulation. One of the devices that allows such shifts is the peculiar construction of the fictional reality - in which the boundary between life and death is violated by interposing the transitory condition of "half-life". Another device is that of "reversibility of time" owing to which regression of reality and the existence of alternative time tracks or "presents" become possible. Incidentally, such a construction of time is in perfect keeping with the premises of postmodernist fiction:

it is Borges's view of the world as a labyrinth of possibilities, of parallel times, of alternative pasts and futures, all of which have equal claims to fictional presentation — a view most intriguingly argued in the story entitled "The Garden of Forking Paths" — that has become one of the major premises of postmodern narrative experimentalism. (Calinescu 1987:299)

In *Ubik*, the violation of the ontological boundary is achieved thanks to the invention of the "cold-pac" technology: it slows the process of dying, while the brain is kept in the state of lingering animation. The half-dead or "half-lifers" are preserved for communication with the living in institutions called moratoriums; they spend the rest of their remaining time dreaming, and from this condition they are woken up by visitors. The boundary between life and death is thus no longer sharp and impenetrable. The existence of this paradoxical condition engenders in the characters confusion and uncertainty about their ontological status, and as a result they find themselves wondering if they are alive or dead, or rather in "half-life", and if they are experiencing the "real" or only a simulacrum.
In addition to the "half-life" condition, another device employed in the service of the strategy of variable reality is Pat Conley's, one of the characters', "negative gift" of "eradicating the present" and substituting a new one for it. This gift is negative because it counteracts another psychic ability, that of predicting the future - "the anti-precog makes all futures seem equally real to the precog; he aborts his talent to choose (Dick 1978:28). Pat Conley "can cancel out the precog's decision after he's made it "(Dick 1978:30). What is more, she can "change the past", in effect producing a different present with the other characters being only very vaguely aware that there is something wrong with the "present" they are experiencing. Pat Conley demonstrates her gift to Joe Chip, who works as a tester for Runciter Associates, the organization whose aim is to counteract the influence of all kinds of psychics - "unauthorized intrusions" - in order to restore the disturbed ecological balance. As a proof, she shows him his skeptical assessment of her abilities, his statement coming "from the previous present, the one [she] abolished". Another proof of the existence of alternative pasts is the ring that she wears - a souvenir from the alternative time track, the "past" in which she married Joe Chip.

With the "half-life" condition and Pat Conley's gift of "eradicating the present" and producing an alternative one, the fabric of the presented world seems to burst at the seams, its ontological stability is seriously threatened, but the already mentioned explosion of the bomb rips apart the fabric of the fictional universe completely, triggering what might be called the play of simulacra, signs of the real substituted for the real, concealing the fact that there is no reality. The blast supposedly killed Glen Runciter, while his agents, including Joe Chip and Pat Conley, survived. But how can they be sure that they are alive and Runciter is dead, and not vice-versa? This nagging question will recur and the answer will never be final but, on the contrary, subject to constant revision.

In the reality initially established in the novel after the bomb blast - the reality that seems "real" enough for the survivors - Runciter apparently dies even though he has been put by his agents into cold-pac. However, soon disturbing signs begin to invade this seemingly ordinary reality, putting its status into doubt: stale cigarettes and moldy coffees, obsolete coins, phonebooks, and tape-recorders, old-fashioned elevators. Things fall apart, they are behind the time, which proves regression at work, the reverse flow of time. The rate and extent of decay rapidly increases, and finally, the group experiences the United States of 1939. However, as Joe Chip observes, "we haven't gone anywhere. We're where we've always been. But for some reason [...] reality has receded; it's lost its underlying support and it's ebbed to back to previous forms" (Dick 1978:137).
Another type of irruptions into the seemingly ordinary is constituted by what may be provisionally called Runciter's manifestations and messages. In various ways, for instance through the proliferation of his images (his head appearing on fifty-cents coins, his photographs), advertisements, strange graffiti scribbled on the bathroom wall, Runciter manifests his presence in the world in which Joe Chip and Pat Conley find themselves after the bomb blast. But if he tries to communicate with them, then he must be alive, even though the moratorium failed to revive him. And if he is alive, this means that they are dead:

"So now we know the truth."

Joe said, "But we are not dead. Except for Wendy. We are in half-life, after the explosion that killed us - killed us, not Runciter". (Dick 1978:109)

However, nothing is certain or final in the reality experienced by Joe Chip and the rest. The news of Runciter's death is announced on the television, and the broadcast shows his body displayed in the funeral parlor in Des Moines, and this seems to confirm the opposite - that Runciter was killed by the bomb. The issue is further complicated by the commercial which appears on the television after the telecast from the funeral home in Des Moines. In this commercial Runciter extols the near-miraculous power of the strange spray-can product called Ubik:

"Tired of lazy tastebuds?" Runciter said in his familiar gravelly voice. "Has boiled cabbage taken over your world of food? That same old, stale, flat, Monday-morning odor no matter how many dimes you put into your stove? Ubik changes all that; Ubik wakes up food flavor, puts hearty taste back where it belongs, and restores fine food smell." On the screen a brightly colored spray can replaced Glen Runciter. "One invisible puff-puff whisk of economically priced Ubik banishes compulsive obsessive fears that the entire world is turning into clotted milk, worn-out tape recorders and obsolete iron-cage elevators, plus other, further, as-yet-un glimpsed manifestations of decay". (Dick 1978:114)

What is important at this point, he specifically mentions the disturbing phenomena pervading Joe Chip's world, then he seems to turn to Joe Chip directly. He explains all these signs as "world deterioration", which is "a normal experience of half-lifers": "a sort of lingering universe is retained as a residual charge, a pseudoenvironment, highly unstable" (Dick 1978:114-115). In other words, what they are experiencing is only a simulacrum, the product of several
(dying) minds fused together.

The fact of Runciter appearing in this commercial with such perfect knowledge of their condition would suggest that perhaps it is not a commercial recorded before his death but a live broadcast, so Runciter is alive and is striving to reach them from the outside, from the fictional real world. Runciter seems to "answer" Joe Chip's question and respond logically to his statements, as if he heard them, as if he were alive and communicated with him, but this is soon exposed as an illusion: "Of course, I'm dead! Didn't you watch the telecast from Des Moines?" (Dick 1978:115). But the confusion is far from being cleared, as Joe Chip wonders if perhaps Runciter "only pretended to be on videotape", and in fact is alive but for some obscure reason tells them otherwise and fosters in them the illusion that they are not dead.

The unresolved controversy over Runciter's commercial, its uncertain status - "prerecorded" versus "live" - encapsulates the "flickering ontology" of the worlds created in the novel, because the broadcast, finally, does not prove conclusively anything about the reality experienced by Joe Chip or the outside world from which Runciter is supposedly trying to communicate with his agents. These two alternative "possible worlds" are equally valid - one in which Joe Chip and the other agents survived the bomb blast, and Runciter is dead, and the other, in which Runciter's agents, in half-life, are experiencing a simulacrum, "a pseudoenvironment" created by their memories fused together, with Runciter on the outside, and alive. However, as might be expected, this simple duality becomes complicated by Pat Conley's talent of reversing the flow of time. Granted, she admits that she has lost her psychic ability, which suggests that "this is not really 1939, and [they] are outside of time entirely [...] This is half-life" (140). But the question remains if she is telling the truth. It cannot be ruled out that she is lying, and, in fact, she is playing games with them: "It means that she could have nullified all this. Everything that's happened to us, starting with Runciter's death" (Dick 1978:150).

The third possibility arises, neatly summarized in Joe Chip's question directed to Pat Conley herself: "Is that what really happened to us - not the bomb blast but you?" (Dick 1978:151). Thus, it appears that the reality they are experiencing is Pat Conley's fabrication, she has eradicated the present and moved them back into the past. She believes that the reality they are experiencing is of her own making, that it is her, with the negative gift of time reversal, who is responsible for the deterioration of this simulated world and deaths of several Runciter's employees (it turns out that she is a double agent, infiltrating Runic-Ted's organization in order to destroy it). But this is finally revealed to be yet another illusion: there is yet another force: "an unnatural and gigantic force controlling what they experienced". This invisible stage-manager, fabricator of
the hyperreality unfolding according to his twisted sadistic program, for a long
time remains hidden behind the scenes, but his presence is hinted at by what
may be called the Cosmic Player trope: "It's as if, he [Joe Chip] thought, some
malicious force is playing with us, letting us scamper and twitter like debrained
mice. We amuse it. Our efforts entertain it" (Dick 1978:66). This Cosmic Player
is defined by Joe Chip as "a polymorphic, perverse agency which likes to
watch. An infantile, retarded entity which enjoys what's happening" (Dick
1978:158). In fact, the world experienced by Joe Chip is the arena of fierce
struggle; there are two forces in opposition - one immature, cruel, and destruc-
tive, and the other, its antagonist, embodied in the mysterious spray-can product
called Ubik, preventing decay, death and disintegration.

In what seems to be the final twist - it does seem final at the moment - the
application of Ubik to one of Joe Chip's companions, Denny, reveals the boy
named Jory, hiding beneath Denny's simulacrum. Jory, another half-lifer, is
exposed as the malefactor "devouring Runciter's agents who are kept in the
condition of half-life. Jory proudly declares: "Dr Francis is a product of my
mind!", Jory said. "Like every other fixture in this pseudoworld" (Dick
1978:174). He admits that he has constructed "the phantasmagoric counterpart"
- the simulacrum - of the world of their own time, but its decomposition is hap-
pening mechanically, because it takes an enormous effort to sustain it (Dick
1978:178), and this explains the temporal regression and decay they have been
experiencing all along.

But the strategy of variable reality in Ubik never stops, the succession of
exposures and unravelings appears to be bent into a kind of loop or perhaps
a vicious cognitive circle in which no explanation is final but subject to revision
or retraction. No reality is "real", but caught in the process of constant erosion,
exposing yet another ontological layer gaping beneath or pole-vaulting to the
next ontological level extending above. The last chapter of Ubik apparently
shows Runciter in the world of the living, in the Swiss moratorium, where after
having reached Joe Chip, after having entered Chip's world in person - they
have a face-to-face encounter there in that simulated world - he is waiting for
his half-dead wife Ella to be brought to him for communication. In this way
reality principle seems to be restored and Runciter's ontological status as being
on the outside, in the fictional real world seems to be affirmed. But the ontolog-
ical foundation of Runciter's world suffers a serious blow due to still another
reversal - this time it is the manifestation of Joe Chip in the "outside" reality,
whose profile appears on fifty-cent coins:

Whose profile is this? he asked himself. Who's this on all three
coins? Not the right person at all. And yet he's familiar. I know
him.
And then he recognized the profile. I wonder what this means, he asked himself. Strangest thing I've ever seen. Most things in life eventually can be explained. But - Joe Chip on a fifty-cent piece?

It was the first Joe Chip money he had ever seen. […]

This was just the beginning. (Dick 1978:191)

Joe Chip's invasion into the fictional real world is indeed a puzzling occurrence, which in effect abolishes the previously constructed "neat" opposition between Runciter's reality and the simulated world collectively experienced by his agents. According to Palmer, this opposition, which he summarizes it in the following way: "[w]hatever existential realm Runciter occupies, the characters feel they must be occupying the opposite one" (2003:25), is maintained to the end. For Palmer, by analogy to the previous proliferation of Runciter's images in the hyperreality generated by Jory, Chip's portraits on the coins are the sign of his acquiring the power to manifest himself in the external reality, penetrating the boundaries of the simulated world of the cold-pac condition; he thus becomes, in Palmer's phrase, "a virtual god" (2003:26). However, such an interpretation implicitly rests on the reassuring division between the simulacrum of the world experienced by Joe Chip and Runciter's "solid" outside reality; this division is reassuring because it lends ontological stability to the fictional universe of Runciter, even though Joe Chip has acquired the mysterious power to affect it.

But yet another interpretation presents itself, under which the very ending of the novel shatters this division and abolishes this neat ontological opposition between Runciter's "real" outside world and Joe Chip's "simulated" reality. For one thing, it immediately suggests yet another in the long series of reversals, as a result of which it transpires that it is Joe Chip who is on the outside, and Runciter is in the cold-pac condition, somehow deluded into believing that he lives in the external reality. However, what is also implied here that this ontological division is ultimately illusory and both existential realms, the "real" outside world of Runciter and the "simulated" world of Joe Chip, are simulations and lack proper ontological grounding. Runciter and Joe Chip dwell in their separate simulated worlds, and both are similarly divorced from reality - from the higher ontological level that would stand here for reality.

It would seem that the sense of reality is saved by postulating the implied reader - and the personal reader identifying with him - who imagines himself safely "outside" these simulated worlds, occupying the level external to or above the fictional universe of the novel, and thus belonging to the ontologically stable reality, immune to erosions and disruptions, free from the "ontological
flicker". But even this certainty is finally undermined by the strategy of variable reality, and this is due to the cumulative effect of the advertising campaign extolling Ubik. This campaign is carried out in the epigraphs preceding each chapter, such as the following one:

Wake up to a hearty, lip-smacking bowlful of nutritious, nourishing Ubik toasted flakes, the adult cereal that's more crunchy, more tasty, more ummmish. Ubik breakfast cereal the whole-bowl taste treat! Do not exceed recommended portion at any one meal (Dick 1978:178)

Runciter praises this wonder-working product of unlimited application in the TV commercial watched by his agents, and later appears in person in the world of Joe Chip to present him with the spray-can of Ubik. However, the epigraphs to each chapter belong to the higher textual level than the textual level that projects the fictional worlds of Runciter and Joe Chip. The epigraphs are addressed to the implied reader of the text - thus the addressee of the whole text also becomes the target of the Ubik advertisements. And this results in the shifting of the levels - the implied reader is projected onto the "same" ontological level as Runciter and Joe Chip, drawn into their simulacrum of the world, which can be construed as a kind of metalepsis, a breach of the narrative levels. As a result of the "ripple effect", also the personal reader may identify with the addressee of the Ubik advertisements and feel the ontological status of his extratextual reality seriously threatened. He may imagine himself inhabiting the simulated world generated by some malignant, malformed and immature illusionist - some sort of the Matrix, where reality, replaced by its "perfect double", "a metastable, programmatic, perfect, descriptive machine, which provides all the signs of the real" (Baudrillard 1998), becomes ultimately ungraspable.

The conducted analysis of the nature of the fictional reality and the literary strategies projected by Philip Dick's novel seems to justify the thesis advanced in the article that it does deserve a place in the postmodernist canon. However, Ubik is not a mere literary response to the "postmodern condition", it is not a cultural document, a testimony to its times. Rather, its affiliation with postmodernist fiction rests on a considerable number of intrinsic literary features that it shares with other representative postmodernist novels, such features as the concern with death as the ontological boundary, the principle of "variable reality", constant shifts and reversals of the ontological status of the fictional universe, resulting in the characteristic ontological "flicker", the open, enigmatic ending recalling the famous postmodernist lack of narrative closure, and finally, the device of metalepsis, projecting the implied reader on the same narrative levels as the fictional characters, with the concomitant effect of the as-
sumed disorientation of the personal reader, the dismantling of their sense of reality.

References


