

# Ethics of Asymmetry and Otherness: Reading Ubik with Baudrillard and Levinas

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## أخلاقيات اللاتماثل والآخرية : قراءة رواية (Ubik) مع بودريار وليفناس

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**Abstract:-**

The present paper builds on the gaps in Baudrillard's idea of the symbolic to justify the possibility of asymmetry in the hyperreal world of Ubik. Making use of the missing link between Baudrillard's Symbolic Exchange and Death and his theories regarding political economy, value system and codes, one can explain the depth of the idea of the symbolic and its subtle relation to temporality. Through detecting examples of symbolic resistance in Ubik we prove that the total domination of the codes is impossible and referentiality still exists. Levinas's ethical theory, on the other hand, gives us the opportunity to see the reality of the human in terms of temporalization of time. Building on the referentiality of body, we detect different levels of otherness in the novel and their relation to time and space. Through the lens of Levinas we find examples of body's vulnerability as trace of otherness. Th and the ethical demands of the other in the novel render a new concept of justice that is founded on asymmetry. Such asymmetry, read a la Levinas, is the result of defining human being in terms of sensibility.

**Key words:** Symbolic Resistance, Baudrillard, Ethical Criticism, Levinas, Otherness, Temporalization.

**المخلص:**

يبنى هذا البحث على الثغرات في مفهوم بودريار عن "الرمزي" لتبرير إمكانية اللاتماثل في العالم الفائق الواقعية لرواية Ubik ومن خلال الاستفادة من الحلقة المفقودة بين كتاب بودريار ❖ التبادل الرمزي والموت ❖ وبين نظرياته حول الاقتصاد السياسي، ونظام القيم، والرموز (الشفرة)، يمكن توضيح عمق مفهوم "الرمزي" وعلاقته الخفية بالزمانية. ومن خلال تتبع مظاهر المقاومة الرمزية في \*Ubik\* تثبت أن الهيمنة الكلية للرموز أمر مستحيل، وأن المرجعية لا تزال قائمة.

أما نظرية ليفناس الأخلاقية، من جانب آخر، فتمكنا من رؤية حقيقة الإنسان من منظور "تزمين الزمان" (temporalization of time) وبالاستناد إلى مرجعية الجسد، نرصد مستويات متعددة من الغيرية (الآخريّة) في الرواية، وعلاقتها بالزمان والمكان. ومن خلال عدسة ليفناس، نكتشف أمثلة على هشاشة الجسد باعتبارها أثراً للغيرية. إن مطالب الآخر الأخلاقية في الرواية تنتج مفهوماً جديداً للعدالة يقوم على اللاتماثل. هذا اللاتماثل، وفق قراءة ليفناس، ناتج عن تعريف الكائن البشري من منظور الإحساس (sensibilit).

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المقاومة الرمزية، بودريار، النقد الأخلاقي، ليفناس، الغيرية، التزمين.

## Introduction

Philip K. Dick is master of creating ambiguity, weaving an unstable reality and meandering in the darkest recesses of existence, all while offering a promise of light. For his purpose, science fiction is the best context for raising philosophical questions; however the unsettling senses of discomfort and indeterminacy makes one's choice of approach to his text, a challenge to be faced. *Ubik* lacks nothing short of the rest of his novels in terms of entertaining all the thematic and narrative devices that contribute to the reader's disorientation on different levels.

The innovative ways of dealing with space and time in his novels of 60s led him along the path to a plethora of various possibilities to approach the idea of reality. The pattern cherished on his part in reviving the concepts of simulation, existence and authenticity basically through problematizing familiar binaries establishes his work as a cornerstone of vast potential. As such the Marxist, postmodernist and poststructuralist readings of his work are indicative of the fact that his text brims with interpretive demands.

Dick's science fiction presents a unique opportunity to both distance and approach the wornout reality of consumerist and simulation ridden America by introducing different levels of otherness. The performative imagination of the characters in *Ubik* provides the reader with a mysterious quality of a philosophically oriented detective story, rendering a new idea of the human in a highly technological world.

Amidst the tapestry of voices, an unusual one belongs to a transcendental force manifesting in various forms. Each revelation of this higher consciousness unveils a distinct reality.

## Literature Review

Peter Fitting in his 1975 paper on *Ubik* states that the novel aims at both deconstruction and reconstruction of the genre in that it both unravels the ideological schemes behind the use of science and fiction while portrays a different view of the future in which we exercise freedom from limits. The paper discusses the fact that traditional bourgeois science fiction is a 'metaphysical construct' and

Dick's work exemplifies one of the main attempts to demystify the genre of its transcendental implications(50). Dick turns a blind eye to the 'scientific plausibility' through his ironic treatment of the scientific language. What is more, *Ubik* is a critique of 'a priori modes of perception'(51). Finally, what distances *Ubik* from the SF tradition is that its ending can be interpreted in several ways.

In her 2021 paper Płomiński, building on Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality and symbolic exchange along with Braidotti's critical posthumanism and Toffoletti's posthuman emergence states that the characters in *Ubik* are thrust into the third-order simulacra which can lead to dissolution of subjectivity. What can overcome the absolute hopelessness and abstraction of such an order is the posthuman perspective. Although simulacrum is believed to be nonexchangeable, the posthuman shift can provide us with a reference by welcoming death. This marks a return to the real.

In the 2015 paper on *Ubik*'s baffling features, Braver makes use of the gnostic theology to resolve the enigmatic aspects of the novel such as 'acceleration of entropy', 'regression of technology' and 'Runciter's fragmented manifestations'(89). What Jory says about his survival through other souls and feeding off them in half-life bears resemblance to the gnostic descriptions of Archons(90). While Jory is 'the lesser god of Gnosticism' or the malevolent initiator of the 'unreal world', Runciter plays the role of the 'redeemer' and seeks different ways to communicate with his employees so as to make them aware of their entrapment in a simulation of life (91).

In a 1975 essay on *Ubik*, Taylor analyzes the novel's themes through the existential and psychological lenses. In this study the author asserts that Dick merges psychological and physical landscapes and creates a universe where subjectivity shapes reality. The entropic decay and the struggle to maintain meaning is read in the context of the Platonic 'idea objects' in order to bring to fore a world that is both a 'human construct' and 'beyond time'(24). In addition, Taylor believes that the human bond between Runciter and Joe and its relation to reality is compatible with schizophrenic themes of the inner and outer spaces of recognition.

Sean Matharoo in his 2020 essay introduces the novel as an 'extro' science fiction. To consider *Ubik* as such requires addressing

it in terms of extraterrestrial immanence. Thinking about the work necessitates examining the contingency tied to immortality, as well as the uncalled-for materializing and resurrecting powers of Ubik. Ubik potentiates the birth of a 'vectorial subject' that both annihilates despondency in its confrontation with capitalism and is responsible for effectuating a political project aimed at universal justice(69).

Jakovljević and Ćirković detect the examples of decoherence and fractal branching of realities in their 2023 paper and point out through using Everret's cosmic theory that the unique features of such realities lies exactly in violation of decoherence principles. The violation is rooted in not only the discovery but also interaction of the protagonists with the realities and in the same way the interaction of the realities with the protagonists. They also refer to Everett's contribution to quantum theory in "merging of the microscopic and macroscopic worlds" which leads to the idea of the observer and observed as inextricable parts of the single quantum system(109). Dick's text, as Jakovljević and Ćirković maintain, provides us with the observer-observed junction between fictional and objective realities, inviting both readers and protagonists to immerse themselves in a multiverse that depicts the multiple possibilities of a primary reality.

### Baudrillard and the Paradox of Signs and Symbols

Baudrillard's rejection of traditional social frameworks reveals the incomplete dominance of code-based systems, with scholars like Genosko pointing to paradoxes in the symbolic's material aspect and existential status of the bar. These key themes shed light on the idea of obligation in shaping social and semiotic reality.

The systems crediting obligation and "imperative of reciprocation", as Walters notices, have brought "object-exchange into direct relation with festival and ritual" (48). While the bars, in Genosko's words, enforce systems of equivalence, their metaphysical role in assigning divides contributes to the later production of codes (23). The obligation of separating the binaries later on turns to a more invisible and complex obligation in the realm of codes. The codes responsible for refusion of the signifiers and signified, along with the components of the signs are influenced by the primal sense of the symbolic which credits the material aspect of the human. The binding of the signifiers of time and those of body

and their re-fusion with the body as a mysterious signified, reflect the inability of the simulacra to impose a purposeless free-float. The otherness of the symbolic shows itself in the manipulation of the signifiers with the conventional correspondence of time and space, hence contributing to the cause of symbolic resistance.

The symbolic is associated with anti-dualism as it dissolves the bars and rejects teleological acts and equivalence. It moreover conveys a kind 'power' in its conjuring of asymmetrical responses. "Power" he pinpoints, "belongs to the one who can give and cannot be repaid" (For a Critique 179).

Baudrillard's spatial logic of cyclical movements and the void, on the other hand, obscures the symbolic's temporal complexity, which operates both within coded value systems and as primal symbolic exchange—reciprocal acts of death, sacrifice, and potlatch that resist calculable reduction (Gane 33).

Endowed with Baudrillardian theories we realize that our social life is neither confined to the value system nor doomed to the fatality of codes. One of the examples of such resistance is the idea of 'weak strokes' (Genosko xxi) the examples of which are detectable in the novel. In Baudrillardian view the system as functioning on the level of signs and codes cannot process calculative and controlling measures of exchange to reciprocate the gift of death. In order to prevent this unfortunate end the system disbars death.

The Baudrillardian view of the political economy considers a controlled opposition as being inevitable. Death in this view can turn to a resource that is systematically administered. This is what Baudrillard critiques about the political economy as absorbing death into its mechanism of control and regulation of value. The symbolic resistance against the irreversibility of economic exchange is not limited to the reversibility of death, it also points to the mysterious role of body itself.

### **Levinas and Ethical Reading**

Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy emerges as a critical dialogue between phenomenological traditions (e.g., Heidegger) and post-phenomenological thought, reconfiguring inherited frameworks into a radical ethics-centered vision. His work disrupts metaphysical

systems by prioritizing the ethical encounter with the “Other” over ontology. Kosky notes that Levinas does not “end metaphysics” but reorients it toward its “true essence” by challenging its historical distortions (Kosky 3). This transformation is marked by a move from an ontological language in Totality and infinity to a performative one in Otherwise than Being, emphasizing ethics as prior to being. Such performativity leads to a dynamic idea of both language and sensibility in Levinas epitomized in ideas of saying and material temporalization. The lapse of time is the condition of possibility for the saying as the ‘passive exposure to the other’(Foran and Uljée 14-19).

In Totality and Infinity, Levinas critiques Western philosophy’s reduction of metaphysical desire to negativity (e.g., Hegel) or confinement within a “preceding comprehension of Being” (Kosky 4). He introduces the “same” and “Other” as non-dialectical terms, asserting that the self’s identity (I) emerges through its relation to the world (e.g., body, labor, economy), which are not external layers but “essential expressions of its structure” (Levinas, Totality, 37). The body, however, is ambiguously positioned: it binds the self to the world (as a site of “slavery”) but also enables transcendence through eros, which bridges being and the infinite. The otherness of eros later on turns to that of saying which is related to a cluster of other terms including ‘proximity’, ‘obsession’, ‘substitution’ and ‘anarchy’ implying fracture in ego’s unity and the asymmetry of “one-for-the-other”(Otherwise 114).

Mills highlights Levinas’ treatment of death and negativity in Totality and Infinity, where the “horrifying encounter with death” reveals the limits of negativity, displacing desire from sameness (Mills 516). The body’s alterity, which is a tension between dependence and independence, anchors the concept of “distance,” a prelude to ethical responsibility(ibid).

In Otherwise than Being, Levinas radicalizes his ethics by redefining responsibility. Unlike Totality, where ethics begins with the I, here it starts with the me, an exposed and vulnerable self “touched” by the Other. The “diachrony” of ethics disrupts the immanence of being, introducing an “anarchical temporality” rooted in an unrepresentable past (88). This time fractures the present, imposing

“extreme urgency” through the Other’s demands—suffering for the Other without reward (Caygill, 135-136).

The economy of violence (a concept Derrida critiques and extends) arises from the interplay of violation and resistance. Levinasian ethics demands confronting violence not through domination but through “doubling” it—resisting while maintaining integrity. Derrida links this to spatial haunting: language, like space, is torn by voices it cannot contain, as seen in Levinas’ domestic space, which is “haunted” by the Other (Derrida, via Wigley, 171).

Levinas’ conception of the body evolves across his works. In Totality, it faces the world’s alterity, mediating between being and transcendence. In Otherwise, it becomes a site of “absolute passivity”, where sensibility—“exposedness”—precedes identity. Sensibility is not an act but a state of receptivity, “called to exposure” without agency (Caygill 136). This inversion of the “conatus of esse” (self-preservation) roots ethics in vulnerability, not autonomy.

Space, too, shifts from the “enclosure” of Totality to the “non-world” (non-inhabitation) in Otherwise. The spatial vocabulary in Totality is already destabilized by the Other’s presence, while in Otherwise, openness implies “non-world” as a realm where “nothing covers anything” (179). Rugo underscores the body’s role as an “open space,” transcending Heideggerian rootedness, and its tension between separation from the *Il y a* (indifferent being) and ethical rupture (516).

Levinas’ language resists binary yes/no answers, prioritizing ethical transcendence over representation. The “face of the Other” in Totality symbolizes this transcendence, mediated through eros, which questions materiality while relying on it (Slaughter 58). Ladyga links Levinas’ ethical sensibility to language as a ‘shadow-like trope of anachrony’ where the Other’s “trace” disrupts textual coherence. This opens pathways for literary analysis, where language itself becomes a site of ethical encounter(57).

Levinas’ ethics extends to the political via “tertiality” and the “third” (Thomas). The third introduces justice by imposing limits on the infinite demands of the Other, disturbing passive responsiveness. This relates to Levinas’ distinction between *Il y a* (indifferent being)

and Illeity (the “there is” vs. “the Other”), and between “saying” (ethics) and “the said” (metaphysics).

Some scholars like Rugo highlight Levinas’ ambiguities: the body’s shifting alterity, the tension between I and me, and the undecidability of vulnerability. These ambiguities are intentional, reflecting ethics’ resistance to totalization.

## Discussion

### The Signs and the Symbolic Resistance in Ubik

The object representing the movement of the telepath on the map falls off as a sign of the latter’s disappearance. The narrator uses the word “disappearance” to describe the unexpected absence of the telepath. Disappearance is a distinct concept in Baudrillard’s oeuvre and compels us to face a challenge. It does not present a finality classically associated with death and linear time. What disappears moves into a constellation of cyclical movements which would probably bring it back. While the sign object is there to convey the simulacra of Hollis’s agent, the liminal state of his existence points to a spatial logic of existence which disguises the failure of the system to realize the temporal aspects his disappearance.

In Baudrillardian view the system as functioning on the level of signs and codes cannot process calculative and controlling measures of exchange to reciprocate the gift of death. As such it would be obligated to act in suicidal terms and destroy itself. In order to prevent this unfortunate end the system disbars death. However what is shown early in the novel is something further than implications of such disbaring; that is the temporality associated with being’s origin.

Ubik, the everchanging product which appears in different forms, undermines the social concerns of human beings through promoting logic of exchange and equivalence. However its operation in terms of merging the outers and inner spaces associated with the status of the man-in-the-world to borrow Heidegger’s term, marks a major attempt on its part to cover the temporalization links to man’s origin. From the perspective of the alienated characters in the novel the dispersion of ubik products in every aspect of the consumer’s life, provides a spatiotemporal consistency in one’s ontological status.

The integration of space and time in other words leads to a safe condition for exchange. This is to say that amid the chaos the only stable reality is exchange. The individual's social concerns, in contrast, demands the symbolic resistance to the logic of exchange. Such resistance can be read through the symbolic idea of 'weak strokes' (Genosko xxi). Joe embraces the energizing *ubik* to resist the entropic collapse of reality. It does not combat the decay through direct action but sustaining a paradoxical half-life in which characters preserve their consciousness. By accepting *ubik* as a Baudrillardian counter-gift, Joe accepts the ambiguity attached to its power in subversion of life/death binary. *Ubik* does not however win against the entropy. Rather it destabilizes the system by refusing to adhere to either side (life or death). A purely Baudrillardian reading might interpret *Ubik's* irony as twofold: it operates both as a producer of signs and as a form of symbolic resistance—a duality that mirrors simulative systems generating their own gaps to indirectly neutralize dissent, even as the system perpetuates its contradictions. This kind of reading dismisses the asymmetry tied to the symbolic which is linked to the denial of the symbolic's temporal aspects.

Other examples of the indirect destabilization can be found in Jory's manipulation of half-lifers. Although he is a psi-active child and a truly powerful character in the novel he prefers manipulative approach to direct opposition. Just like the irony we addressed above about *Ubik*, Jory's manipulations end in his survival rather than total destruction of what he aims at (half-life). This passive-aggressive reversal of the system portrays the symbolic exchange as a 'cruel revenge of things' (Genosko xii). What is more pre-cognition is a self-canceling act. It destabilizes the system by making its rules incoherent (Genosko 14). The speculative time of symbolic exchange in all these cases entails a complex cyclical movement since the destabilization of the linear time and the juxtaposition of different reciprocated moments, though done in favor of subsistence and survival, indicate a differential potentiality through which part of one's existence is sacrificed for the other.

I begin with the status of the signifiers to add more light on the case. The signifiers of exchange exercise their political power over the consumers. The signified, on the other hand, is not a metaphor to be selected or a linguistic unit containing a transcendental mystery.

Most interpretations of the novel have considered *Ubik* as a transcendental signifier, serving to explain every unusual occurrence. The former readings have dismissed the important role of the symbol in its otherness. The symbolic fluidity which is the contemporary form of symbol in the age of technology indicates a major structural asymmetry.

The signifiers of exchange and those of life and time are entangled in the novel. On the surface, what we see as readers of *Ubik* is the merging of the physical and the psychoanalytic reality. Analyzing concepts like desire and the unconscious as models of simulation still leaves a gap concerning the significance of the most complex referent, the body. What Baudrillard tries to pinpoint in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* through highlighting the materiality of death is in nature putting into relief the material status of the body itself.

Seeking advice from his wife to save their organization Runciter, head of the biggest anti-psi company sheds light on the way unconscious is treated in their society. Runciter and Ella both share the same idea of the passage toward the final point symbolized through the 'red light'. Their discussion on red light indicates the depth of controlling system governing and fetishizing life and death by mint of simulating not only the signs and the political economy but also the unconscious. In their conversation, Runciter mentions that this is the same light in the Tibetan book, *Bardo Thodol*, which the doctors made Ella read while she was dying. The fact that any kind of death is a rebirth is pinpointed by what Runciter calls the "womb":

Well, like they say, you' re heading for a new womb to be born out of. And that smoky red light - that' s a bad womb; you don' t want to go that way. That' s a humiliating, low sort of womb. You' re probably anticipating your next life, or whatever it is." He felt foolish, talking like this; normally he had no theological convictions. But the half-life experience was real and it had made theologians out of all of them (Dick ch. 1).

This shows that the signifiers of life even in their state of abstraction refer back to the material aspect of birth. The signifiers in other words gravitate toward the material aspects of the symbols of the body. Ella's references to body, on the other hand, pinpoint its

uttermost significance which can be defined in terms of its otherness. Being in the state of half-life Ella can connect to other people and feel herself incarnated in other bodies: “I think that other people who are around me - we seem to be progressively growing together. A lot of my dreams aren’t about me at all. Sometimes I’m a man and sometimes a little boy; sometimes I’m an old fat woman with varicose veins” (12).

In Baudrillardian terms, as Genosko points out, the symbolic through the course of the time breaks into the semiotic allegedly gaining a “fatal independence” in their final turn into codes (Genosko introduction). Based on such an argument the final turn of the semiotic is ascribed to the loss of concrete relation between people in “pre-simulacral societies”(45). The symbolic breaks into the sign in order to bring about the flow of the signifiers while at the same time re-fuse the signifier and the signified(introduction). Such ambivalence indicates two different mechanisms of time which do not annul one another. The signifiers tend to gravitate toward the corporeal in the novel and re-fuse with the signified of the body. The residue of the past in both the signifiers and the signified obligates their re-fusion. This is completely against the idea of randomness and the floating of the signifiers based on the law of codes. According to such frame of justification one can explain why the maintaining of the body in half-life is pronounced in such obsessive terms by Herbert Vogelsang who thinks of the burial for instance as “barbaric” (Dick ch. 1).

Baudrillard notes that the symbolic’s post-effraction state in the third order of simulacra disrupts “consumptive patterns” through its reification as system-assigned signs, obscuring production/consumption via structural equivalence—a guise masking symbolic asymmetry. Symbolic disorder complicates the body’s status, as its endless signifier chain resists codification, rendering life/death signs neither oppositional nor autonomous. Commodification attempts like “moratoriums” falter, as the body belongs to a higher logical order: Body is an effect which lacks finality.

In the novel the tautological movements at play help us read the system according to Baudrillard’s theories. Such movement includes the cultural social and material contextualization of the human in the highly technological society. The thematic focus of the novel explored

in terms of reality, identity and existence appears through the constant self-questioning of the characters about their spatio-temporal place in the world.

Glen Runciter, for example, ruminates about the circumstances which justify keeping people in half-life until they finally meet their death. Half-life is a state where different levels of experience are made possible. The reliance on the ideal of space and the visual experience contribute to the idea of finality as expulsion from the system while the idea of time-bound embodiment is implied in the highlighting of the age and bodily functions. The tautological statements resonate with the repetitive nature of advertisements which state obvious benefits of Ubik in different shapes and functions rendering value wrapped in the shadows of ambiguity.

Use value is no longer solely tied to the idea of utility due to its subsumption into structural systems. Genosko ascribes this depth to the use value's role in maintaining and destabilizing the structural oppositions(14). The merging of the values into the system of signification in the novel gains extra significance due to the major changes in the consideration of the function of the bar. The power bar in the novel is assigned only to be destabilized in half-life. The homology between objects and signs on the other hand is disrupted due to their mysterious relationship to the idea of materiality. Trace of the primordial time of symbol(in its first sense) remains as a residue in the sign. Even if we take the codes as controlling the movement of the signifiers, the latter's flow is influenced by the temporality of the material. The process of the consummation of the body brings about an unconventional temporalization that prevents the purely operational rendering of the body. Within this context, the consummation of the body and the consumption of the objects can never be in the same level since the symbolic status of the former is entangled with its embodiment for the other. The status of the body can effect that of the objects in a sense which will become more tangible when we get to the section covering Levinasian approach.

The short-circuited tactical approach to body, in Baudrillard's language, which draws predictable responses with the help of stimuli, is related to the body as pure function. This is what the reader infers from the rationale behind establishing institutions such as the Moratorium in Ubik's society. In spite of the attempts to objectify the

body, what leads us toward the social significance of the body is the idea of “selection” in Baudrillard. For our purpose we tend to unravel the paradox in the “selective readers” in the age of the dominance of the codes. As Baudrillard mentions in Symbolic Exchange more than being users we select and get to be selected and tested in the process of decoding. In essence then we are readers more than anything else; readers of the messages given to us as a test (Symbolic Exchange 63). What is constantly needed to be tested is the code itself. The constant presence of the advertised objects are significant in the same lines since they are not meant to serve anyone but to test the influence of the code. In Ubik the test challenges both the reader and the characters alike. As for the reader the reality of the advertisements and the repeated presence of Ubik in different forms has nothing to do with the reality that people face in their lives. Every image, object and data is supposed to incur instantaneous response, the element which ends up in absolute control. The status of the body in half-life, however complicates the interrogative approach of the power structure manifested in the code. To be selected as a half-lifer is to enter a social exchange in which the non-contemporaneity of the temporalizing process in two different worlds disturbs the complete dominance of the code. When Ella or any other half-lifer is selected to produce an opinion they are selected paradoxically to be consummated in a relationship, something utterly human rather than code-oriented.

The society’s idea of death which is channeled through Vogelsang’s thoughts shows a certain tension between the necessity and expense in the political economy. Vogelsang thinks about his will and the way he would have his heirs revive him “one day a century” in order for him to “observe the fate of all mankind”(Dick, ch. 1). This could place a financial burden on the heirs to the point where they might need to have his body buried, much to his disappointment. The Baudrillardian view of the political economy considers a controlled opposition as being inevitable even if it does not end up in the favor of the system. A conventional reading of the system in the novel attaches the necessity of preserving the individuals to the use-value of the half-lifers’ bodies. The expense of reviving them on the other hand, is attributed to the exchange-value associated with the service. Death in this view can turn to a resource that is systematically administered. This is what Baudrillard critiques about the political

economy as absorbing death into its mechanism of control and regulation of value. Moreover, the traditional significance of death viewed in the light of ritual and mourning is dismissed, hence another point of critical entry for Baudrillard. What can problematize this interpretive approach is something more than the controlled oppositions which would finally lead to the so called idea of equivalence of the values in the system. The symbolic resistance against the irreversibility of economic exchange is not limited to the reversibility of death. Another kind of resistance against the assimilative force of the political economy is at issue here.

The synchronizing power of the political economy influences spatiotemporal existence of beings to exert control and reproduce its mechanisms. Such regulation assures that the individuals are confined to their specified roles and positions. synchronization develops a generalized and permanent 'mobilization' where every aspect of life is meticulously aligned to fulfill the system's demands (Utopia Deferred, 193). The examples in the novel include controlled animation of half-life, the talking door that demands money and the talking device in the coffee-shop at the moratorium. As the characters experience temporal regression, they develop an increasing reliance on the mysterious product, influenced by the harmonizing forces of synchronization which put their survival, the availability of the product and their consumption patterns in sync. The activities and movements of the characters like Joe, Runciter and Pat are fixed as if their role as corporate agents is entangled with their very existence as human beings.

The enforcement of the "collective functional models" leads to maintaining of the semiotic order so that the individuals "fit" into the system's codes (Symbolic Exchange 133). Runciter's desire for visibility aligns with such models which contributes to the cause of reproducing media driven identities. Ella's body as the ground of pre-determined differences moreover is another example of such models. The merging of the behavior, identity and value in the functional model in the case of both Runciter and Ella can lead to the reductive process of codification so that Runciter's "built body" conveys power and Ella's static face and body conveys passive reproduction of what system needs. But such homogenizing loops are not completely successful in reproducing the simulated identities due to the symbolic

resistance of the body in feeling pain of the other (Ella sensing other bodies) and Runciter's anxiety concerning the pressure on Ella's body.

Institutions like moratoriums exercise power through controlling the process of dying through submerging it in the process of thought in order to impose a rational border between these two states. The result however is beyond the desired confines of science as the experience of half-life explores the threshold of existence where contradictions of the human experience lead to total indeterminacy.

Jory's symbolic violence and his disruption of the all-encompassing state of half-life violates the logic of equivalence and exchange. The catastrophe tied to his pre-modern origins which is rather primitive becomes apparent later on in his usage of cannibalistic language. To use Baudrillard's symbolic terms, the catastrophe-oriented presence of Jory is due to his understanding of death as more intelligible than life (Symbolic Exchange 182).

Jory's interruption of Runciter's conversation underscores Baudrillard's critique of technological mediation. This disruption reveals a deeper tension: while technology—like the proximity of half-lifers' cold pacs—can disrupt consciousness, it cannot fully replicate the body's role in grounding temporal experience (Symbolic Exchange 133). Consciousness, caught between agency and subjugation, is shaped by the technological system's "totalizing" logic, yet remains tethered to the body's transcendent influence. Baudrillard's tension between deconstruction and phenomenology (as Rajan notes) further clarifies this paradox: consciousness oscillates between being directed toward objects/systems and directed by them. Trifonova's "illusory" framework amplifies this ambiguity: consciousness exists in a liminal space where reality and illusion share a common limit (181–82). Baudrillard's own distinction between subjective illusion (confusing real/unreal) and objective illusion (the physical world's non-contemporaneity) adds another layer to this puzzle.

Building on this critique, Runciter embodies Baudrillard's "collective functional model" ( 133). By preserving societal balance through advertising, he prioritizes image consumption over authenticity—idealizing his wife's youthful image while aging himself.

This mirrors the novel's broader critique of consumerist identity, where consciousness fixates on one's position within the system rather than internal subjectivity.

Shifting to character dynamics, consciousness in *Ubik* is both dynamic and fractured. Rajan's "double consciousness" (259)—a split between a reflective, alienated self and a primal, engaged "external double"—finds echoes in interactions between characters and half-lifers and also Pat's erotic presence. Pat's erotic power merges symbolic exchange (e.g., Runciter and Joe's shared secret sign) with semiotic codes. Yet her claim to rewrite past, which critiques Baudrillard's floating signifiers paradoxically underscores the persistence of a sophisticated referentiality. Despite her ability to manipulate signs, her ignorance of the secret sign Joe recognizes (unknown to her) highlights the unresolved tension between systemic codes and material reality.

Pat's role extends beyond narrative intrigue as her body symbolizes embodied obligation, linking time and value through metonymy. This interplay between her physicality and symbolic agency reaffirms Baudrillard's point: referentiality persists even as codes proliferate.

The novel's critique intensifies when examining technological objects. The money-gulping door, for instance, merges economic and sign values, destabilizing subject-object hierarchies (Genosko's "asymmetry in binary opposites," 85). Similarly, Tippy Jackson's simulated dreams epitomize consumer culture's dehumanizing effects: tasks performed in sleep conflate economic gain with symbolic mission. Even the cold pac and protophason detectors collapse life/death binaries, forcing readers to question their semantic foundations.

Amid this chaos, symbolic demand drives sign proliferation and re-fusion. Yet their material grounding—Pat's body, the secret sign—resists total abstraction. Baudrillard's "meta-value" (Hegarty 35) remains unresolved, leaving ethical ambiguity. Dick's novel thus becomes a Baudrillardian experiment: it critiques simulacral excess while paradoxically relying on its destabilization to generate meaning.

Ultimately, *Ubik*'s Möbius strip structure—where past/present and inside/outside blur—reflects the non-dialectical relationship between

reflective and non-reflective consciousness. Characters like Pat and Joe navigate a world where symbolic exchange (e.g., Joe's evaluative mark) clashes with semiotic codes. Despite technological totalization, human agency—rooted in bodies and material time—resists erasure. The novel's genius lies in this tension: it mirrors Baudrillard's theories while exposing their limits, proving that the irreducible human cannot be fully contained by systems of code or sign.

### Ethical Approach to Ubik

The narrative accelerates when Runciter assembles his team—including inertials, precogs, and anti-psi—to pursue Stanton Mick's mission on Luna, which turns into a deadly trap culminating in an explosion. Amid the chaos, protagonist Joe Chip navigates a shifting reality and deals with existential complexities which casts doubt on the ultimate power of Ubik.

Joe's conapt apartment undergoes different temporal realities, with unknown aspects despite his long residency. Due to the diversity of simultaneous temporalities, technological objects are juxtaposed with those of cultural significance; an object is both a material entity and bearer of signification, hence a form. The narrator's subtle descriptions and characters' experiences show consumption's role in delaying or nullifying "enjoyment" (in Levinas's parlance) by rendering activities like eating a mere performative act leading to an "unusual" or "alienating feeling." The narrator, acting as a higher consciousness mediating lived life, thus fails to reflect the "I's" enjoyment within the society of consumption.

In Levinasian philosophy, the formalism of essence links to synchronicity as "togetherness in place," a form of thematization where essence manifests as synchronized presence (Uljee 244). Defining being through the synchronicity of image consumption and time reveals a totalizing status quo, as seen in Ubik when Joe tries to remember via proliferating signs that reduce experiences to significations. Underlying this synchrony is "the difference of what cannot be assembled" (Beals 135), highlighting the symbolic's paradox: it is both embedded in the system and radically external to it, creating ambivalence through Baudrillard's positioning of bars in political economy. This leads to confusion in existential status and

sign-symbol boundaries, prompting the question of whether Joe consumes signs or is consumed by them, especially as signs assume symbolic functions.

“Essence” or “interest” as “persistence in essence” which fills up “every interval of nothingness” encompasses attitudes towards death, negativity and “struggle of egoisms” (Otherwise, 125, 4). In *Ubik* the essence appears as “absolute synchronism of war” in that the psi group thematizes the intentionality of the other in terms of their own so as to make judgment regarding such synchronisms. From reading minds to measuring psi field in Luna, all these reductive activities result in the contemporaneity of the sensing and the sensed. The objectifying consciousness provides the balance of each power as contained and controlled by another. Runciter says to Mrs. Wirt: “defusing a Psi operation has to be done on a systematic basis....we have to balance Hollis people individual by individual , an anti-talent for every talent....Hollis has done it the same way: Psi by Psi”(Dick, ch.4). Both Hollis and Runciter manipulate consciousnesses. Moreover, before the blast, the “rational peace” is driven by exchange patterns through which object-signs without real use-value represent coded differences in progressive time. The individual’s struggle for status and identity among signs is a “one against all”(Zhao 9) struggle per Levinas.

Although entertaining a metaphysical grandeur in enforcing revival and truth, *Ubik* is not the ultimate reality in the novel. Another significant reality is that of the structure of the human subject, marked by obligation and responsibility which can be read in terms of the affectivity of the body. Billy and Matt’s appearance in Tippy’s dream reciting Richard III is significant. Richard’s “deformed unfinished sent before my time”(Dick, ch. 5) connects bodily deformation to ethical disposition—a Levinasian prioritizing of material incarnation over idealist creation. The poem justifies evil as rooted in the deformed body. Though Tippy never heard this poem, Bill and Matt threaten her because rationality, like sensibility, operates through “pure subjection”—autonomy achieved only through subjection to prior rule. Her dream, though technologically induced within her knowledge limits, reveals rational faculties already structured as subjection.

The brothers' primitive appearance—"blunt incisors" suggesting a "diet of raw food" (Dick, ch. 5) —transforms Tippy into a symbolic scapegoat. Their facial expressions mark consumption patterns and physical character as sources of sign exchange rooted in human symbolic significance. Through technology, Tippy discovers threats from Hollis agents, highlighting the novel's appearance/disappearance theme. This creates a Baudrillardian 'paradox' (Gogan 108) as Tippy navigates reality through imagination to discover meaning in proliferating signs. While her imaginative discovery operates through abstract signs and symbols, her conceptualization filters through concrete incarnation signifiers. Her fear stems from vulnerability toward the agents' faces—the concrete amid abstraction.

Pat Conley brings unusual sophistication to *Ubik*, illuminating different levels of otherness through the feminine's phenomenological status. Even in her first encounter with Joe, Pat is sexually attractive making their encounter readily erotic. For Levinas's tradition, the erotic oscillates between the otherness and possession, reverence and desecration. Her precog ability put her in a superposition in that she exemplifies both openness and domineering tendencies associated with the eros and the feminine. When Runciter asks about her talent, he suddenly finds himself in another place and time, understanding he hasn't accepted Stanton Mick's contract due to Pat's ability to manipulate temporal possibilities. He returns to primary reality through the domineering presence of Pat at his work place.

This multiplicity of realities associates with the primary reality of the desiring body. Pat's presence demonstrates temporalization and otherness possibility, yet "no transcendence being possible since every divergence from the present ends up in the contemporaneousness of self and other. Crucially, no direct erotic relationship is hinted at—rather, we understand the erotic figure's influence through conjuring the mystery of existence through unravelling the fantastic structuration of time. Pat's presence reveals to Runciter something amiss in his and Joe's future; such absence is, in Levinas's terms, "time" itself (Ellis pt. 1, sec. 4). By dispossessing them of subjectivity, she indicates the relationality of subjectivity that Levinas identifies in Existence and Existents and Time and the Other.

Though overwhelmed by the presence of the feminine and transcendental reason both Joe and Runciter are responsible beings. Pre-blast, Runciter's worry over lacking a "resident precog" for Luna reveals the "irreversible burden of responsibility and age." This Levinasian responsibility stems from temporalization - aging surpasses one's powers (Otherwise xxiii). Responsibility's irreversibility connects to time's irrevocability: the past cannot be made present or represented. The past passes irretrievably (xxvi), linked to "immemorial past" and "otherness in the same" (11). Post-blast complexity emerges through living on death's edge. The group's easy Luna escape suggests half-life state - experiencing embodiment through both facticity of being and passivity of subjective structure. Temporal instability and the I's anachronistic experience delay enjoyment. While Joe's noematic reason estranges elemental existence, man exists fundamentally through body.

Anachronisms manifest in Joe Chip's contradictory experiences across places, intensified post-blast. Joe and his group cold-pack Runciter for half-life preservation on Terra, seeking his advice on organizational fate, while all admit feeling they have aged years under Joe's leadership. Joe uniquely sustains his totalizing self and corporeal existence, consuming himself for the otherness of the other as Runciter's friend and inheritor, while assuming a judgmental stance toward the 'third party'.

The psi group's uncertainty about their state echoes the ontological grip of being, where the immersive il y a—filling essence's emptiness—is only transcended through mastery (Wyschogrod 9). Their distancing from reality, veiled by unity of consciousness and essence, reflects Levinas's betrayal as "conveying something through misrepresentations" (Thomas 144), where sensibility's duplicity distorts truth.

Post-blast, questioning Hollis's trap—why they escaped with Runciter's body unevaded—leads to decay signs: the ship's phone book declares numbers "obsolete," revealing its two-year age, and Joe's cigarette "breaks apart." Wendy links this to time's lapse, defying randomness of proliferating signs in half-life, as unity of consciousness and essence conceals temporal distance, treating time as "reminiscence and reminiscence as time" (Otherwise 29).

Decay signals a betrayal of becoming—'weighted down with matter' (Otherwise 144)—and evokes alterity as an ethical counterforce. As they follow Runciter's signs (matchboxes, tapes, walls), their consumption fosters responsibility, structuring subjectivity as responsivity, amid the receding time of half-life.

The motif of life and death in half-life is ambivalent, blurring categories through brain signals sustaining existence while the body decays. Readers and characters navigate endless possibilities, yet human factors like responsibility persist. The narrator suggests Joe and his group are alive, but Runciter might be dead—or vice versa, as seen in Al's elevator vision and restroom scrawls. Amid their struggles one truth holds: the group are obliged to respond to each other. Responsibility as obliged responsiveness marks the structure of Levinasian structure of subjectivity.

Ubik acts as a totalizing force, influencing cognition and consciousness while being shaped by human subjectivity's time structuration. During their Luna escape, Joe's thoughts fix on details like Pat's attire and the elevator's dangers, amidst Hollis's conspiracy. He rationalizes it as "another unrelated, meaningless, sense-datum registered in his mind" (Dick ch. 6), an anachronistic distraction in crisis. Post-blast, when the body's bond to reality is strong, eros's synchronizing power masks temporalization's reality, intertwining the other with unconventional time movements.

The play of metaphors and metonymies in the novel reflect the ambiguity in the relationship between being and non-being. Since half-life is a state in which characters are in throes of both body and reason such ambiguity gains extra significance. The cold sensation operates as a metonymical movement where a sensory detail stands for or extends to their deeper existential condition(their entrapment in the cold-pac's liminal reality). The sensation as such can be also regarded as a partial sign gesturing toward the whole of their metaphysical disintegration. The cold-pac moreover is both a material object and symbolic extension of the character's existential fragility. What counts as the ontological regression can be their chance of gaining ethical vulnerability.

The treatment of the body in the novel is rather multivarious. Although examples of the objectification of the body abound in Ubik,

certain existential motifs are there to divert it from such simplistic interpretations. As such we witness the divergence from the Wendy's and Runciter's hardly distinguishable corpses to Joe's body in throes of the existential fatigue. One of the metaphors that engages such fatigue is the following 'a bird caught in cobwebs, age hung about the image and this frightened him' (Dick, ch. 7). In Levinas's early phenomenology, fatigue embodies the oppressive 'condemnation to being' of 'Il y a'—a paradoxical existence marked by the impossibility of possibilities (De Vries 147). The corporeal weight of fatigue situates one already in the presence of the other." (De Vries 147). The relation between metaphor and metonymy comes to fore in this regard in that the metaphorical image of the trapped bird sheds more light on metonymic movement of passivity. This is what Denroch identifies as 'stack of counters' through which metaphor operates by selectively activating metonymic features while deactivating others(73). Metaphors appear through cross-domain resemblances and metonymies through combinatorial contiguity. Similarly, otherness can be interpreted in terms of both selection and combination. Fatigue is a phenomenological feelings which is both the metonymic extension of the impersonality of being (Il ya) and an existential metaphor for the passivity of the ever-indebted Levinasian self. The regressive movements of the objects(including Ubik products that assume degrading shapes) are also metaphors for the otherness of the temporalization and the spatial/temporal reterritorialization ascribed to Pat and Jory's power metaphorically represent otherness as rupturing the totality of the same. Ella and Joe's salvation through production and consumption of Ubik's reviving products metaphorically stand for the their responsiveness to the Deity-like Other.

The complex interplay of metonymy and metaphor in the image of the bird indicates the rupture of the human other. A single instant which in its conjuring of fatigue and aging indicates the time as out of phase with itself. The retention of such temporal divergence is the Levinasian immemorial past which is utterly human, hence ethical.

To speak of the Il y a is to address the contemporaneity of the "futurity without the other" and "futurity without me"(De Vries 149). As such Il y a demonstrates an inhuman otherness. Although distanced from the inhuman other, the feminine embodies an 'enigmatic and

reserved transcendence'(Chalier 177). To analyze the compatibility of Pat's character to the Levinasian "feminine" one can say that Pat complies with its features in several ways. She represents the divergence from the sameness of being while at the same time brings about one's immersion into it. Her movement in time is both 'extraterritorial'(Bernasconi 50) to the spatiotemporal sameness and provider of the condition of its sameness. Her freedom however leads to more entrapment since she is incapable of transcendence. Consciousness gains power in the contemporaneity of the sensing and sensed in the extraterritorial space of encounter between characters and Pat.

Human consciousness perceives this contemporaneousness as simultaneous temporalizations, associating the 'I' with collective "doom." Yet, aging signals a "desire without end without telos," a "constant passing away" that Blanchot calls the simultaneity of "arret de mort" and "au dela mort" (De Vries 149). In Ubik, deviations from expected order are rationalized as tensions between destructive (Pat) and constructive (Ubik) forces, but they never guarantee truth, tied to freedom and knowledge. Pat's cognitive precedence, though symbolizing freedom, never leads to her delivering of truth or saving others since at best her erotic presence confines the individuals to the sameness of visual experience. Her contribution to justice, if there is any, is done under the wake of freedom to assert one's right under the sun based on the 'necessity of truth' rather than the otherness of the human.

Consciousness, as a dominating representational intentionality, can be expmlified in the dominating and assimilative power of Jory who fuses other half-lifers' memories and imaginations. On the other hand, time as consciousness implies synthesis and recognition in imagination(Otherwise 34). As such the state of dying in the novel can be tied to the pre-reflective on different levels. The Levinasian said or the ontological ground can be detected in ad-oriented language of society as constantly emphasizing consumption. The non-dialectic pole of the ontological discourse or the saying can be found in the trace of the other which in no way resides in the experience of the present. Trace as 'the present of someone who has never been there' can be found in the time of the responsible

and responsive half-lifers whose susceptibility and vulnerability to the other never let them experience the 'pure now'.

To understand the role of the Levinasian said as ontological discourse one can focus on the idea of amphibology of being and entities or beings. When the inertials address the strange events centering around Runciter like his appearance on coins and match folders, the latter being an ad about a free shoe kit that has brought about a noticeable upward shift in Runciter's income though he is in half-life, they argue that there are two forces affecting the changes in their surrounding one giving rise to decay and the other "moving things in an opposite direction". They associate the latter with Runciter. This argument is reminder of the characteristic feature of the world of the said; the amphibology of being and entities. Runciter in other words is treated as both a being and a force for that matter which indicates the totalizing assemblage of the language.

Amphibology in language is the verb force of being in nouns. The coming to be of the unprecedented language in the novel is significant here. The titular Ubik itself as providing and maintaining reality is the verbal force of being trapped in the limit of nominal forms(products with the same name). The invention of new forms and linguistic innovations like moratoriums, psi abilities and various technological neologisms could exemplify the processes or states that the existing language cannot adequately contain. The disruption of the old categories also occurs on the level of the narrative itself as emergence of certain words surprise Joe. This status of language gives us a perspective on justice as well since the representations of the spatialized language and spatialized time (extraterritorial space) are further renderings of the dominating logic of being(contemporaneity).

Justice belong to the realm of representations. However the Levinasian approach to justice is rather complex since the infinite demand of otherness should be confined to the equality of justice. Justice, moreover, is beyond the simplistic correspondence as it is known in the wake of thirdness or tertiality. The movement towards justice has in its base an asymmetrical element of humanity which always prioritizes the singular other. Runciter plays the role of the singular other the responsibility toward whom brings about the

responsibility toward the group as a whole. His otherness, as a consequence, bears the tertiality of illeity.

Ubik's meaning-giving creates multiple forms of presence. This meaning-making—seen when Joe consumes Ubik as he loses his ability to process reality—shows the saying's teleological movement toward the said. Syncing with characters' presence which is data exchange between them and their surroundings is complicated by Ubik's ambiguous status. when the responsibility for the other intensifies in line with the vulnerability of bodies Ubik's position shifts as well. At the end of the novel Ubik introduces himself as a demi-god, a metaphysical entity which not only observes but also influences the world of humans but two points bear the highest significance in this respect. Ubik in such doing reveals itself in terms of the discourse (Levinas's Here I am). As such, he assumes humane features in Levinasian logic. Paradoxically, such an introduction on its part does not bestow upon it absolute singularity since what really concretizes it, is human life. The productivity associated with it, on the other hand, is proved as needing human life.

### **Conclusion:**

As a philosophical science fiction Ubik provides us with a new meaning of the social, one that engages a relationship between being and other. The strength of the narrative lies in its enfolding rather than unfolding, the former of which is associated with one's distance from the other and also otherness as the structure of subjectivity, given its (narrative's) rendering of different philosophical perspectives. What appears to be a purely metaphysical power (Ubik) is influenced by the social status of man as responsible and responsive being. Such an influence is apparent in its entrance into ethical discourse through which it introduces itself as ready to respond to the otherness of humans. Justice demands that the otherness of the human get acknowledged. The asymmetrical responsibility to Runciter (and Ruciter's to Joe) founds justice in the human trace. What provides the ground for such reading is the asymmetry associated with symbol as well which is exercised in different senses in the novel.

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