

The Human Remains:
Paradox, Projection, and Preservation in Philip K. Dick
by
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Abstract

In my thesis, I analyze two dystopian novels from science fiction author Philip K. Dick in order to explore his craft of projecting into the future. I frame this analysis, in part, as a reevaluation of Dick's present-day "sci-fi prophet" label. My first chapter focuses on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Dick's most famous novel. My analysis in this chapter primarily pertains to a cluster of scenes in the novel that speak to the role of art as an ostensible "preserver of humanity" in a dystopian environment. Through close reading of these moments — including via the concept of hauntology as formulated by cultural theorist Mark Fisher — I explore the novel's various paradoxes that question the function of art as a means of capturing the human experience, and that subsequently confront the ability of art to maintain this essence of "the human" in dystopia. Notably, the novel places these contradictions alongside human and android characters who experience intense and emotional reactions to works of art. Thus, the text prompts an exploration of how the relational and empathetic functions of art — their insufficiencies in archiving or preserving "the human" notwithstanding — still have implications for human-android relations. In my second chapter, I move chronologically in Dick's oeuvre, analyzing *Ubik*'s formal quirks and horror-leaning narrative in relation to the themes presented in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* I first focus on another paradox — that of the life-sustaining "half-life" technology present in the novel — before turning to the titular *Ubik* itself, a bizarre entity that materializes as products inside *and* outside of the narrative. It is via this latter lens that I analyze consumer culture's proliferation of entities and objects that are malleable solely by way of *internal* change, while defying any *external* resistance. In connecting *Ubik* with its predecessor, I posit that the primary preoccupations of both novels evince Dick's deftness in extrapolating from his present day into the future. By virtue of this analysis regarding the persistent inclinations and anxieties of "the human," the ascriptive label of "prophet" appears inadequate in describing Dick's craft; this descriptor fixates upon the futurity of these texts, as opposed to their explorations of humanity's enduring fears and philosophical quandaries. I argue that these thematic cores of the novels exist outside of the science fiction aesthetics that house them — that what Dick's fiction makes manifest are the ways in which the future exists in the present. My analysis of the inherent self-preserving tendencies at work in what we call humanity — especially as they are manifested in the cultural imagination of Dick's present, which was obsessed with apprehending and controlling the future — allows me to venture that what makes this author truly visionary is that we still live in this interminable present that desperately seeks to insure itself against change.

Keywords: humanity, stasis, hauntology, science fiction, preservation, dystopia

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Short Titles

DADES: Dick, Philip K. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Del Rey, 1996.

Introduction

I guess that's the story of life: what you most fear never happens, but what you most yearn for never happens either. This is the difference between life and fiction. I suppose it's a good trade-off. But I'm not sure.

— Philip K. Dick

The genre of science fiction is lauded — often first and foremost — for its prescience; there is a very impulsive, very *human* fascination with how these texts have in some ways predicted or forecasted the world we live in today. The images of burning books in *Fahrenheit 451* are often evoked in contemporary debates about censorship, not to mention the novel's flat-screen televisions, in-ear audio devices and prototypical ATMs. In the case of Bradbury's novel, the authorial intent was primarily to *diagnose* the social ills of the Red Scare and of Nazi book burnings. Curiously, this purported intent seems to shift over time; as we see in later interviews with Bradbury, he describes the novel as emblematic of the relationship between mass media and literature, and views the regime within as an allegory for “political correctness,” a term that, while certainly *en vogue* since the late 20th century, had not quite made its way into popular parlance in 1953. These retroactive accounts of “intent” aside, this example demonstrates the strange relationship between science fiction, time, and capacities to envision the “future.” Moreover, it displays the political underpinnings of the genre; underneath the flying cars and massive screens is a biting commentary on contemporary social issues — its authors will attest to this. However, as I mentioned before, we try to hold this understanding while also seeking out the ways in which these texts are prophetic. What does Bradbury's willingness to cycle through various authorial intents say about how the genre operates? What is lost when a

fictional dystopia is not read as an accentuation of — and an extrapolation from — contemporary issues and anxieties?

Philip K. Dick is one such “prophet” of mid-20th century science fiction, proclaimed as such by Eric P. Nash on the cover of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (*DADES*):

“A KIND OF PULP-FICTION KAFKA, A PROPHET.”¹

Dick’s work is certainly not immune to being viewed as presaging a gloomy future — a future that has now become our present. We see androids and video calls and surveillance in our present and thus, now more than ever we can see Dick’s prescience! Turning over the 1996 Del Rey edition of *DADES*, we are reminded that, “even today,” the novel is “a masterpiece ahead of its time.” Yes, certainly — the year 1992 depicted in the novel is “ahead” of 1968. Do we *wish* for androids to escape from a moon colony and come to Earth, and for coin-operated doors and kitchen appliances, so we can return to the texts that prophesized this? Perhaps, a century from now, we will be caught in the crossfire of psychic and telepathic agents as our friends and family are placed in half-life, and we will mourn the fact that we did not heed the warnings of *Ubik*.

These attitudes towards Dick’s work are prevalent, and while they make for intriguing text-to-life connections, they often seem to ignore other facets and thematic preoccupations of his work. A useful framework here is that of the preservation/decay binary; we see the future deterioration of objects, systems, people, etc. as generating author-prophet Dick’s “prophecies.” However, one need not look just slightly deeper to observe how these novels present quite an ambivalent approach to preservation and stasis as a means of protection against future decay. The moves Dick makes are ones that, while complicated and in many cases paradoxical, demonstrate his deftness in extrapolating from the emergent sociocultural concerns of his time, and, even more prominently, from the various intrinsic traits of humanity that interfere with our *own*

¹ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Del Rey, 1996).

abilities to conceptualize and confront the future. In addition, these novels examine what is inadvertently lost when attempting to preserve present-day art, objects and people to serve as an anchor of certainty in the uncertain future.

My primary texts are Dick's novels *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and *Ubik* (1969), both of which tackle similar themes, albeit via quite different approaches. I chose the former novel in particular because of its status both in Dick's oeuvre and in popular culture, generating a major film adaptation in *Blade Runner* (1982) and becoming a staple of twentieth-century dystopian fiction. *Ubik* presents a narrative that is by contrast — and intentionally so — less readily accessible to the reader. Over the past decade, the novel, its comparatively meager critical commentary notwithstanding, seems to have received not a *reappraisal* per se, but perhaps a rediscovery of its importance in Dick's oeuvre; in its entry on Time's list of the 100 best English-language novels (from which the historically-revered *DADES* is curiously absent), *Ubik* is described as a “deeply unsettling existential horror story, a nightmare you'll never be sure you've woken up from.”² It is by way of this “horror” in particular that *Ubik* adapts the themes of its predecessor.

In my first section, I will work with *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, focusing on a particular cluster of scenes that, while conspicuous and strange, also eschew an immediate explanation or analysis of their inclusion. Here, I will argue, it is not the obvious “sci-fi” elements but rather the narrative's temporary focus on art and preservation that help elucidate — if not always consistent or coherent — the novel's themes regarding humanity and empathy. In particular, I will examine the persistence of art as a vessel of humanity, as well as the way art acts (or is perceived to act) as an ossification of particular moments in time, where these pieces

² Lev Grossman, “All-Time 100 Novels,” Time, January 11, 2010, <https://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/slide/all/>.

of the past seemingly hold much value in the imagined, dystopian future of the novel. Via this lens, I will explore the ways in which the novel empathizes with a human urge and tendency to preserve the cultural productions of the past and capture moments of change and/or transformation. At the same time, however, I will analyze how the novel highlights this struggle against time as essentially futile, its aims of preservation producing inferior iterations, ghosts and once-significant-now-hollow cultural objects.

My second section will pertain to the novel *Ubik*, published just one year after *DADES*. In this section, I will explore the tensions that this short gap in time produces, given the distinctions between the novels, and how we see the work of *DADES* evolve into something more complex and sinister, as the thematic undertones in *DADES* become formally embedded and generally more salient in the narrative of *Ubik* — a “race against time.” I will analyze the technology of “half-life” present in the novel, exploring how the paradoxes of this method of preservation call into question its own utility. Furthermore, I will explore the elusive nature of *Ubik* itself, using the novel’s mock-advertisement epigraphs to connect this “god-product” to the proliferation of consumer culture.

In my concluding chapter, I will focus on solidifying what I have identified as connections between these two novels in terms of their paradoxical nature, and implications for how Dick projects into the future. I will explore the ways in which Dick’s future-making operates not by inventing and fixating on “new” forms of fear, but by adapting and extrapolating from observations in his own time, as well as humanity’s perpetual dilemmas, sentiments, and predilections — and fusing them with his particular brand of paranoid, futuristic narrative.

Time out of Joint in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Thinking this, he wondered if Mozart had had any intuition that the future did not exist.³

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (DADES) is a novel that is haunted, both by the past as well as the fearful, paranoid anticipation of the future. As a dystopian vision of San Francisco in 1992, *DADES* operates at a peculiar midpoint with regard to how exactly its future recollects and/or re-presents the past.⁴ On one hand, the world depicted has been ravaged by the destruction of “World War Terminus” and the fallout of radioactive dust in its wake. On the other hand, the economy of art and cultural production in the novel is *not* one that has been comparably eradicated, yet it still remains extremely sparse; it is made notable by both the fact of its existence *and* because this existence is so narratively faint and sporadic. As I will note later on, the specific cultural relics and (albeit meager) fragments of history in *DADES* confirm that the narrative’s “past” — a pre-World War Terminus period, when this event and its outcomes remained unforeseen, and when, to many if not most, “the future *did* exist” — is the present day outside of the narrative; in other words, the reader lives in this prewar moment. It is worth exploring, through the concept of hauntology, exactly how these “ghosts” appear and function in the present day of *DADES*, and what implications they have for how Dick conceptualizes his futures. Mark Fisher, adapting the term from Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*, characterizes hauntology by “its confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of the future.”⁵ The hauntological sociocultural condition is one in which this failure primarily entails the loss of the

³ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Del Rey, 1996), 98.

⁴ I am referring to the “past” in the narrative, as well as the present day outside the novel. In some cases, as I will explore later on, these appear to be one and the same.

⁵ Mark Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16>, 16.

very ability to conceptualize wholly “new” futurities, or in Fisher’s words, “the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live.”⁶ In *DADES*, various fragments of an esteemed past are haunting the decayed present and this (re)appearance of the past in Dick’s imagined 1992 is made especially significant by the temporal distance between these figures in the present and the cultural contexts that once housed them. They are people whose productions are seemingly vital to the preservation of human emotion and experience, especially because the remnants of these compositions are few and far between. However, as we will see, the novel subtly but potently elicits various paradoxes and contradictions that clash with this particular understanding of the art-humanity relationship — a conception that the characters in the novel (and the world outside the narrative) seem inclined to adopt.

This recurring sense of “haunting” I refer to appears throughout Rick Deckard’s pursuit of the escaped android Luba Luft, a German opera singer. Deckard’s initial reaction to the assignment of this mission is strange: “I’ll pose as an opera fan ... I particularly would like to see her as Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*. In my personal collection I have tapes by such old-time greats as Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Lotte Lehmann and Lisa Della Casa.”⁷ The sudden celerity with which Deckard begins listing real-life operas and performers is notable, as the references to artists are similarly jarring in the scope of the novel; the appearance of these names acts metaleptically as an uncanny link to the world outside *DADES*, as these “old-time greats” are more or less contemporaries of the novel itself. It is also worth considering the span of these performers’ *real life* careers, and how this impacts their inclusion here; by 1968, Schwarzkopf, Lehmann and Della Casa had either reached or were reaching the end of their careers. Perhaps

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

more than the references made later on in this scene, the way these names “haunt” *DADES* carries a particular eeriness, as well as a strange sense of nostalgia: the names invoke the recent past (in relation to the present day outside the novel) and, additionally, are propelled by a disruptive force, whereby the real world briefly intrudes into the fictional one. Here, *DADES* presents — and, notably, doesn’t seek to resolve — a confluence of real and fictional temporalities; Rick Deckard reminisces about the *reader’s time*, the texts from which have been preserved — via tape, a format subject to decay — into a future the 1968 reader has yet to experience, and that the 2024 reader *failed* to experience. Deckard encounters the past via these “old time greats,” while the reader encounters the future — a failed future, nonetheless — containing traces of their own moment in history.

Fredric Jameson touches on a similar note when he outlines one particular aspect within Dick’s work, though it is certainly not unique to it: a “nostalgia for the present,”⁸ a seemingly paradoxical concept wherein a work exhibits a longing not solely for “the past,” (e.g. the 1920s) but instead fixates itself upon the qualities that defined the present day of this past (the experience of living “here and now” in the 1920s). Hence, this “nostalgia” forms and attaches itself to the *experience* of occupying a past period of time. The exemplary text for Jameson in this case is the Dick’s 1959 novel *Time Out of Joint*, which leans heavily into the pop culture iconography of 1950s America, but this brief moment in *DADES* serves a similar, if more understated, end. In *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher writes that Dick is able to capture this effect “by constellating stereotypical images of the decade he was writing at the end of.”⁹ The nostalgia that appears in *DADES* takes a slightly different form, as it appears quite fleetingly in contrast with the 1950s imagery in *Time Out of Joint* that evidently acts as a narrative backbone.

⁸ Mark Fisher. *The Weird and the Eerie*. Random House Inc, 2017, 49.

⁹ Ibid.

However, the brevity of this “nostalgia” in *DADES* makes its presence no less puzzling. As Fisher states:

Some of the most powerful passages in Dick’s work are those in which there is an ontological interregnum: a traumatic unworlding is not yet given a narrative motivation; an unresolved space that awaits reincorporation into another symbolic regime.¹⁰

It is precisely this ostensible lack of “narrative motivation” that makes the scenes of old art in *DADES* as uncanny as they are, and it is this peculiarity of Dick’s that makes him, as Fisher writes, less worthy of being conceptualized as a prophet of pernicious technological advancements: “It is not Dick’s skill in projecting into the future that is to be admired . . . but rather his capacity to imagine how the future world would see the Fifties.”¹¹ The latter half of this quote is particularly apt with regard to *DADES*, in which case “the Fifties” is substituted for an assortment of artworks, performers, and images from across history. We see instances of characters whose relationships with the past and with each other are, in many ways, severed or fractured. Consequently, they appear to be confronted with a “cultural impasse” of their own: a longing to “connect” via art with a past — either a personal past, or perhaps a shared/collective past. However, as I will observe later, this longing is at once neutralized by a present-day fragmentation and dissolution of the very same cultural productions that are — or were — believed to be a precondition of this connection. In other words, these characters seek out art as a conduit for empathy and understanding while, at the same time, the novel demonstrates how art is subject to its own inherent complications and forces of decay, ultimately calling into question the ostensible project and relational function of art, as well as the complex and often paradoxical nature of its preservation in the name of concurrently preserving “the human.”

¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹¹ Ibid.

Nostalgia and Art as Commodity

After being apprehended by and promptly “retiring” another rogue android, Rick Deckard travels to visit Luft at the War Memorial Opera House. Along the way, he reflects again on his fondness for opera, viewing this as leverage over another bounty hunter: “That’s another advantage I have over Dave; I’m more culturally oriented” (*DADES*, 95). Deckard’s reference to “culture,” whether read sarcastically or not, helps exemplify the commodified objects of art and “culture” in *DADES*; the only *new* media output in the novel is “Buster Friendly and his Friendly Friends,” a 23-hour television and radio broadcast. *DADES* is peppered with moments of characters interacting with the program — listening, watching, calling in — and it is worth noting how the place of “Buster Friendly” in pop culture becomes more ambivalent as the novel progresses. The program eventually shakes its schlocky tendencies, emerging as a “jack of all trades” broadcast for its widespread viewership. This involves the program’s well-received incorporation of investigative journalism reporting; the novel’s conclusion is partially centered around Buster Friendly’s exposé on the phony Christlike figure of Wilbur Mercer and his respective dogma of Mercerism. This state of media production and consumption in *DADES* is one that, while perhaps not explicitly indicative of a dearth of “new art,” illustrates the commodified nature of what art *is* being produced in the novel’s postwar environment. Thus, Deckard’s “cultural orient[ation]” is one informed not by an appreciation of the artistic output of his present day, but rather one steeped in an uncanny nostalgic inclination towards a past — in particular the *art* of this past — with which Deckard was not contemporaneous.

As Deckard approaches the opera house, he begins to demonstrate a bizarre change in character and affect: “he loudly sang a potpourri of arias, with pseudo-Italian words made up on the spot by himself; even without the Penfield mood organ at hand his spirits brightened into

optimism” (*DADES*, 96). This new arousal of emotion is sustained when Deckard enters the building, “recogniz[ing] the music: Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*” (*DADES*, 97). As he sits to listen to the rehearsal, he is particularly moved by a personal favorite scene: “Now Papageno . . . had joined Pamina to sing words which always brought tears to Rick’s eyes, when and if he happened to think about it” (*DADES*, 97). Deckard’s demonstrated knowledge of *The Magic Flute* is not only extensive, but also demonstrative of the emotional resonance of the piece; he is acquainted enough to know that “the chorus . . . had taken up their song a bar too soon and this had nullified the simple rhythm of the magic bells” (*DADES*, 97). The glimpses of human emotion that manifest here are striking among the desolate atmosphere of *DADES* — a world where devices like “mood organs” are relied on to generate simulations of emotions and sensations.

As the rehearsal continues, Deckard ponders the premature death of Mozart, which occurred shortly after the writing of *The Magic Flute* (*DADES*, 98). He does so in a peculiar manner: “Thinking this, he wondered if Mozart had had any intuition that the future did not exist” (*DADES*, 98). This moment of contemplation has many ramifications for the art/memory/humanity connection presented in these scenes. For one, Deckard articulates the transcendent qualities of art (*The Magic Flute* will live beyond Mozart) that he has observed only implicitly up until now. Furthermore, the phrase “the future did not exist” becomes enigmatic upon inspection, as it applies the broad and general “future” to the life of Mozart in particular — as opposed to “*his* future.” Furthermore, the phrase itself shimmers with hauntological implications; the very *notion* that, to anyone, anytime, and for any reason, the future could “not exist” evokes Fisher’s “lost futures” and the present-day absence of a social imagination capable of envisioning the future. The blurring of the collective and the personal in this scene further explains the sudden appearance of Deckard’s “new” emotions, even insinuating that their

“newness” is not only dubious but evidence of an inseparable connection to the past — that these emotions are in fact latent, that this newness comes instead from the unforeseen (re)emergence of the past — of memory — in the present day. This moment is one of many instances where Dick captures a more sanguine attitude with regard to the “use” of art as a tool of emotional and historical preservation, regardless of whether this function is inherent or not. As we will see, this attitude persists in spite of the aesthetics of art’s (non)existence in dystopia, but it also contrasts with the other, more bleak stances on this art-time-humanity relationship that Dick adopts in the novel.

Still disengaged from the rehearsal, Deckard continues to contemplate the destructive nature of the passage of time:

This rehearsal will end, the performance will end, the singers will die, eventually the last score of the music will be destroyed in one way or another; finally the name “Mozart” will vanish, the dust will have won. If not on this planet then another. We can evade it awhile.... In a way, he realized, I’m part of the form-destroying process of entropy. The Rosen Association creates and I unmake.¹²

Deckard’s introspection is revealing for a number of reasons. First, it provides another evaluation of art in relation to society and culture more broadly, with Deckard’s scope widening as he continues. Deckard views the erosion of “the name” as the final step of this entropic process — the step where “the dust will have won” — where, notably, we see him associate a *physically* destructive occurrence with the loss of something nonphysical and intangible. Deckard’s recognition of himself as destructive, as “form-destroying” is something that he holds equally in fear and awe, foreshadowing the skepticism surrounding his line of work that he exhibits near the end of the novel. Ultimately, Deckard’s reflections here mark a turning point in *DADES*. As he explores the tenuous nature of art’s “timelessness,” he also articulates a distinction between the

¹² Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Del Rey, 1996), 98.

androids' aim of self-preservation and the destructive duties (euphemistically referred to as "unmak[ing]") that his occupation requires: "The Rosen Association¹³ creates and I unmake." By the end of this reflection, what is most notable is the shift made by Deckard, whereby the dust and decay of *DADES* — across Earth, within buildings, within bodies — now appears outside the realm of the physical, situating itself abstractly in "the name" and broadly in the loss of art and culture — a loss that Deckard essentially makes comparable to the postwar destruction that predates the events of the novel; both are situated as inevitabilities in the wake of this "form-destroying process."

Shortly thereafter, Deckard makes another reference to his "form-destroying" self as he observes Luba Luft singing prior to the end of the rehearsal: "and again he perceived himself *sub specie aeternitatis*, the form-destroyer called forth by what he heard and saw here" (*DADES*, 99). What is notable here, however, is Deckard's confrontation with his task of "retiring" Luft, wherein he observes a link between Luft's (and broadly, the androids') verisimilitude and the necessity of her retiring: "perhaps the better she functions, the better a singer she is, the more I am needed" (*DADES*, 99).

Couched in this remark is the implication that in the novel's economy of art, the better a singer Luft is, the *less* human musicians are needed. Again, we see how this economy centers on the commodification of art — if an android can produce what is essentially an authentic performance as a human, then what is the purpose of a human musician? What this scene adds to the conversation, however, is a focus on the human's fear of their eventual obsolescence, a fear which only exists — and *can* only exist — when there is an economic benefit to substituting human performers for artificial ones. Moreover, a paradox arises: is it in the androids' best interest to "appear" human as accurately as possible? As I've noted, their "better" performance

¹³ Manufacturer of the "rogue" androids in the novel.

and thoroughly authentic appearance constitutes a threat to their existence. But at the same time, humanity's ability to discern this seems tenuous and impermanent. The narrative elicits another paradox here — that humans can (and do) hypothesize about an eventual point of android/human indistinguishability that they, *because* of this very sameness, will inherently be unaware of.

While the novel's methods of determining who is and is not an android, like the Voigt-Kampff test, already feel dubious, their utility is similarly provisional. This threat to androids (and, conversely, the purported threat androids pose to humans) only exists insofar as humans are capable of creating tests to confirm or deny someone's status as an android. What Deckard does not explicitly consider in this scene is that the better Luft performs, there exists the probability he, or any human, will simply never know that she is an android.

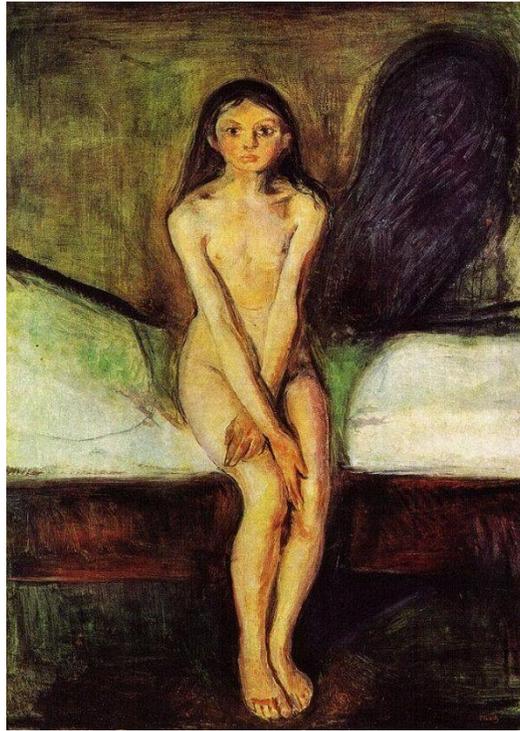
Munch's *Puberty* and Currier and Ives

Following the scenes of Deckard's experience at the *Magic Flute* rehearsal, the uncanny appearance of past art returns — in this case, visual art. As I will note later on, this marks a shift in medium as much as it is a shift in aesthetics and artistic movement; in the narrative, the elegant compositions of Mozart are supplanted by the more troubling aesthetic preoccupations of Expressionist and early Modernist art. Within Deckard's questioning of Luba Luft and her subjection to the Voigt-Kampff test,¹⁴ a scenario is presented of a cabin decorated with “old maps, Currier and Ives prints” (*DADES*, 104). Luft is confused by this description, and the test proceeds without a response: “I don't understand ‘Currier’ or ‘Ives’ or ‘decor’” (*DADES*, 104). Later on, having been momentarily apprehended by police following this failed questioning, Deckard rediscovers Luft at an art museum, staring at a print of Edvard Munch's *Puberty* (*DADES*, 131). Deckard purchases a copy of the painting for Luft, in his last act before “retiring”

¹⁴ The “empathy test” performed to determine whether or not the subject is an android.

her – an action that Luft holds in high regard: ““There’s something very strange and touching about humans. An android would never have done that”” (*DADES*, 133). When Luft is “retired,” she is referred to as resembling the subject of the Munch: “she lay crouched against the wall of the elevator, screaming. Like the picture, Rick thought to himself, and, with his own laser tube, killed her” (*DADES*, 134). The existence of these pieces in *DADES* — the Currier and Ives prints and the Munch paintings — prompts questioning; why *are* these fragments the ones that have survived the “dust?” The former’s placement in the Voigt-Kampff test scenario is ostensibly meant to create a scene of (quintessentially American) comfort and domesticity, one which is upended by the presence of a deer’s head mounted above a cabin fireplace (*DADES*, 104) in order to provoke an empathetic response from the test subject. Moreover, along with the “old maps,” the reference to the Currier and Ives lithographs makes the constructed scene strangely antiquated; the test relies on the subject’s comfort with and nostalgia for these fragments of Americana, but they feel doubly outdated, considering both the time periods depicted (the company had dissolved by 1907) and the large gap in time between their heyday and the setting of the novel. Munch’s *Puberty* appears to represent another instance of cultural artifacts being protectors of human emotion and experience, yet the “retiring” of Luba Luft by two human characters undermines this. Both cases have a strange and, again, contradictory existence within this imagined dystopia; art is charged with attributes that *seem* to strengthen its ties with the human, and that are purported to capture “uniquely human” experiences, but it is primarily used by humans in formal and informal “tests” of one’s android/human status. Ultimately, Luft’s interest in the artwork is not enough to save her, but as we will see, it appears to be sufficient in making her “feel” human.

The content of Munch's *Puberty* presents an interesting case for analysis. The piece, painted between 1894 and 1895, depicts a young girl sitting at the edge of a bed, nude, with her hands placed in her lap. She is casting a rounded, amorphous shadow on the wall behind her.



Munch, Edvard. "Puberty," 1894. National Gallery. Oslo.

The image's pertinence to *DADES* seems to be as elusive as its subject and symbolism; via this ambiguity and absence of detail, *Puberty's* depiction of its subject expresses a sense of dread. Its title evokes a process of change and growth, an experience that appears to resist the representational capacities of a still image. Yet the painting is able to distill an ominous sense of trepidation, of the fear that often accompanies change. The large shadow in the image at once sits behind the girl, yet also seems to originate from her, as the dark mass bleeds into her position on the bed. Its formlessness and size indicate the influence exerted by uncertainty – the fear of the unknown. Furthermore, its position in the right side of the image (and to the right of the girl) can be viewed as creating a crude timeline: the girl in the (central) "present," the formless shadow in

her “future.” This interpretation aligns with the subject matter, which is ostensible from the title: the imminent and/or ongoing changing of the body is a source of dread.

What are we to make of *Puberty*’s brief appearance in *DADES*? On one hand, the aforementioned “persistence of humanity” through art is seen again if only through the fact that an art gallery *exists* in the world of *DADES*, and *Puberty* is housed within it. However, there’s also a more subtle way that the painting impacts this scene, derived from an intimation of this inextricable art/humanity link as well as the use — and perhaps *misuse* — of art as the interpreter or “meaning maker” of exclusively human experiences. Viewing *Puberty* as embodying a sort of dread — of bodily changes and, more nebulously, of the “future” — couples curiously with Luba Luft’s interest in the painting. Furthermore, Luft reveals her awareness of her android status shortly before being “retired,” making the reasoning for her interest in *Puberty* twofold: Luft *performs* an interest in *Puberty* as a means of outwardly displaying this kind of “human” penchant for connection, and she exhibits this connection internally (to herself) for the sake of becoming human in a more intimate sense — *feeling* human. The painting itself, whether concretely or not, evokes a uniquely organic/biological bodily process that Luft, like any android, will not experience, yet Luft appears to connect with *Puberty* in a way that transcends this. With this in mind, the category of “human” in *DADES* proves to be just as slippery and convoluted as nearly everything else in this scene, and, importantly, on a level deeper than that of the androids’ resemblance to humans. The “human” has become a chiefly relational category that encompasses one’s capacity to feel and perform humanity, both to themselves and to others. It was first demonstrated that humanity is not necessarily inherent in art, and now, there is an underlying concern that humanity is not even inherent in *the human*.

Additionally, it is worth looking back at the narration of Luba Luft's first encounter with *Puberty*. Here, it is through some vague wording that the novel invites this kind of ambiguity, this blending between Luba Luft and the subject of *Puberty*: “[She] stood absorbed in the picture before her: a drawing of a young girl, hands clasped together, seated on the edge of a bed, an expression of bewildered wonder and new, groping awe imprinted on the face” (*DADES*, 131). The use of “imprinted on the face” here implies a second actor or party — an artist, writer, or manufacturer — who has done the imprinting, which, curiously, makes the description equally applicable to an artificial human *and* to the subject of a painting. An unfamiliarity with the painting in question certainly leads us to take this description at face value, but ultimately, this is *not* what the girl in *Puberty* looks like. If we take into consideration the implications of Luft's interest in the painting — that engaging with this art is her means of “feeling” human — we then read this expression as belonging either to Luft's face *or* to her perception of the painting (and its utility in performing humanity). Her being “absorbed in the picture” bolsters the ambiguity of this description, as it elicits both the artwork's enrapturing effect on Luft and the seeming malleability of the android as a figure who can situate itself within the narrative's nebulous definition of the human. Both the narrative and the text itself blurs the line between Luft and the subject of *Puberty*, as the self is concurrently lost in reality, and found (perhaps crafted or performed) through art. It is precisely this loss of the self that, as we will see, ironically fosters a degree of connection between the android Luft and the human characters of Deckard and Resch.

The version of *Puberty* that Deckard purchases for Luft, needless to say, is not the original painting. Nor is the painting that Luft first views in the gallery the 1894 piece — it is printed within a catalog. The piece is still ostensibly worth “keeping” in the world of *DADES*, but *Puberty* is only being encountered as a reproduction — or, likely, as a reproduction of a

reproduction. Ultimately, the painting that Luft is able to view or to keep for herself is not the original, emotionally stimulating piece or even a mostly-accurate recreation, but a smaller facsimile of *Puberty*. However, its significance and resonance appear unchanged; Luft still “uses” the painting as if it were the original in a gallery setting. This, again, evokes the novel’s varied attitudes with regard to the value(s) of art’s preservation, emphasizing the mutative nature of this process: each “preserved” version of an object is in fact disparate, both from the original and from other reproductions of this original. The novel, notably, does not make this faulty attribute explicit in the narrative, therefore exhibiting (and eliciting from the reader) a degree of sympathy for Luba Luft; drawing more attention to *Puberty* as an endlessly-reproduced product could have trivialized Luft’s experience of the artwork. Once again, this twofold nature of Luft’s encounter with *Puberty* encapsulates the intricacies and seeming contradictions of Dick’s future-making. On one hand, *DADES* arouses the paradoxes of humanity’s longing for stasis and preservation, exploring the attempts made to fend off the future by both preserving the present and perpetually recollecting and re-producing the past. However, it concurrently demonstrates the value (fallibilities notwithstanding) of art as a means of preserving human experience and emotion, even if this value appears to be ascribed rather than axiomatic.

The Scream, Puberty and Humanity

When Deckard observes the “retiring” of Luft, he comments on the position that her body takes upon being shot by Phil Resch: “Like the picture, Rick thought to himself, and, with his own laser tube, killed her” (*DADES*, 134). While at first this connection Deckard makes seems congruent with his observations, the description of Luft’s body — “crouched against the wall of the elevator, screaming” (*DADES*, 131) — and the “picture” referred to by Deckard both allude to Munch’s *The Scream*, not *Puberty*.

Prior to their viewing of *Puberty* in the art gallery, Deckard and Phil Resch encounter *The Scream*. Curiously, the piece is not referred to by name in *DADES* — did the process of entropy skip to the final step? This omission might be explained by the painting’s popularity compared to *Puberty*, but it is surprising when we contrast the novel’s sparse details surrounding *Puberty* with its extensive description of *The Scream* — the vivid detail in which the painting’s subject is depicted:

The painting showed a hairless, oppressed creature with a head like an inverted pear, its hands clapped in horror to its ears, its mouth open in a vast, soundless scream. Twisted ripples of the creature’s torment, echoes of its cry, flooded out into the air surrounding it; the man or woman, whichever it was, had become contained by its own howl. It had covered its ears against its own sound. The creature stood on a bridge and no one else was present; the creature screamed in isolation. Cut off by—or despite—its outcry.¹⁵

The description accentuates the haunting elements of Munch’s painting, notably through the ambiguity of its subject; it is only referred to as an androgynous “creature,” a “hairless, oppressed” being with a “head like an inverted pear” (*DADES*, 130). The uncanny creature is portrayed as not only terrified, but isolated; as he views the painting, Phil Resch remarks: “I think... that this is how an andy must feel” (*DADES*, 130). As we have seen with Luba Luft and *Puberty* and Deckard and *The Magic Flute*, Resch uses *The Scream* as an indirect means of connecting to another being, in this case an android. This instance of empathy is reminiscent of the sudden outburst of emotion experienced earlier by Deckard. However, when Phil Resch uses this painting to seemingly better understand his android adversaries, the “empathy” he exhibits feels distant and removed. Once again, the narrative’s paradoxical nature becomes salient: through art, Resch displays a “connection” that, while appearing to be substantial and revelatory in the novel’s shaping of human-android relations, is characterized not by the formation of a true

¹⁵ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Del Rey, 1996), 130.

connection but conversely by a recognition of the androids' alienation — a condition and state of being which makes connection with humans essentially impossible. This revelation is only truly successful in the sense that it tempers Resch's guilt; he understands "how an andy must feel," but not *why* an android feels that way. Moreover, he "understands" the android only indirectly, only via a man-made image that, at its inception, ostensibly captured the inner turmoil of *the human*.

Since the presence of Munch's *Puberty* and *The Scream* does not play any clear narrative role in *DADES*, we can speculate that Dick uses these artworks to demonstrate how, in his imagined future, the persistence of humanity through art is both synonymous with the rapturous, extravagant emotions of an opera *and* with the tumult, trepidation and, perhaps, pure terror that often seems to be equally essential to the human experience. The operas and artworks in *DADES* once held the elusive quality of having captured something "human." However, much like the original pieces are inherently incapable of capturing or preserving the inner lives and emotions of their creators, their afterlives are similarly malleable, with new meanings made from their images and storytelling.

Curiously, we can see how the presence of art in *DADES* operates doubly, depicting narratively a definition and function of art that, while often subscribed to by the characters, is also subtly confronted and questioned. The hollow and fractured state of art in *DADES* is indicative of some kind of failure to preserve in the face of destruction, certainly, but Dick also elucidates other "failures" of art that seem to exist inherently; its purported preservation/capturing of emotion is almost always achieved indirectly¹⁶ and thus neither "captures" nor "preserves" but instead interprets or figures. It is not the case that, in *DADES*, Dick advocates *against* preservation as we move forward into the future. Rather, he offers a reminder of how what we seek to preserve will inevitably end up transformed, even destroyed,

¹⁶ See the figures in *The Scream* and *Puberty*

and how this very ambition to preserve is rooted in a vague and indefinite understanding of what constitutes “the human.”

***Ubik*: Formal Decay and the Preservation of the Present**

He would never again see her with eyes opened; nor would her mouth move. She would not smile at his arrival. When he departed she would not cry. Is this worth it? he asked himself. Is this better than the old way, the direct road from full-life to the grave?¹⁷

With *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, I explored how Dick invites the reader to question the notion that preserving art is simultaneously a means of preserving traces of human experience and emotion well into the future. Ultimately, this aim of humanity is fraught with complications on both fronts. Whether a “preserved” original piece or a reproduction in its umpteenth iteration, more has been changed than left unchanged. Moreover, the “human” that is captured in the narrative is too hazy a figure, and thus always resists being preserved outright. Notably, Dick uses a postwar environment to house these paradoxes; thus, as with the radioactive dust and other remnants of World War Terminus that persist in the narrative, we are only privy to the *after-effects* of humanity’s drive to preserve itself, rather than the events and circumstances that seemingly necessitated this preservation. However, at the same time, the novel attributes a certain emotional power to art. This power (seemingly) connects androids to a sense of “humanity,” and humans to empathy for the androids, but is also appropriated by humans for the purpose of “retiring” an android.

Dick’s following novel, *Ubik* (1969), is preoccupied with similar questions: Can humanity survive in the face of inescapable and irreversible destructive forces? Conversely, how does humanity itself act as a destructive force? What things, ideas and people are able or allowed

¹⁷ Philip K Dick, *Ubik* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 10.

to persist? Which are *given the opportunity* to persist—and as a corollary, which are discontinued, “retired,” or left to perish? While *DADES* primarily examines this ambivalence *thematically* within its narrative, *Ubik* pursues this line of inquiry *formally*. Given this, the novel presents a more complex case for dissection, as the text “deteriorates” in itself, rapidly becoming as disordered and confusing as the experiences of its characters — mimicking the destructive, “entropic force” of the novel that precedes it. If a chief preoccupation of *DADES* is the aftermath following a period of catastrophic change and upheaval, then *Ubik* delves deeper into the violent and harrowing processes that define this “change.”

As was the case with *DADES*, *Ubik* is paradoxical in nature, evident in its preoccupation with similar questions regarding preservation, change and the (in)ability to imagine the future. *Ubik* portrays a certain type of chaotic change faced by the characters — jumping backwards and forwards in time, through false “realities” — for which the only antidote, the only *constant*, is Ubik, a pernicious entity that occupies a multitude of forms. Moreover, in its own strange way, the novel holds a lens up to consumer culture as a similarly unchanging and malevolent force. In the process, it envisions an alarming future, but one that is often characterized by stasis; what ought to be feared in the future is already in existence, and one need not imagine anything “new” in order to be apprehensive of this future.

Half-life and the Paradox of Preservation

Early on in the novel, we are introduced to the technology of “half-life,” a process by which people can be preserved for a period of time following their death. *Ubik*’s most prominent “half-lifer” in this portion of the novel is Ella Runciter, the deceased wife of Glen Runciter. The couple acts as co-owners of the anti-psyhic agency Runciter Associates. When Glen Runciter contacts Ella for the first time, we are presented with the mechanics of half-life, as well as the

ways in which this technology is fraught with complications that undermine its very purpose. Ella Runciter first appears (in true science-fiction fashion) “in her transparent casket, encased in an effluvium of icy mist... with her eyes shut, her hands lifted permanently toward her impassive face.”¹⁸ The circumstances of Ella’s half-life state, and of half-life in general, point towards physical preservation as the chief concern and goal of the technology, as she exists in a state physically identical to the moment of her death: “it had been three years since he had seen Ella, and of course she had not changed.”¹⁹ What troubles this, however, is the deterioration that occurs when interacting with a person in half-life; whenever Ella becomes active, “alive” in half-life, her inner faculties gradually begin to decay, until eventually, it is impossible to contact her in any way. This process of decay is, ironically, conveyed to the reader as a “death” of sorts (“Ella died somewhat”²⁰), and thus, half-life not only makes possible the preservation of life but conversely the duplication of death; deceased people will somehow die *further*, die for a second time, die in a manner that is perhaps even more tragic than the first time. Suspension in half-life will keep someone “alive,” as long as they are not interacted with, which convolutes what would be the purported aim of the technology. The “half-lifers,” sealed away and unable to be interacted with, even seem insufficient in acting as a “memory” of a person, a condition that would imply/include the kind of dynamic, fluid recollection of the past that is absent in the cold sterility of the half-life environment. In our first encounter with this technology, Glen Runciter ruminates on the tragic paradox of half-life, painfully aware that speaking to his wife “doomed her,” fearing that his desire “to activate her constituted a sin against her.”²¹ The attitude that Glen Runciter presents towards the technology of half-life is skeptical, even apprehensive, but the

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

affordances of this preservation ultimately outweigh his hesitations; in Runciter's own words, "the alternative is nothing."²²

I mentioned previously that the status of half-lifers in *Ubik* is essentially that of an inadequate memory, and this seems to be the case with Glen and Ella Runciter in particular. It is not explicitly stated how long Ella has been dead, but there is an insinuation that a considerable amount of time has since passed; the preserved Ella Runciter is around twenty years old, and Glen Runciter is in his eighties. Thus, in the case of the Runciters, half-life becomes especially tragic as Glen — by way of accessing the past (*his* past, shared with Ella) — is haunted by the presence of his wife, quite literally frozen in time.

This "paradox of preservation" that half-life presents is fascinating not only as it appears in *Ubik*, but also compared to the novel that precedes it. The central "fear" of *DADES* (and of the kind of sociocultural forecasting it engendered outside the text) is an imagined future where androids have not only become prevalent in society, but also are essentially indistinguishable from humans. This future perhaps doesn't "preserve the human" outright so much as it perpetuates a certain form of humanity especially suited to certain economic ends. A common response to the fear of generalized loss and destruction, both inside and outside the novel, is to protect above all the human and the cultural productions that are viewed as inherently human — the art, literature, and music that outwardly express the otherwise incommunicable interiorities of the human. Both *DADES* and *Ubik* have shown how these attempts at preservation fall short. The androids, of course, are inadequately "human" with their brief life span, and the "us vs. them" social distinctions prove to be rather flimsy as humans inevitably empathize with their android counterparts. The art, likewise, is preserved not through maintenance or conservation, but instead via the reiteration of increasingly inferior reproductions; the past is

²² *Ibid.*, 11.

accessed through tinny recordings and miniscule paintings printed in books. Half-life keeps people around, certainly, but in a state truly “half alive,” where decay and deterioration is still unavoidable if we succumb to the — empathic and very “human” — urge to reconnect with these people.

Consumerism and the God-Product

In a similar vein, *Ubik* also evokes capital’s role in the subsumption of “the human” in a manner not dissimilar to its predecessor. In *DADES*, the functions of human-android dynamic appear to be, in many ways, mutually detrimental. Humans exhibit a clear advantage in power over the androids, as the androids are created by and for humans in order to be employed as servants. Moreover, the hunting of “rogue” androids on Earth is an act that is not only legally permissible, but also *endorsed*, as this essentially constitutes the duties of Rick Deckard and his colleagues. This dynamic surfaces again in *Ubik*, but the novel appears to expand its scope; the “non-human” here is not the android, but rather the object, specifically the *product*. As I will explore later, this is evident in the various manifestations of the titular “Ubik” — a product that, by the novel’s conclusion, becomes certain characters’ sole hope for survival. However, it is worth noting how the product’s command over the human as it manifests in *Ubik* precedes the transcendent and macabre turn the novel takes in its latter half. Along with the introduction of Joe Chip is the illustration of the role of “the product” in governing even the most mundane aspects of his life. Various household objects in Chip’s apartment — including his coffee machine and front door — require the payment of a fee with each use, and Chip is shown to take issue with this: “[f]rom the drawer beside the sink Joe Chip got a stainless steel knife; with it he began systematically to unscrew the bolt assembly of his apt’s money-gulping door. ‘I’ll sue you,’ the door said as the first screw fell out. Joe Chip said, ‘I’ve never been sued by a door. But

I guess I can live through it.’ (25) While this moment is played as humorous, especially given the door’s ability to respond to and threaten Chip, it also subtly insinuates the lack of agency and control experienced by Chip in his dire circumstances at the end of the novel. Piotr Płomiński, in “Negotiating Subjectivity Within Simulation: The Posthuman in Philip K. Dick’s *Ubik*,” also notes this “expos[ure] to a reality in which objects usurp a primary place in the societal hierarchy.”²³ The absurd tone of this scene perhaps works to conceal Chip’s consistently futile resistance to governing forces and agents. However, the implications of this helplessness become saliently harrowing as *Ubik* progresses and, as Płomiński describes, “[t]he agency of the objects in the real world of the novel foreshadows the hegemony of hyperreality in the half-life virtual world.”²⁴ This particular scene, as with the aforementioned “Ubik” product itself, demonstrates the horrors accompanying the extension and expansion of capital, envisioning a world where the “product-ness” of a good is interminably sustained following the moment of purchase.

The preeminent formal quirk of *Ubik* is the novel’s epigraphs. Each chapter opens with a faux advertisement presenting a new iteration of a mysterious product called Ubik. As we read on, we are reminded that “the best way to ask for beer is to sing out Ubik,”²⁵ that we ought to get some “new miracle Ubik, the easy-to-apply, extra-shiny, nonstick plastic coating,”²⁶ and that “if money worries have you in the cellar, go visit the lady at Ubik Savings & Loan.”²⁷ At first, these blurbs appear to be unrelated to one another, save for the name, “Ubik,” given to all of the products being advertised.

²³ Piotr Płomiński, “Negotiating Subjectivity within Simulation: The Posthuman in Philip K. Dick’s *Ubik*,” 96.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

My hair is so dry, so unmanageable. What's a girl to do? Simply rub in creamy Ubik hair conditioner.

In just five days you'll discover new body in your hair, new glossiness. And Ubik hairspray, used as directed, is absolutely safe.²⁸

Lift your arms and be all at once curvier! New extra-gentle Ubik bra and longline Ubik special bra mean, Lift your arms and be all at once curvier! Supplies firm, relaxing support to bosom all day long when fitted as directed.²⁹

It takes more than a bag to seal in food flavor; it takes Ubik plastic wrap — actually four layers in one.

Keeps freshness in, air and moisture out. Watch this simulated test.³⁰

The advertisements produce an uncanny effect even at a surface level — they are entirely separated from the narrative, produced in a vacuum, addressing the reader/viewer directly — they are hijacking the narrative and being interspersed into the text by some outside force. Furthering this divergence from the rest of the novel, these manifestations of Ubik never make an appearance to the characters, who instead encounter Ubik as an aerosol in a spray can, as a powder and as an antiquated “liver and kidney balm.” While it seems as if these inserts would fracture and complicate *Ubik* further, they produce quite the opposite effect. As the narrative unravels, *Ubik*'s mock advertisements serve as an anchor in the text, not unlike the centrality and significance of the *product* Ubik to the survival of the characters. *Ubik*'s final epigraph raises the stakes immensely, as it complements the unresolved conclusion of the novel itself.

I am Ubik. Before the universe was, I am. I made the suns. I made the worlds. I created the lives and the places they inhabit; I move them here, I put them there. They go as I say, they do as I tell them. I am the

²⁸ Ibid., 117.

²⁹ Ibid., 179.

³⁰ Ibid., 192.

word and my name is never spoken, the name which no one knows. I am called Ubik, but that is not my name. I am. I shall always be.³¹

The novel ends abruptly with Glen Runciter discovering coins bearing the image of Joe Chip, who is now in half-life. This moment, along with the concluding epigraph and the final sentence, “This was just the beginning,”³² prompt a disconcerting revelation about the novel as a whole — that the only constant, the only thing *preserved* over the course of *Ubik* is Ubik itself, a product that — being ubiquitous, after all — appears in every aspect of the consumer’s life, to suit their every need. Moreover, to Joe Chip, stuck in half-life at the novel’s conclusion, Ubik is a necessity, required to prevent further deterioration in his current state.

We aren’t aware that the cure-all Ubik is some kind of “god-product” until the end of the novel, which recontextualizes everything we had read up until this point. Looking back, the advertisement epigraphs suddenly become pernicious, undergirded by this force/entity that “shall always be.” This presents a curious temporality: we know of Ubik as the all-seeing, all-knowing entity it is only after it has “won out” over the employees of Runciter Associates — not by being the force that destroys these characters, but by simply surviving beyond them, and surviving in spite of their rapidly decaying environment. Ubik doesn’t have to act in order to prevail— it simply *does* because it simply *is*.

With this in mind, let us not forget that, before its true “self” is revealed, Ubik appears, both to us and to the characters, as a product. Couched in the blurbs advertising this product is a crystallized version of Dick’s mid century moment — specifically, the American brand of consumer culture. Suddenly, wants and desires have become needs, and these needs can (and will) be met only by a product that will change your life. If you aren’t beautiful, this product will

³¹ Ibid., 227.

³² Ibid.

make you beautiful. If you *are* beautiful, then *this product will keep you that way*. Here, the role of preservation as a concept becomes manifold; the “god-product” and its progenitor (one and the same) are maintained eternally, yes, but the products themselves also exist to preserve things in perpetuity. Ubik plastic wrap “seal[s] in food flavor,” the Ubik bra preserves a (ad and product-ascribed) sense of youth, and once you see and feel the effects of Ubik hair conditioner, you certainly won’t be letting go of this newfound moisture anytime soon.

The nature of these advertisements referencing or “holding onto” the contemporary world outside the novel seems reminiscent of the “old-time greats” in *DADES*; they act as reinforcements, stationary and unchanged as we move forward in time. Even in the future, everyone is still doing the Frug,³³ and, through the relief provided by Ubik, an upset stomach won’t hinder your ability to dance as well:

Can’t make the frug contest, Helen; stomach’s upset. I’ll fix you Ubik! Ubik drops you back in the thick of things fast. Taken as directed, Ubik speeds relief to head and stomach. Remember: Ubik is only seconds away. Avoid prolonged use.³⁴

The recommendation to “avoid prolonged use” is both humorous and haunting, since as I mentioned, Joe Chip becomes reliant on Ubik in order to survive. What Dick predicts with these advertisements isn’t something “new,” per se, but rather the continuation of the present, the eternal presence of something that *already exists*, something that “shall always be.” Remember: the future is only seconds away.

³³ A dance fad, popular at the time of the novel’s publication.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

Names, Branding, and Image

Earlier, I described how the faux advertisements in *Ubik* appear in a sort of textual vacuum, concurrently occupying our attention, the screens and sounds of the novel's world, and the real-world culture it seems to mock. It does so not through a satirical "spin" on trite ad-speak, but instead by presenting this jargon largely unaltered, existing in contrast with the horrific predicaments of the characters. Just as *Ubik* need not be presented explicitly as a villainous entity/object in order to loom over the narrative, these advertisements need not be adapted or modified from the kind of absurd reality they are meant to reflect. In these advertisements, the sentences become almost incoherent, given the restrictions of the page; without a visual or aural accompaniment, the ads cannot replicate the multiple "voices" and characters within them. Until the final revelatory epigraph, each features one condensed speaker, asking itself questions, answering these questions, and recommending *Ubik* to itself.

Again, when we look back with the "god-product" in mind, we see how these advertisements also seek to infuse mythical and/or transcendent properties into these products. Much like the form of *Ubik* that Joe Chip and the others encounter, these *Ubik* iterations have an essentially unexplained source, and, although not lifesaving, have some kind of magical quality or property — one that seeks to transcend the "product," to become something that has been *created* and not merely produced. This kind of suffusion of the transcendent into the product is reminiscent of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, as these products have become the myths of their (and our) time, emphasizing, and perhaps fabricating, the qualities that were heretofore nonexistent. Our linen has suddenly become "deep," thus our detergent must be capable of "deep-cleaning";³⁵ the *Ubik* plastic wrap has "four layers in one" — not like you would be able

³⁵ Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies* (Fontana Press, 1973), 37.

to confirm or deny this simply by using the product, but it is exciting to know that this “magic” has entered our own homes: Four Layers of Protection in One Impossibly-Thin Sheet!

With further regard to Barthes’ *Mythologies*, it is worth exploring how plastic — and plastic products — seems to be evoked through Ubik’s formlessness (and thus, endless forms), immortality, and, well, plasticity. Much like how we see Ubik simultaneously as a product, creator of said product, and the transformation of said product, Barthes finds similar mystical, infinite qualities in plastic: “more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity³⁶ made visible.... [P]lastic is, all told, a spectacle to be deciphered: the very spectacle of its end-products.”³⁷ In many ways, Ubik acts as this “ubiquity made visible,” repurposed in all its forms and branded with a short, catchy name that still references its omnipresence. Because of their versatility (and the cosmic “powers” they hold), both plastic and Ubik are capable of taking the place of essentially every other product: “The hierarchy of substances is abolished: a single one replaces them all: the whole world *can* be plasticized.”³⁸ As we see in the novel, the confluence of Ubik’s godlike omnipresence and its varied but always-present utility to the consumer, means that, yes, the whole world *can* be Ubik-ized.

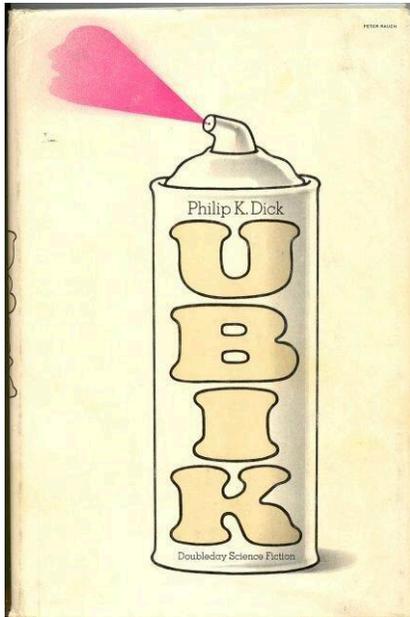
With regard to branding, transformation, and preservation: the various covers produced for *Ubik* over the decades often reflect the sensibilities of the text itself, filtered through a Pop Art-esque approach to the aesthetics of consumer culture.³⁹ Perhaps the best examples of this, though quite divergent in appearance, are the first U.S. edition of *Ubik*, and the Finnish edition published in 1994:

³⁶ !!!!!

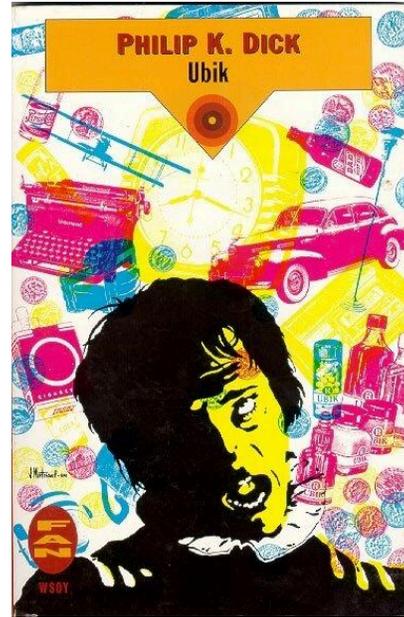
³⁷ Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies* (Fontana Press, 1973), 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁹ Thanks to Hunter Bishop for introducing me to an article compiling the most fascinating covers of the novel.



U.S. first edition, 1969



Finnish edition, 1994

Both covers evoke the “Ubik is everything” sentiment of the text and its epigraphs, although both do so in very different ways. The U.S. cover presents, quite plainly, Ubik in its aerosol form, as interacted with by various characters in the novel. The title of the novel itself plays with the Ubik-uity of the product, and here, it arouses even more ambiguity: is the “Ubik” on the cover the title, or the branding for the product? Is the book in our hands yet another magical reconstitution of the Ubik essence?

Conversely, the cover of the Finnish edition evokes the pervasion of Ubik, and here, it is explicitly shown through many of its forms; we see a distressed (and likely deceased) man, surrounded by the cigarettes that disintegrate, the coins that bear the visage of Glen Runciter, and the Ubik in all its forms as salves, balms and sprays. Clearly meant to evoke the nightmarish, absurd narrative of *Ubik*, this cover also derives its images from the more thematic aspects I’ve spoken about. If we disregard how some of these objects and products (the coins, cigarettes, Ubik containers) have particular significance to the novel, the cover perhaps speaks more to the

broader issue of consumer culture in the novel; the man, the “consumer,” is inundated with products and images in nauseating, bright colors. Moreover, the cover itself communicates very little about the science-fiction attributes of *Ubik*, in particular *the future* — none of its imagery connotes “the futuristic.” In fact, similar to how they appear in the novel, the products featured are antiquated versions of their “modern” counterparts. It contains, perhaps, an essence of the pernicious (but gradually more salient and suffocating) undercurrent of consumerism present in the novel. This essence resists any kind of substantial transformation, regardless of how its reverberations into the past and present manifest as objects; the thematic resonance still remains, even if the car on the cover is a ‘69 Mustang, or if the typewriter is replaced with an Apple II and keyboard.

Other *Ubik* covers over the decades bring various other aspects of the novel to the fore. For example, one edition published in Japan depicts an unknown figure suspended between two masses in a cosmic scene. This cover seems, at once, to relate to the god-product (or perhaps “product-god” in this case) of *Ubik* — the creator, entity, and object is centered in the void from which it speaks to the reader — as well as the half-life technology present in the novel, if we view the galaxy-like masses as the two planes of life and death, with the figure suspended in between them.

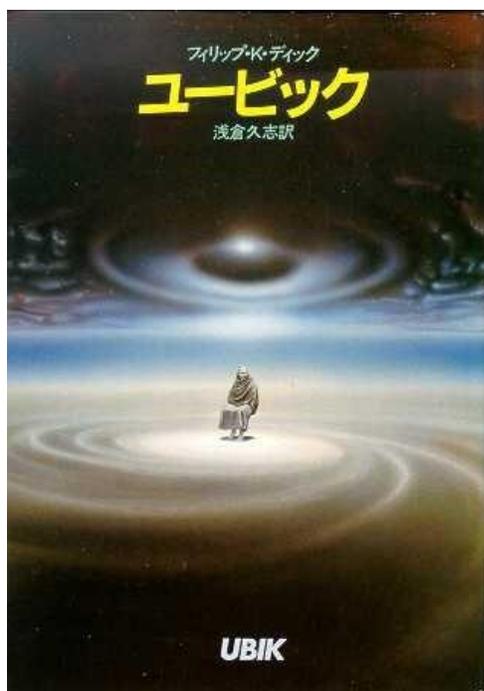
The Slovenian edition from 1982 features a cover that is particularly striking, if only for its abstention from imagery that either evokes *Ubik*’s existential horror outright or otherwise visually screams “science fiction.” Here, the cover curiously attempts to capture a temporal process in still image(s) — the loss of the “human.” Notably, however, this edition presents a quite different conception of this process, compared to what we see in the novel. As the characters in *Ubik* experience firsthand, the deterioration in half-life leaves its victim as “a

huddled heap, dehydrated, almost mummified.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, this decay proceeds rapidly from its onset; when Joe Chip recognizes this “heap” as his colleague Wendy Wright, he prays that he met her fate quickly: “in her last few hours of life — or perhaps minutes; he hoped it was only minutes — this had overtaken her, but she made no sound.”⁴¹ The cover, ostensibly, tries to capture the process of this, but not in a manner that emphasizes the horror of the situation. Instead, “the human” is lost in stages, slowly and methodically. The subject here sees himself gradually pushed downward, out of frame, in order to accommodate... what exactly? It is fascinating how the subject is replaced by, well, nothing, and how this could be a particularly unnerving possibility — that the human could be lost or replaced, with nothing left behind. Not even a shriveled, dusty corpse can be used to mark a once-living human. It is also worth noting how an arrow is used to depict this process. As I said before, it systematizes the process of human loss and destruction, but the placement of these images also emphasize the repetitive nature of the process itself. The arrows suggest movement into a new state, while also implying that this movement will be repeated indefinitely, as “the four squares produce a circular logic, drawing the eye back up and allowing the story to repeat endlessly.”⁴²

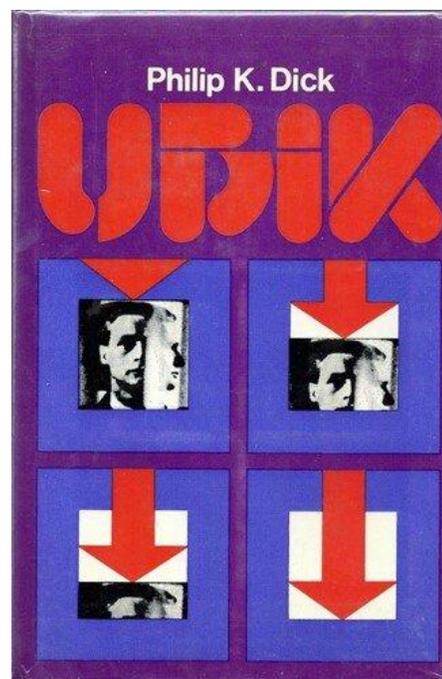
⁴⁰ Philip K Dick, *Ubik* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 105.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Andrew Raba, “You Won’t Believe These Cover Designs to Philip K. Dick’s 1969 Classic Mind-Fuck Conspiracy Novel *Ubik* — The Dirt,” *The Dirt*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.thedirt.media/blog/2020/4/24/11-of-the-coolest-foreign-language-ubik-covers>.



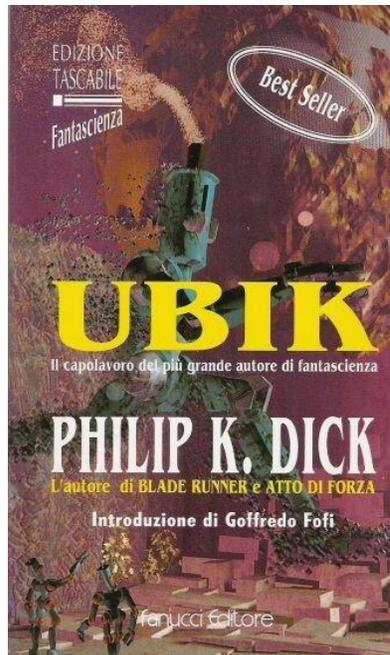
Japanese edition, 1994



Slovenian edition, 1982

Most of these covers, save for the Japanese edition, don't evoke the genre of science fiction as much as they highlight other thematic or generic (horror/thriller) aspects of *Ubik*. With the Italian edition from 1995, however, quite the opposite is true. The only issue is, the novel being promoted here *isn't* *Ubik*. As much as I would like to read the version of *Ubik* this edition seems to depict, it is worth noting how this cover has virtually nothing in common with the novel yet is arguably the most "sci-fi" of the group. Its giant, disintegrating robot leaps across the scene, with a large planet in the background. Two of the robot's smaller counterparts watch on, marveling from below. While it quite humorously diverges from the contents of the novel, this cover still reveals our expectations of science fiction, and moreover, our expectations of "the future." But, what happens when the future isn't massive robots dissolving through alternate realities, and is instead a deluge of spray cans, advertisements, and consumer goods? What happens if nothing

changes in the future, and what if the “new” is, instead, an extant form that, like *Ubik*, has been regurgitated, repurposed, and repackaged as “new?”



Italian edition, 1995

In *DADES*, we received a taste of commentary on the nature of old art commodified in a new era. As both an extension and aggravation of this, *Ubik* explores a consumer culture that utilizes change (in form and in image) to maintain its hold over time, while also resisting any kind of *external* change that could defeat or suppress it. With this in mind, we can see how the aforementioned “paradox of preservation” is a, if not *the* thematic core of *Ubik* and its speculation into the future. Like *Ubik* itself, this concept is one that, while changing superficially and appearing in multiple instances (including the novel’s predecessor in *DADES*), also maintains a kind of essence that remains unaltered, regardless of circumstance. Taking the “half-life” technology, for example — while quintessentially “science fiction” in terms of aesthetics, it is evident that its tragic and paradoxical nature is what takes precedence in the text. It is not tragic because the technology exists in this dystopian environment, but because the

plight of Glen and Ella Runciter speaks to multiple, persistent human urges. In this case, the familiar, longstanding fear of losing loved ones overlaps with a newly emerging economy of items that exist for the purposes of preservation — the imagined, futuristic half-life technology achieves the same basic goal of all of the extant products into which *Ubik* shapes itself.

However, that half-life involves the preservation of *people* and not products does not negate the fact that its method of “preserving” essentially leaves half-lifers as an object or product; as consumers, their loved ones outside the cryogenic chamber are for whom the technology truly exists. The case is similar with the god-product *Ubik* in relation to the bizarre, suffocating consumerist world that it both created and inhabits; I mentioned earlier — and it bears repeating now — how the novel’s advertising blurbs mimic the style and tone of those in Dick’s own time, yet, they have been grafted onto a futuristic setting. As previously mentioned, what is fascinating about all of these horrific and tragic aspects of *Ubik*’s narrative is that we can separate them from the imagined future they reside in, and discover how they each originate in both longstanding human tendencies and motivations, *and* the emerging, malevolent norms of consumerism in Dick’s time.

Conclusion

Reading these novels as if it were the late Sixties and not 2024 opens doors to new insights and interpretations; instead of looking back to see what Dick “got right” about the future we now inhabit, we can see exactly how Dick crafts his futures and how he responds to the looming fears of loss and decay as we head towards them. This “response” that Dick offers is not always straightforward, and intentionally so. With *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Ubik*, Dick demonstrates how we, as humans, are inevitably afraid of “the future” in many ways: we fear death, so we place our deceased loved ones in half-life; we fear that the works of Mozart and Munch will be lost to time, that “the dust will have won,” so we seek to preserve their works in opera houses and museums; we fear being unable to distinguish between the humans and androids among us, so we seek the ability to “know,” to discern and discriminate, creating tests that, in turn, create and sustain the distinctions between these groups; we fear our own deterioration in the half-life state, so we trust in *Ubik* to protect and restore us. In these novels, Dick both recognizes — and often sympathizes with — these urges, but ultimately demonstrates how the indefinite aim of “preservation” as we move into the future is accompanied by its own complications, and ironically, its own losses. We want the human to persist in any capacity, but what happens when these attempts at preservation fall short?

Upon a closer analysis, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* transforms into a novel that, while certainly preoccupied with forecasting its dystopian future, is simultaneously revelatory of Dick’s methods and aims of future-making — not simply what the future can/will look like, but *how we will arrive* at this future, and what seeds and traces of it are found in the present. As we see through the novel’s treatment of art in dystopia, a multitude of (often confounding) attitudes towards art become salient, all of which stem from the notions that art

possesses an inherent function of “preserving the human” as well as fostering empathy and connection.

DADES depicts a world where art has essentially failed, and new and novel cultural productions are few and far between. However, what is more fascinating is the strange, fractured relationships these characters have with art from the past — a narratively nebulous “past” that encompasses canonized 18th-century operas as well as figures of Dick’s own time. The art that appears in *DADES* does not coalesce with any of art’s proclaimed “purposes,” or “uses,” yet, curiously, the facets of the novel’s world that engender this are not necessarily *unique* to it. In other words, the reasons that art “fails” or has “failed” are not owed to the conditions of dystopia, but are instead inherent in the very project of art as a means of ossifying a particular “moment,” sensation and/or emotion. In multiple instances, the characters respond with and connect to the art in these scenes: Deckard has an emotional reaction to opera, specifically *The Magic Flute*; Resch briefly empathizes with the android Luba Luft upon viewing *The Scream*; and Luft herself is enchanted by the figure in Munch’s *Puberty*. Yet, both Deckard’s overarching mission of ultimately “retiring” Luft and the troubled existence of both “new” art and old/reproduced art, cast a strange shadow over these semblances of emotion in the dystopia of *DADES*; the relationships formed between Deckard/Resch and Luft, under the guise of connecting and empathizing via art, are actually the means by which the two men seek to “retire” her. Moreover, Dick confronts and questions the *qualities* of the art, as well as the efficacy of its preservation; each instance of these images, recordings, etc. gesture toward the forces of loss and decay that have begotten their current state, the “preservation” (and thus, existence) of these pieces in the future-world of *DADES* notwithstanding. They each demonstrate the complications in preserving and reproducing art — that along the way from the narrative's past to its present,

the process of preservation (in the name of stasis, or control over potential loss in the future) has had unforeseen consequences that leave the artworks and cultural productions transformed from and dissimilar to the original pieces.

Ubik, as I have argued, often incorporates these themes, and in many instances adapts them to complement its comparatively strange and horrific narrative. The stakes have been raised: if art acts (or is purported to act) as a means of accessing empathy or “the human” in *DADES*, then *Ubik*’s “half-life” posits a scenario where this preservation does not require a medium — the human is preserved outright, without the necessity of a human production or creation like art. This particular narrative focus represents a curious and ironic progression from what is observed in *DADES*, whereby an ostensibly more direct and immediate method of preserving “humanity” (in this case, literally *preserving the human*) is ultimately prone to the same issues that undermine the aim of preservation in itself. Moreover, time is out of joint across all of *Ubik*, and its only semblance of a narrative anchor is the figure/product/deity of Ubik itself, a figure that proclaims its own eternity and omnipresence. In imagining the future, *Ubik* often explores the unchanged; the novel posits a horrific state of futurity that is marked by stasis as opposed to novelty: what if the future ought to be feared for what *doesn't* or *won't* change — the entity of Ubik, moving through history — rather than what does or will change?

When the science fiction novel becomes “prophetic” first and foremost, the author’s coincident “prophet” label is one that, ironically, deflates and undermines the degree of shrewd observation and inference in their work; although both are noteworthy, these authors’ prescience is regarded (and often rewarded), rather than their perceptiveness. Moreover, this approach undercuts the political underpinnings that, at least partially, define the genre; the act of reading becomes a game of observing which “guesses” have (or have yet to) come true, minimizing the

roles of speculation in crafting literary futures — it is more difficult for these narratives to “come true” if they are already, in varying degrees, derived from the authors’ observations and perceptions of their present.

The familiar science-fiction images and aesthetics of both of these novels are undoubtedly entwined with the kinds of questions and examinations they provoke; with *DADES* in particular, the philosophical human/android explorations bear much thematic importance. Yet, the particular narrative elements I have noted can easily be divorced from the futuristic aesthetics that house them. The thematic cores of art’s failure in *DADES*, and of *Ubik*’s “half-life” and bizarre consumerist quirks, all evoke what is culturally, psychologically and emotionally latent in Dick’s time as well as our own. In Mark Fisher’s adaptation of Derrida’s “hauntology,” he designates “two directions in hauntology” that encompass the various sociocultural traits and tendencies that weigh on our ability to conceive of “the future:”

The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic “compulsion to repeat,” a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior).⁴³

In a similar manner, reappraising Philip K Dick’s dystopias does not undermine the paranoid and often harrowing atmospheres that essentially define them. Rather, they instead evoke the ways in which the *future* is always *present*: vividly in the social imagination and dormant in humanity’s “compulsion to repeat” its most persistent anxieties through the preservation of the past and present as an anticipatory safeguard against not simply the forthcoming, “real” future, but our imaginings of it as well.

⁴³ Mark Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?,” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16>.

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