

An Exploration of *Ubik*'s Modernism from the Perspective of Thing Narrative

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Abstract

Philip Dick's *Ubik* is a science fiction novel with modernist features. Dick breaks the traditional narrative and manifestation modes, deeply exploring the themes of human existence, consciousness, reality and illusion. By combining the Thing Narrative, the profound analysis of the symbols and metaphors of things and their narrative functions, this analysis reveals the modernist expression of *Ubik* in the aspects of theme, form and style. This exploration examines how these things reflect the complexities of modern society, the spiritual dilemmas of individuals, and innovations in literary form. The analysis further explores how things construct multiple realities, reflect individual alienation, and distort time and space, providing new insights for understanding *Ubik* and modernist literature, enriching academic discussions on the work and its historical context.

Keywords

Thing Narrative; *Ubik*; Modernism; Object-Oriented Ontology.

1. Introduction

Ubik is one of Dick's most acclaimed novels. In 2009, it was chosen by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 greatest novels since 1923. In his review for *Time*, critic Lev Grossman described it as "a deeply unsettling existential horror story, a nightmare you'll never be sure you've woken up from"[1]. Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* is a pivotal work in modernist literature due to its unique narrative structure and exploration of complex themes such as reality, identity, and existential uncertainty. The novel disrupts traditional storytelling by blurring the lines between reality and illusion, reflecting the modernist preoccupation with subjective experience and fragmented reality. *Ubik* is a 1969 science fiction novel by American writer Philip K. Dick. The story is set in the future of 1992 where psychic powers are used for corporate espionage, and cryonic technology allows recently deceased individuals to be kept in a state of hibernation. It follows Joe Chip, a technician at a psychic agency, who begins to experience strange alterations in reality, which can be temporarily reversed by a mysterious substance called *Ubik*, available for purchase at a store. This work expands on characters and concepts previously introduced in the short story *What the Dead Men Say*.

Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* holds a significant place in modernist literature, with its unique narrative structure and thematic exploration making it a key work for understanding the modernist movement. The novel employs a non-linear narrative style, resulting in a fragmented story structure that reflects the variability and uncertainty of real life. Additionally, the shifting of time and space in *Ubik* continually challenges readers' perceptions, embodying modernism's focus on subjective experience and the fragmentation of reality. Thematically, the work delves into the nature of existence and consciousness, questioning the authenticity of reality. Characters experience profound alienation, reflecting individual struggles in a rapidly changing world. Philip K. Dick challenges traditional conventions in *Ubik*, blending science fiction with

literary modernism and breaking genre boundaries. The exploration of simulacra and hyperreality in the novel foreshadows themes prevalent in postmodern literature. *Ubik* serves as a cornerstone for understanding the transition from modernism to postmodernism, highlighting Dick's role in bridging these literary movements. This analysis will examine the symbolic significance of everyday things in *Ubik* to explore deeper philosophical issues related to consumerism and identity.

"The Material Turn" is an important trend in recent humanities research, emphasizing a renewed focus on materiality and its role in culture and society. Significant progress has been made in the international academic community regarding the study of Thing Narrative. Researchers explore the symbolic meanings and narrative functions of things in literature and culture through various theoretical frameworks. According to scholars in "The Material Turn", things can convey meaning through their inherent properties and forms, as well as through the materials and decorations used in their construction [2]. Thing Narrative provides us with a new perspective for understanding the multiple functions and meanings of things in both texts and real life. Through its interdisciplinary nature, Thing Narrative theory effectively facilitates dialogue and collaboration between philosophy, cultural studies, and cognitive science.

2. Theoretical Exposition on Things

Traditionally matter was taken to be rudimentarily inert. But today the new materialists, object oriented ontologisms, speculative realists, share a set of general assumptions [3]. They often focus on a contingent ontology or metaphysics rather than epistemology, emphasizing the complexity of matter in its various relational forms and compositions. Their work frequently challenges our understanding of binaries like mind and body, nature and society, human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, and subject and object.

2.1. Bill Brown's Thing Theory

Bill Brown, who first proposed the concept of "Thing Theory", distinguishes between "thing" and "object". In his framework, "object" is produced by the subject, that is, phenomenological intentional object or Harman's sensual object, while "thing" is bare entities with materiality[4]. Objects typically refers to items used and controlled by humans, whose functions and meanings are often assigned by humans. However, when items surpass their functionality or when they cannot be entirely controlled by humans, they become "things". "Things" are those entities that, to some extent, transcend human understanding and control, carrying deeper significance. Brown emphasizes that objects are not merely passive existences, they possess agency and can actively participate in and influence human behavior and emotions in certain contexts. Brown asserts that "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us"[5]. Bill Brown emphasizes how the world of objects transforms human beings. He demonstrates how the material environment shapes us and explores the symbolic value of things and the subject-object relationship. In his essay "Thing Theory" he begins by distinguishing the dynamics of these relationships : "when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily"[5].

A closer analysis of Brown's work reveals that the "thingness" of an object becomes apparent when there is an interruption in its usual function. Brown suggests that when a glass breaks, the object of utility (the glass) becomes a "thing" to us. This particular glass might hold metaphorical significance, such as being a gift from a grandmother. Brown asks a pertinent question in this context, pointing out how such interruptions can transform our perception and relationship with objects.

“Could you clarify this matter of things by starting again and imagining them, first as the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by perceiving subject, the anterior physicality of the physical world emerging, perhaps as an after effect of mutual constitution of subject and object, a retro projection? You could imagine things, second, as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects-their force as a sensual presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols and totems. [5]”

From the perspective of Thing Theory, an “object” can be tangible object or entity with sensory presence or metaphysical power. For instance, in *The Great Gatsby*, “the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg” are seen by Wilson as a symbol of God’s or moral scrutiny. These eyes witness the various sins and hypocrisies within the novel, becoming a symbol of societal corruption and moral decay. The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are endowed with an omniscient perspective, silently observing the era’s sins and the madness of people. Though they do not speak, they record all the depravity, providing a form of covert surveillance that prompts readers to deeply reflect on human nature and morality. Additionally, the “eyes of God” represent a sense of emptiness. “They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose.[6]” This is a billboard put up by an eye doctor to attract business. “And then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away.[6]” The false “eyes of God” has already lost their ability to guide and regulate people, becoming a laughable irony. In an era dominated by money and materialism, the power of God has been weakened, and faith and moral standards no longer govern people’s actions. The “eyes of God” can only silently observe this era. According to Brown’s Thing Theory, their sensory presence or metaphysical power is gradually diminished, reverting to their materiality.

By exploring the relationship between the functionality and materiality of objects, Brown reveals that the materiality of objects is often overlooked. This process not only redefines our understanding of objects but also offers a profound reflection on the roles objects play in our lives.

In “The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane and The Economics of Play” (1977), he analyzed Crane’s fiction to explore how ordinary lives inhabited their imagined worlds as strange presences. In 2001, Brown edited a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, which he later expanded into the book *Things* (2004), where he introduced his “Thing Theory”. His book *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* applied this theory through detailed analyses of authors like Mark Twain, Henry James, and Sarah Orne Jewett, reshaping our understanding of objects[7]. Studying these writers reveals why and how we use objects to create meaning and fulfill our dreams. In brief, Brown’s work offers a new perspective on materialism.

2.2. Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory

In Latour’s view, the subject-object dichotomy is merely a theoretical construct of modern people. In practice, so-called “modern people” cannot achieve an absolute separation between subject and object, nor between related concepts like society and nature, or fact and value. Instead, modern practices are carried out through a fusion of subject and object. The distinction is simply a result of artificially separating an already intertwined hybrid world [8]. Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) emphasizes the role of objects in social networks, arguing that objects and humans together construct social reality. According to Latour, the essence of society is the association composed of many heterogeneous elements [8]. Society is not something to be used for explanation but rather something that needs to be explained and reorganized. Actor-Network Theory is composed of “networks” formed by “actors”, which

Latour calls “an association between entities” [8]. This network is not a static web but a dynamic one that is constantly “in flux”. Actors can be shaped by the network and, conversely, can shape the network itself. Therefore, within actor-networks, actors interact and co-construct each other. Here, actors include both human and non-human factors, so no single type of actor holds a central position. Another key concept is translation. For example, in Latour’s example of “gun and people” when a person has a gun and uses it to kill, the person becomes a “murderer”, and the gun becomes a “murder weapon”. Both the person and the gun are actors, and in this process, all actors undergo translation. The gun itself does not kill automatically, but in a specific context, it interacts with human behavior to jointly cause the event[9]. This example illustrates why non-human objects can also serve as “actors” and explains the concept of “translation”. Only through translation can actors be combined to form an actor-network, where stable relationships between actors are expected to be established.

2.3. Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology

Graham Harman, a key figure in speculative realism, proposed and developed object-oriented ontology. He argues that objects possess a reality independent of humans and other objects, characterized by infinite “withdrawal”, meaning they cannot be fully grasped because objects “resist any form of causal or cognitive capture” [10]. Harman introduced the concept of the quadruple object, suggesting that objects have four facets: real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, and sensual qualities. There is a perpetual conflict and gap between these facets. He posits that the true nature of objects is always in retreat, and can only be indirectly alluded to. The essence of literature and art lies in enticing us to glimpse the truth of objects through such allusions [10]. Harman’s study of Lovecraft demonstrates that Lovecraft often introduces supernatural creatures indirectly, allowing readers to perceive sensual qualities without grasping their true existence, thus creating a terrifying reading atmosphere. This creation of conflict between sensual qualities and real objects is also reflected in *Ubik*.

2.4. Weisheng Tang’s Ontological Narratology

Weisheng Tang proposed the concept of “Object Ontological Narratology”, suggesting a narrative system centered on objects that transcends the limits of human rationality. This theory emphasizes three basic models: material culture studies, living thing or subject objects, and ontological objects or study of thingness. This perspective not only enriches the traditional scope of narratology but also provides new insights into understanding objecthood in literary works. In his book *A Study on Narrative of Thingness*, Professor Tang systematically constructs Thingness Narrative Theory. He distinguishes three modes of thing narrative: symbolic objects, actor objects, and ontological objects. He also proposes four fundamental strategies: infinite withdrawal objects, equal objects, non-human objects, and vibrant objects[4]. Additionally, he explores thing narrative from both theoretical construction and critical practice, focusing on The Material Turn and Thing Narrative, basic strategies of thingness narration, and their challenges and expansions to narratology.

3. The Narratives of Things

3.1. Ubik as a Multivalent Symbol: Transcendence and Consumerism

The title of the novel, “Ubik” is itself a significant symbol of thing. It is both an omnipresent product and possesses a mysterious quality that transcends materiality. Ubik deconstructed the pervasive infiltration of consumerism and commercialization into modern life, while also suggesting a force or existence that transcends reality. In the novel, after people die, they can be frozen in “moratoriums” where their “half-lifer” consciousness is stimulated through photonic technology, allowing them to communicate with the living. However, each

conversation consumes energy, pushing them closer to true death. Ubik can delay this process of dying.

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 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 [11].

Yet, what Ubik actually is and its origins remain a mystery in the novel. According to Dick's ex-wife, Ubik is a metaphor for God—omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. During a lunar mission, an explosion killed all the team members except for Runciter. Runciter transported their bodies back to a moratorium in Zurich. In the novel, the dead can communicate with the living through the moratorium. In this world, Joe Chip and the other team members are unaware of their deaths and suspect it to be a trap set by telepaths. Meanwhile, they believe Runciter died on the lunar mission and that they are in the moratorium world sending him back to Earth. In the process, their world begins to regress, with everything devolving—cars and time revert to 1939. The team members start dying one by one due to this regression. Eventually, Joe Chip discovers through investigation that a being named Jory is a fabricated entity in this world, consuming other half-lifers to gain energy. In the end, Joe Chip uses a spray called Ubik to resist the regression and continue his struggle with Jory.

From the perspective of Thing Narrative, the Ubik spray functions as a symbol and metaphor, advancing the plot and reflecting the characters' struggles. Ubik dominates this uncertain world and even controls the protagonists' lives and deaths. Analyzing it through Latour's Actor-Network Theory, the Ubik spray is a crucial non-human actor with special properties that resist the world's regression and reversal, helping Joe survive in a perilous environment and contend with Jory. Ubik interacts with other actors (including Runciter's wife Ella, Pat, and the constantly changing environment) to form a complex network. The appearance and use of Ubik lead to shifts in the actions and strategies of other actors: Jory tries to prevent Joe from using Ubik, resulting in conflict and struggle between them. Therefore, Ubik holds a certain power within this network, granting abilities and advantages to its user, and interacting with other actors throughout the novel, influencing the overall storyline and the characters' fates.

3.2. Automated Service Machines: Dehumanization in a Capitalist Society

Automatic service machines frequently appear in the novel, symbolizing a highly automated and capitalized society that suppresses humanity. People must pay for various services, even just to open doors, highlighting the dominance of money and the indifference in human relationships. In Chapter 3, Joe skillfully operates various machines. "Joe Chip hazily seated himself at his kitchen table, lit a cigarette and, after inserting a dime, twiddled the dial of his recently rented' pape machine'[11]." With just a coin, the machine responds enthusiastically: "'Yes sir,' the' pape machine said heartily. 'Gossip. Guess what Stanton Mick, the reclusive, interplanetically known speculator and financier, is up to at this very moment'[11]." Due to unpaid debts, Joe's credit is lowered, and he is denied further service from the maintenance department. Even making coffee and opening doors require coins: "Back in the kitchen he fished in his various pockets for a dime, and, with it, started up the coffeepot." "The door refused to open. It said, 'Five cents, please.' He searched his pockets. No more coins; nothing. 'I'll pay you tomorrow,' he told the door[11]." Joe angrily expresses a desire to overthrow the "tyranny" of automated service machines, reflecting his dissatisfaction with the highly automated, capitalized society they represent. Although these machines provide various services, they lack human values, compassion, and warmth. Here, automated service machines may symbolize the

negative impact of technological overdevelopment and commercialization on society. In this world, automated service machines “humanize” and respond with proud, provocative tones. “Objects can become characters, endowed with consciousness and experience. They can assume the role of narrators and possess human-like language abilities, but do not necessarily experience the world from a human perspective[12].”

“It was dead,” she asserted shrilly, “by the time I got it home. Here; you can have it back.” She set a pot on the counter; it contained, Al saw, a lifeless plant, perhaps an azalea—in its moribund state it showed few features. “I can’t give you a refund,” the checker answered. “No warranty goes with the plant life which we sell. ‘Buyer beware’ is our rule. Please move along now [11].”

The impersonal reactions of the automatic service machines reveal the ruthlessness and harshness of contemporary society. On one hand, to some extent, automated service machines possess initiative and agency, causing Joe great anger and making him dependent on them for many aspects of life. On the other hand, they exacerbate the conflict and balance between technology and humanity, and between social progress and humanistic care.

3.3. Decaying Things and Entropic Regression: Time, Space, and Fragility

In the novel, the world inhabited by the half-lifers is gradually decaying, with items like dilapidated houses and broken equipment symbolizing the collapse of order and the inevitability of entropy. These objects reflect the modern society’s sense of uncertainty about the future and helplessness toward reality.

There’s some force at work producing rapid decay. It’s been at work since—or started with—the blast there on Luna. We already knew that. We also know, or think we know, that another force, a contraforce, is at work, moving things in an opposite direction. Something connected with Runciter. Our money is beginning to have his picture on it. A matchfolder—[11]

They felt an opposing force. The new tape recorder’s internal parts were already damaged, with shallow spots on the rubber drive wheel, and the fast-forward and rewind mechanical brake pads were worn out, urgently needing cleaning and lubrication. The production dates on canned goods in the supermarket jumped from two years ago to forty years ago within a day. The old woman’s newly bought azaleas were also affected, wilting as soon as they got home. “And meanwhile, he thought, our world declines, turns back onto itself, bringing to the surface past phases of reality. By the end of the week we may wake up and find ancient clanging streetcars moving down Fifth Avenue [11].” Joe understood that time was reversing, bringing the past into the present. “From rocket propulsion to jet, from jet to piston-driven aircraft, then surface travel as the coal-fed steam train, horse-drawn cart—[11].” The force of time reversal was accumulating, and antique items appeared overwhelmingly faster than expected. Throughout the climax to the end of the novel, decaying things symbolized the decline of human civilization and society. They appeared worn out, damaged, and lost their original functions, possibly serving as a warning from the author that technological advancement and societal progress come with problems and crises. Simultaneously, the decaying things actively propelled the plot, causing characters confusion and struggle. They had to strive to understand and cope with everything happening. Due to the changes in decaying things, characters continuously explored and reflected, gradually approaching the “truth”. Joe came closer to Jory and discovered the secret of Ubik. The narrative of decaying things reinforced the novel’s obscure and claustrophobic atmosphere, revealing the fragility of human existence and the

irreversibility of time. It also helped to build social relationships and express the characters' inner worlds.

3.4. **Ubik Advertisements: Ambiguity and the Critique of Hyperreality**

Philip K. Dick introduces each chapter with an advertisement for the Ubik company. Initially, the novel doesn't directly describe the Ubik spray. Instead, a series of varied ads keeps the concept of Ubik in the reader's mind, creating intrigue and mystery without offering a clear understanding. Is Ubik beer, coffee, salad dressing, an antacid, a razor, or a kitchen product? "The best way to ask for beer is to sing out Ubik. Made from select hops, choice water, slow-aged for perfect flavor, Ubik is the nation's number-one choice in beer. Made only in Cleveland [11]." "Instant Ubik has all the fresh flavor of just-brewed drip coffee. Your husband will say, Christ, Sally, I used to think your coffee was only so-so. But now, wow! Safe when taken as directed[11]." By introducing this unknown entity through pervasive advertisements, Dick sets up a narrative that corresponds with the ending's interpretation of Ubik as "eternally present". Ubik becomes a symbol of salvation and existential questioning, challenging the reader to explore deeper philosophical implications. This deliberate ambiguity mirrors the novel's themes of uncertainty and shifting realities, prompting readers to question the nature of products and reality itself. As the story progresses, Ubik becomes a symbol of salvation and existential questioning, challenging the reader to explore deeper philosophical implications.

4. **The Modernist Themes of *Ubik* through Thing Narrative**

4.1. **Blurred Realities: The Collapse of Subject-Object Dichotomy**

The tradition of thingness in Western philosophy is primarily centered on "human beings". This tradition has led to the concrete practice where people believe that human subjects have absolute control and dominion over objects as subjects. Consequently, "nature becomes like a 'machine' that can be manipulated at will, and humans themselves become a means to achieve human goals, thus becoming an integral part of the technological society [13]." However, Philip K. Dick breaks this tradition in his novels, where things seem to have absolute control and dominion over humans: all automated service machines require coins to operate, and these heartless machines show no human warmth. In the world of the half-lifer in *Ubik*, it can prevent aging and holds power over life. Coins with human images can indicate the passage of time.

In "*Ubik*" the absurdity is primarily reflected in the distortion of reality and the management of supernatural phenomena. Set in a time when telepathy and other superpowers are used for corporate espionage, the presence of these supernatural elements makes life uncertain and unpredictable. The novel also explores the limitations of language and human cognition, further intensifying the reader's skepticism about the real world. There are frequent depictions of the protagonist's existential reflections, as Joe transitions from trying to keep Runciter conscious in the moratorium to realizing that he himself is in half-lifer, expressing fear and helplessness toward death. "How could it happen to her? Because of the blast. We're going to die like that one after another. One by one. Until none of us are left. Until each of us is ten pounds of skin and hair in a plastic bag, with a few dried-up bones thrown in [11]." Moreover, uncertainty is vividly portrayed in the novel. One of the novel's central questions is "What is Ubik". This question runs throughout the book without a definitive answer, with each chapter beginning with an advertisement for Ubik. This reflects the author's thoughts on the blurred line between science and mysticism and symbolizes humanity's helplessness when faced with the unknown and uncontrollable. For example, at the end, the protagonist asks an invisible deity what Ubik is, receiving a response that is neither a spiritual revelation nor a clear scientific explanation but rather a lengthy spiel filled with pseudoscientific jargon.

“A spray can of Ubik,” the girl answered, “is a portable negative ionizer, with a self-contained, high-voltage, low-amp unit powered by a peak-gain helium battery of 25kv. The negative ions are given a counter-clockwise spin by a radically biased acceleration chamber, which creates a centripetal tendency to them so that they cohere rather than dissipate. A negative ion field diminishes the velocity of antiprotophasons normally present in the atmosphere; as soon as their velocity falls they cease to be anti-protophasons and, under the principle of parity, no longer can unite with protophasons radiated from persons frozen in cold-pac; that is, those in half-life. The end result is that the proportion of protophasons not canceled by anti-protophasons increases, which means—for a specific time, anyhow—an increment in the net put-forth field of protophasonic activity...which the affected half-lifer experiences as greater vitality plus a lowering of the experience of low cold-pac temperatures. So you can see why regressed forms of Ubik failed to—”[11].

The story returns to the “real world” where Runciter visits the moratorium to contact Ella. When he reaches for a coin to tip the attendant, he finds Joe’s face on it, realizing this is just the beginning and that he is in a world regressing backward, sending a chill down his spine. “He had an intuition, chillingly, that if he searched his pockets, and his billfold, he would find more. This was just the beginning [11].”

The image on the coin symbolizes the transition and influence between different worlds or states. Runciter keeps appearing in Joe’s world, while Joe’s image appears on coins in Runciter’s world, indicating their mutual influence across worlds, switching between life and death. The coin possesses powerful significance, granting an omniscient perspective. In a tech-dominated world, every service machine requires coins. It provides the protagonist with clues, helping him gain “awareness” of his world. By the novel’s end, the coin reveals to Runciter that he is also part of an illusory world, just like Joe in the half-life state. It continually links the plot, driving the story forward. The coin and other objects form a network with the protagonist, translating and creating different outcomes.

Additionally, the novel enhances the sense of uncertainty by depicting various absurd events in the daily lives of ordinary people. For instance, if someone challenges the existing order, they are immediately seen as a threat and suppressed. This extreme social control and oppression of individual freedom make people live in constant fear and distrust. Finally, through its complex narrative structure and multi-layered thematic exploration, “Ubik” successfully weaves absurdity and uncertainty into the entire story. It is not just a science fiction novel but a profound reflection on the essence of human existence. As Dick illustrates, when everything is controlled and predictable, the authenticity and free will of individuals become increasingly blurred and uncertain.

In conclusion, “Ubik” through its detailed depiction of a future world and in-depth analysis of the human psychological state, showcases multiple dimensions of absurdity and uncertainty. It prompts readers to continually ponder what is real, what is illusion, and how we can find our place in such a world.

4.2. Consumerist Satire: Ubik’s Pervasive Commercialization

The things depicted in the novel represent various phenomena of modern society, such as the rampant consumerism and the indifference of human nature, expressing the author’s criticism of contemporary society. In “Ubik” the product Ubik is repeatedly advertised, with its contradictory slogans satirizing the deceitful practices of businesses under consumerism. This advertising strategy not only reveals how consumerism manipulates and deceives consumers but also reflects the prevalence of false advertising in modern commercial society. Furthermore, the ubiquitous TV commercials and paid services in the book highlight the pervasive infiltration

of consumerism into everyday life. "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." "Perk up pouting household surfaces with new miracle Ubik, the easy-to-apply, extra-shiny, non-stick plastic coating. Entirely harmless if used as directed. Saves endless scrubbing, glides you right out of the kitchen!" "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[11]." The advertising strategy, with its pervasive and omnipresent ads, satirizes consumerism by infiltrating ordinary people's daily lives. This advertising approach is not only ubiquitous but also closely tied to the anti-psycho market, reflecting the comprehensive control and influence that large corporations have over ordinary people's lives. Philip K. Dick's work is filled with influences from realist literature, using metaphors and satire to reveal social issues such as wealth accumulation, information surveillance, and consumerism. The scene where Joe cannot open the door because he cannot produce fifty cents further highlights the invasive nature of consumerism in daily life. This phenomenon reflects the widespread irrational consumer mentality in contemporary society, such as blind conformity, comparative consumption, and impulsive buying.

In modernist literature, the mental state and subjective experiences of individuals often become the focus of attention. In this work, alienation and loneliness are important themes. "Ubik" explores issues of individual identity and reality through this lens, showcasing Joe's psychological changes and struggles in a highly automated and capitalized society. This deep exploration of the inner world reflects a core characteristic of modernist literature—emphasizing the uniqueness and complexity of individual experience. From the text, it's clear that the protagonist feels abrupt and helpless in the face of loneliness. In Chapter 13, Joe is noticeably unwell and senses his proximity to death. Even speaking can strain his physical burden and vision blurs. He feels fear and helplessness, but Denny's visits provide him with a sense of care. "Patricia Conley remained, but that did not make him feel less alone. His isolation, in spite of her physical presence, had become absolute[11]." Everything Joe experiences, including those fantastical, absurd, and indescribable encounters, makes it impossible for him to truly share and be understood by others. Even he has company, his inner world remains isolated. The confusion he faces, his bewilderment about the truth of the world, and the uncertainty of his own existence cannot be alleviated by mere companionship.

Metabolism, he reflected, is a burning process, an active furnace. When it ceases to function, life is over. They must be wrong about hell, he said to himself. Hell is cold; everything there is cold. The body means weight and heat; now weight is a force which I am succumbing to, and heat, my heat, is slipping away. And, unless I become reborn, it will never return. This is the destiny of the universe. So at least I won't be alone. But he felt alone. It's overtaking me too soon, he realized. The proper time hasn't come; something has hurried this up—some conniving thing has accelerated it, out of malice and curiosity: a polymorphic, perverse agency which likes to watch. An infantile, retarded entity which enjoys what's happening. It has crushed me like a bent-legged insect, he said to himself. A simple bug which does nothing but hug the earth. Which can never fly or escape. Can only descend step by step into what is deranged and foul [11].

Joe discovers that his strength is waning and body is starting to feel cold, signs that he is approaching death. As life ends, the body's heat dissipates, but the idea of rebirth might restore that lost warmth and envision it as a cosmic home, making fear and loneliness less daunting. However, he is immediately overwhelmed by a profound sense of isolation, which is not natural

but manipulated by some malevolent force. He likens himself to a weak insect, highlighting his helplessness in the face of this unknown and void world. This reflects Joe's inner pain and struggle when confronted with the cessation of life, the oppression of loneliness, and the manipulation of unknown forces. The novel is filled with gradually decaying and deteriorating objects—such as old buildings, antique radios, broken machines, and degraded Ubik cans—which clash with Joe's perception of a normal world. Their state of disrepair hints at the decay of the world and Joe's isolation and helplessness.

The conflict between Joe and Jory is not only a personal clash but also a challenge and reflection on the nature of reality. This conflict reveals that human perception of the "real" world is limited and subjective. As depicted in the novel, the so-called "real world" is actually a sandbox where external forces input order and energy. Furthermore, modernist literature emphasizes the psychological experience of individuals, highlighting the oppression and distortion life imposes on them. The struggle between Joe and Jory exemplifies this oppression and distortion. Their conflict reflects not only the inner struggles of individuals but also symbolizes the alienation and loss of direction humans experience in modern society. Modernist writers often explore philosophical questions such as "Who am I" and "Who are we"—questions profoundly addressed in *Ubik*.

5. Conclusion

In "Ubik", things are not merely background settings they play an active role in the narrative and even influence the characters' destinies. This "object-oriented narrative" model differs from traditional storytelling, allowing readers to gain a deeper understanding of the material world in the story and its socio-political implications for human interactions. For example, elements such as virtual reality technology and complexity theory in "Ubik" showcase Dick's profound insight into postmodern scientific theories, offering a unique case study for modernist research. In recent years, there has been increasing academic interest in the "object-oriented" trend, with philosophy and new materialist theories elevating "things" to the center of attention. This shift in focus has prompted literary scholars to reconsider the socio-political significance of interactions between objects and humans and has stimulated the development of narratives and the objects within them [14]. The object-oriented narrative in "Ubik" not only enriches the content of modernist studies but also provides new avenues for exploring object-oriented narrative research in contemporary novels. In summary, "Ubik" offers rich material and new perspectives for modernist research through its unique object-oriented narrative and complex themes. This research approach not only deepens the understanding of "Ubik" but also advances modernist studies towards more diverse and in-depth directions.

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