

OBJECTS IN PHILIP K. DICK'S *THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE* AND THE NEW MATERIALIST APPROACHES TO REALITY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present a selection of findings from my doctoral dissertation on the relationship between Philip K. Dick's novels' and posthumanist philosophy. Specifically, I offer a reading of *The Man in the High Castle* that investigates the novel's alternative-history setting and the role of inanimate objects, as well as the broader nature-culture material assemblages to which they belong, in revealing for the human subjects the contingent nature of reality. My analysis focuses on the climactic scene where the character of Mr. Tagomi, a high-ranking official of Imperial Japan, seemingly transports to an alternative timeline while contemplating a piece of jewelry made by a Jewish craftsman. Drawing on Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology, Jane Bennett's philosophy of vital materialism and Francesca Ferrando's thought experiment of the posthuman multiverse, I argue that, within the narrative of the novel, inanimate objects and works of art are portrayed as active agents capable of altering individual perceptions of reality. Such instances uncover the complex contingencies guiding the organization of their reality, refuting the essentialist ideology of fascism dominant in the novel's setting. Ultimately, I argue that Dick's novel, in concurrence with new materialist philosophies, challenges dominant hierarchies of essential humanism and highlights the transformative power of encounters between humans and nonhuman actants.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) as a novel in which Philip K. Dick expands the scope of inquiry into the nature of reality with an idea of a system of agency, or a mechanism of interaction with the world, which extends beyond individual human cognition. Different ways in which nonhuman assemblages are signaled in the novel will be analyzed, using the frameworks of new materialist philosophy as conceptualized by Graham Harman

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and Jane Bennett. The second paradigm informing the inquiry will be the posthuman philosophy of Francesca Ferrando. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, these approaches venture to articulate the dynamic complexity of the material world which cannot be accounted for by attributing agency, and the ability to construct a reality, solely to individual human subjects.

Central to Dick's experimentation with authenticity and reality in *The Man in the High Castle* is the novel's setting. Unlike most of his science-fiction, which imagines possible futures, this work tells the story of an alternative present. The plot of the work unfolds in a version of twentieth-century America in which the Axis powers have won the Second World War. Throughout the narrative, the reader is gradually provided glimpses of this altered geopolitical landscape. At certain key points, the historical events diverge from those familiar to Dick's audience: President Roosevelt had been assassinated before the war, the Allies lose the Battle of Britain, and Nazi Germany conquers Europe and Africa, subsequently carrying out mass exterminations on an even larger scale than those that actually happened. The novel opens in the 1960s, in an America divided by the two fascist regimes—the Nazis and Imperial Japan—locked in a cold war. Most of the action takes place in San Francisco, a territory occupied by the Japanese, and revolves around a fictional novel *The grasshopper lies heavy* and an ancient Chinese divination text—*I Ching*. While these texts are important to the main themes of *The High Castle*, they have attracted considerable scholarly attention,² especially in terms of novel's metatextual qualities. My analysis focuses instead on the relationships between human characters—both the occupants and the occupied—and the material objects that surround them. The perspective allows me to trace the connections between Dick's narrative strategies and the theoretical framework of new materialist philosophy. Although *The Man in the High Castle* contains a wide range of narratively and symbolically important objects, such as weapons, books, yarrow stalks, commodities and locations, my discussion will concentrate on two crucial scenes featuring a lighter and a piece of jewelry. This focus reflects both from the constraints of a journal article and a need for a more detailed analysis. As I argue, these two objects represent crucial vehicles for Dick's investigation into the material reality and its interaction with the networks of human signification.

2. Occupation, nostalgia, historicity

From the very beginning of the novel, we can see a complex relationship that the Japanese occupiers have with American culture. They appropriate the artifacts

² See: Everett & Halpern (2013), Mountfort (2016), Rieder (1988), Rossi (2011), Srinivas (1999).

of the prewar United States, fetishizing and idealizing the symbols of a bygone era, while at the same time displaying blatant superiority over the people of the conquered nation. This attitude becomes evident in the depicted interactions between Robert Childan—an American antiques dealer—and his clients—high ranking officials and businessmen from Japan. The novel begins with a phone-call between Childan and Nobusuke Tagomi, a prominent functionary at the Pacific Trade Mission. Tagomi treats the salesman with condescension, signaling his superiority beneath the veneer of formal etiquette: "... Mr. Childan?" Tagomi deliberately mispronounced the name; insult within the code that made Childan's ears burn" (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 10). And yet, despite his disdain towards the antique dealer, Tagomi holds the objects themselves in high esteem. He carefully tends to his Colt revolver, and when presenting a bewildered guest with a Mickey Mouse wristwatch, he describes it as "most authentic of dying old U.S. culture, a rare, retained artifact carrying flavor of bygone halcyon day" (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 47–48). This juxtaposition reveals how the imperial invaders exhibit a certain nostalgia for an image of America that they themselves helped to destroy. The artifacts thus function simultaneously as war trophies and substitutes for national guilt for the invaders. As such, these objects and the historical significance attached to them become crucial in unveiling to the reader the power relations within the novel's political regime.

The historicity of the objects lauded by the Japanese may be considered a manifestation of the modernist artifice as articulated by Lyotard in *The postmodern condition*. As the French theorist argued, "modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; however, the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" (Lyotard [1997](#): 81). What the occupants seek in those looted artifacts is an outlet for a kind of vicarious nostalgia over the great narrative of American history. All of the coveted items—antique guns, lighters, stamps and collectible cards—embody a distinctly modernist aesthetic. In seeking them out, the Japanese attempt to recover fragments of lost stability—reference points that dissolved in the wake of the Second World War. This pursuit allows a particular kind of self-delusion: the construction of a historical narrative unburdened by the atrocities perpetrated during their conquest. The objects are therefore steeped in the politics of the regime. At the same time, the underlying, unspoken antagonism between the occupiers and the occupied is mutual. Childan harbors deep prejudice against his clients, not only because they are colonizers of his homeland, but because he himself is a racial supremacist, equally hateful towards the Blacks and the Jews. He internalizes and reproduces the hierarchical structure of his society by redirecting the racial sentiment further down the supremacist social ladder. The reader gets a glimpse at this process in the inner monologue

of the character while riding a pedicab: “And it was pleasurable to be peddled along by another human being... To be pulled instead of having to pull. And to have, if even for a moment, higher place” (Dick 2014 [1962]: 27–88).

These short insights into the perspectives of both Mr. Tagomi and Childan allow us to see how the novel constructs a complex network of relationships between physical objects, human beings and ideologies. The two dynamics highlighted here—the instrumentalization of people and fetishizing of objects as cultural appropriation—are both symptoms of a broader epistemological crisis identified by Dick, one in which the power structure determines the human perception of the material objects and their meaning and value. Much of the novel’s focus falls on scrutinizing this crisis by presenting the reader with human and nonhuman interactions which uncover a tension between material reality and subjective perspective.

3. Two lighters and the ontology of objects

We may be able to unravel the mechanisms of this process by reading a selected scene from *The Man in the High Castle* through the lenses of object-oriented ontology³. At the crux of this philosophy is the distinction between *real* objects and *sensual* objects and the matrix of possible interactions between them. Object-oriented ontology stands in contrast to poststructuralist approaches. According to Graham Harman, “whereas many of these currents have asserted that reality is something ‘constructed’ by language, power of human cultural practices, OOO is a bluntly *realist* philosophy. This means among other things that the external world exists independently of human awareness” (Harman 2018: 12). Rather than aligning with poststructuralism, OOO resonates more directly with posthumanist philosophers who advocate post-anthropocentric perspectives attentive to the materiality and embodiment of a lived experience. For Harman, what is *real* is always “a surplus beyond any possible opinion” (Harman 2018: 158)—something that facilitates all interactions and influences subjective perceptions without being reducible to them. Metaphor, in this framework, is understood as an interaction which consists of the displacement of the qualities of one object onto another (a proxy) that is witnessed by a third actant. Through what Harman calls “vicarious causation”—a notion I will return to later—things assert themselves as equal agents. Building upon the Heideggerian notion of equipment, Harman contends that

³ Abbreviated OOO. Throughout this article, the title of Harman’s book, *Object-oriented ontology*, will be abbreviated OOO as well, but italicized, to avoid confusion.

the true danger to thought is not relativism but *idealism*, and hence the best remedy for what ails us is not the truth/knowledge pair ... but *reality*. Reality is the rock against which our various ships always flounder, and as such it must be acknowledged and revered, however elusive it may be. (Harman [2018](#): 9, emphasis original)

How, then, might we reconcile Dick's epistemologically uncertain narrative with this realist insistence on elusive but irreducible reality? I argue that Harman's call for reverence toward reality illuminates why Dick's stories are filled with fakes, replicas, and phantasmagorical simulacra. These function as a kind of test environments through which the author seeks to determine whether any meaningful distinction can be made between an "authentic" and "fake" realities. His pursuit of the authentic experience of the world hinges upon often fruitless attempts to bring forth the qualities of reality that are not discernible from the limited vantage point of a human being. Dick himself describes this limitation as *idios kosmos*—a private world—and, in an essay "How to build a universe that doesn't fall apart two days later" ([1978](#)), he ponders: "Maybe each human being lives in ... a world different from those inhabited and experienced by all other humans ... If reality differs from person to person, can we speak of reality singular, or shouldn't we really be talking about plural realities?" (Dick [1995 \[1978\]](#): 261).

In *The Man in the High Castle*, Dick contemplates the reality of *objects* as a counter to the potentially solipsistic perspective of an individual. Similarly cognizant of humanistic biases and limitations, Graham Harman postulates that each thing, which also includes events and humans, possesses a collection of empirically inscrutable features that make up the *real* object—subsequently called the "real qualities"—and what the observer accesses is not that thing but the *sensual* object. In his words, "objects come in just two kinds: *real objects* exist whether or not they currently affect anything else, while *sensual objects* exist only in relation to some other object ... Real objects cannot relate to one another directly, but only indirectly, by means of a sensual object" (Harman [2018](#): 11). In other words, reality, as well as the things and events constituting it, always withdraws behind its superficial qualities that are produced at the point of encounter between objects, whether through a physical interaction or cognitive interpretation. While the real object exists independently of temporary assemblages, the sensual exists as mediation between agents or "only as the correlate of our acts of consciousness" (Harman [2018](#): 132). Therefore, the "sensual qualities" remain linked to the real object yet distinct from it, since they manifest only temporarily at the point of interaction between entities.

The "withdrawal" is a term which Harman borrows from Martin Heidegger's theory of equipment from *Being and time*. For Heidegger, as Harman observes, from the point of view of a conscious user (a specific *Dasein*), tools disappear

behind their functions and qualities, while the objects themselves “withdraw from human view into a dark subterranean reality that never becomes present to practical action any more than it does to theoretical awareness” (Harman: [2002](#): 1). Harman extends this principle beyond the human-object relation, to any entity, arguing that each causal interaction between objects occurs between their *sensual* qualities, while the ontology of the real object, its “tool-being” remains unknowable. Harman emphasizes that “OOO renounces all claims to know the essence of anything directly. Yet this does not entail that nothing *has* an inner nature, and that therefore everything would be willfully performed or socially constructed” (Harman [2018](#): 135). Rather, the knowledge is always imperfect, able to only encompass the superficiality of whatever is being described while the real entity eludes—or withdraws from—scrutiny.

The difference between the withdrawn entity of the real object and the instance of the sensually perceptible object that emerges in an interaction with another object is first demonstrated in the novel by a secondary character, Wyndam-Matson, when he explains the concept of historicity. Notably, he is the owner of a workshop where he manufactures forgeries of antique American firearms. His counterfeits are supposed to deceive the Japanese collectors—the people most seduced by the immaterial qualities of objects. Ostensibly, he tries to justify to his mistress, Rita, the absurdity of the Japanese fetishism of historical artifacts. He explains:

‘[H]e hurried into his study, returned at once with two cigarette lighters which he set down on the coffee table. ‘Look at these. Look the same, don’t they? Well, listen. One has historicity in it.’ He grinned at her. ‘Pick them up. Go ahead. One’s worth, oh, maybe forty or fifty thousand dollars on the collectors’ market.’ The girl gingerly picked up the two lighters and examined them. ‘Don’t you feel it?’ he kidded her. ‘The historicity?’ She said, ‘What is ‘historicity’?’ ‘When a thing has history in it. Listen. One of those two Zippo lighters was in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s pocket when he was assassinated. And one wasn’t. One has historicity, a hell of a lot of it. As much as any object ever had. And one has nothing. Can you feel it?’ He nudged her. ‘You can’t. You can’t tell which is which. There’s no ‘mystical plasmic presence,’ no ‘aura’ around it. (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 65–66)

In this case the presumed real objects would be A) the Zippo lighter that had interacted with Franklin D. Roosevelt at the moment of his death, and whose unseen qualities and status as an object have been strongly modified by that historical event, and B) the second Zippo lighter which presumably has not been a witness to any presidential assassinations. If we accept these conditions, we can therefore assume that the historicity spoken of in the above quote is a feature which distinguishes one object from another. As Harman establishes,

“every object is the result of a connection. The history of this connection remains inscribed in its heart ... But connections occur only between two real objects, not any other combination” (Harman [2007](#): 208). Therefore, the lighter A does not project its history onto its sensual representation. The real object *withdraws*, appearing to an observer to be identical to the other lighter. The reality of that encounter is therefore elusive to a limited observer and, to access it, that particular quality must be approached indirectly.

For Wyndam-Matson this indirect interaction happens through institutional scrutiny—he produces a certificate from the Smithsonian Museum authenticating the connection between the lighter and the historical event. Here a chain transference among the sensual qualities takes place: the observer engages with the document, ascribing meaning to lighter A and contrasting it with lighter B, which in turn allows lighter A to be something more than itself in the eyes of the observer. The historicity of the lighter, as understood by a human subject who reads the certificate, is therefore tenuously related to the object’s material history, having been transmitted through multiple instances of mediating operations.

In that sense, the *real* historicity of the Zippo lighter—the one that was physically present in Roosevelt’s pocket at a specific historical moment—is different from the constructed value of its sensual instance. The latter corresponds to the kind of historicity Fredric Jameson defines as “a *perception* of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy” ([1997](#): 284, emphasis mine). This secondary historicity arises from within the observer (themselves a “thing”) as a reaction to their perception of an object, rather than from the object itself. It is also this phenomenon—the creation of a distance between the present and history—that the Japanese find so alluring in the American artifacts. They have collectively succumbed to the spell of politicized nostalgia. This idea harks back to the earlier discussion of how the invaders appropriate historicity to escape the collective memory of war. Wyndam-Matson is therefore partially correct in claiming that the quality he attempts to disprove is created around the object rather than intrinsic to it. However, from the point of view of Harman’s OOO, he errs in dismissing completely the existence of qualities that remain indiscernible to human perception in the present.

To justify his position, Wyndam-Matson shows the document of authenticity to his mistress, after which the narrator explains that “the paper and the lighter had cost him a fortune, but they were worth it—because they enabled him to prove that he was right, that the word ‘fake’ meant nothing really, since the word ‘authentic’ meant nothing really” (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 66). Of course, the irony lies in the possibility that the certificate itself may have been falsified without his knowledge. Yet, Wyndam-Matson is willing to believe in the seductive power of the symbolic value the paper represents.

I argue, however, that this relativism does not represent the central thesis of *The High Castle*. Wyndam-Matson's demonstration, intended to discredit and invalidate the concept of historicity, in fact inadvertently reinforces the model of reality proposed by Harman. The quality described in that scene corresponds to the second principle of OOO which states that "[o]bjects are not identical with their properties, but have a tense relationship with those properties, and this very tension is responsible for all of the change that occurs in the world" (Harman 2018: 11). Wyndam-Matson disregards that tension, believing that the lighter is nothing but its external properties. Thus, what he fails to appreciate in his ironic detachment is that the object is not composed of its sensual qualities; rather, it produces them as a form of withdrawal of its reality.

However, where Wyndam-Matson is correct is that the words "authentic" and "fake," as applied to the lighters are not reflective of reality, regardless of their historicity. Both objects equally are a part of the material world; yet the discursive regimen of the novel's society assigns different values to each. Marcus Boon explains this issue in an observation, which, while relating to a much later novel, *A scanner darkly*, is highly relevant here, demonstrating how Dick continues to build upon his early philosophical concerns throughout his oeuvre. Boon argues that, for Dick,

[t]hings—humans and nonhumans—are enslaved by their obligation to participate in a political-economic regime in which they must necessarily present themselves as counterfeit. Their suffering consists in the ontological gap between that which they are required to appear as and that which they are. (Boon 2015: 73)

The scene concerning the two lighters showcases this conflict between the object and the sensual qualities it projects. These properties change dynamically between being perceived as fake and as authentic depending on the observer, and the context in which they are displayed. Whether or not either of the two Zippos has been in the place and time of Roosevelt's assassination, they are both real things: different but equal with regard to the status of ontological reality. In the hierarchical power regime however, one is given the arbitrary status of more authentic—more real—than the other. In the novel's social order, owning authentic artifacts is a status symbol—however, it is a self-delusion at best and a discursive tool of oppression at worst. To claim that a political ideology may authoritatively designate a taxonomy of real/fake is an extension of the anthropocentric arrogance that claims the privilege to be able to observe and objectively describe an essential reality.

The enslavement described by Boon occurs when lighter B is compelled—by a piece of paper—to display the sensual quality of inauthenticity, to present itself as somehow lesser than lighter A. This point becomes particularly poignant when we consider that the dominant cultural narrative depicted in *The High*

Castle is Nazism. The regime is preoccupied with the idea of the “real”; Dick reveals that fascism’s dangerous power lies in its discursive ability to impose upon both living and inanimate entities such superficial taxonomies masquerading as essential truths. Within this paradigm, people—Jews, people of color, homosexuals—are subjected to systemic prosecution and extermination, deemed less than human, less *real* in the eyes of their oppressors. As a result, in Dick’s alternate America, under the fascist and imperialistic rulers, slavery is reinstated. By exposing the gap between what is real and what is perceived, Dick dismantles here the artifice of the humanistic, constructed and politicized reality and thus aligns himself with the core of the new materialist philosophies. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost contend that “[f]or critical materialists, society is simultaneously materially real and socially constructed: our material lives are always culturally mediated ... the challenge here is to give materiality its due while recognizing its plural dimensions and its complex, contingent modes of appearing” (2010: 27). Acknowledging the inaccessibility of a direct, objective reality, while at the same time calling attention to the fallacies of solipsistic relativism, Dick navigates both positions.

If we accept that nonhuman things can exist as autonomous agents, independent of relativistic interpretation, then it becomes possible to identify within the novel the instances of sensual qualities that arise in resistance to dominant modes of signification—or at least generate perspectives distinct from those of the oppressive social hierarchy. The indirect access to reality through power-related system of signification demonstrated between the lighters and Wyndam-Matson can be considered flawed or incomplete. It is steeped in humanistic biases and the false duality of fake vs authentic. This taxonomy, employed by the novel’s totalitarian regime reflects the essentialist approach to the reality and truth of objects: a fascist proclaims a supposedly intellectual, rationalized insight into the true nature of things, constructing on that basis a justification for ideological supremacy. The new materialist philosophy, on the other hand, rejects the human claim to epistemological objectivity⁴ and the presumption of access to the essence of objects. Matter itself actively participates in meaning-making, as the sensual qualities it produces determine one’s perception of the world rather than the hidden reality of the object. The object’s agency lies precisely in its refusal to be qualified in human terms. Is there, then, any way to establish a connection with the real object?

⁴ Harman conveys that point by arguing against Husserl’s claim that humans possess an “intuition of the essence” that allows us to mitigate the limits of sensual perception with intellectual inquiry. Conversely, “OOO counters Husserl by denying that intellectual intuition can grasp things as they are any better than sensual intuition does. This is a rationalist fallacy that arises when Husserl denies the gap between real and sensual objects” (Harman 2018: 133).

As the next section will demonstrate, for both Dick and the new materialist philosophers, such a connection is possible and can be realized through indirect aesthetic interaction.

4. The silver pin and the vibrancy of matter

To identify a thing's agency is to recognize its capacity to transform other things with which it interacts—to alter their qualities and states of being. To describe this process, we may once again turn to Harman and his concept of “vicarious causation”, as it manifests through aesthetic experience. In Peter Wolfendale's apt words:

[vicarious causation] attempts to reconcile the thesis that objects withdraw from one another with their obvious ability to interact with and thereby change one another, by explaining how their sensual facades mediate between them (Harman 2007). Harman does this by modelling causation on the deliberately indirect allusion to an object provided by metaphor ... He holds that in such encounters the allure of the sensual object grants us indirect access to the real object, insofar as it enables the latter to affect us. (Wolfendale 2020: 298)

In other words, the transformative power of an object lies in its capacity to relate to another by displacing its qualities onto a proxy. As Harman claims, “when two objects give rise to a new one through vicarious connections, they create a new unified whole that is not only inexhaustible from the outside, but also filled on the inside with a real object sincerely absorbed with sensual ones” (Harman 2007: 208). This kind of aesthetic interaction is special insofar as it does not make claim to any knowledge of reality (as opposed to the previous example of the lighter's historicity), but instead embraces the material incompleteness of sensuality. Two or more objects can approach one another through a mediation of a third one, which serves as the basis for metaphoric displacement. This proxy shares the qualities of the object without requiring the observer to come into direct contact with its underlying reality. The sensual object therefore closes the distance to the real object and its ontology. The ontology remains withdrawn; yet it can therefore be experienced vicariously by appearing *as* or *within* an aesthetic relation to some other entity. Vicarious causation thus represents a moment of transformation in which the object's agency is unveiled: a thing modifies the observer's perception of itself when they come in contact through aesthetic mediation⁵.

⁵ Harman provides an example of a metaphor with which he illustrates that procedure: “When the poet writes ‘my heart is a furnace,’ the sensual object known as a heart captures vaguely defined furnace qualities and draws them haltingly into its orbit. The inability of the heart to fuse easily with furnace-traits ... achieves allusion to a ghostly heart-object lying beneath the overly familiar sensual heart of everyday acquaintance” (Harman 2007: 216).

This model of interaction offers a useful analytical framework for identifying the nonhuman agency in *High Castle*. However, Francesca Ferrando notices that, while Harman shares the post-anthropocentric sensitivities, he “skips a crucial contribution [of philosophical posthumanism]: the studies of the differences ... within the postmodern frame. This omission comes with some serious consequences: the notion of the human in OOO is still based on the assumption of a ‘neutral’ and generalized human subject” (Ferrando & Braidotti [2021](#): 164). Therefore, the OOO’s reliance on the principle of flat ontology—its insistence that all entities exist on an equal ontological footing—does not fully address the ethical implications of a materialist reality. The hierarchies and dualities within the novel’s regime, and the violence enacted based on them, as discussed in the previous section, remain unexamined when heterogeneity of beings is left out of consideration.

Therefore, for a more comprehensive new materialist reading of *The Man in the High Castle*, I propose to expand the OOO through inclusion of Jane Bennett’s philosophy of vital materialism and Francesca Ferrando’s posthuman multiverse. Both paradigms contend that, when organized into contingent assemblages (chemical, physical, biological and so on), individual material objects have a capacity to spontaneously generate agency. Bennett conceptualizes material reality as a complex network of heterogeneous, contingent assemblages of objects that possess the capacity “not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans, but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett [2010](#): viii). Within this framework, the agency of matter manifests itself both independently and through its interaction with the human perception. As such, nonhuman objects take an active role in shaping public life, catalyzing events and initiating difference – by virtue of their position in an assemblage as well as their physical qualities (Bennett [2010](#): 9). Bennett articulates her argument against anthropocentrism, where

almost as soon as [the manifestations of matter’s agency] appear in public (often at first by disrupting human projects or expectations), these activities and powers are represented as human mood, action, meaning, agenda, or ideology. This quick substitution sustains the fantasy that ‘we’ really are in charge of all those ‘its’ (Bennett [2010](#): x).

As much as the humanist paradigm envisions the individual as unique and independent in their subjectivity, the new materialist philosophy compels us to acknowledge that our agency, too, is contingent on the dynamic assemblages of the matter that constitute both the human and nonhuman actants.

For Bennett, each object possesses “Thing-Power”, defined as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” ([2010](#): 6). It is the elusive vitality or movement of things, often imperceptible

to a conscious observer, that put into motion entire assemblages of entities. Subsequently, these assemblages, through the interaction of their components, generate a certain “vibrancy”, which may manifest as agency despite the lack of conscious intention or a common trajectory of action in the entirety of the assemblage. As the scholar explains,

The effects generated by an assemblage are ... emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone. Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage. (Bennett [2010](#): 24)

This vitality, and subsequent vibrancy of matter, may operate on both physical and metaphysical levels: physically, on an atomic or cosmic scale; and metaphysically, as a manifestation of a partial independence of objects from the human social sphere.

In Dick’s novel, this particular phenomenon may be produced by the works of art. Frank Frink, an artisan craftsman and a Jew hiding his heritage to avoid persecution and death from the hands of the Nazi regime, becomes a central figure in this exploration. In the course of the novel, he is fired from Wyndam-Matson’s workshop and decides to start his own business with a partner. However, instead of continuing to manufacture replicas of American antiques for Japanese collectors, Frink undertakes a risky enterprise of creating hand-made, original jewelry. His designs are composed of abstract geometrical shapes that deliberately forgo the representation of any historical identity and thus exist outside the binary of authenticity and falsity.

Frink’s pieces eventually find their way into Robert Childan’s antique shop, where their unique design catches attention of Paul Kasuora—one of the Japanese collectors. He is the first to express the transformative allure of the objects. In a conversation with Childan, Kasuora tries to convince him that a pin created by Frink possesses a certain ineffable quality that cannot be replicated. Kasuora claims that this yet unnamed feature of the artifact has been unveiled to him precisely because the object lacks historicity:

“For no logical reason I feel a certain emotional fondness. Why is that? ... I still see no shapes or forms. But it somehow partakes of Tao. You see?” He motioned Childan over. “It is balanced. The forces within this piece are stabilized ...”

...

“Robert, this object has *wu*.”

“I believe you are right,” Childan said, trying to recall what *wu* was; it was not a Japanese word—it was Chinese. Wisdom, he decided. Or comprehension. Anyhow, it was highly good.

"The hands of the artificer," Paul said, "had *wu*, and allowed that *wu* to flow into this piece. Possibly he himself knows only that this piece satisfies. It is complete, Robert. By contemplating it, we gain more *wu* ourselves. We experience the tranquility associated not with art but with holy things. I recall a shrine in Hiroshima wherein a shinbone of some medieval saint could be examined. However, this is an artifact and that was a relic. This is alive in the now, whereas that merely remained." (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 170–171)

Kasuora's elaborate description offers crucial insight into Dick's conception of the world of objects. For Dick, as for the new materialists, the underlying reality is unknowable in a direct, epistemological sense; we, as human beings, are confined to *idios kosmos*. Yet, there persists a trace or a signal of the material reality that is spontaneously broadcast from one object to another through a causal medium—a proxy object. In Kasuora's account, that conduit operates on two levels. The first is metaphorical: the comparison of the jewelry to the spiritual experience in a shrine. This analogy satisfies Harman's notion of vicarious causation, in which two objects relate to a third, sensually similar yet ontologically distinct proxy: the pin and the shrine are related in their sensual qualities, but only marginally. The second quality, emerging from the first, is more conceptual and refers to eastern philosophy. Dick uses the Taoist notion of *wu* to encapsulate the essence of the object. The narration of the novel describes Tao as "that which first lets the light, then the dark" (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 106) —a quality of universal balance. While the imagery of light and dark ostensibly signifies good and evil, it could also be also read as the dialectic between the manifestation of sensual qualities (light) and the withdrawal of the real object (dark).

Paul himself seems unsure about the importance of aesthetic value for the intense effect that the pin has on him. He remarks: "The name for it is neither art, for it has no form, nor religion ... We evidently lack the word for an object like this ... It is authentically a new thing on the face of the world" (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 171). To reconcile this statement with the idea of indirect causation, one must recognize that *wu*—the essence Paul speaks about—is not a quality of the real object but indeed the medium of a metaphor. The concept of *wu* itself, taken from eastern Taoist philosophy, is an object, however abstract and intangible. It is the medium or proxy that facilitates the vicarious interaction between two other objects—the jewelry and Paul. Therefore, for Kasuora, the piece itself is not the sole originator of the effect. Rather, the aesthetic experience is produced through the transference of qualities from the concept of *wu* to the jewelry. Kasuora's meditation upon the pin, filtered through the conceptual medium of the *wu*, exemplifies the real object's causal agency facilitated by aesthetic experience. At the same time, it constitutes an instance of a vibrant assemblage—an interrelation of entities whose emergent effects exceed the sum of their individual qualities.

To demonstrate these effects Dick stages a radically intense aesthetic experience involving Frink's silver pin and Mr Tagomi. One of the jewelry pieces made by Frink makes its way into the hands of Tagomi, who at this point of the novel has gone through a series of tribulations, including a shootout with Nazi spies in an effort to deescalate the cold war. Assured by Childan of the silver pin's unique qualities, he seeks a moment of respite, sitting on a park bench and attempting to access those qualities for himself. He first tries a direct, empirical engagement with the real object, which fails for the reasons already discussed—the object's reality withdraws beneath the layer of its superficial qualities. A breakthrough occurs, however, when the observer relinquishes his scrutiny. Tagomi lifts the pin to the light and experiences a moment of aesthetic epiphany:

in the sunlight, the silver triangle glittered. It reflected light. Fire, Mr. Tagomi thought. Not dank or dark object at all. Not heavy, weary, but pulsing with life. The high realm, aspect of yang: empyrean, ethereal. As befits work of art. Yes, that is artist's job: takes mineral rock from dark silent earth transforms it into shining light-reflecting form from sky...
Body of yin, soul of yang. Metal and fire unified. The outer and inner; microcosmos in my palm. (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 221)

Through the metaphor of fire, Tagomi finally finds access to the real object, which opens up to him a vector of vicarious causation. The piece of jewelry interacts with the observer on the aesthetic plane—as a work of art. However, the scene involves more than just a relationship between the observer and the object. The assemblage of the pin, Mr Tagomi and the metaphor of fire includes also Frank Frink—the artist and his craftsmanship—as well as the sunlight, which intervenes in this seemingly closed system at precisely the right moment to transform the sensual qualities of the pin. This description aligns with Bennett's model of an assemblage in which things form a “contingent tableau” of dynamic material qualities. The surprising phenomenon that arises from such a seemingly static configuration is vibrant in that it spontaneously produces effects that are not originating in any component elements but serves as an exercise of agency of the whole assemblage. Bennett uses the example of a gutter filled with plastic debris and animal remains which presented itself to her as a collection of inert material objects until—as was the case in *The Man in the High Castle*—“[they] started to shimmer and spark” (Bennett [2010](#): 5) when hit by a direct beam of light momentarily producing perceptible effects not ascribable to any individual elements of the assemblage. This interaction unveiled them “as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics” (Bennett [2010](#): 5). Similarly, once the pin interacts with the sunlight, it generates a new sensual

quality corresponding to its withdrawn reality. This quality is then read as a metaphor and thus vicariously experienced by Tagomi, transforming his perspective of both the object and the world around him

The shift in Tagomi's perception is quite radical. As he lifts his gaze from the object, he suddenly finds himself transported to another world. He partakes in a vivid vision of history in which the Axis lost the Second World War—presumably the same kind of world that the reader of *The Man in the High Castle* experiences. The new reality, though composed of the same material elements as his own, is unarguably different from Tagomi's hitherto experience, eliciting in him terror and disbelief: "Mad dream, Mr. Tagomi thought. Must wake up. Where are the pedecabs today? He began to walk faster. Whole vista has dull, smoky, tomb-world cast. Smell of burning. Dim gray buildings, sidewalk, peculiar harsh tempo in people" (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 223). Tagomi's experience of the altered world overwhelms him precisely because it defamiliarizes the familiar. Yet, what unsettles him most is the sudden inversion of social hierarchies and prejudices he is drawn into. Entering a diner, he gets confused and startled by the hostile reactions of white Americans who now hold his former position of privilege. They proceed to ignore him at best, and belittle and discriminate against him at worst (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 223).

Tagomi expects the citizens' deference to a Japanese occupant; therefore, when his authority is not recognized, and he is subjected to racist remarks, his instinct is to reject the newfound reality as a delusion. Yet, he cannot ignore the symmetry, and thus a similarity, between the mechanisms of prejudice active in that moment and those enforced by the regime in his own timeline. Tagomi tries to convince himself that what he experiences is impossible, and therefore an illusion, but he cannot dismiss the fact that this "nightmare" vision of reality is made up of the same material components, and the differences are solely the result of a shift in the political paradigm.

Dick engages here not only in a generalized commentary on the unstable foundations of all ideology, but also issues a dire warning about the possible outcomes of unchecked fascist and racial supremacist tendencies that lingered in 1950s' America. As Umberto Rossi observes, "[t]he destructive madness of Nazism could easily destroy the 'mad' alternate reality conjured up by Dick, but also the 'real' world where he and his readers lived in 1962. Though Nazism has been defeated, its cosmic death drive is still active, still threatening to wipe out humankind" ([2011](#): 93). One can therefore argue that in the world of Dick's novel all political circumstances and alternative political realities are equally possible, since those realities, and people within them, just as the Zippo lighters, are equally subject to the same exercises of power. If we consider each of the worlds described in the novel as Bennett's vibrant, contingent assemblages, encompassing all matter within them, Mr Tagomi's teleportation or vision tells

us that our timeline may, under different political pressures, exhibit the same properties as the one from the novel. Both worlds have the same material parameters; they bifurcate based on a random chance that puts one ideology over another as the dominant cultural paradigm. The true horror of *The Man in The High Castle* is not the vision of a fictional world run by Nazis, but the fact that our variant of reality has the same potential to be distorted by fascistic ideologies.

What kind of alternative framework of ethics can then emerge from that newfound awareness? For an answer we may again turn to Bennett. Her model of vitality comes into play when we establish that the newly experienced reality does not originate either in the pin or in Tagomi but in a heterogeneous assemblage mediated by aesthetics. Moreover, this reading also corresponds to N. Katherine Hayles's model of the posthuman ontology in which "[w]e do not see a world 'out there' that exists apart from us. Rather, we see only what our systemic organization allows us to see. The environment merely *triggers* changes determined by the system's own structural properties" (Hayles 2010: 11). The element of the system which enables change in this instance is the jewelry pin. It is this object that causes a familiar reality, with its familiar arrangement of the material, the cultural, and the political layers, to unravel before Mr. Tagomi. The agency exhibited by the object lies in bringing attention to the limitations of the individual human consciousness in the face of the complexities—material and social—of the world. By transporting Tagomi to a different configuration of the same material reality, the pin allows him to see what other potentialities are possessed by matter, if we think of matter as a self-organizing entity. The object is at once a part of and a representation of a greater whole, or what Tagomi describes as "[t]he outer and inner; microcosmos in my palm" (Dick 2014 [1962]: 221). It is exactly this kind configuration that informs the starting point of ethics according to Bennett, as it relies on "the recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality ... The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it" (Bennett 2010: 14).

Tagomi achieves that openness as he takes in the exhibited mutability of matter as the vision of an alternative historico-political timeline. The vibrant matter grants him access to a broader perspective wherein the universe may be seen as a set of possible worlds, a multiverse in Ferrando's posthuman sense, united by the same initial circumstances but different in the temporary assemblages configured within each of them. In her terminology, these parallel dimensions share the same materiality but are arranged into different frequencies. As she describes the concept, "it entails that matter, while constituting this universe, would also be actualizing an indefinite number of other universes, in a process of both relationality and autonomy ... the notion of the multiverse greatly expands a speculative perception of the self, by relating the individual

to other realms of existence” (Ferrando [2020](#): 266). Ferrando uses this framework as a thought experiment designed to illustrate how the material relations inform a posthuman perspective based on the deconstruction of the Self/Other paradigm, in that “every dimension can be seen as an autopoietic mode of existence which, even though it may perceive itself as autonomous, is intrinsically connected to many other modes of existences” (Ferrando & Braidotti [2021](#): 179). By presenting reality as “generative nets of material possibilities simultaneously happening and coexisting, in a material dissolution of the strict dualism one/many” (Ferrando [2020](#): 267), we can describe each dimension as a vibrant and contingent assemblage that we perceive only in its effects and the phenomena emergent from the interactions of its parts. The pin’s influence on Tagomi points toward this new materialist and posthumanist inter-active model and forces the observer to acknowledge the mutability of the social and physical world, and thus the responsibility of any participant of that reality to contribute ethically to the organization of this autopoietic system. Dick unveils to the reader, as does the silver pin to Tagomi, a frame of ethics encompassing the multiverse—the differing variants of the same reality, all of them contingent on the coexistent human and nonhuman agencies working within. Thus, he aligns himself to a certain degree with Ferrando’s sentiments. Her multiverse is crucially non-anthropocentric, and, while the most obvious difference between the dimensions witnessed by Tagomi lies in disparate cultural and political regimes, we have also seen that nonhuman objects are actively involved in these politics.

The newfound perspective on ethics is put into practice in the novel once Mr Tagomi’s perception returns to his original timeline. With his sense of stable points of reference upended, he is more careful when exercising his power, with a new understanding that “our space and our time [are] creations of our own psyche” (Dick [2014 \[1962\]](#): 225), distorted by societal biases, as opposed to the underlying material reality. As a result, he protests the dominant cultural narrative when a form requesting the extradition of Frank Frink to Germany, after he has been revealed to be a Jew, arrives at his desk. Tagomi refuses to give the prisoner over to the Reich and orders him to be released from arrest. The vibrancy of the pin echoes further, starting a chain reaction: Tagomi, after the radical change of perspective, protests against the instrumentalizing regime and protects Frink from extradition to Nazi Europe. The fates of those two people become entangled even though the two of them never met, the pin mediating their interaction within the assemblage of material reality.

5. Conclusions

That an object created by Frink as a form of rebellion against dominant cultural signifiers saves him through vicarious interactions emerging among

human and nonhuman agents proves that for Dick, as well as for Bennett, “bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage” and that agency “becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body” (Bennett 2010: 23). The intricate network of vibrant objects remains unseen by the individual nodes of the system, but the effects of their thing-power reverberate throughout the organization. The pin, by transforming the Japanese official’s perspective has simultaneously saved its creator from possible execution.

The novel’s open ending keeps it ambiguous whether Tagomi’s efforts under his new outlook on ethics will have a broader impact on the Nazi-dominated world, but the moment of Frink’s pardon gives the reader a subtle indication that for Dick any sincere interaction with material reality may have far reaching effects not only for the individual, human observer, but for the broader political paradigms they are involved in. This scene from *The Man in the High Castle* showcases Dick’s burgeoning idea of a system of agency, or indeed an ontological mechanism of interacting with reality which extends beyond the scope of individual human cognition. Mr Tagomi glimpses another world, through an expanded network of subjects, objects and texts, which shows him the possibility of different cultural paradigms imposed on the same material reality, revealed through a complex interplay of individual perception (Mr Tagomi’s disillusionment with fascism), physicality of the object (the silver pin that catalyzes the paradigm shift), and the spontaneous pattern emerging from the universal vibrancy (the branching posthuman multiverse).

This sort of complexity may be seen as a preliminary outline for the model of the posthuman assemblage. Indeed, a posthumanist scholar Robert Pepperell supposes that cubist artistic expressions of Picasso or Braque produce a radical perspective on materiality in which “[a]ny object ... is not *absolutely* there, but *possibly* there ... The world of seemingly stable reality then, rather than being composed of fixed things, becomes a cluster of probabilities that mutate over time and which are dependent on the viewer for their perception” (2009: 166). The undefinable shape of the pin, a “blob,” as Kasuora calls it, shares this quality and as such affirms the model of non-hierarchical and non-anthropocentric perspectives found in the scholarship of new materialisms and critical posthumanism.

By presenting objects in *The Man in the High Castle*—artifacts, tools and works of art—as actively involved in the creation of political reality, I have argued that Dick opens up a possibility for the emergence of non-anthropocentric agencies, in concurrence with the new materialist philosophical thought. These inanimate props may be seen as his early attempts to construct posthuman ontologies as material and conceptual actant-objects with and without human involvement. These actants, when engaged in dynamic assemblages

possess potential to modify one's subjective construction of reality. Both Wyndam-Matson's lighters as well as the pin scrutinized by Mr Tagomi reveal the complex contingencies guiding the organization of the characters' reality, in refutation of the essentialist ideology of fascism, dominant in the novel's setting.

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