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Pursuing a Subtle Monster in Philip K. Dick's *Ubik*

ABSTRACT

This study has as starting point the inventory of monsters made by Ambroise Paré in the XVIth century and a theory of the fantastic as interpretation, applied on Philip K. Dick's novel, *Ubik*. We found out that Jory, the antagonist, has all the characteristics of a subtle monster. This specific kind of monster seems to be more common in post-modernity and in post-humanism, cultural territories that helped him evolve and hunt. He strikes deadly helped by his ability to fade into reality. He often creates virtual realities as traps for his victims whose energy he consumes. We will follow Jory and his kind in this PKD novel to bring him into light, identify his habits and establish a typology.

KEYWORDS

Philip K. Dick; Ambroise Paré; Fantastic; Fantastic of Interpretation; Monster; Strangeness; Illusion; Energetic Vampire.

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In the 16th century, Ambroise Paré, the famous surgeon of the French royalty, elaborated an inventory of a few dozen monsters (marine, volatile, terrestrial, and celestial) in the volume *Animaux, monstres et prodiges*¹; he also presented a list of the reasons for which monsters are born. The following causes are presented here: God's glory, God's wrath, too high a quantity of man seed, too low a quantity of man seed, imagination, too small a uterus, indecent actions of the mother during the pregnancy, blows to the mother's belly during pregnancy, genetic or accidental diseases, degenerate man seed, mixture of man seeds, demons and devils.

According to Ambroise Paré, the most dangerous monsters are the volatile monsters, the incubi and succubi, as well as the invisible monsters, the monsters with human appearance, which are corrupted on the inside. This type of invisible monsters was present in literature, in various forms, the most important feature being the realist and social component of the human monster, which is immoral, cruel, remorseless, able to do anything, using a deceiving appearance. There are sufficient examples among Dickens' negative characters. Then, there is another model, in *Dorian Gray*, the aesthete monster. There are also the variations of the



Faustian myth, with exemplary monster-characters in Goethe, Marlow, Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Mikhail Bulgakov, and other authors. Finally, there is a special sub-category belonging to the category of invisible monsters: the subtle monsters always placed at the border. The effect of this type of monster is obvious, they completely change the reality with which they come into contact, their presence cannot remain unnoticed; however, their existence cannot be proven.

The theme of the Subtle Monster is most frequent within manifestations of the fantastic of interpretation. The fantastic of interpretation, a term coined by Matei Călinescu in 2002, refers to a form of fantastic different from the modernist one as defined by Caillois and Todorov, a form M. Călinescu approached in Mircea Eliade's works. This term and theme I later developed in my study *Introducere în fantasticul de interpretare*, Tracus Arte Publishing House, Bucharest, 2012.

Briefly, if, in the case of the modernist fantastic, one deals with ambiguous, unsettling events breeding bizarre, enigmatic or grotesque forces in the mist of a banal, recognizable world only to culminate in an often unhappy end, the fantastic of interpretation attempts to stimulate and free the reader's imagination by fascinating rather than disconcerting him, and leads him to discover the credible within the incredible or vice-versa. The fantastic of interpretation is, as Matei Călinescu put it, a hermeneutical adventure² in which images, symbols, metaphors, stories or dreams are possible bearers of epiphanies or codified memories. Thus, the reader's imagination is required to decipher the significance of hidden or lost world.

Basically, the fantastic of interpretation, according to my definition, is similar to what R. Caillois called *explained*

fantastic, the only difference being that in this case there is no explanation in the end, but we have clues that sustain both the intervention of the fantastic and the rational explanation. So, at the end, the reader has to decide if the fantastic has occurred or not, if the rational, visible world has collided with an irrational and invisible one. His or her decision is extremely important because it changes both the meaning and the purpose of the text.

This kind of fantastic literature uses peculiar characters. Well hidden, masters of disguise, often inhabitants of two territories at one time, the subtle monsters are among them. The scariest thing is precisely this: subtle monsters are among us and many literary works come to reveal this fact. The subtle monster is extremely important in contemporary society because it is the only active monster. In modern society, man quickly learned how to fight the obvious monsters, so, in the post-modern society obvious monsters evolved into subtle monsters. But are they visible? Well, we can surely see the effects.

The strangeness, the fertile ground of the fantastic, is the result of subjective observation on a realist ground, which simultaneously conjures the presence of a fantastic realm within the same reality, without providing firm solutions. Suspicion is therefore the rule of the fantastic and the one that veils and unveils the subtle monster, successively. The subtle monster could be relevant not only for the literary field, but also for cinematography and contemporary art, with extensions into psychology and sociology, because the subtle monster can be paradigmatic for post-humanist society.

One of the novels where the subtle monster powers are taken to the edge, almost permitting him to disintegrate the surrounding, known world is *Ubik*, signed by Philipp K. Dick. This PKD's novel is one of the most surprising pieces of literature in the



last decades. Negligently written at the beginning, it evolves into something spectacular.

Written in 1969, this science-fiction novel is set in 1992, in the “North American Confederation”. In the novel, many characters have parapsychological abilities, human life cycle has been extended, since people have the ability to sink into the state of “half-life”, a phase following death, which allows fully living humans to communicate with their deceased loved ones. A man called Glen Runciter runs an organization that employs telepaths, precogs (as in precognitive), inertials and other people with psionic powers. Runciter’s organization is engaged in a struggle against a rival organization for control of the psionics market. Runciter’s young wife Ella is in “half-life” (a form of cryogenics) in a facility in Switzerland, but among others there’s a boy in half life called Jory who is starting to invade the half-life world of Ella Runciter. Thing that, as the Switzerland facility’s Director says, never happened before. But the main focus is on Joe Chip, one of the key members of Runciter’s team.

We should notice the typical humor, the fact that Chip seems to be a self parody of PKD, but I’ll stick to the facts that interest us the most. So, in the first pages we find out that Chip has interviewed and hired a new talent, called Patricia Conley. Her unique gift is that she can alter and reshape the past. She proves it by going back in the past and marrying Joe Chip.

In a last attempt to surpass his rival, Runciter starts a mission on the Moon, but there is a trap set by his rival and a bomb explodes killing Runciter, or at least it seems like that. The rest of the crew hurry back on Earth, to Switzerland, to connect Runciter to the half-life, so that he could give them further orders. But from here things take a new course. They cannot contact Runciter and all the surrounding reality

seems to depreciate and vanish. At a certain point all things start to deteriorate. Chip starts to think Patricia Conley, his wife, is a double agent sent to destroy them by continuously changing the past and, consequently, the future. Some of the crew dies mysteriously and their remaining turns into dust. Finally Runciter contacts them through all kind of media messages and suggests that they are those who died in the explosion and are now in half-life and he is the only one alive. In the end, when everybody is dead, Chip finds out from Ella Runciter that their killer is Jory, a creature that evolved in the half-life into some kind of energetic vampire, who feeds himself with the remaining energy of the corpses in half-life, prolonging this way his own half-life. In order to “capture” his victims Jory creates and animates mental worlds, similar to the worlds his victims lived in before and allows them to live there while sucking every drop of psychic energy out of them. But Jory is not omnipotent, he can create very limited worlds, and when he is tired he can no longer control entirely the world he created and things start a historical regression process. The only thing effective against Jory is the antidote Ubik, created by Ella Runciter’s mind. She was the first and only half-life person that survived Jory’s subtle attacks.

Jory in this case is a subtle monster, there is nothing obvious in his actions, as simple as it may appear, everything is uncertain, and even the most probable actions are denied by this shady character. Jory plays with the heads of his victims as PKD plays with the heads of his readers. Everything is uncertain in Joe Chips half-life’s world, as everything is uncertain in the novel, by the very end when the reader is suggested that Runciter could be the one who is really in the half-life after all and that Joe Chip and Jory’s world could be the “real” one.



“Dick’s better books are less novels than they are explorations of the relationship between reader, writer and story. His explorations become even more pointed after he suffers a mental breakdown in 1981. Whether his breakdown had anything to do with his experiments with drugs remains unclear, but subsequently it became harder to separate Dick from his work. It seems pretty clear that’s what he had in mind, or, at least, it’s a side effect that he would have found perfectly appropriate. As a result, reading his stuff is at once a venture into the mind of a highly creative man, and a fictional roller coaster ride – because Dick’s work took on a slightly hysterical apocalyptic tinge as it grew darker. It may be that reading Phil Dick is as close as one can get to the world of the paranoid schizophrenic, without going too far”³, states A.L. Sirois on www.sfsite.com, pointing that there is not a clear separation between fiction and reality, fantastic and reality, subtle monsters and reality in PKD’s work and world.

There is a double game of cat and mouse here, one between Jory and Runciter’s crew and the second one, maybe more important, between PKD and his readers. There is a fine line between what is real and what illusion is and this is the main weapon of the subtle monster because he is, like Jory, and like the devil himself, a master of illusions.

The similarity between the author and his evil master mind character goes further. Both PKD and Jory de-construct and re-construct the surrounding reality, taking everything to the limit, or, to be more specific, to that limit where you know for sure you cannot trust anything, and that things are never, or rarely, what they seem to be. The texture of reality is in a permanent change only to undermine and destroy the beings that landed on this virtual reality net.

Death is just one frontier, but not the last, the last one seems to be the oblivion, and the subtle monster is desperate to alter reality, to transform it into a quicksand reality that disorients, chokes and drags his victims into oblivion, there where he can consume them.

Real and illusory, life and half-life, victim and subtle monster, all elements of solipsism, but who generates this solipsism? Is it Glen Runciter, Ella, Chip, Pat, Jory, PKD himself, or the reader? The correct answer seems to be: all of them and this makes it no longer solipsism, but an emanation of possible worlds.

This certain world of half-life we’re referring to is awkward, it is a dual one, it has a creator and it has a destroyer, but they are the same person, Jory. The good and the evil coexist in this case in one person. He creates in order to feed himself. He creates only for basic, egocentric needs, but does this in such a stylish way, in such a delicate way you always need an extraordinary, fantastic intervention to point out that you are being haunted by a subtle monster as Jory is.

Coming back to Ambroise Pare and his definition of the subtle monster, Jory fits it perfectly: he completely changes the reality with which it interferes, he is invisible (he never shows his real face, when he interacts with Chip, when Chip figures him out, he takes over the body of one of the last men in the crew), but his actions cannot remain out of sight, and even at the end his existence cannot be fully proven, only felt through his actions’ effects.

There are different categories of subtle monsters, and Jory belongs to the one we call Destroyers, monsters that take over your life, without even sensing it, live through you and finally kill you only to get to the next victim.

In the end PKD does not offer any clue about who is going to win, Jory or Chip, the



monster or the human because this is an everlasting battle, an ancient and future clash between human weakness and hidden evil.

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Notes

¹ *Animaux, monstres et prodiges*, Le club français du livre, 1954, p. 99.

² *Despre Ioan P. Culianu și Mircea Eliade. Amintiri, lecturi, reflecții*, Polirom, 2002, p. 171.

³ <http://www.sfsite.com/10a/ubik90.htm>.