



**"Everything is True, Everything Anybody Has Ever
Thought: (Im)possibility at the Interface of Science Fiction
and Urban Fantasy"**

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Science fiction and Fantasy, falling under the general classification of imaginative literature, have an established tradition of charting the impossible through narratives that verge on possible, often articulating underlying concerns about our social worlds through the paradox of '(im)possibilities'. The term '(im)possibilities' is understood in this essay to describe that precarious and uncertain divide between what seems objectively possible and impossible. G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* (2012) and Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) rely on conventions of other-worlds and keenly observe these (im)possibilities to reveal the liminal fabric of reality as a nebulous uncertainty while questioning the tradition of secular rationalist discourse of the Western Age of Enlightenment. Despite being written and published nearly 40 years apart, these texts share a rejection of rationalistic secularist thought, adopting '(un)real' narratives – a term which expresses a similarly located instability of a pre-existing empirical reality and which therefore undermine the possibility of certainty of knowledge as such. A comparison of these novels reveals that their evocation of the (im)possible complicates and puts at stake the knowledge system that underpins contemporary Western liberal democracy.

For clarity, this essay begins with some expository detail on the two novels examined. Wilson's *Bildungsroman* tracks teenager Alif as he traverses the contemporary urban setting of The City, an unnamed Middle Eastern security state. Alif's knowledge of technology and awareness of government control has led him to identify as a 'hacktivist', a social activist who primarily undermines state control through data programming and hacking computer systems. He resentfully develops a computer program called 'Tin Sari', which electronically shields him from his ex-lover Intisar, but also proves unexpectedly useful to the security agents of his government. The latter's acquisition of Tin Sari triggers his flight into the underbelly of The City, a techno-magical world of jinn that defies the laws of reality and challenges its limits through an exploration of the fantastic. There, Alif encounters Vikram, an animalistic, shape-shifting jinn who assists him on his quest to understand the Alf Yeom, or 'The Thousand and One Days', a book of tales narrated by the jinn and the inverse to *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Dick's science fiction novel, in contrast, is set in a futuristic, dystopian San Francisco and tracks a single day in bounty hunter Rick Deckard's life as he pursues a group of fugitive androids (the



latest design by multi-terrestrial corporation Rosen Industries). The dominant religion within this techno-future of humanoid androids and flying cars is Mercerism, in which the collective consciousnesses of its proponents are merged through the use of an Empathy Box. In *Do Androids?*, the ability to experience empathy delineates ‘human’ from ‘android’, and as a signifier of empathic emotion, the moment of fusion through Mercerism significantly entwines humanism with a transcendental religious belief.

Within contemporary Western liberal democracy, the continued development and prioritisation of scientific rationality as the primary mode of philosophical thought has caused this framework to permeate the discursive habits of liberal subjects and innately constrains alternative modes of action. By manipulating genre, place, and realities, *Alif the Unseen* and *Do Androids?* produce a critique of the widely-held assumptions of that rationalistic epistemology as the pinnacle framework of philosophical thought. In transgressing established conventions of their genres, subverting and re-newing them, these works insistently collide against the

(im)possible, producing an (ir)rational lens for readers to re-examine the world.

Typically grounded in scientific or technological ‘nova’ (“Latin for ‘new thing’”) which are of “material, physical rationalization, rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one”, SF narratives rely on materiality to generate a credible contextual reality.¹ Literally, then, SF hinges on both matter and reality, a sort of ‘mater(reality)’, a neologism constructed in this essay which ties reality into materiality. This mater(reality) supports those modes of (im)possibilities which are essential to SF narratives. Mater(reality) provides the “discourse of possibility” which further demarcates SF’s split from fantasy, where fantastic elements of the text are not necessarily grounded in demonstrable possibilities.²

However, in introducing the novum of the Empathy Box, Dick rejects these strict distinctions in *Do Androids?* in order to manifest a world which is simultaneously hyper-realistic and other-worldly. In disrupting the established SF conventions of using nova to generate mater(reality), Dick blurs the barriers between reality and (un)reality, unsettling the rationalist secularism of Western discourse. The unfathomable design of the Empathy Box blurs

¹ Ibid.

² Roberts, "Defining Science Fiction," 6.



'hard science' with the ethe(real) religious experience of Mercerism: upon contact with the box, users enter not virtually but actually "into the landscape of drab hill, drab sky" that is shown on the television screen it is connected to.³ This shared empathic experience, "fusion," is only ever explained as a crossing over "in the usual perplexing fashion; physical merging – accompanied by mental and spiritual identification – with Wilbur Mercer".⁴ Though proponents of Mercerism never physically leave their ordinary location, the emotional experience of fusion during which rocks are thrown at Wilbur Mercer leave material traces on the users sharing in his experience; they find themselves bleeding corporeally from cuts left behind by the virtual rocks hurled at them.⁵ Not only does Dick blur the liminal line between the virtual and the real through this novum, this embodied corporeality of psychological experience also resists the dominant mode of thought which delineates the separation between mind and body experiences.

Dick further blurs the dichotomy of science and mysticism through the uncertain existence of Wilbur Mercer,

whose struggle up a never-ending mountainside against an unceasing volley of rocks is simultaneously Sisyphean and Christ-like, imbuing the figure of Mercer with cultural significance but also connotations of being mythical – fictitious. However, though popular television host Buster Friendly apparently exposes Mercer as a Hollywood-esque hoax relying on fake backdrops and cheap acting,⁶ Mercer nevertheless physically "manifest(s) himself and offer(s) aid" to prevent Rick's death through his omniscient knowledge and presence.⁷ This moment becomes utterly inexplicable: this dissonant event where the intangible intervenes in the tangible world births an (un)reality which rejects not only the strict distinction between spiritual mysticism and reality, but also questions contemporary reliance on tangible, evincible rationality as a system of knowledge that can be trusted. By merging rational experience with supernatural intercession, Dick tests the limits of rationality and rejects accepted SF conventions in order to produce a new, provocative mode of thinking. By expounding on Mercerism as a legitimate religious experience where the moment of fusion is

³ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?* (London: Phoenix, 1968), 16.

⁴ Dick, *Do Androids*, 17.

⁵ Dick, *Do Androids*, 17.

⁶ Dick, *Do Androids*, 162-165.

⁷ Dick, *Do Androids*, 175.

experienced in the Real and leaves visible, corporeal markers on the body after the fact, Dick insistently presses at the space between real and spiritual, rejecting the binary distinction between these modes to create an (im)possible world that poses inherent challenges to the nature of reality.

Wilson similarly melds the paranormal with the rational through the presentation of the jinn (an incredible phenomena) through Alif's manifest, credible experiences, and in doing so de-familiarises the urban cityscape presumably known to that reader, compelling them to reevaluate that familiar world and begin to re-view it as something that is simultaneously alien and familiar: the (un)known. Wilson immerses the world of the jinn within The City, implanting "fantastic pocket universe(s)" such as the Immoveable Alley within the otherwise recognisable urbanity of The City.⁸ In doing so, Wilson literally locates "the sublime in the irruption of reawakened supernatural powers into the urban landscape".⁹ The Immoveable Alley, accessible through the Old Quarter down a "slender

opening" between two walls is, significantly, out of sight;¹⁰ Vikram finds it through its smell of "vagrant air...water in pools of quartz...garlic".¹¹ The hidden space is only accessible through an unorthodox sensory faculty, through which Wilson strives to disrupt 'ways of seeing' or understanding – the presupposed essential conditions of epistemology as known in modern discourse. By embedding the jinn and their living spaces as embodied and manifest religious beings within The City-scape, the novel borrows from the SF convention of mater(eality) to lend credence to the real potential actuality of the para-normal, merging urban modernity with archaic religiosity to upset modern secularism's emphasis on scientific rationality.

Furthermore, stylised as a proper noun, The City is simultaneously signified as unique even as it remains generically unnamed: it becomes "an anywhere and a nowhere," an "ultimate zone of uncanny spectrality".¹² The City becomes "a plural space" of "hidden and liminal sites" which challenge and re-make our perceptions of urban

⁸ AC. Irvine, "Urban Fantasy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, eds. Edward James, Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 205.

⁹ Irvine, "Urban Fantasy," 201.

¹⁰ Willow G. Wilson, *Alif The Unseen* (Crows Nest, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2012), 160.

¹¹ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 160.

¹² Maria Beville, "Zones Of Uncanny Spectrality: The City In Postmodern Literature," *English Studies* 94.5 (2013): 616.

modernity, de-familiarising the familiar by invoking the (im)possible.¹³ Where impossible loci emerge as existent, the para-normal is joined with the Real, generating a meta-physical space that inately redefines reality. Just as Dick interrupts SF conventions with a fantastical techno-spirituality, legitimising Mercurism as a religion based on a genuine omniscient power to invite a reconsideration of secularist rationalism, Wilson borrows from SF's mater(realities) to create an (im)possible world which intertwines magical impossibilities with scientific rationality. Alif the Unseen thus complicates the apparently strict disjunct between unbelievable magic and tangible rationality as well as the tendency in modern philosophical thought to prioritise the latter absolutely.

Where Wilson's city stands for the tension between strains of thought, Dick's San Francisco in *Do Androids?* is a dark, inverted mirror city that stands for an uncanny unreal which challenges the limits to individualist objectivity. Plunged into the 'fake' San Francisco, Rick becomes "bewildered" when he is

taken to a police department which claims to be the only San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) to exist.¹⁴ He has no knowledge of these "parallel police agencies," nor they knowledge of him: they repeatedly refute Rick's claims to being a bounty hunter, undermining his knowledge of his own identity.¹⁵ Significantly, they are not just not known to each other but (un)known to each other: Rick recognises the building and all its internal functionality as "Like this, but not this".¹⁶ This moment triggers Freud's 'uncanny', where that "species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (emphasis added) marks the tangible dissonance between inverse realities, and this (un)familiar moment highlighting the absolute (un)knowability of the city.¹⁷ Briefly, Rick begins to question his own being and his perceived reality, invoking the paranoid fantasy where an individual, suspicious that "the world he lives in is a fake" recognises "its very hyper-reality" as that which makes it "irreal, substanceless, deprived of the material inertia".¹⁸ Just as Rick's knowing of reality as such

¹³ Beville, "Zones Of Uncanny Spectrality," 616.

¹⁴ Dick, *Do Androids*, 86.

¹⁵ Dick, *Do Androids*, 89.

¹⁶ Dick, *Do Androids*, 89.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 124.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, "Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblance," in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, (London: Verso, 2002), 13.

within that inverted San Francisco becomes confused and made (un)familiar, so Dick complicates the potential recognition of any existing objective truths or realities.

Wilson similarly constructs a critique of epistemology and the ability to know (empirically and objectively) in Alif through the inverse relationship between Alif's knowing and the function of his coding. Alif successfully develops the code for Tin Sari, a "software program" that impossibly identifies "complete, individual personality,"¹⁹ based on metadata, but he has no "understanding [of] how it work(s)".²⁰ In contrast, he believes that he is able to understand the intrinsic truth behind the Alif Yeom as a series of jinn tales that have "developed a system of transmitting knowledge that could accommodate the contradictions" of information.²¹ Wilson alludes here to metaphor as such, of "knowledge existing in several states simultaneously and without contradiction".²² The shift in Alif's mode of acquiring knowledge appears to mark his fundamental understanding of how knowledge as such exists, the

grasping of which elevates Alif's intellectual prowess.

Yet at this literal height of triumph, during an allegorical dream sequence in which Alif rides atop "the columns of code on his computer screen" that have become "a tower of white stone",²³ he realises the "nature of his coding scheme" can "no longer compensate for its inherent instability" and his tower begins to crack.²⁴ Ironically, the knowledge Alif has used to form his code and programmed to "be anything it wanted" has "degenerate(d) into nothing at all".²⁵ The inverse parallel between these two instances highlights the disjunct between functionality and knowledge, where they do not accord but instead contradict. The reference to the 'ivory tower' of academia further suggests a deep critique of institutions which lay claim to knowledge, of knowability itself, highlighting these things as (im)possible fallacies.

Besides inherently critiquing notions of objectivity and secularist rational modes of thought, Alif the Unseen also implicitly undermines liberalism and its claims to an objective mode of internalised subjectivity, exposing it

¹⁹ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 46.

²⁰ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 44.

²¹ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 230.

²² Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 228.

²³ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 235.

²⁴ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 240-241.

²⁵ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 240.



instead as hypocrisy. Wilson positions Alif within the apex of liberalist (mis)recognition, where Alif views himself as free-from-ideology in his belligerent claim that “anyone who could pay... was entitled to” his hacking protection.²⁶ Yet even as Alif positions himself as non-partisan and truly neutral, this liberalist statement, in espousing a particular construction of ‘free-for-all’, is always-already ideologically constructed. In presenting Alif’s mindset as a locus where freedom from ideology is conceptually possible, Wilson inherently critiques the dominant mode of liberal ideology by manifesting this (im)possibility within her (im)possible world.

This (im)possibility is further presented rhetorically in Alif’s resistant misrecognition of the actuality of the jinn’s existence in the material world he believes he understands and recognises, despite his repeated encounters with the fantastic. In relation to Vikram’s “leo-nine joints”²⁷ and “improbable knees,” Alif recognises the cognitive dissonance of what he can see encountering the limits of his belief, but continues to reject the improbability of Vikram’s (un)humanness.²⁸ He wants instead to “break it down into its composite parts

until it makes some kind of rational sense” (emphasis added), advocating an internalised rationalistic framework of thinking that refuses to allow for gaps in knowledge.²⁹ Dina, Alif’s childhood friend, exposes the incongruity of this mode of thinking when she calls him out for belittling her “for believing things [he] only read(s) about”.³⁰ As Dina accuses of him, he has “reactions, not convictions”; Wilson hints that Alif, a representative of the liberal mode of thought, fundamentally and functionally philosophises a priori but which recognises itself as functionally philosophising a posteriori.³¹ Wilson’s intuitive critique of contradictory modes of thinking here expressly lays bare the discrepancy in liberal thought where its notions of subjectivity and objectivity lies firmly within what it holds already as an a priori truth, exposing the foundations of liberalism as false ideology.

Dick similarly addresses the (im)possibilities of true subjectivity as such by highlighting Rick’s gradual loss of liveliness as he grows to empathise with androids and begins to recognise (un)humanness as human. Rick originally understands his world as a straightforward one where the human-android

²⁶ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 15.

²⁷ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 93.

²⁸ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 129.

²⁹ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 93.

³⁰ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 354.

³¹ Wilson, *Alif The Unseen*, 354.

binary is absolute and clear. This lack of ambiguity is upset by his introduction to Rachael Rosen, an android that initially passes for a “schizoid girl” with “underdeveloped empathic ability” and to whom Rick is attracted.³² During his sexual encounter with Rachael, she reflects on the violation of her existential sense of self, questioning the “illusion that [she] personally – really exist(s)” when, as an android, she is only a “representative of a type”.³³ Rachael’s introspection, following a dispassionate but nevertheless intimate sexual liaison, becomes a powerful catalyst for Rick’s cognisance of androids’ ability to recognise their own existentiality as such.

Rick’s ontological re-cognition of Rachael Rosen as such literally humanises her, through which Dick complicates not just the categorisation of humans but “upends notions of autonomy”, another essential principle that supports the tenets of liberalism.³⁴ In humanising and existentially re-cognising Rachael, the novel suggests “an ontology of intra-action and entanglement,” postulated by Barad as the instance of recognizing the “mutual

constitution of entangled agencies”.³⁵ Rick’s sexual relationship with Rachael, which is representative of his existential relationship to her, is thus not a point of ‘interaction,’ as assumed, but “intra-action”.³⁶ This ‘intra-action’ is a “mutual constitution of entangled agencies,” positing that “distinct agencies” do not intrinsically exist, but follow on from “intra-action” as the very concept of “separate individual agencies” rely on a “mutual entanglement”.³⁷ Rick thus recognises that his existential identification as human is the obverse to Rachael’s identification as non-human – their self-identification requires being recognised in relation to what they are not in order for any meaningful perception to emerge at all.

Exposed to the terror of this mutual entanglement, Rick’s unambiguous dis-identification with the androids becomes impaired. Physically and psychically connected to Rachael, Rick can no longer bring himself to kill her.³⁸ Rachael previously declares that she’s “not alive! You’re not going to bed with a woman... it’s convincing if you don’t think too much about it”; Rick must not

³² Dick, *Do Androids*, 43.

³³ Dick, *Do Androids*, 149.

³⁴ Jennifer Rhee, “Beyond The Uncanny Valley: Masahiro Mori And Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?*,” *Configurations* 21.3 (2013): 316.

³⁵ Rhee, “Beyond The Uncanny Valley,” 316.

³⁶ Rhee, “Beyond The Uncanny Valley,” 316.

³⁷ Rhee, “Beyond The Uncanny Valley,” 316.

³⁸ Dick, *Do Androids*, 158.

think about it, because his belief in objectivity will be shattered – like Alif, he does not have convictions, but beliefs and reactions which, dangerously, can be changed, disrupted.³⁹ Faced with a world that strips him of his fundamental principles through his exposure to a (mis)recognition of bionic entities as organically alive, Rick Deckard’s diminishment of self is illustrated by the shift in narrative at the end of *Do Androids?* where his wife Iran’s perspective on events takes priority.⁴⁰ Rick’s subjective perspective becomes expressed in speculative terms: Iran, and thus the reader, can only guess at his emotions, and it is only ever “as if [he is] baffled,” “as if perplexed,” or “as if hearing himself” (emphasis added).⁴¹ The loss of definitive expressive voice here marks Rick’s withdrawal from not only the novel, but symbolically, his own world. The impossibilities of retaining a sense of Self in a world where the boundaries between subjectivities collapse put at stake the principles of liberalism which lays claim to recognising subjectivity, exposing it as the ultimate (mis)recognition and a false ideology.

Despite being written out of different historical context, *Alif the Unseen* and *Do Androids?* share an implicit

challenge to the trajectory of secularist thought emerging from the Age of Enlightenment, putting at stake the rationalistic frame of thinking which pervades contemporary discourse. Embedded within genres that already diverge from realism, the narratives both Wilson and Dick re-present insistently disrupt genre and narratively represent (im)possible worlds in order to re-present and reveal the (im)possibilities of our own world. They rupture the foundations of the Enlightenment and that which follows most pervasively – Western secularist liberalism and its ethos of individualist rationalism. By imbuing cities with (un)familiarity, these texts further suggest alternative opportunities to read the liminal spaces between what is known and what is always-already (un)known in order to experience the terrifying and terrific locus of existence. What is at stake in these (im)possible worlds is thus a challenge to orthodoxy and a passively internalised rationality which precludes and excludes disruptions. By bringing forth these essential eruptions of disjointed disbelief, Wilson and Dick make possible a mode which celebrates imaginative potentialities and reinvigorates the dominant (and stagnant) mode of rationalistic secular thought.

³⁹ Dick, *Do Androids*, 152.

⁴⁰ Dick, *Do Androids*, 189-193.

⁴¹ Dick, *Do Androids*, 191.

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