

**MYSTICISM IN SCIENCE FICTION: SCIENCE FICTION AS A VEHICLE
FOR MYSTICAL THOUGHT AND EXPERIENCE**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Mysticism in Science Fiction: Science Fiction as a Vehicle for Mystical Thought and Experience

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Literature Review

Much of the current available scholarship on science fiction and its engagement with the spiritual centers about religious tropes in science fiction, such as aliens as deities, gnosticism, the “personhood” of machines, and apocalypse. James F. McGrath in his book *Theology and Science Fiction* argues that science fiction often intersects the spiritual, and suggests that these religious tropes in science fiction are actually an engagement with common theological questions. The trope of gods as aliens corresponds to the theological question of “what merits our worship, or at least our reverence?”; gnosticism responds to the question of “whether comfortable truths are preferable to a pleasant lie”; and so on (McGrath 27, 36). Scholarship on mysticism, on the other hand, typically engages with the history of mysticism and the common forms of mystical practices, as enumerated in texts such as *Mysticism: Its History and Challenge* by Bruno Borchert and *Mysticism* by Evelyn Underhill. This thesis connects these two realms of scholarship by engaging with the mystical, rather than the theological aspects of science fiction, and investigating why science fiction is an appropriate vehicle for mystical thought and action.

Thesis Statement

The reading of science fiction literatures, especially the work of Stanislaw Lem and Philip K. Dick, may be understood as simulations aimed at inducing metacognition, and through this metacognition, enlightenment. Through common science fiction tropes such as simulation, the divine invasion, and the breakdown of reality, science fiction novels thus present themselves as simulations which induce inquiry into the nature of the self and the nature of reality, and in effect, rearticulate ancient contemplative tropes through the language of a relatively modern literary genre.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this thesis is informed by an understanding of mysticism according to authors and scholars such as Evelyn Underhill, Richard Doyle, and Jeffrey J. Kripal. The framework is also based in an understanding of rhetoric that informs the analysis of how and why science fiction is conducive to mystical thought and experience.

Project Description

Science fiction is a genre steeped in mystical tradition. Many themes in science fiction, such as the theme of the unknowable, incomprehensible alien, as well as the theme of alternate realities/dystopia, can be read as literary reworking of mysticism, which is conglomerate of beliefs and practices that attempts to engage with a higher power or hidden truth. Using a mystical framework informed by scholars such as Evelyn Underhill, Jeffrey J. Kripal, Richard Doyle, and Joshua DiCaglio, science fiction novels can be read and analyzed as not only informed by mystical ideas, but as texts which function as simulations of the mystically experience in of themselves. In particular, the novels of Philip K. Dick and Stanislaw Lem rework ancient

contemplative tropes concerning the nature of reality and of the self through the modern language of science fiction using its tropes of simulation, the divine invasion, and the breakdown of reality.

INTRODUCTION

Attempts to define science fiction literature can easily result in a mere listing of tropes prevalent in the genre, such as technologically advanced societies, space travel, and other futuristic concepts. In the scope of this project, however, a definition of science fiction as literature which merely deals with a specific set of tropes is insufficient.

The most useful definition for science fiction is instead provided by the author Philip K. Dick, who refers to science fiction as a genre in which there is “a fictitious world...predicated on our known society” (Dick, *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick*). According to Dick, this fictitious world “must be different from the given one in at least one way...to give rise to events that could not occur in our society” (Dick, *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick*). This intentional difference between the worlds is referred to Dick as a “conceptual dislocation” which forces the reader into a state of “dysrecognition” due to conflict between the familiarity of fictitious society and the shock of the dislocation (Dick, *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick*). The rhetorical effects of science fiction and its premise of conceptual dislocation are, according to Dick’s definition, significant. “Good science fiction” Dick writes, “unlocks the reader’s mind so that that mind, like the author’s, begins to create...[and experiences] the joy of discovery of newness” (Dick, *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick*).

Dick’s definition of science fiction as a genre that precipitates a transcendental shift in the mind of the reader, not coincidentally, closely mirrors the effects described by those who have undergone what may be referred to as a “mystical experience”. But Anglo-Catholic author

Evelyn Underhill, who is most well known for her seminal text *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, admits that mysticism is “one of the most abused words in the English language” (Underhill 8). For this reason, it is important to this project to clearly define mysticism, in this instance borrowing from Underhill once more, who writes that mysticism is “the art of establishing [a] conscious relation with the Absolute,” wherein the “Absolute” may be understood as the greater truth of the universe, more commonly known as the divine (Underhill 79). Furthermore, Underhill goes on to enumerate the mystical experience as that which takes the from three distinct psychological stages, beginning first with (1) a primary break with the sense-world, followed by (2) a “new” birth and development of the spiritual consciousness on high levels, and culminating with (3) a conscious participation, and active union with the infinite and eternal (Underhill 37). Perhaps the greatest asset Underhill provides with her definitions is the basis that the mystical experience is as psychological as it is spiritual in nature. It is this assertion that provides, in many ways, the jumping off point for this project: for if mysticism is not just conducive to spiritual effects, but to psychological effects as well, then to some degree, mysticism exists on the same plane as rhetoric, which seeks to persuade through the creation of specific psychological effects and stimuli.

But the scope of this project is not merely to suggest that the mystical experience and rhetoric both produce psychological effects - after all, the psychological effects of both concepts have been, and continue to be investigated and argued by scholars in their respective fields. Instead, this project seeks to investigate specifically the relationship between mysticism and the science fiction genre: what aspects of the science fiction genre mirror the mystical experience,

and what about the rhetoric of science fiction lends itself as a vehicle for mystical tropes?

Indeed, the relationship between science fiction literature and mysticism has been noted and studied by scholars for the past few decades, not only due to the mystical content of the fictions, but also due in part to those science fiction authors who had mystical experiences of their own, the likes of which include authors Aldous Huxley and Philip K. Dick. Dr. Richard Doyle is one such scholar that has studied the mystical experience of Philip K. Dick, commenting that,

Wisdom for PKD is neither the reception of nor a transmission of a packet of information or knowledge, but is instead a set of means by which awakening from the spell cast by the world's claim to reality can occur (Doyle 13).

Doyle's commentary illuminates the connection between Dick's definition of "good" science fiction and the psychology of the mystical experience according to Underhill. In Underhill's terms, the initial stage of the mystical experience is a shift away from reliance on the sense world and into a truer understanding of reality. Philip K. Dick's definition of science fiction is dependent on a similar schism, termed "conceptual dislocation," which is used to point the reader (and often characters) towards a "true" reality that has been obscured, and thus allowing for the "awakening from...the world's claim to reality" as described by Doyle (Doyle 13). In fact, even the final effects of Underhill's schema and Dick's definition are remarkably similar. The last stage of the mystical experience according to Underhill culminates with "a conscious participation... with the infinite and eternal," whereas the rhetorical end results of Dick's definition of science fiction are such that the reader "begins to create" alongside the author, who may be understood to be the driving force, or the Absolute, behind a novel (Underhill 37, Dick 19). As such, both

definitions result in an active and continual engagement between the Creator (Absolute/author) and the experiencer (mystic/reader).

The similarities between these definitions, however, are not resigned merely to each other, but constitute what many consider to be a greater trend in the relationship between science fiction and mysticism, wherein many of the common tropes found in the science fiction novel correspond to aspects of the mystical experience. These tropes then, are not mere storytelling devices belonging to a genre, but correspond to ancient contemplative thought, thus simulating mystical experience. One such scholar who has noted the mystical tropes in certain science fiction media is Dr. Jeffrey J. Kripal. Following specifically the genre of comic books and their superheroes, in his book *Mutants & Mystics*, Kripal investigates tropes such as the alien superman and its connections to both the science fiction genre and mysticism. While many believe the idea of the superman to have originated with Nietzsche's *ubermensch*, Kripal suggests that the superman is in fact “an ancient religious trope” that is based on the “most primordial figure of the history of religions: the shaman” (Kripal 73). Noting similarities between the trope of the shaman and the life of the superhero, Kripal writes that both character tropes include “an initiatory crisis, often around puberty... and subsequent magical powers” (Kripal 74). Perhaps in his comment most useful to this project, Kripal argues that comic books have taken the ancient shaman trope and replaced it with the trope of the alien superhuman/mutant, thus “shift[ing] from the Occult to the Alien, that is, from the mysticism to the science fiction” (Kripal 73).

Just as Kripal investigated the tropes of comic books according to their mystical origins, this project seeks to investigate certain tropes in the science fiction genre and they correspond to ancient contemplative thought and the mystical experience as outlined by Evelyn Underhill.

Tropes to be investigated include simulation, the divine invasion, and the breakdown of reality - all are mainstays within the works of Philip K. Dick and Stanislaw Lem, which this project seeks to examine. While each trope will have a chapter dedicated to exploring the way in which they function within the science fiction texts, it is useful to enumerate briefly the ways these tropes mimic ancient contemplative thought. The trope of the simulation which induces metacognition corresponds to the contemplative trope of inquiry (particularly into the nature of the self and of reality), as exemplified in many famous contemplative texts, including *The Interior Castle*, composed by St. Teresa of Avila. Continuing, the science fiction trope of the divine invasion functions as simulation of the divine mystical experience of the theophany, while also corresponding to the contemplative notion of the ambiguity, or *aporia* of that which is divine. And lastly, the trope of the breakdown of reality is a trope which mirrors the contemplative response to experiencing an inquiry or theophany, often culminating in changed opinion towards the nature of self (the most extreme form being that of ego death) and the nature of reality.

CHAPTER I

SIMULATION IN SCIENCE FICTION, SCIENCE FICTION AS SIMULATION

The Science Fiction Novel as Simulation

In a 1978 speech “How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later,” author Philip K. Dick reveals what may be considered some hallmarks of fiction, and of the science fiction genre more generally.

It is my job to create universes, as the basis of one novel after another. And I have to build them in such a way that they do not fall apart two days later. Or at least that is what my editors hope. However, I will reveal a secret to you: I like to build universes which do fall apart. I like to see them come unglued, and I like to see how the characters in the novels cope with this problem (Dick, 1978).

First is Dick’s insight that to write fiction is to create “universes” which are not real. Perhaps it is obvious, but it bears repeating: the universes which exist in fiction are fabrications. It may seem ironic, then, that one of the ways in which a fiction (that which is fabricated and unreal) is judged is by how well it corresponds to (and perhaps manipulates) that which is real. That is to say, one of the hallmarks of a good fiction is the ability to translate a (fabricated, fictional) experience to reality. The examples for this are manifold. Perhaps a fictional universe has been so well designed (described) that it gives the illusion to the reader’s imagination that it really exists. Or maybe the emotions felt by a fiction character in a novel are so poignant that the reader, one who exists in reality, finds himself experiencing the same feeling. Successful fiction then, is that which

is not real (fabricated), but corresponds enough to the real to either simulate or manipulate reality. Thus Dick's second term for these artificial universes: pseudo-realities (pseudo-from the Greek *pseudes*, meaning lying or false).

The second critical insight Dick gives into the mechanism of fictional universes: that these universes are built and manipulated in order to achieve a desired effect. In his explanation as to why he writes so many novels with universes that seem to collapse, Dick responds that he "like[s] to see how the characters in the novels cope with this problem" (Dick, 1978). In other words, Dick is constructing universes and manipulating them to give rise to various scenarios, all in an effort to observe how these scenarios play-out. Given this explanation, the universes engineered in Dick's science fiction novels may be understood as such: a pseudo-reality which has been manipulated, with the results of this manipulation having been observed and recorded in the form of a novel. This mechanism of using an artificial space which corresponds to, but is not reality, in order to observe the effects of a specific manipulation, perhaps is more easily understood as a simulation. Thus, it may be surmised that Philip K. Dick understands science fiction novels themselves to be simulations constructed via rhetorical protocols aimed to yield a specific result.

Why Science Fiction for Simulation?

The idea of the science fiction novel which functions as a simulation is in fact, integral to Dick's conception of the genre. In an attempt to define science fiction, Dick writes that,

[Science fiction] must have a fictitious world, a society that does not in fact exist, but is predicated on our known society... that comes out of our world, the one we know: this world must be different from the given one in at least one way, and this one way must be sufficient to give rise to events that could not occur in our society... so that as a result a new society is generated in the author's mind, transferred to paper, and from paper it

occurs as a convulsive shock in the reader's mind, the shock of dysrecognition (Dick, *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick*).

Using Dick's language, then, that which is a "simulation" is something which "predicates" itself on reality but is dislocated ("different") enough to create the effect of "dysrecognition".

"Dysrecognition," is a term created by Dick, and may be understood as the experience of partial recognition - wherein which some aspects of an experience feel familiar, while others remain alien. Thus, for "dysrecognition" to occur, "recognition" must be present as well, if only in part.

One reason science fiction as a genre succeeds in creating the effect of "dysrecognition" then, is due to its ability to create "recognition" in the reader using the pretense of scientific thought and systems. While it remains true that most science fiction is decidedly less based on science and more constructed on fiction, the tendency of the genre to present its fictional universes and their technologies as operating under some sort of systemic logic founded on universal laws and theory creates in the reader a form of "recognition." The universe of the science fiction novel, while perhaps wildly different from the universe of the reader, appears to be governed by principles which the reader may at the very least, find to be "logical" or within the realm of scientific possibility, thus paralleling the mechanisms by which we believe our own universe to function.

Thus, science fiction as a genre not only lends itself to the creation of dysrecognition through (or through the appearance of) its appropriation of scientific thought, but according to Dick's definition, by its very virtue, aims to create a sense of dysrecognition in the reader. What then, it must be asked, is the effect of dysrecognition which causes science fiction authors to aim for creation? The answer, perhaps, may be deduced by Dick's own description of dysrecognition as a "shock" (Dick, *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick*). The effect of dysrecognition (and by proxy, the dysrecognition caused by simulation) is a sense of sudden, overwhelming uncertainty (a useful

term is the Greek *aporia*) in relation to one's conception of reality. This uncertainty, as we will examine further, often leads to a questioning of oneself and how one perceives their reality - a thinking about one's own thinking, more commonly termed metacognition.

Simulation Within Science Fiction: *Solaris* on the Failure of Human Perception

Just as the science fiction novel as simulation may be used to induce introspection in the reader, many science fiction novels use simulation (as an internal trope) for the purpose of metacognition in those characters which experience the simulation. Two such novels which experiment with the trope of simulation are *Solaris* by Stanislaw Lem and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* by Philip K. Dick.

Solaris by Polish author Stanislaw Lem's exemplifies the way that the trope of the physical simulation may be used to induce metacognition. The foremost example of simulation in the novel comes in the form of the G-formations, which are physical manifestations of the innermost desires, thoughts, and memories of a person. Contrary to many typical conceptions of simulations, the G-formations of *Solaris* are, by many standards, patently real. Unlike virtual or psychological simulations, G-formations are a corporeal, undeniable part of the phenomenal world. They are manifestations which have flesh and blood, and can be measured and studied by material means. Given the real physical nature of the G-formations, it is not due to a failure to physically exist in reality that they qualify as simulations. Rather, the G-formations function as simulations due to their ability to correspond, but not truly replicate reality. This can be seen throughout the story, wherein characters will interact with G-formations which correspond eerily to reality, while also noticeably contradicting it. Perhaps the most poignant instance of this realization in the novel occurs between Dr. Kelvin and his interaction with the G-formation of his dead wife, Harey,

“Listen,” she said, “there’s one other thing. Am I... really like... her?” “You were,” I said, “but now I don’t know anymore.” “What do you mean...?” She got to her feet and looked at me with eyes wide open. “You’ve already taken her place.” “And you’re sure it’s not her but me that you... Me?” “Yes. You. I don’t know. I’m afraid that if you were really her, I’d not be able to love you.” “Why not?” “Because I did something terrible.” “To her?” “Yes. When we were—” “Don’t say.” “Why not?” “Because I want you to know that I’m not her” (Lem 2414).

The discrepancy between the G-formation and that which they are supposed to represent is cemented by this dialogue between Kelvin and the G-formation of Harey. While initially, the G-formation appeared to truly be the deceased wife of Dr. Kelvin, the lack of information she possesses concerning the “terrible” thing which occurred in their relationship is one giveaway that the G-formation is only a simulation in the likeness of Kelvin’s wife, and not a resurrection of the person herself. As the G-formation herself affirms, “I’m not her” (Lem 2414).

The disparity between reality and simulation as seen in the G-formations may be understood due in part to the origin of the G-formation: the human mind. While humans are not the creator of the G-formations in *Solaris*, the blueprints for the manifestations are in human memories - that is, the G-formations are not based on reality, but rather on what a person experienced and internalized as “reality”. The failure of the G-formation to correspond with reality, then, indicates a failure not within the simulated object itself, nor even its creator. Instead, the G-formations highlights a failure within the human mind to accurately experience and encode reality. Indeed, the G-formations should be understood to be interactions not with the ghosts, but rather as interactions with the internal parts of themselves (aspects of their minds). As such, the simulation of the G-formations in *Solaris*, in forcing the characters in the novel to come to terms with (in the most

visceral sense, as the G-formations cannot be killed or ignored) their failures in perception, and thus the warped aspects of themselves and their memories, serves a metacognitive function. In fact, the failures of human cognition and perception is one of the most ruminated topics in *Solaris*. When considering the G-formations, one of the characters muses that,

Human beings set out to encounter other worlds, other civilizations, without having fully gotten to know their own hidden recesses, their blind alleys, well shafts, dark barricaded doors (Lem 2610).

On the topic of metacognition and the failure of humans to fully understand themselves, it is perhaps worth noting another interesting aspect of the simulations/G-formations in *Solaris*: they only ever appear to simulate the form of human beings. The failure of the G-formations to authentically replicate a human being is further indicative of the human failure to perceive the truth, even of themselves.

Simulation Within Science Fiction: *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and the Transformation of Barney Mayerson

Whereas the simulations of *Solaris* remain largely material, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* reflects the idea of the psychological simulation which leads to metacognition. Specifically, the simulations of Three Stigmata occur as hallucinations, which are the result of using psychedelic drugs known as Can-D, and a new, alien psychedelic drug known as Chew-Z. The hallucinations of Can-D are, at their heart, a consumerist fantasy. Users of Can-D hallucinate that they are Perky Pat and her boyfriend Walt, two idealized citizens of Earth with beautiful bodies, luxurious wardrobes, and plenty of time for leisure. Atypically, however, the simulated experience of Can-D is one in which the objects which manifest in the hallucinations respond correspond directly to that which exists in reality. The hallucinatory world of Can-D is directly controlled by layouts, a miniaturized

version of the environment experienced during the hallucinogenic translation which users can manipulate in reality in order to achieve a desired effect during translation. If a user wishes to dress Perky Pat in a specific outfit during translation, they can purchase a miniaturized version of the outfit and place it in the layout, after which the item will appear in the hallucinatory world. Thus, Can-D is a hallucinatory simulation in which users experience control.

The other psychedelic drug in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* is a new, alien substance from the Prox system known as Chew-Z. Whereas the simulation of Can-D exists (and briefly at that) only within the world of Perky Pat, Chew-Z supposedly allows users construct and experience any universe they can imagine, for as long as they wish to imagine it, without losing any real time on Earth. Given these non-constraints, Chew-Z users could hypothetically experience an endless amount of universes and existences, thus the product's slogan, "GOD PROMISES ETERNAL LIFE. WE CAN DELIVER IT" (Dick 82).

If the safety and failure of Can-D is in the rigid (read: controlled) framework through which the hallucinations take place, the horror of Chew-Z occurs in the users' inability to fully control the simulation. This lack of control manifests particularly in the form of the three "stigmata" of the figure Palmer Eldritch which begins to infiltrate the hallucinatory trips (and realities?) of Chew-Z users. The simulations of Chew-Z, then, are eerily rife with manifestations of artificial hands, metal jaws, and mechanical eyes in places where they do not belong. These distortions in the simulation serve to incite the characters in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* to inspect the structure of their realities and inspect the instances in which things do not line up. Indeed, the use of a false reality (read: simulation) to reveal a greater truth is trope of Dick's that has been noted by Dr. Richard Doyle, who reflects that "our world seems real precisely because it is a simulacrum of the actual transcendental...out of which it has been projected and created. It is precisely the world's

proximity to truth that beguiles us and challenges us to observe its distinction from Truth with wisdom”(Doyle 7).

Perhaps the best example of this is the hallucinogenic experiences of Barney Mayerson. Mayerson, in an attempt to get back together with his ex wife, uses Chew-Z to revisit and relive his memories with Emily. In his translation experience, however, Barney finds himself haunted by the presence of Palmer Eldritch, which first manifests itself in the form of the three stigmata. The manifestations of Palmer Eldritch are not only a glitch in the simulation that causes Barney to question his reality, but also serve to spur Barney into metacognition. In experiencing the invasion of Palmer Eldritch in both his hallucinations and, potentially, his reality, Mayerson becomes immersed in *aporia* - that is, uncertainty about the nature of his experiences and his reality. This *aporia*, or uncertainty Barney experiences, however, has a concrete effect - in his uncertainty, Barney, in examining his reality more closely (looking for signs of Eldritch to indicate that which may or may not be a simulation), In one example, Barney hallucinates of a time when he and Emily are still together, causing Eldritch to appear,

“Let me talk to your husband a moment,” Eldritch said to Emily in a peculiarly gentle voice; he motioned and Barney stepped out into the hail. The door shut behind him; Emily had closed it obediently. Now Eldritch seemed grim; no longer gentle or smiling he said, “Mayerson, you’re using your time badly. You’re doing nothing but repeating the past. What’s the use of my selling you Chew-Z? You’re perverse; I’ve never seen anything like it. I’ll give you ten more minutes and then I’m bringing you back to Chicken Pox Prospects where you belong. So you better figure out very damn fast what you want and if you understand anything finally” (Dick 92).

The apparition of Eldritch in this passage gives a clue as to the purpose of the simulations: that they help users understand their realities and current situations. However, as Eldritch points out to Barney in this passage, the use of Chew-Z to simply “repeat the past” is a waste of the simulation, as this repetition does not allow for any metacognition or internal change (Dick 92). Rather than accepting the traumatic fact that he is largely responsible for his divorce with Emily and thus reintegrating himself with his past, Barney, in his unacceptance, attempts to simply relive the past the first time he uses Chew-Z. It is not until experiencing a simulation of a near-death experience that Barney finally accepts his past and becomes content with his present, resigned to live the rest of his life as a colonist on Mars (see more in Chapter 3 subsection on ego death). Notably, once this change occurs, Mayerson resolves to stop his Chew-Z usage,

“You’ll never get off Mars,” Leo said. “I’ll never wangle a passage back to Terra for you.

No matter what happens from here on out.”

“I know it.”

“But you don’t care. You’re going to spend the rest of your life taking that drug.” Leo glared at him, baffled.

“Never again,” Barney said” (Dick 122).

At this point, it becomes clear that the simulation has served its purpose: Barney has accepted his past, let go of his attachments towards his ex-wife, and fully integrated himself with reality. He no longer needs the assistance of the Chew-Z simulation.

The Science Fiction Novel as Simulation: VALIS and “Ultra Metacognition”

If *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Solaris* are examples of using the trope of simulation to induce metacognition, VALIS is a novel which moves from metacognition to “ultra metacognition,” the act of examining the way one thinks about thinking. And while *The Three*

Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch and *Solaris* contain within their plots the trope of the simulation, VALIS stands apart yet again, in that it is not the internal trope of simulation which is found in VALIS, but rather the book itself which functions as a simulation.

That which VALIS is simulating, then, is an experiment in how to react to a mystical experience. The mystical experience examined in VALIS is, naturally, the VALIS experience of the author Philip K. Dick, during which “God...fired a beam of pink light directly at him,” a beam which Dick would claim carried information which lodged itself in his brain (Dick 20). The story of VALIS, then, follows the character of Horselover Fat (a modality of the narrator, Phil/Dick himself) and his attempt to make sense of the his mystical experience through his various theories, conversations with friends, research, and findings, all of which Fat writes down in his journal, which he dubs his *Exegesis*. Indeed, VALIS is interspersed with excerpts from the Philip K. Dick’s actual *Exegesis*, the 8000 page journal Dick began after having his VALIS experience, and presented as the writings of Horselover Fat. The initial act of *Exegesis* writing can be understood, of course, as a metacognitive act, as suggested by the narrator’s comment regarding Fat’s *exegesis*, “in essence, Fat monitored his own mind and found it defective” (Dick 40).

What allows VALIS to move from the metacognitive to the ultra metacognitive are the separate and distinct persons of Philip K. Dick which exist in the simulation of novel. The author (Philip K. Dick), narrator (Phil), and the main character (Horselover Fat) all act as different modalities and espouse separate opinions throughout the novel, so that when Fat is writing his *exegesis* (a process which, by nature, requires aspects of metacognition), and Phil, the narrator examines the thought processes of this (his) own metacognition, creating double (ultra) metacognition. The most glaring instance of the ultra metacognition allowed by the simulation of VALIS occurs at the end of the novel, when Fat is unable to accept the result of his experience (the

death of St. Sophia) and decides he wants to start his search anew, to which Phil, the narrator responds,

“There is no ‘Zebra,’” I said. “It’s yourself. Don’t you recognize your own self? It’s you and only you, projecting your unanswered wishes out, unfulfilled desires left over after Gloria did herself in. You couldn’t fill the vacuum with reality so you filled it with fantasy; it was psychological compensation for a fruitless, wasted, empty, pain-filled life and I don’t see why you don’t finally now fucking give up; you’re like Kevin’s cat: you’re stupid. That is the beginning and the end of it. Okay?” (Dick 218).

Here, Phil marks exactly that which is Fat’s failure: his inability to give up (read: die, see ego death section) and let go of his experience, and through the simulation of VALIS itself, that Philip K. Dick is able to recognize the failure of himself, Horselover Fat, and thus displays his own “ultra metacognition”. Just as contemplative texts, although they texts about how to read themselves, often require a “guru” to make sense of them, it may be for this reason that Philip K. Dick once referred to VALIS as a “cipher” for his own *Exegesis* - VALIS is both a simulation of how (or rather, how not) respond to the mystical experience, as well as the key to making sense of the *Exegesis*.

However, it should be noted that the failures in metacognition do not rest solely with Horselover Fat, but are to be found in the character of narrator Phil, as well. The way in which Phil fails is in his refusal to internalize a transformation from experiencing the simulation, and insistence to treat the simulation purely as such. In recognizing Phil’s failure, PKD further ratifies the notion that the purpose of the simulation is not merely to point out the existence of the simulation or the cracks in reality, but ultimately, after experiencing the simulation, to come to a point of metacognition where the experience is internalized, resulting in a fundamental change in perception and character.

CHAPTER II

THE DIVINE INVASION

The “Divine” Alien

The experience of the simulation, which is by nature not reality but only corresponding to it, in its failure to be the truth, at the very least necessitates the existence of one. As the previous section indicates, the experience of the simulation and its effect on one’s perception of that which is and isn’t real, often lends itself to (ultra) metacognition concerning one’s ability to perceive the truth more generally. Thus, the simulation in science fiction novels acts as an awakening of sorts, a signposting of the human inability to accurately perceive reality. The next question to investigate then, is from where - or from whom - does this jolt into (ultra) metacognition via the simulation originate?

In mystical contexts it is often an experience with a deity which brings forth an awakening to that which is outside of the structure of the limits of one’s thoughts, but in science fiction this change in cognition tends to come as a result of one of its most pervasive tropes: contact with the alien via the invasion. This correlation between (ultra) metacognition and invasion is not without implications - why, if at all is the rhetoric of the invasion useful in speaking about the journey to (ultra) metacognition?

That Which Is Alien

Because many subsets of science fiction concern themselves with space travel and the cosmos, it is not uncommon for the term “alien” to mean that which is literally extraterrestrial. However, in the broader scope of science fiction, that which may be defined as “alien” is not limited

to that which is extraterrestrial, but rather to that which is the “other”. For the sake of this project, that which is “alien” should be understood as that which is viewed as an “other,” for reasons including but not limited to: being non-human, being non-terrestrial, or possessing abilities considered uncommon to humans.

As noted by James F. McGrath in his book *Theology and Science Fiction*, beings with supernatural abilities are often understood by humans to be supernatural themselves, and are thus deified. This trend can be particularly noted in the science fiction genre, for which McGrath coined a trope which he refers to as “Aliens as Gods”. Whether these aliens that possess supernatural abilities are truly divine beings is a topic for theological debate, but for this project, what is crucial to understanding the trope of “Aliens as Gods” (from here on referred to as “divine aliens”) is to understand that (whether actually divine or not), most divine aliens are viewed as such due to their approximation to humans, to which they over which they may have superior understanding, power for destruction and creation, the ability to alter time or reality, or merely cognitively unfamiliar (the ability to function beyond the realm of the “rational” human cognition). While divine aliens may not truly be gods, in approximation to humans, they are often seen to be like gods, which is close enough to be of significance.

If the nature of the divine invasion is examined in contemplative terms, perhaps the most useful way to describe such an invasion is as a “theophany” - the revelation or “breaking in” of an already existing divinity. In Philip K. Dick’s novel VALIS, the character of Horselover Fat, after experiencing a divine invasion, investigates the concept of the theophany, writing that,

“If reality “[is] to some extent ‘hidden,’” then what is meant by “theophany”? Because a theophany is an in-breaking of God, an in-breaking which amounts to an invasion of our world; and yet our world is only seeming; it is only “obvious structure,” which is under

the mastery of unseen “latent structure.”...if Heraclitus is correct, there is in fact no reality but that of theophanies; the rest is illusion” (Dick 39).

Here Fat picks up on an important distinction regarding theophanies, as enumerated by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: the theophany is not merely an in-breaking of a figure with divine-like power or authority, but is the in-breaking of a “latent structure” - that is, a pre-existing structure/divinity which is a) initially unseen or hidden in some aspect and b) larger than the immediate self. In claiming that there is “no reality but that of theophanies,” Horselover Fat insinuates that the divine invasion (or, the theophany of the “latent structure”) is ultimately an invasion of perception which allows one to observe, in the words of Heraclitus, true “reality,” including the reality of the self (Dick 39). Thus, the divine invasion as theophany, as postulated in VALIS, is an invasion necessary to achieving ultra metacognition.

If the divine invasion ultimately amounts to an invasion of perception, however, this leads to another conclusion worthy of note: such an invasion, in order to alter human perception and cognition, must be an invasion of psychological means. Thus, the divine invasions this chapter investigates involve two different aspects: in the classical sense, an invasion of the “world” (the external), as well as an invasion of the self (the internal, the psyche). The two types of divine aliens to be analyzed will be the alien which is larger and the alien that is actually extra-terrestrial. Their invasions will be investigated as both external and internal phenomena.

The Invasion of the Larger: Solaris and Scalar Perception

Despite being authored over sixty years ago, *Solaris* by Polish author Stanislaw Lem remains one of the most poignant science fiction novels regarding human and extraterrestrial contact. Unlike the typical alien invasion story which mainly involves a physical invasion by the

foreign into the terrestrial space, the divine invasion that occurs on Solaris is also scalar and psychological in character.

While the oceanic alien of *Solaris* is in fact an extraterrestrial, the scalar relationship of the alien to humanity is what makes this divine invasion unique. The massive material size of the alien, especially in approximation to human beings, is implied by its very designation as an ocean. The alien of Solaris, although a singular organism, is so large that it cannot be fully observed by the scope human eye. No technology can fully penetrate its depths, and to even traverse a decent amount of the ocean (alien) surface requires the use of an aircraft. Mere offshoots of the ocean, termed by scientists as “mimoids,” reach thousands of feet into the sky, resembling entire human cities. Perhaps the most poignant example of the scalar difference between the alien ocean and humanity exists in form of a failed exploration, wherein 106 people died as a result of one of the oceanic mimoids collapsing in on itself. While the catastrophe involved both the human and the alien lifeforms, the disastrous effects of such seemed to be experienced by humans alone. No trace of trauma as a result of the accident exists to be seen on the ocean, leading one of the scientists to remark that “in that place the surface [of the ocean]...is no different than any of its other regions” (Lem 2022).

The scalar difference between the ocean of Solaris and humanity is an example of an external invasion wherein which the physically larger encroaches on the smaller. However, this external divine invasion is internalized when it develops a psychological effect - in this instance, the external scalar difference is internalized as a cognitive shift in perspective from that of the human to that of the larger. Dr. Kelvin in particular comes to realize the scalar insignificance of humanity when compared to rest of the universe, which the alien ocean synecdochizes. In the final scene of

the novel, during which he finally interacts with the alien ocean face to face, Dr. Kelvin finds himself coming to terms with his - and humanity's own scalar insignificance,

“I didn't believe for a minute that this liquid colossus, which had brought about the death of hundreds of humans within itself, with which my entire race had for decades been trying in vain to establish at least a thread of communication—that this ocean, lifting me up unwittingly like a speck of dust, could be moved by the tragedy of two human beings” (Lem 3389).

Thus, the scalar difference implicit in the divine invasion of the alien ocean triggers in Dr. Kelvin a shift from the human viewpoint, where the human subject is superlative, to a perspective of the larger, wherein the human is as scalarly inconsequential as “a speck of dust” (Lem 3389). This cognitive shift towards a more (at the very least, scalarly) “accurate” understanding of reality may be read as an example of the theophany of the latent structure (the “true” reality) which manifests via the divine invasion. And notably, this scalar shift is perhaps the first step towards a larger shift that is fundamental to the mystical experience: the movement from the perspective of the self to the perspective of the absolute. While the narrative of *Solaris*, which culminates with Dr. Kelvin metacognitively ruminating on the failures of human thought and perception, does not, in fact, make the transcendent shift to a perspective of the absolute, the novel remains a useful example of the mechanism by which the external scalar invasion may be internalized in the form of a perceptual shift which induces metacognition.

While the scalar difference which concludes as a cognitive shift is an example of the psychological internalization of the external invasion of *Solaris*, the manifestation of G-formations (read more about the mechanism of the G-formations in chapter 1) exemplify the externalization of an internal psychological invasion. G-formations, which are external, physical creations of the alien

Solaric ocean, are organisms whose blueprints originate in those memories most indelible (termed by one character as “mental encystments”) in the minds of the scientists living on Solaris (Lem, 1194). To access the information necessary to the creation of specific G-formations, then, requires a psychological invasion of the alien ocean into the “mental encystments” of the scientists - an internal invasion which results in the external, somatic simulation of the G-formations (Lem 1194). Indeed, it is concrete, physical aspect of the corporeal G-formations which firsts begins to convince the scientists that the G-formations are the result of a simulation grounded in reality, rather than mere hallucinations of the mind. Thus, the relationship between the divine alien invasion and the simulation is further illuminated by this paradox: if the divine alien brings about the simulation which induces metacognition, then the simulation itself is proof of the invasion.

Just as the internalization of the external scalar invasion of the Solaric ocean resulted in a transformative inducement of metacognition, so does the externalization of the internal psychological invasion via the G-formations lead to metacognition. While the motive the alien ocean has in creating the G-formations remains a looming question throughout the novel, Dr. Snaut correctly theorizes that the scientists are “unlikely to learn anything about [the ocean]” from the G-formations, but perhaps are likely to learn something “about [them]selves...” (Lem 1254). Thus, in externalizing their most ineffaceable memories, the G-formations force the scientists to reexamine their trauma and attachments, and rethink their relationship to these memories, making possible a metacognitive transformation.

The Invasion of the Alien Entity: The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch

As with *Solaris*, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* depicts the divine invasion as one which moves between the external and the internal (psychological). But while the invasion in *Solaris* manifests via corporeal entity, the invasion in Palmer Eldritch occurs in the form of

hallucinations resulting from the ingestion of an alien psychedelic. The divine alien figure in the novel, as suggested by the title, is the figure of Palmer Eldritch, a space explorer who has been gone for 10 years exploring an alien system, and has recently returned home, bringing with him the an extra-terrestrial drug which he has dubbed “Chew-Z” (the mechanisms of which are discussed in Chapter 1). During their Chew-Z induced hallucinations, users find their environments unexpectedly invaded by the presence of Palmer Eldritch and his three stigmata - an artificial hand, metal jaw, and mechanical eyes. In fact, Eldritch’s stigmata begin to manifest even after users believe their initial trips have ended, leading some to assume Eldritch has trapped them in their hallucinatory environments, while others conclude Eldritch’s influence is able to penetrate reality itself. Indeed, Eldritch’s invasive presence, which disrupts the users ability to truly control their hallucinations, leads some to theorize that he may in fact be an alien deity that has invaded via the psychedelic of Chew-Z. Thus, in *Three Stigmata*, the mechanism through which the invasion of Palmer Eldritch occurs is via an external alien source (Chew-Z) which, when ingested, is experienced internally and psychologically as hallucinations.

As an invasion which is made manifest by taking that which is external and literally internalizing it via ingestion, it perhaps unsurprising that one of the characters relates the experience of taking Chew-Z (and thus taking in Eldritch) as a form of transubstantiation,

“All three stigmata—the dead, artificial hand, the Jensen eyes, and the radically deranged jaw.” Symbols of its inhabitation, he thought. In our midst. But not asked for. Not intentionally summoned. And—we have no mediating sacraments through which to protect ourselves; we can’t compel it, by our careful, time-honored, clever, painstaking rituals, to confine itself to specific elements such as bread and water or bread and wine. It

is out in the open, ranging in every direction. It looks into our eyes; and it looks out of our eyes” (Dick 117).

Indeed, as with the Eucharist, wherein the presence of Christ does not appear as the external form of a man but rather as the “accidents” of bread and wine, the external figure of Palmer Eldritch as a man remains largely absent from the plot of *The Three Stigmata*, his presence instead occupying the “accident” of the psychedelic Chew-Z. In ingesting Chew-Z, then, one takes in the entity of Palmer Eldritch - both his stigmata and his perspectives - and in effect, internalizes the external alien (“it looks into our eyes”), thus bringing the invasion inside of oneself (“it looks out of our eyes”) (Dick 117). It is this psychological internalizing aspect of the invasion of Palmer Eldritch which, as we will examine, simulates metacognition and thus allows for transformation.

If the the hallucinations through which Palmer Eldritch invades are understood as simulations, then that which occurs within these simulations is also a simulation - one which aims to produce metacognition. The primary character which experiences the simulation-of-the-metacognition-simulation is Barney Mayerson, for whom the effect is not only (ultimately) metacognitive and transcendental, but also incredibly invasive. Indeed, Barney quickly finds that Eldritch is present and able to manifest even in Barney’s most personal simulations, including those involving his ex-wife. Indeed, many of Barney’s initial Chew-Z trips are spent in particularly painful and intimate scenarios, as Barney attempt to regain the affections of his ex-wife, Emily, even if only in the hallucinogenic world. After another futile attempt at reuniting with Emily, a group of Palmer Eldritch’s appear to Barney, hoping to illuminate the nature of his situation,

“You don’t understand,” the Palmer Eldritch’s all said, collectively shaking their heads...

“As was pointed out to you: since this is your future you’re already established here. So there’s no place for you; that’s a matter of simple logic. Who’m I supposed to snare Emily

for? You? Or the legitimate Barney Mayerson who lived naturally up to this time? And don't think he hasn't tried to get Emily back. Don't you suppose—and obviously you haven't—that as the Hnatts split up he made his move?" (Dick 103).

Here, Eldritch, who has thus far accompanied Barney on all of his hallucinogenic attempts to win back Emily, confronts Mayerson with a final conclusion: neither Barney nor Eldritch can change the future, and as such, Barney's attempts to reunite with his ex-wife are all destined to be futile. By appearing to Barney in all of his hallucinations with Emily, Eldritch and his stigmata serve as a signposting for those attachments, experiences, and memories which demand confrontation from the user. Thus, the invasion of Palmer Eldritch functions by resimulating the moments wherein which users believe they have agency - in Barney's case, the belief that he can get his ex-wife back - while ultimately proving that agency is exactly what users lack. Through this resimulation, the invasion of Palmer Eldritch also leads users to metacognitively examine their attachments, and hopefully, by finding them futile, rendering these attachments and memories as alien unto themselves. As is the case with Barney Mayerson, who by the end of the novel has let go of his attachment to his ex-wife, and is instead determined to be content with his life as a colonist on Mars. Thus, the divine invasion of Palmer Eldritch and his three stigmata function as the external alien cue which, as a result of having been internalized, points towards that which the user psychologically needs to confront, investigate, and ultimately, accept.

CHAPTER III

THE BREAKDOWN OF REALITY

That Which Is A Breakdown

Revisiting once more the relationship of the tropes we have thus far encountered, it becomes increasingly clear that the divine invasion results in the simulation which induces metacognition, and thus the simulation is proof of the divine invasion. For the divine invasion to occur, however, necessitates another thing entirely: something (a planet, universe, or reality) which can be invaded. For the divine invasion which produces a simulation aimed at inducing metacognition to occur, necessitates something capable of metacognition which can be invaded - in other words, a thing which thinks within the terms of the self.

Thus, the divine invasion, in order to have something to invade, must make space for a material world and/or a sense of self. That which follows the divine invasion - the breakdown of reality, must make space for these pre-existing structures as well, as is suggested by Philip K. Dick,

I like to see [universes] come unglued, and I like to see how the characters in the novels cope with this problem...Do not believe — and I am dead serious when I say this — do not assume that order and stability are always good, in a society or in a universe. The old, the ossified, must always give way to new life and the birth of new things (Dick, 1974).

Such is the nature of the breakdown of reality: while it seeks to abolish faulty perceptions of reality and of the self, it is preceded by the divine invasion which makes room for these things. For the “new” to exist there must be “the old, and ossified” to abolish, and for a breakdown to occur there must be a pre-existing perception of “order and stability” which can be destroyed (Dick, 1974).

The Material Breakdown

While the trope of material breakdown is commonplace in many science fiction novels (including the work of Philip K. Dick) it should not be assumed that this suggests that material breakdown is always a function of the simulation. Indeed, the trope of the material breakdown may find its way into science fiction due to a simple fact: that which is material, by nature, breaks down. Even in apocalyptic novels where a detritus trope may serve to signify a breakdown accelerated by unnatural means, breakdown itself is often still presented as a natural and unstoppable force of the universe. One such instance may be read in the Philip K. Dick novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, which finds the earth in a state of unnaturally rapid decay due to the effects of a global nuclear war. But even while the rapidization of decay in *Androids* is presented as unnatural, the ultimate process of material breakdown and decay is portrayed as anything but, one character describing it as “a universal principle... the entire universe is moving toward a final state of total, absolute kippleization” (Dick 26). In more scientific terms, the material breakdown in science fiction novels is not always to be presumed as a function of the simulation, but merely as an example of the universal law of “the form-destroying process of entropy” (Dick 39).

As Philip K. Dick suggests in his speech, however, the trope of the breakdown can be simulated in specific ways to achieve a desired effect. Two types of breakdowns which may be considered a “breakdown in reality” will be examined in this chapter: the breakdown of the material world, and the breakdown of the self (otherwise termed “ego death”).

The Material Breakdown and the Breakdown of Reality: *Ubik*

As discussed above, the instance of material breakdown in a science fiction novel does not necessarily mean the author intends to signify a breakdown in reality. Even so, science fiction, in admitting that the material world is always naturally breaking down, leads to a startlingly

contemplative conclusion: if the world is naturally always breaking down, any conception of reality as stable is not a depiction of true reality, but merely a simulation of it. Thus, one way in which science fiction handles the contemplative trope of reality as an illusion is through simulating a breakdown of it. One such novel which simulates the breakdown of reality via the material is *Ubik* by Philip K. Dick, wherein which the process of decay is portrayed as anything but typical,

The phone said, "I am sorry, sir, but I can't accept obsolete money." The quarter clattered out of the bottom of the phone and landed at his feet. Expelled in disgust. "What do you mean?" he said, stooping awkwardly to retrieve the coin. "Since when is a North American Confederation quarter obsolete?" "I am sorry, sir," the phone said, "the coin which you put into me was not a North American Confederation quarter but a recalled issue of the United States of America's Philadelphia mint. It is of merely numismatical interest now." Joe examined the quarter and saw, on its tarnished surface, the bas-relief profile of George Washington. And the date. The coin was forty years old. And, as the phone had said, long ago recalled (Dick 87).

This excerpt demonstrates the atypical nature of material breakdown in *Ubik*: rather than objects simply progressing into decayed versions of themselves, the physical objects in the world of *Ubik* regress into earlier forms of themselves. In this example, a North American Confederation quarter, which due a natural process of decay may have merely tarnish, instead regresses into an earlier form of itself, a completely different version of the quarter which had been in use forty years ago. This atypical process of regression is not limited to encoded values like currency, but is found all throughout the world presented in *Ubik*. The characters find themselves in an existence where the way in which things operate has very suddenly shifted - where there were once spaceships there are now biplanes, and upright telephones take the place of vidphones.

The unnatural form of material breakdown in *Ubik* serves a simple purpose to the characters: it is a cue which alerts them to the actuality of their situation - mainly, that their belief that they are alive and experiencing true reality is in fact false. In actuality, the main characters of *Ubik* are dead, suspended in a state of half-life, wherein they are being preyed upon by a malignant force. Experiencing the material breakdown, then, leads the characters to experience a “breakdown” of reality because it reveals their perceived reality is in fact, no reality at all, but merely a simulation. In the terms of Heraclitus, the atypical material breakdown of *Ubik* clues the characters into realizing the latent structure of reality (that they are dead, experiencing half-life through the manipulation of the malignant figure Jory) hidden behind the obvious structure perceived by their senses (that they are alive and experiencing the living world). Indeed, the regressed objects of *Ubik* challenge the very way in which the characters have, up until this point, conceived of reality as that which can rightly and correctly be perceived through the sense world. Consider the ruminations of Joe Chip,

Prior forms, he reflected, must carry on an invisible, residual life in every object. The past is latent, is submerged, but still there, capable of rising to the surface once the later imprinting unfortunately - and against ordinary experience - vanished. The man contains - not the boy - but earlier men, he thought. History began a long time ago (Dick, 130).

In experiencing the “prior forms” of regressed objects in *Ubik*, Joe Chip has thus not only become aware of the unreality of his situation, but has also been clued in to the idea that much of true reality is latent and is obscured by ordinary experience (Dick 130). Thus, while the ordinary experience of decay allows for the perception of the obvious (the gestalt, the “figure” of the image), in experiencing the regressed forms in *Ubik*, Joe Chip experiences the “ground” (background) of

reality as well, allowing himself to, in effect, view the whole (or at the very least, the greater part) of reality.

Shortly after his reflection on prior forms, Joe Chip, in hopes of being able to see beyond the obvious structure of Jory's simulation, attempts to simulate Underhill's first phase of the mystic experience, the break with the sense-world. The most notable instance this occurs in a drugstore, where, suffering from decay, Joe attempts to unregress a jar of ubik by focusing intently on it, hoping to see beyond the obvious structure of the jar and bring to the forefront what he believes may lie within the latent structure - the aerosol version of ubik. While Joe is ultimately unsuccessful in his attempt to unregress the jar of ubik, it is perhaps notable that his attempt to do so by is similar to the contemplative practice of "asceticism, the domination of the senses," (Underhill 58). Just as Joe Chip attempted to look beyond what his eyes perceived and thus see into the latent structure of the jar of ubik, so too can ascetic practices be understood as those practices which seek to dominate the senses in an attempt to simulate a breakdown in the obvious structure of reality and allow the latent to pierce through.

The Psychological Breakdown: The Trope of Madness in VALIS

The material breakdown, as seen in *Ubik*, results in a breakdown of (perceived) reality due to the break with the sensational world it induces. Thus, in no longer trusting the sensory receptors as acceptable indicators for reality, the experience of the material breakdown of reality may be said to culminate in a dying to the physical, sensational world. On the other side of the coin of the material breakdown, of course, is the psychological breakdown. Indeed, just as not all experiences of material breakdown in science fiction are a function of a simulation or invasion, nor are all psychological breakdowns indicative of this either. Instead, this chapter will seek to discuss those

psychological breakdowns which do arise from the experience of the invasion, the most mystical of which culminate in a dying to the self, also be termed as ego death.

Perhaps the trope which remains the most emblematic of the psychological breakdown is the trope of the mad man - a trope which is heavily built and dissected in Philip K. Dick's novel VALIS. VALIS follows the character of Horselover Fat (a manifestation of PKD) and his experience encountering God through a beam of pink light which blinds him for three days. After this initial event, Fat begins to experience a breakdown in his reality, as what Fat initially believed to be true or real concerning the universe becomes radically shifted by his spiritual awakening, which is subsequently informed by visions, hallucinations, and secret knowledge that Fat claims was brought to him via the pink light. Thus, the breakdown of reality in VALIS occurs due to a psychological breakdown resulting from (what Fat believes to be) an invasion of the divine. Notably, the narrator of VALIS, Phil, also describes this breakdown in reality as a breakdown in Fat's psyche - a breakdown which he terms "mental illness" (Dick 24).

The descent of Horselover Fat into what the narrator, Phil, conceives to be madness is one of the main discussion points of VALIS, and as such, the trope of madness (and its effects) is examined heavily throughout the novel. According to the narrator's description, "insane people—psychologically defined, not legally defined—are not in touch with reality" (Dick 39). Horselover Fat, as a result of his VALIS experience, is one who has experienced a break with that which the narrator considers reality, and is thus revealed by the narrator to be "insane" (Dick 39). Furthermore, the narrator enumerates that "the madman experiences something, but what it is or where it comes from he does not know," revealing ultimately what he believes to be another effect of the psychological breakdown: the incessant need of the "madman" to make sense of that which he experiences - in this case, the need to make sense of the divine invasion (Dick 24). Indeed, this

symptom of what the narrator considers madness is exemplified throughout the story using excerpts from Fat's *Exegesis*, wherein which he spends hours theorizing about his experience, the nature of reality, and the nature of the greater universe. The necessity and obsession Fat feels to know and understand his experience with the divine invasion is an effect which corresponds to the "mono-ideism" Evelyn Underwood has noted in many mystics (Underhill 61). Underwood writes that for the mystic, the obsession or "dominant idea is a great one: so great in fact, that when it is received in its completeness by the human consciousness, almost of necessity it ousts all else" (Underhill 60). Certainly Fat's obsession to understand the universe and ultimate truth is not so far off from the great idea of the absolute which mystics have contemplated for centuries.

If Fat truly did experience a divine invasion, otherwise termed a theophany of the latent structure, then the breakdown of reality he experienced may be considered not only sensible but correct: in receiving the truth of the latent structure, Fat embodies a breakdown in reality through his refusal to accept the obvious, phenomenal structure (what most people, himself included, used to conceive of as reality) as the true reality. While this earns him the title of an insane madman, the narrator of VALIS concedes that "sometimes an appropriate response to reality to go insane" - especially, if in the case of Fat's experience, the reality you are expected to believe in is revealed to only be a simulation (Dick 10).

The Psychological Breakdown: Aporia and Identity in *A Scanner Darkly*

Horselover Fat's refusal to accept society's notion of reality, even though it wins him the designation of a "madman", represents a lack of concern towards the world, and as such he may be understood as a character which, as a result of the breakdown of reality, has "died" to the opinions and thought processes of the world. But the other aspect of the psychological breakdown which leads to the breakdown of reality - the dying to the self, otherwise known as ego death - is a

breakdown which Fat, in his refusal give up on his quest in VALIS, is unable to experience. The trope of psychological breakdown of the self, from here on out referred to as “ego death” is marked by many experiences, among them including a loss of self/self-identity, a loss of personal attachments, and often, a sense of futility concerning the self. In other words, ego death manifests as a total “giving up” of that which we conceive of as the self.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a literal loss of identity can be read in the character of Fred/Bob Arctor from Philip K. Dick’s novel *A Scanner Darkly*. Fred is an undercover cop posturing as a drug user (Bob Arctor) in an attempt to gather intel concerning the suppliers of America’s latest drug epidemic, a drug known as substance D. Fred’s cover is so deep that his alias as Bob Arctor is not known even to his superiors, nor is his true physical appearance, which he obscures from others in law enforcement using technology known as a “scramble suit”. As a result of his double identity and substance D usage, Fred begins to lose his sense of self.

To himself, Bob Arctor thought, *How many Bob Arctors are there?* A weird and fucked-up thought. Two that I can think of, he thought. The one called Fred, who will be watching the other one, called Bob. The same person. Or is it? Is Fred actually the same as Bob? Does anybody know? I would know, if anyone did, because I’m the only person in the world that knows that Fred is Bob Arctor. *But*, he thought, *who am I? Which of them is me?* (Dick 942).

In his inability to articulate his own identity, Fred/Bob demonstrates the *aporia* surrounding his sense of self. Indeed, it may be presumed that it is the *aporia* necessary to Fred’s job as an undercover police officer which makes possible the loss of identity exemplified by Fred/Bob in this passage. To be an undercover officer, Fred first must pretend to be a drug addict, and after a time he actually becomes one, blurring the lines between what is and isn’t his true identity - is he an officer,

Fred; an addict, Bob; both or neither? The very nature of Fred's job demands that he rely on *aporia* concerning identity to ensure his safety.

The psychological effects of substance D, which Fred abuses, also contribute to Fred's *aporia* concerning his identity, mainly due to the mechanism of the drug. One effect of Substance D is disrupts the brain's figure-ground perception, which is the ability to distinguish the "figure" of a picture "ground" (background). In contemplative terms, that which the disruption of figure-ground perception represents is Fred's inability to separate the self from the non-self - in essence, substance D prevents Fred from being able to internalize himself from the rest of the world, thus causing him to lose his sense of personal identity. This loss of identity leads to ego-death.

While the psychological breakdown of the self, as well as the term ego death, sound like decidedly negative experiences, in contemplative terms, the abolition of the conception of the self is a goal to aspire after, as contemplatives view the self as an idea which separates that which is implicitly connected. Indeed, ego death as a positive breakdown can be read in *A Scanner Darkly* without the assistance of mystic thought, as it is only after Fred/Bob have so burned out their identity that they are sent to work on a farm as a form a rehabilitation. It is while working on the farm that Fred (now going by the name Bruce) discovers what he has been searching for all along: the supply of substance D, growing in the fields of the New Path rehabilitation farming commune.

The Psychological Breakdown: The Ego Death of Barney Mayerson

The character of Barney Mayerson from *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, while perhaps not losing the ability to literally articulate his identity as explicitly as Fred/Bob Arctor does in *A Scanner Darkly*, experiences ego death as a result of his experience with the invasion of Palmer Eldritch, the results of which can be seen through his loss of his attachment to himself, his relationships, and his ambitions.

Perhaps the first step Barney takes in achieving ego death is letting go of his attachment to his ex-wife. While the invasion of Eldritch serves to point to the futility of Barney's attachment to his ex-wife (read more in Chapter 2), this also functions as the first step of Barney dying to himself, and thus transcending the self. In one hallucination, Eldritch tells Barney,

“And look at yourself.” The six Palmer Eldritch's gestured contemptuously... “You're a Ghost.” Barney stared at them and they stared back placidly, unmoved. “Try building your life on that premise,” the Eldritch's continued” (Dick 103)

It would be best, according to Eldritch, for Barney to instead build his life on the premise of being a “ghost” - not only as one who has “died” to the rest of the world, but also as one who has died to himself and his attachments, which might otherwise be termed ego death (Dick 103). In living as a “ghost,” dead to himself, Barney can finally find freedom from his futile attachments and thus freedom from the suffering of himself (Dick 103).

While letting go of his attachments to his relationships is one aspect, and perhaps the beginning of Mayerson's ego death, it is not until Barney nearly experiences death during translation with Eldritch that he comes to accept the futility of the self, and thus dies to his attachments and very self. After almost dying in Palmer Eldritch's place, Barney muses that,

Eldritch had lived many lives; there had been a vast, reliable wisdom contained within the substance of the man or creature, whatever it was. The fusion of himself with Eldritch during translation had left a mark on him, a brand for perpetuity: it was a form of absolute awareness...it knew much more than I did about the meaning of our finite lives, here; it saw in perspective...And in comparison I knew—had done—nothing (Dick 113).

In his admittance that he, as a single individual “knew—had done—nothing,” Barney denotes a psychological shift which recognizes the futility of the self to construct meaning and adequate

perception (Dick 113). Richard Doyle, who has written extensively about the necessity of this psychological shift, notes that this change allows for an important insight into the nature of perception as a that of a “non-linear and highly distributed system not ‘ownable’ by a self and navigable only...through its dissolution,” a sentiment which Mayerson echoes in noting that his attempts to perceive the world, from the perspective of the individual self, were utterly futile (Doyle 11). Indeed, in describing himself as having fused with Palmer Eldritch, Mayerson also denotes the concept of ego death, as he is no longer able to separate his sense of self from that which he experienced with and as Palmer Eldritch - an insight echoed by Anne Hawthorn when she remarks to Barney that ““part of you has become Palmer Eldritch...And part of him became you. Neither of you can ever become completely separated again” (Dick,112).

The true extent of Barney’s ego death can be seen at the end of the novel, when after experiencing his near death experience as Palmer Eldritch, Barney decides to let go of his personal identity and attachments - to his wife, to his home on Earth, and to his job as a pre-fash consultant, and instead, accept his new life, remarking that he will, “live [on Mars]. As a colonist. I’ll work on my garden up top and whatever else they do” (Dick 112).. In dying to his attachments and his former identity, Barney Mayerson is a character which represents the psychological breakdown of ego death as a result of the invasion.

CONCLUSION

ONE MORE TIME FOR (ULTRA) METACOGNITION

This project has examined the tropes of simulation, invasion, and breakdown, and the way they function inside of various science fiction novels. And after nearly thirty pages of written exploration and explanation, I find myself circling back again to that age old question, the very same question I was asked when I applied to write this thesis: why is this important? What is the use of studying fiction, especially when you can study anything else?

To which I would like to say: I really, really hate that question. Not because it is a bad question, but because those who ask it usually already have heard an answer which satisfies them. It is a question they have asked a thousand times, and have heard answered in a thousand ways better than I could ever do. But it is an important question regardless, and so I will take a stab at answering it, lest anyone try to say that I did not make clear *why* the things studied in this project are relevant, or important.

Fiction is a rhetorical art and practice. As I stated in the first chapter, “good fiction” not only simulates what we perceive to be our reality, but “manipulates” it when it succeeds in manipulating us - emotionally, mentally, etc. Fiction seeks to persuade us to see the world in a certain way, to feel certain things. And notably, fiction sometimes succeeds in doing so. And so the question “why study fiction” becomes the query “why study rhetoric?”. To this, a very human centric (a thus, according to many, satisfactory) answer might be given: if the way we treat the world and all those inside it is determined by our perceptions, then there is perhaps *nothing* so

important as understanding those things which persuade us to see the world in a certain way. It becomes a matter of survival. That is why the study of fiction is important.

If one believes (as I do) the argument that the power of fiction lies in its rhetorical ability, the final questions for this project becomes these: do we, as readers of these science fiction novels, find ourselves persuaded, and if so, in what ways? While each novel examined in this project differs in specifics, they all share a common denominator: if fiction is a simulation of ourselves and our own “reality”, then by inducing metacognition in the characters of the novel, the authors hope to lead the readers to some metacognition of their own. The breakdown of reality in *Ubik* is a simulation of our reality, leading the reader to recognize that reality is not actually stable, but is continually breaking down - not only materially, but also by way of obsolescence, as our technologies and encoded values become outdated and fade away. The character of Barney Mayerson in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* simulates our resistance to letting go of our memories, and shows the reader how to approach the contemplative practice of examining our attachments and making them alien unto ourselves. The experiences of the scientists in *Solaris* simulate the human tendency to anthropomorphize, and thus misunderstand the alien, as well as themselves - and so on and so forth. The novels examined in this project all simulate the ways we as people respond to certain stimuli - stimuli such as the alien, the simulation, and the breakdown, in order to lead us as readers to metacognitively reflect on the how we perceive these things ourselves, and perhaps even change our ideas about them.

The true power of fiction, and of these novels, however, arise when they result in ultra metacognition rather than simply metacognition. Whereas metacognition is examining your own ways of thinking, ultra metacognition is a continual application and examination of metacognition. The difference is that of a person who reads *Ubik*, comes to the conclusion that reality is an illusion,

and never thinks about it again, and a person who reads *Ubik*, come to the conclusion that reality is an illusion, and continues to remind themselves of this and thus continues to examine their way of thinking about reality. Consider the wisdom literature of the Epistle of James,

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do (*New International Version*, James 1:22-25).

Thus, here we have what is, for this project, the final similarity between contemplative rhetoric and science fiction: the distinction between metacognition and ultra metacognition, between the one who hears and the one who practices, between the unintegrated mystic and the integrated. It is the difference between Horselover Fat, a character trapped by his inability to give up on his ideas, and Barney Mayerson, a character who gave up his ideas, attachments, and ambition - and was truly transformed.

And now, for our very last question:

What will you do when you put down the book?

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