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Simulations of Moksha: Liberation, Mysticism, and Transhumanism in Philip K. Dick's *Exegesis*

> I will conclude this nightmare marathon analysis by noting that my 10-volume meta-novel can herewith be newly—and perhaps finally correctly—understood. And it serves a very valuable (Gnostic) purpose, to emancipate the cosmogenitor from his own world, to which he is fallen victim.—Philip K. Dick, *Exegesis* 720.[1]

In Philip K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip* (1964), the Martian immigrant and repairmen Jack Bolen arrives at a school where automated teaching bots with names like "Angry Janitor" and "Kindly Dad" socialize children into appropriate forms of behavior. While he works, Jack notes that these bots are disturbing for how they peddle a culture to keep in place a set of values: "the Public School was an attempt to stabilize those values, to jell them at a fixed point—to embalm them" (65). Jack's prior schizophrenic episode, by contrast, is described as an instance where "a person … could not live out the drive implanted in him in society" (64). As he fixes the Kindly Dad, Jack declares that "you teaching machines are going to rear another generation of schizophrenics.… You're going to split the psyches of these children because you're teaching them to expect an environment which doesn't exist for them. It doesn't even exist back on Earth, now; it's obsolete" (75). At this point, Kindly Dad glitches, declaring on repeat "Yes, little Jackie, it has to be." Obligation—"it has to be"—is jammed on repeat in response to the disjunction of a new environment, which demands new cultural devices, new adaptations, and new modes of being.

Such tension arises when our technological systems solidify and perpetuate cultural practices while also disrupting the context and environment for that culture. In the half-century since the publication of *Martian Time-Slip*, this tension has become even more pronounced in the ongoing disruptions of environmental crisis, the unease of multinational corporations intervening in everything from DNA to space travel, the political upheavals and resurging nationalisms spurred by globalization and enabled by information technologies, and the worldwide disorientation caused by the coronavirus outbreak. In this environment, many of our global cultures are stuck on repeat, declaring "it has to be" even as new forms of response, adjustment, and socialization are needed. Yet in these moments of tumult, we seek a return to stability, what Dick describes as a neurotic perpetuation of the very culture that produces the schizophrenic break. We are jammed on repeat and need a release, a particular kind of liberation that I will mark as *moksha*, a term drawn from the mystical traditions with which Dick finds himself colliding as he searches for this release. While Dick's sf provides us with dozens of scenarios that work through this tension, this mystical turn continues to perplex his readers. In February and March of 1974, Dick experienced a transformation that shifted

his perspective on his life's work. Afterwards, he spent the last eight years of his life obsessively writing his "Exegesis," which attempts to understand this "2-3-74" experience, where, he says, he was beamed information from an entity he calls VALIS (the Vast Active Living Intelligence System). For many, this turn and resulting texts (including the semi-autobiographical novel *VALIS* [1981] and the *Exegesis* itself) are an enigma for an already enigmatic writer. What happened to Philip K. Dick?

A significant portion of the *Exegesis* was only published in 2011.[2] While working with this text, I have noticed something peculiar: the more I read Dick's *Exegesis*, the more it provides a powerful inquiry into these questions about insanity, adjustment, and transformation. On the other hand, the more I read commentary on this text, the crazier and weirder it appears. The *Exegesis* does contain bizarre claims that provide a basis for asserting Dick's insanity and for the fear, expressed by many both shortly after his death and now, that Dick was on his way to some L. Ron Hubbard-style religious cult.[3] But it also contains an accumulation of ideas, references, and questions that, if approached in the right way, provide a potent exploration of how to approach a reality that is not as stable and coherent as we routinely pretend. This tension is particularly noticeable in Erik Davis's recent *High Weirdness* (2019), which, although exceptionally generous to Dick's vision, focuses on its weirdness. Davis alternates between positive assessments of the text ("The Exegesis is … a learned, poignant, sometimes brilliant, and sometimes beautifully written text" [334]) and reminders of its weirdness ("It is a 'chaos of paper' stuffed with oracular voices, cosmic conspiracies, and a mass of sometimes half-digested religious, mythological, philosophical, and speculative ideas"[333]). Dick's text *is* often strange and disorienting. Yet when I turn back to the *Exegesis*, I find that, for all his strangeness, he has a persistently refined set of theories and a rationale for why he is writing so obsessively. He refuses the most science-fictional explanations of his experiences while reinterpreting his body of work in terms congruent with his basic realizations, and he presents a captivating means of pursuing some essential philosophical questions.[4] Dick's musings, in short, become an essential extension and clarification of his fiction, particularly those texts focused on breaking down and moving beyond ossified yet incongruent ideas, cultural forms, and personal beliefs.

Clearly, Dick's *Exegesis* needs to be more appropriately and thoroughly positioned in order to align his philosophical writings with his fiction in the context of this failure to adjust to the disruption of one's prized sense of reality. I want to do so here by building on Richard Doyle's Afterword to the published portion of Dick's *Exegesis,* which positions Dick as a "prophet of the information age" who "teaches us what it can feel like to be in an infoquake" (897). This claim can easily accommodate a negative reading of the *Exegesis*: Dick went insane because the information age is insane. But Doyle takes a different turn when he suggests that "Dick's arguments, diagrams, summaries, breakthroughs, and premature conclusions all put him

… squarely within what Aldous Huxley called 'the perennial philosophy': the 'contemplative' traditions at the core of all world religions" (898).

For many this is treacherous ground; scholars of religion have widely argued that perennialism is at best naïve and, at worst, a violent production of colonizing narratives.[5] Yet what if there is a reason that Dick found himself using the language of mysticism to explain his transformation? I argue here that this turn to a theological inquiry is a result of what has been called the "ontological uncertainty" of Dick's fiction. The problem is that mysticism is generally read in terms of religion, which represents, in so many ways, the prime example of cultural ossification. As a result, this religious reading does not clarify Dick's experience and how this experience relates to his writings. For instance, Gabriel Mckee discusses Dick's relationship to mysticism (see especially 68-71) in a way that helpfully distills Dick's place as a theologian, but does not fully explain why Dick found himself in religious discursive terrain, nor does it clarify the grounding for his inherently anti-dogmatic, anti-institutional approach. In turn, Davis positions this anti-dogmatism as a product of the 1970s, but while this explains a great deal about the character of Dick's musings, it does not clarify how to approach them as anything more than a curiosity. My question is how these relate together: how does this persistent anti-dogmatism relate to his mysticism, and how does all of this speak to our ability to become newly and more appropriately responsive to our highly entangled, globalized, technologically dense landscape?

With this question in mind, I want to re-frame the task of the *Exegesis* and the problem that generated it. My primary thesis is that Dick's *Exegesis* functions as a space for running simulations, examining and dissecting our cherished concepts and values in order to transform them. When we take the *Exegesis* in this way, these conceptual simulations complement and extend Dick's narrative simulations, which are designed to induce a disorientation that then needs to be navigated and developed into a broader reorientation. Using extracts from the *Exegesis* about the value, purpose, and means of reading the *Exegesis*, I will show that Dick conceptualized this task quite early in writing the *Exegesis* and that this task remains consistent throughout the *Exegesis*, even if he periodically forgot it. In fact, the task required that he forget it so that he could run the simulation anew.

Because this reading requires a reconsideration of "mysticism," this article will also reposition and clarify mysticism's relation to science fiction.[6] In the process, I use Dick's *Exegesis* to explore the notion of running simulations of and on one's sense of reality for the purpose of pushing past these ossifications. As Dick himself put it towards the end of his life, he was writing endlessly about the arrival of liberation, of moksha.[7] This freedom is an essential transformation of perspective working against the embalming of personal and cultural values.[8] The resulting discussion clarifies the rhetorical parameters of Dick's writing as a fictionalizing philosopher. What is at stake is the value of exegesis (of Dick, science fiction, any text, or experience itself) for questioning apparent reality as a given so that we can individually and collectively adjust to the demands of the present.

The Core Problematic: Experiencing Existence Beyond the Human. In his discussion of the weirdness of science fiction, Erik Davis invokes Seo-Young Chu's argument that the genre performs a kind of mimesis, not on directly apparent things but on the cognitively estranging (Chu 5; Davis 121). This argument extends Darko Suvin's classic definition of sf as estranging because it disrupts our assumptions about reality. Chu repositions this estrangement, arguing that what unites sf writers is "their capacity to generate mimetic accounts of aspects of reality that defy straightforward representations" (10). Chu's definition re-situates cognitive estrangement in relation to a basic problem for science: the fact that much of what science produces defies straightforward representation or understanding.

We can push this argument further by noting one reason why the need for "mimetic accounts" arises within science. Scale, in particular, highlights a paradox inherent within scientific descriptions. When science describes, visualizes, and manipulates cells, climate patterns, viruses, black holes, DNA molecules, Oort clouds, and quantum behaviors, it describes the world in a way that no human can directly experience, yet is still empirical and connected to experience. These different scales of evolving scientific knowledge rewrite our reality from a perspective outside of human perceptual domains, re-describing the objects available in everyday experience in unfamiliar ways. Changes in perspective are routine in science but become momentous when considered as transformations of our ways of viewing reality. How is it possible that we are simultaneously quarks, atoms, cells, bodies, and components in an ecological network, moments in the thermodynamic dispersal of the sun, and elements in the gravitational whirl of galaxies? We have all seen images and diagrams of cells, but how often do we think of those as being statements about what our bodies are? If we agree that our bodies are made up of semi-autonomous units called "cells" that are at this very moment performing complex operations that are not immediately apparent within our experience but nonetheless underlie it, what then are we to make of our sense of self-control, separate identity, self-making, and relative independence?

One can move from a basic scientific fact to such questions about our most basic assumptions only if we dwell on how scientific descriptions are already inherently estranging. Given that scientific knowledge has come to permeate our way of thinking, speaking, and acting, clearly such reflections are needed. In its ability to induce cognitive estrangement, sf serves as one productive venue for processing science's transformations in our perspective of the Cosmos. Yet it also inherits a difficulty: what do we make of these forms of knowledge that push us beyond immediate human experience?

This point about scale and cognitive estrangement hinges on the "human" as a particular domain of experience and cognition manifest within the biological, sensory, and tactile limits of the *Homo sapiens* body. Such limits run up against the "human" in the more critical sense arising from posthumanism, which critiques the notion of the human as a limited, historical

construct that has been more destructive and distorting than beneficial. Philosopher Rosi Braidotti points to posthumanism as marking "the decline of some fundamental premises of the Enlightenment, namely the progress of mankind through a self-regulatory and teleologically ordained use of reason and of secular scientific rationality allegedly aimed at the perfectibility of 'Man'" (37). Yet these notes about scale show that scientific rationality can disrupt and reorient those *Homo sapiens* who have learned to move beyond their limits by connecting their bodies up to the networks and devices of contemporary technoculture. When Cary Wolfe suggests that posthumanism "names a historical moment … which [performs a] decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatics, and economic networks" (xvi), we can see that this critique of the human in the historical sense comes from a moving beyond the human in the biological sense. This is another manifestation of the scalar contradiction just noted: how have humans made it possible to extend ourselves beyond ourselves? How do we handle the disorientation?

In her foundational text on the posthuman, N. Katherine Hayles reads sf (including Dick's) alongside the history of cybernetics to examine this tension between the revision of the human and popular accounts that seem to graft a "liberal humanist view of the self" onto a posthuman world (286-87). She is particularly distressed by Hans Moravec's description of brain-uploading, noting that "When Moravec imagines 'you' choosing to download yourself into a computer … he is not abandoning the autonomous liberal subject but is expanding its prerogatives into the realm of the posthuman." (287). This blending of sf narratives with cybernetic rhetoric leads Hayles to questions about the nature of the human and subjectivity as she productively untangles the hasty blend of sf tropes (brain uploading) and philosophical assertions made by Moravec.

Cary Wolfe responds to Hayles's concern by separating visions such as Moravec's from posthumanism and deeming this preservation of the human a defining aspect of "transhumanism" (xii-xv). Yet this confuses the issue since the human in the first sense (what *Homo sapiens* experiences due to its biological limits) is not lost but rather extended and transformed by our technoscientific productions. To understand this extension of human capacities and experience, Andrew Pilsch positions "transhumanism" as a tradition for thinking about how our technoscientific moment is transforming our concepts and capabilities. As Pilsch shows, the term "transhumanism" can be traced to Dante—the term *transumanar* appears in Canto I of *Paradiso*—as part of a recurring experimentation with what it means for humans to develop capacities beyond their supposed limits. Importantly, Pilsch emphasizes the change in scale: "the body that … consumes these transhuman technologies becomes a technological body on orders of magnitude previously unimaginable in human history" (8). Pilsch notes that sf has been essential to this attempt to understand this new scalar position, and that early sf frequently returned to the question of how humans extend beyond themselves.

In tracing visions of transhumanism from Dante through twentieth-century figures such as Teilhard de Chardin and P.D. Ouspensky, Pilsch highlights a relationship between transcending the human and mysticism. For Pilsch, this connection between Dante and modern transhumanists "provides a thread of shared thought between the mystical overcoming of human cognitive limits and the transhuman overcoming of human physical ones" (39). He notes that many transhumanists seem to be articulating a "cybernetic mysticism" that aims to understand shifts in thought brought about by new technologies *as* a means of transforming the human in this ongoing expansion of cognitive and physical capacities.[9] The more problematic elements of transhumanism (such as brain uploading), Pilsch argues, arise from the "basic incommensurability between the ecstatic content of the transhuman vision and language's inability to transmit that vision" (61). When considered in relation to Hayles's critique of Moravec, Pilsch adds an essential connection: a refusal of mysticism is directly related to the reassertion of a humanist notion of the self as an embalming of outdated concepts within a new informatic context. This tension is demonstrated when transhumanist philosopher Nick Bostrom states that transhumanism would like to "learn to think about 'big-picture' questions without resorting to wishful thinking or mysticism" (qtd. in Pilsch 121). In response, Pilsch suggests that a "more mystic transhumanism" is needed to adequately understand our relationship to technology and our way of imagining the future (61).

Why "more mystic"? The term "mysticism" circles around a set of ideas and practices that aim at developing an awareness of a reality beyond human limits.[10] The religious-studies scholar Arthur Versluis defines mysticism as "the contemplative ascent of the individual from duality to subject-object transcendence.… Mysticism is a word for coming to recognize transcendent reality for oneself" (7-8). This shares a strategic connection with posthumanism in its rethinking of the traditional subject-object (or human-other) duality. What if "mysticism" can function as a comparative term for those traditions and writers attempting to move beyond subject-object? If so, mysticism arises from a particular reaction to encountering the limits of the human. What if science, in extending humans beyond the human, finds itself in mystical territory when we attempt to reconcile our "selves" with these extensions? In my examination of scale, I found that when scientists attempt to make this reconciliation, their inquiries overlap significantly with mystical articulations. Thus I define mysticism as "the branch of inquiry that aims to induce and integrate encounters with nonhuman scales, particularly the cosmic scale" (*Scaling Theory*).

This secular definition of mysticism requires cognitive estrangement, whether from sf or some other technique. Since human experience is patched together in a subject-object configuration, we assume our "selves" to be these bodies that are coherently here in advance and able to be designated subjects in relation to objects external to us. A breakdown in this configuration requires a significant reorientation, which produces this soteriological (relating to liberation, or salvation) element: it is because we do not usually experience

reality outside our human confines that we must be "freed" in some sense from these limits. If our whole experience, language, and values are formed within a limited, nonscalar, human-bound experience, then the reorientation implied by a scalar, mystic transhumanism requires a reworking of these ingrained cognitive forms. In some sense, mysticism aims for a systematic and extensive cognitive estrangement that brings this re-cognizing to its fullest reaches.

Sf can provide such estrangement, but this does not mean that sf is inherently mystical. For example, the scalar encounters of Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (1985), in which microbes are made intelligent, or Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014), a parable of environmental horror, are not mystical even as they perform significant feats of cognitive estrangement, because they are works about the horror of encountering these scales of existence rather than a reconciliation and extension into this cosmic, scalar perspective. They focus on these new scales without providing a clear means for reorienting to this new configuration. In Dick's fiction there is certainly plenty of horror and disorientation. Dick uses the inherent ambiguities in technoscientific productions—the androids in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), the immersive simulations of *A Maze of Death* (1970) and *The Simulacra* (1964), the artifacts of war in *Dr. Bloodmoney* (1965) and *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), space travel in *Our Friends from Frolix 8* (1970), cryonics in *Ubik* (1969), and drugs in *A Scanner Darkly* (1977) and *Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965)—to disorient our sense of reality. Yet, in the *Exegesis* and post-1974, there is a breaking-through that reverses the horror, even inverts it or converts it into an ecstatic transformation. This switch from horror to ecstatic transformation is characteristic of mysticism and is a potential result of cognitive estrangement. But just as science does not always lead us to radical inquiries about scale, producing this transformation requires a particular kind of following-through on this reorientation in order to convert responses such as horror into a new stance and new values. The *Exegesis* is one attempt to simulate this transformation of thought and language while navigating these avenues of horror, insanity, doubt, and disorientation. Dick finds a way through this disorientation that makes disorientation the central technique.

An Outline of a Mystical (Re)orientation: Reading *Ubik* through The *Exegesis*: "It's all there in *Ubik*, could I exegete" (214). A much-acclaimed novel praised for its postmodern and Marxist themes, *Ubik* nonetheless runs up against perhaps the central tenet of postmodern philosophy, now largely inherited by posthumanists: what Lyotard calls an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv). The problem is that although *Ubik* provides an excellent portrayal of ontological uncertainty, it contains the central figure of "Ubik" that patches together and sustains reality. Understanding the relationship between "Ubik" and ontological uncertainty will therefore clarify Dick's turn to mysticism by highlighting some basic attributes of mystical

experience as well as the interpretive tensions that arise between mystical and non-mystical ways of reading Dick's fiction.

Ubik is a story that depends upon ontological uncertainty: the first portion reads like a typical sf novel until a bomb explodes. The novel continues as normal with the characters not critically injured, until parts of reality start to decay or, more bizarrely, regress to more primitive states. We learn that the characters are likely dead and in the cryogenic freezing known as "cold-pac." At the end, a typical Dick reversal occurs: Runciter, the main boss who is supposedly alive, experiences a similar decay as if he too is in cold-pac. We are left disoriented: what then is real? This is the essence of ontological uncertainty that makes Dick comparable to Borges, Kafka, and Italo Calvino.[11]

In addition, the novel is laced with economic concerns and has often been read as a meditation on biopolitics.[12] Dick became aware of early criticism of this sort by Darko Suvin, Fredric Jameson, and others whom he referred to as "The Marxists" (see *Exegesis* xvi). In one unpublished passage, Dick recounts meeting "the Marxists" in the mid-1970s, noting that they "took great interest in "Ubik" and wanted to know what Ubik was" (38:24). Dick's answer, however, was unacceptable:

> it is the Logos, St. Sophia, but the Marxists, although evidently aware of its existence (how come?) could not accept that explanation. They may be right; a more modern, more precise formulation may be possible. I am not able to do that; I keep falling back on traditional stereotyped theological terms and concepts. (38:24-25)

Here Dick runs into resistance to religious language specifically and metanarratives generally. How could this ontological uncertainty lead to the transcendent Reality that had been repeatedly exorcised from philosophy since it was barred by Kant and declared dead by Nietzsche?

In this vein, one resistance to Dick's mysticism is to treat his turn to *Ubik* and his post 2-74 work as an attempt to refuse or resolve the ontological uncertainty of his novels. Yet, Dick, both in *Ubik* and in the *Exegesis*, insists that this transcendent reality is a result of the ontological uncertainty. Dick notes that "I guessed a long time ago that the world we perceive is a simulation, but this diagnosis only makes sense when you can point to a real world as contrast, and this, prior to 2-74, I could not do" (341). This passage reworks Jean Baudrillard's statement that in Dick's work "the reader is, from the outset, in a total simulation without origin, past, or future—in a kind of flux of all coordinates…The simulation is impassable, unsurpassable, checkmated, without exteriority" (311). On one level, Baudrillard is correct, as Dick would leave nothing out of the simulation—all that we call "reality" is itself part of the simulation. But Dick obviously refuses this final impassability, both narratively in *Ubik* and personally after 2-3-74. For Dick, the stakes are soteriological; they are about being freed from the limited human-bound ways of constructing reality. They are about actually finding Ubik.

Ubik provides a context for this entrapment through its critique of capitalism. Joe Chip, the main character, finds himself incapable of basic money management in a world that requires money for everything (including opening your own door). In turn, Ubik is introduced as a kind of commodity—a medicine that can be applied to the world to stabilize it. In addition, messages informing the characters that they are dead and instructing them to find Ubik are discovered on consumer products such as cigarette cartons. The epigraphs to each chapter work Ubik into an advertisement for various consumer products, from razors to deodorant, until in the final chapter, the epigraph reads as a biblical statement of divinity: "I am Ubik. Before the universe was, I am. I made the suns. I made the worlds. I created the lives and places they inhabit.… I am the word and my name is never spoken, the name which no one knows. I am called Ubik, but that is not my name. I am. I shall always be" (226). Pervasive economic valuation gives way to this transcendent essence that is expressed already within and through the very commodities that trap the characters. This is the essential maneuver for Dick: that he found god in trash in the gutter.[13] Dick makes a lot of this statement in the *Exegesis*; over time, he came to recognize this manifesting of the divine in the most mundane as a basic aspect of his encounter with Ubik or Valis. Yet this statement needs to be situated within a mystical perspective expressed by the classic Sanskrit phrase "*tat tvam asi*"—you are that, meaning that you are already the undivided whole (Brahman) experiencing itself here (as Atman). Dick invokes this phrase directly in 1978: "My realization then in 2-3-74 is the highest realization that can come to a person, irrespective of his particular religion: tat tvam asi. You are God" (410). The counterpart to this is that if you are God, so is everything else; therefore, it makes sense that you would see God in the most mundane trash rather than in some exceptional location.

Within the critique of capitalism, "the Marxists" wanted to know what Ubik is because it points to a salve that, even in the face of renewed attempts to commodify and capitalize, can break through the totalizing hold of economic value. If we read Dick as a simulation without outside, however, we refuse this possible breakthrough. One of "the Marxists"—Fredric Jameson—once wrote to this effect, stating that what happens in critical theory

> is that the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic … the more powerless the reader comes to feel. Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralyzed. (5-6)

Even within Marxist critique, the refusal of Ubik leaves one in a bind: what is the way beyond the powerful value-structure of capital for Joe Chip, for ourselves? In *Ubik* and in his post 2-3-74 musings, Dick suggests that this change in perspective (the finding and applying of Ubik, even as it manifests amongst the detritus of capitalism) is necessary if economic commodification is to lose its hold as the organizing and totalizing reference point for value.

In this context we can return to "the Marxists'" original question—what exactly is Ubik?—and delineate features of Dick's Ubik and the experience of it, adding these points about the reorientation of the human to his "traditional stereotyped terms and concepts." First, Dick's divine entity is noticeably scalar. Not only is Valis first and foremost "vast," but Dick ties Valis to classic scalar articulations: most commonly, Greek notions of the One (particularly in Parmenides and Plotinus), the hermetic microcosm-macrocosm, and the Vedantic distinction between Atman and Brahman (developed greatly by Shankara). For example, Dick writes in 1980: "have I not said that the essence of Valis is unity, that Valis above all is, through structure, unitary? This, then is Plotinus' One or God. And unity is what I saw that made me realize I had seen Valis" (601). This notion of the One (macrocosm, Brahman) relates directly to the place of oneself (microcosm, Atman) as two scales of viewing the same thing (the Cosmos). Dick persistently writes from this scalar perspective, such as when he states that:

> We have no independent (discrete) existence whatsoever.... The role of Christ in this is to wake us up and hence make us aware of our condition.... [I]t is epiphany of the macro-mind in person: a micro-form of it, like a mirror.... Here the views of Sankara come in. The macro-mind is moving toward consciousness throughout its total self. Every person who wakes up is a Christos: a micro-form of the total mind. The macro-mind is overjoyed when a constituent wakes into consciousness: it means a glad reunion.... The component remembers its identity—and perceptually sees reality as it actually is. (563)

To see reality as it "actually is" is to grasp this larger configuration of oneself as already a micro-brain within this macro-brain.[14] In 1980, Dick brings these ideas together:

> "The self is everywhere."... And: "we are each parts." ... Valis—where is it? It is not in the human mind that sees it. It is not in the world. It is in both—superimposed as one. It is in neither (alone). It is an event, when the human mind—the self—superimposes itself in union (syzygy) with the world. Which is to say, when Atman and Brahman become another universe higher than either. (Either alone). Brahman alone is everywhere and underlies all objects and change.... Together they form Valis: everywhere, causing everything, and conscious. (570)

The localized human discovers itself as a form of this vast Cosmos—a truly mystic transhumanism. Feeling this shift intensely one evening, Dick writes,

> It is an omni-faceted revolving sphere of some kind reflecting back at us what we project, or what something in us or—well, Brahman, nice to meet you, you cunning dreamer of worlds, how obliging you are, right down to the minute trivia. Not only can you assume (take, take on, be, appear to be) any form, but all forms. I always come back to you when I push this far enough. I'm right, then, in my writing, aren't I? Silly putty universes, a whole lot of them. But underneath it's you.... Emerson was right. Tat tvam asi—here I am, one of the forms you take, writing about you, figuring out your ways—Brahman

> delighting in detecting Brahman; this may be one of your favorite games. (375-76)

The reorientation here is not horrific or weird except from the perspective of the ego that reels at this new configuration and balks at the apparent breakdown of its reality: "The transformation from the inauthentic to the authentic mode requires the sacrificial death of the illusory psyche, a difficult price to pay—difficult to make because for a little time it means the extinction of the person" (390). What from one perspective is a reinvigoration and in-breaking of ecstasy (etymologically, to be beside oneself), is from another perspective horrific:

> In this dying system Valis breaks bringing new life and energy as if invading our world (which is not a real world). To encounter him is to encounter the uncanny, the inexplicable, the destroyer (rather than sustainer) of what we misconstrue to be world. It is his macromind shattering the brittle and congealed husk of our own objectified prior thoughts which imprison and devitalize us. (482)

This redescribes the distress of cognitive estrangement as the breakdown of the illusion that our world of experience, concepts, and values is in any way absolute. This view suggests that such cosmic horror is a common yet not necessarily required pit-stop on the way to healing: "Strangest of all, the Upper Realm … seems to be this realm, this world of the dialectic, of flux, seen another way—as if the Gnostics were right; and to see it healed is to cause it to be healed.… To see unity is to cause repair" (601). In *Ubik* this process is literalized as Ubik, the salve sustaining the world.

This change in perspective is not the addition of something new, but the breakdown of an already existing Gestalt: "When I saw Valis, reality was breaking down (to what it really consisted of), and not an invasion of reality. This 'breaking down' in the sense of breaking down an engine or model of something to see what it's made out of. This is a de-Gestalting" (543). The mystical experience lies in transforming how this "human" parses reality, making room for a reality beyond the human through an observation of its limits. This inversion—to break down reality is to get to reality—is the heart of all of Dick's work: "The cardinal fixed idea of all my writing has been … (1) Reality is not what appears to be and (2) I am not who and what I think I am" (218). These two disorientations are related: the disorientation of self and the breakdown of reality are necessary conditions for moving beyond a human-bound perspective. Yet for reorientation to begin, some kind of disorientation has to occur. In another section, Dick writes that "I think I've figured out the basic move necessary: an ethical balking. That is how the world-denying begins. That is the first step in unraveling the counterfeit quality of the world" (271). This is the basis of Dick's method, both in his novels and the *Exegesis*: a balking at what appears to be reality so that one refuses to accept the world produced by the *Homo sapiens* body and attendant cultures as absolute.

Dick came to see this balking as the persistent aspect not only in his work but his life. In this context he makes one of his most direct statements about his relationship to mystical experience:

> Without knowing it, during the years I wrote, my thinking and writing was a long journey toward enlightenment. I first saw the illusory nature of space when I was in high school. In the late 40s I saw that causality was an illusion. Later, during my 27 years of published writing, I saw the mere hallucinatory nature of world, and also of self (and memories). Year after year, book after book and story, I shed illusion after illusion: self, time, space, causality, world—and finally sought (in 1970) to know what was real. Four years later, at my darkest moment of dread and trembling, my ego crumbling away, I was granted Dibba Cakkhu [Divine Eye]. (392)

Anyone familiar with post-1960s American spiritual culture may be dismissive of Dick's claim to enlightenment here, a claim often prematurely awarded to oneself as a kind of badge.[15] Yet this is less a claim to a status and more a description of an event: what Dick is calling the "divine eye" is the result of a persistent ethical balking, an on-going renunciation of the world to make room for a larger reality to break in and reorient his perspective.

Dick's invocation of enlightenment is not a self-aggrandizement (although there is a dose of this that he will come to critique later), but a recognition that 2-3-74 resonates with larger traditions of contemplation. Early in the *Exegesis*, Dick speaks of his experience as directly identified with mysticism: "At the height of my 'mystic' experience, which is to say, my extremely heightened perception of reality, I saw my environment decline in intensity; whereas at the same time, I felt an inner self … grow dynamically" (122). And later: "I had an absolute insight into the way everything linked up and functioned together, which is the mystic insight par excellence.… What I had is common to mystical experience" (186). Over time, Dick develops a nuanced notion of mysticism, suggesting at one point that his experience "was not precisely mystical" (604) because it did not fit with nuances he saw within some accounts of mystical experience. Ultimately, Dick invokes the term mysticism to understand the nature of his experience, not to fit it into a tradition or dogma. As he states in 1980, "What is really pointed to is: the Absolute is non-sectarian: it is Christian and Brahmanist and Platonist and Taoist all at once. If it really is the Absolute, this should be expected" (616).

This "Absolute" is an attempt to comprehend an experience defined by this sense of freedom, of moksha. This aspect remains consistent throughout the *Exegesis*, even in its many supposedly "fresh starts." Near the end of his life, Dick writes, "Okay. The one billionth fresh start. All of it—2-74-2-75—and what the AI voice has said, and all the revelations and visions—it's all indubitably this: soteriology. That is clear" (888). Freedom emerges out the other end of the ontological uncertainty found in *Ubik* and many of his other novels. Dick's position does not resolve this uncertainty but follows through on its effect, turning the reality disruption into a radical reorientation accompanied by a reworking of one's perspective and values. This

reorientation is what he wants us to experiment with, not a new doctrine or correct articulation—a truth that is only true because it will set you free.[16]

The Task of the *Exegesis*: Simulations of Moksha. This massive, sprawling, text that Dick called his *Exegesis* responds to a particular rhetorical challenge, which can be called "the contemplative rhetorical situation." This situation dictates the aims and functions of such writing while also providing parameters for effectively approaching it. In the middle of 1975, Dick has already worked out the basic situation. After an encounter beyond-the-human—what Dick names an "authentic holy-possession experience"—one attempts to understand what happened, to "cast back to figure out who it was" (170). This searching leads to a question: "can we be sure these different religious groups are experiencing different entities—or rather isn't it just the names which differ?" Yet Dick admits that "after 14 months, all I really know is that I don't know anything except what happened to me." This recognition leads to a crucial realization: "Maybe there just is no common language between our space-time universe and the Eternal World, or common concepts; or ours just don't apply" (170). Dick then glimpses the situation as a task:

> I can see where it is an enormous task, really beyond our ability, when we (I mean religious leaders, those actually into forming religions and subsects) struggle with such a titanic fiery wind from another universe, a far vaster reality in all respects … trying to codify it, put it into linguistic categories, trying to figure it out, cope with the enormous paradoxes which effortlessly transcend and defy human reason…. [W]e're all getting massive headaches and sitting up all night trying and trying to explain ourselves and to write it down coherently. (170)[17]

Since the experience, by definition, exceeds human categories, the articulations generated sound not only strange but futile:

> the secular world supposes that religion is a fake and a snare and we've got nothing to offer but a lot of flak talk, but in fact the reality behind the words is so far removed from what we can comprehend that our problem is really trying to reduce it and make our kind of sense out of it, and always failing failing, and never giving up, knowing what it means but never being able to get it right, never, never, always seeing something new or previously unseen, always understanding it better, giving up and then starting over, getting closer and closer, wondering if we were meant to try this. (170-71)

Yet this wondering prompts him to articulate the point of such attempts:

> But it's a way of remembering what happened. Of recalling it. The prolonged, arduous work shows that something happened. As they say in modern semantics and philosophy: the word 'banana' points to something which we call a banana but isn't, because 'banana' is the word, not the thing pointed to. In this case the disparity between words and the thing pointed to are probably the greatest possible. In 14 months, I've found that my experience fits every description of personal mystic religious experience and none, every specific religion and none: each system or explanation works as well as any other, but none really is congruent; there is always a part left over, and in the night that

> small unexplained part or fact grows like the mustard seed or the leaven until it is the whole loaf or landscape by morning. It's as if the experience itself were alive. (171)

This process, defined so early, would continue for the next seven years as Dick found many more ways of recalling this situation. Near the end of his life, Dick will say nearly the same thing again:

> Now, I will certainly natter on past this point, worry and ponder and obsessively write for years to come; but this is a kind of tribute on my part to the importance of what I underwent, what I saw, what I learned; it is a way of preserving the memory of it all, this endless rehashing: that is the real point, to keep the memory—which is so cherished—alive.... But this is what an exegesis of a mystical experience is for, to develop it rationally, so that it can be expressed in words. Words fail in the end, though. But the attempt must be made. (611)

In addition to the work of recollection, Dick also introduces early on the literally rhetorical question: "why doesn't it occur more often?" (159). From this question, Dick situates the difficulty in relation to the solidification of human-based categories:

> From a total relaxation (a giving up) of the automatization of perception, the 'model of the universe' each of us builds—through weariness or despair or fear; it breaks down to reveal the koinos kosmos beneath, which to our surprise is like the Magic Garden.... We like to be able to recognize everything. To know (label) what it is. Our early textbooks teach us to do this (horse, cow, car, mother). Once we have identified everything, then reality has passed away and we're in a world of the familiar, stuck there because we wanted it that way.... [I]t's a form of scientific-magic; it depotentiates the menacing and the hostile by abolishing the unknown. (172)[18]

This basic maneuver of categorization and recognition is fundamental to our sense of reality; it makes a world that is safe and familiar but at the cost of making these categories seem absolute. Some technique is therefore needed to undo this solidification: "But to reach us, the actual information (Logos) has to breach a veritable wall of spurious flack. It must break the hold which the false information as world has on us" (327). Dick situates this process as a rhetorical task: "There is still, upon having seen [the insubstantiality of categories], the problem of conveying and comprehending it" (172). In this view, the *Exegesis*—or this kind of exegesis more generally—aims not only to recall the experience but to continue the process of breaking down the solidification of the categories.

The writing seems to work; it does something substantial and positive for Dick over the next six and a half years. In November 1980, Dick writes of an experience in which a God figure appears to him as the infinite and forces him to reckon with this endless speculation as inherently less than that infinite. Every time Dick attempts to come up with a theory, God simply reasserts "Infinity, play again" (639-643). This moment of meta-reflection causes Dick to reassess the value of the *Exegesis*:

> the—this—exegesis came before the theophany. The exegesis finally reached the conclusion that everything I had seen in 2-3-74 had to do with the world ("a perturbation in the reality field")…. However, this sudden transformation in world in 2-3-74 did show that world as we normally see it is indeed a delusion; it's just that what replaced normal world was no more real, just more sophisticated and complex, and, to me, not just more convincing but totally convincing! I believed for over 6 ½ years that I had seen true reality, in contradistinction to the previous Maya; but … it was just a more cunning Maya. As I say in *VALIS*, the maze is alive and it changes. (656-57)

This is not a contradiction or rejection of the *Exegesis* but a fulfillment of its task. The rejection of his interpretations of 2-3-74—especially the assertion that he had seen God—was a further development of the breaking down of the habit of treating limited categories and concepts as (the) Absolute.

The key to reading the *Exegesis* productively is to understand the conditions for the transformation that would permit Dick to move beyond even his own prized cosmic speculations. I will summarize five of these conditions. First, Dick had to accept the existence of multiple narratives that could be simultaneously true as attempts to point to and develop a particular experience. Much later he would develop this perennial perspective as a series of "programs" that he positions within his novels: "[*VALIS*] contains a number of … 'sacred narratives,' not just one; and different mythic rites reperformed keypunch you into entry into particular narratives among the plural narratives; and I call these 'programs'" (607).

Second, the primary purpose is rhetorical, i.e., for transformation of one's values and modes of response.[19] Any given narrative is what Richard Doyle calls a "rhetorical software"—"linguistic, visual, musical, and narrative sequences whose function resides less in their 'meaning' than in their capacity to be repeated and help generate patterns of response" (*Darwin's Pharmacy* 52). To this end, Dick points to the rhetorical function of paradox: "The paradox does not tell; it points. It is a sign, not the thing pointed to. That which is pointed to must arise ex nihilo in the mind of the person. The paradox, the koan tells him nothing: it wakes him up" (703).

Third, the possibilities must be explored internally—on ourselves: "He must actually go through the experience—not just knowledge—of the irreality of himself and his projected world" (390). In facing the paradox, Dick notes that "What has been most needed is reality testing, and a willingness to face the possibility of self-negating experience: i.e., real contradictions, with something being both true and not true" (517). Reality testing is central to the whole operation; earlier he notes that he "must go where the truth (as I've experienced it) takes me" (203). Throughout the *Exegesis*, Dick models this attitude:

> Reality outside confronts me as a mystery, as so does my own inner identity. The two are fused. Who am I? When is it? Where am I? This sounds like madness. But when I read the Scriptures I find myself in the world which is to me real, and I understand myself. The Bible is a door. (261)

"The Bible is a door" when read as a means of testing reality: "The individual human of [our current age] doesn't read scripture; he writes Scripture (produces it himself out of himself)" (597). In turn, Dick's own disorienting prodding might serve as a site for encountering our own stabilization of values and practices, but only if we produce it out of ourselves, i.e., treat these articulations as rhetorical programs run on our ourselves.

Fourth, we need to keep in view the limits of articulation. For Dick, the rewriting, discarding, and frequent expressions of doubt are crucial for this operation:

> all the ideas in the world … have a practical purpose—as a cloud of mental ink…. [A]ny and all ideas I get as to my identity, nature, purpose, and origin is just scatter, random flak, each idea as real as the next; like white noise. And the closer I get to knowing, the more scramble of conflicting ideas; ultimately an infinitude—including this idea. Hence the endless paradoxes, and the fact that I can't finalize or stabilize my exegesis—it's for my (and our?) protection. (493-94)

But this white noise does not mean that an effect did not occur, only that the expressions must always be negated in turn: "Epistemologically, what I really know is all negatives: that what we see is not real" (659). Even more to the point: "There is no rational way out of the maze, no rigid formula. Rigid formulas are maze constructs" (769).

In the end, Dick rediscovers again and again that, fifth, the only real metric for the experience and articulation is the effect it has on you:

> What I have achieved during these past seven years is to deepen and augment my mental ability to conceive of and comprehend what in 3-74 I perceived, and, ultimately, this is an apprehension, a comprehension, of God, of the divine nature of being…. Whether it is 'true' or not depends on what you mean by true. What if the experience itself is not true? To me that question is unintelligible; it is my experience: it belongs to me, is a part of me, and by construing a model adequate to it I make it a permanent part of me, not something that escapes. If my model works, if it is an adequate representation, I can … convert it back into something like the original experience, so it is an encoding, an informational analog of that experience (to the degree that I have been successful). I am a device on which God renders an impression, hopefully a permanent impression; it will be permanent if—and to the degree that—I function correctly. It is not a doctrine or even a theory … ; it is an impression, a change in me as to what I am. I have become not the same, due to what happened, and this has been a task, an act stretching over years on my part. (710)

The central guide here is a result: a change as to what I am. Everything else is an outgrowth of ongoing transformation. Such a development is primarily negative from a conceptual perspective: the recombinant narrativizing is meant to keep oneself committed not to an articulation but to reality testing.

These five points can be found in one passage from June 1981:

> No, there will be no one Scripture (narrative); it will perpetually recombine uniquely for each situation and person, so instead of one narrative there will

> be an infinitude of narratives; but for each choice situation the recombinant message will be appropriate. No one thing is right or true. The mind that recombines the meta-morphemes is 'in' the person, not outside him; it is him. (765)

In this mode, one would approach the *Exegesis* (or any exegesis of this kind) as Dick himself does: as the ongoing recombination within oneself of the possible effects yielded by the process of running (and re-running) a program challenging and transforming our prized concepts, values, and sense of reality.

Simulating Getting Lost in the Simulation: *VALIS* as cypher. We can now pose the obligatory question: if we run the simulations on the transitory nature of reality, as Dick prompts, what will happen? We can see a frank example of this concern in Davis's *High Weirdness*: "I wanted to see what happened when I brought rigorous theoretical and methodological approaches to bear on some seriously weird shit. But at the last minute I balked.... I feared losing my way, and possibly my sanity, in the loopy labyrinths of the *Exegesis*" (381-82). Davis is undoubtedly not alone in this hesitation. And yet what exactly are we afraid of? What will happen if these ideas are taken seriously but not dogmatically, appreciating the humor but understanding that there is value in the articulation, rereading Dick's valuable oeuvre from the perspective of this transformation in perspective? Dick himself writes that "The transformation ... requires the sacrificial death of the illusory psyche, a difficult price to pay" (390). Only at a "moment of dread and trembling, my ego crumbling away" did he find himself experiencing this transformation (392). This framing suggests that the insistence that Dick's work is so weird can become a defense mechanism to avoid experimenting with it ourselves and facing this moment of dread as our cherished categories crumble into ontological uncertainty and cognitive estrangement. This resistance further embalms our entrenched ideas, as we saw in *Martian Time-Slip*, at the very moment that our human-bound perspective is dying away. In such an encounter, the going does get weird as our little human brains attempt to reorient themselves to this new perspective. Yet Dick models this approach as he faces the weird disorientations, sits with the distress, refuses to back down, critiques himself with brutal honesty, and sticks insistently to the central task with a continual prodding rather than a believing acceptance.

In fact, Dick anticipated this kind of hedging and worked it into the simulation of the *Exegesis*—even made it central to the simulations of moksha. In addition to Dick's persistent modeling of doubt throughout the *Exegesis*, the novel *VALIS* is largely a meditation on ways of running awry in this kind of exegesis, getting lost in the tangle of ideas, the possible allures of religious exceptionalism, and the ambiguity of possibly going insane. Indeed, near his death Dick took to calling *VALIS* his "cypher-book," a "code-book" to his novels and his writing more generally (777). Without *VALIS*, few would have known about the *Exegesis* since it provides a science-fictionalized version of 2-3-74 and the writing of the *Exegesis*. Yet Dick notes that "*VALIS* in itself means nothing!" (777). Elsewhere Dick states that "in *VALIS* I transmuted

myself and my life into a picaroon character.... *VALIS'* message is not the Parousia but pistis" (689). In other words, *VALIS* is about belief (pistis) and not about successful exegesis (Parousia, the arrival of the divine). The novel is meant to head off this problem of belief and train its reader in possible ways of aborting the simulation, as the baseline required to teach us how to run the simulation.

VALIS is built around one possible reaction to Dick's experience and to the *Exegesis*: he has gone insane. It is a largely autobiographical account of Horselover Fat, a translation of Philip from Greek and Dick from German, who is writing a "Tractate" after VALIS has beamed him information. The novel presents Horselover Fat as insane: he is split from the narrator, the sf novelist named Phil. In this simulated (fictionalized) insanity, Philip K. Dick (the author) has Fat, Phil (the narrator), and their friends conduct zany discussions about the meaning of Fat's experience, including the possibility that Fat has gone insane. *VALIS* is a layered simulation whereby Dick is able to reflect on this possibility, which is useful both because he often considered this possibility for himself and because he was widely read in this way as soon as he started talking to people about 2-3-74.[20]

The frame above helps us see why this semblance of insanity arises. As in the musings on schizophrenia in *Martian Time-Slip*, Dick insists that "weariness or despair or fear" can break down the reliance on stabilized categorization that locks us into our limited perspective and structure of values. Throughout *VALIS* and the *Exegesis*, he shows that this type of breakdown can be distinguished from mental illness. The difficulty is that this new perspective redefines insanity or madness in two separate ways. On the one hand, insanity is flipped so that what we think is the sane world is actually said to be insane: "My insanity, given an insane world, is, paradoxically, a facing of reality, and this is sane; I refuse to close my eyes and ears" (*Exegesis* 692). Or, as he says in *VALIS*, "someone in touch with reality is, by definition, in touch with the insane" (37). In 2-3-74, Dick seemed to be in contact with the irrational in this sense because it is beyond the literal ratio-making, categorizing structures on which human experience is built. On the other hand, there is a kind of madness in the hunger to get beyond a limited perspective, often described, as in Soren Kierkegaard's philosophy, as a hunger for the infinite, a description that can be traced to ancient texts such as Plato's *Phaedrus*. Dick writes:

> the finite creature's hunger for the infinite is such that it will drive itself mad in its search; … this is the cause of my psychosis that began to take over and lasted until 2-74; … I was psychotic until 2-74, as I suspected, but now I see why; … the inbreaking of the infinite "sombers the landscape"; that is, the madness is abolished for what I construe as logical reasons. Drugs did not cause my psychosis; Nancy and Isa leaving did not; normal schizophrenia did not; anxiety and danger and suffering (in particular '71) did not; poverty did not. It was generated by (a) a hunger for the infinite; and (b) the necessary impossibility of the finite creature discovering the infinite. (884)

This passage flips the usual assumption: rather than going insane after 1974, Dick is arguing here that he was insane before 1974, yet underlying his madness was a hunger for the infinite. From this perspective, the experiences after 1974 were not a mental breakdown but a healing. This fits with the musings on mental illness from *Martian Time-Slip*; it points to the need to break through entrenched human limitations as the source of mental imbalance. In the spring of 1979 Dick writes:

> I am sobered; I have lived on fantasy and immensely enjoyed my alleged heroic status. My basic delusion was to actually believe it was possible that a Soviet espionage ring (KGB) would contact me; that is psychotic and grandiose … I grossly overestimate my importance to all concerned. What I have to face now is that a lot of what I believed was psychotic. Simple paranoia would have sufficed. (515)

Dick does not say here that his Valis experience was insane, but rather separates out the paranoia, psychosis, and delusions of grandeur from the more sober assessment of the theophany.

We can likewise push against attempts to refuse the significance of Dick's experience on psychological grounds, as N. Katherine Hayles does in a footnote to *Exegesis* suggesting that the experience can be read as an "internally generated as a cerebral event, accompanied by the rearrangement of his neural circuitry (232)."[21] Saying that an experience is a cerebral event does not say anything about the significance of the change, how that change correlates to experiential shifts, or whether that shift relates to something substantive, as Dick does in the *Exegesis*. Likewise, when commentators suggest that the *Exegesis* is primarily psychotherapy for his various troubles, one might ask again about the nature of this therapy and the transformation. These therapeutic frames often attempt to humanize Dick, but they also serve to empty his work of its substantial posthuman element.[22]

Ultimately, this meditation on insanity is viewed most productively in the split between Fat and Phil. This split is about the perils of pistis (belief) and religious exceptionalism as a means of voiding the Gestalt switch even as you accept it as a belief. In *VALIS*, Fat meets a secret society that has discovered the divine incarnated in a little girl named Sophia. When they meet her, she immediately cures the split between Phil and Fat. Within the simulation, the fictionalized device whereby Phil is able to speculate about his Valis experience disappears. Shortly thereafter, Sophia offers a mystic transhumanist teaching: "man is holy, and the true god, the living god, is man himself. You will have no gods but yourselves" (219). Here, the end of the fictional splitting culminates in directing the divinity back to oneself. While one could read this statement in a humanist frame akin to the Protagorean "Man is the measure of all things," when placed in a mystical frame Sophia's statement is simply another iteration of tat tvam asi, the identification of self (Atman) with the divine (Brahman). Even though Fat is told that man himself is the living god, he still searches for divinity outside himself. When Sophia dies, Fat/Phil falls into confusion, uncertain where the divine has gone, and the two are split

again. The reality is that, just as both Fat and Phil are actually simulations being run by Dick (or the reader), the madness is actually, as Phil yells at Fat towards the end, a failure to see that "there is no 'Zebra' … it is yourself. Don't you recognize yourself?" (243).

This is not "yourself" as Dick (the identity associated with a body that died in 1982) or Phil (the narrator of stories) or Horselover Fat (our imagined enlightened selves) but rather the transformative view beyond this limited, fragmented human Gestalt. When one adopts this as a belief or state of exceptionalism—shortly after the conversation with Sophia, Phil is told that he is now part of "a privileged group" (363), the same group that then accidentally kills Sophia—the insanity resurfaces more intractable than ever. The book ends with Phil (the now more apparently fictional narrator) searching for symbols of the divine on his TV while Fat runs off to find God.

Fictionalizing Parousia: Reading Dick's Fiction through the *Exegesis*. Reading *Ubik* and *VALIS* through Dick's *Exegesis* is essential for unraveling their relationship to ontological uncertainty and cognitive estrangement. Not only are these novels conceptually different in this frame but their effects are different. In taking the *Exegesis* as seriously as Dick's fiction, we can reposition the relationship between these two kinds of simulations, one fictional, one conceptual. While many have argued that we might only read the *Exegesis* because we value his novels, Dick states in no uncertain terms that he sees his work as primarily philosophical: "I am basically analytical not creative; my writing is simply a creative way of handling analysis. I am a fictionalizing philosopher, not a novelist; my novel and story writing ability is employed as a means to formulate my perception. The core of my writing is not art but truth" (693). In the published volume, we find a footnote from the novelist Steve Erikson, which argues that

> Dick is no more a philosopher or theologian than were Vincent van Gogh or L. Ron Hubbard. Dick was one of the most important American novelists of the last half of the twentieth century, and what he offered wasn't the clarity and rigor of a philosophical vision but the imagination and ambiguity of a literary one. The "philosophy" is erratic, even crackpot. (*Exegesis* footnote, 693)

In this attitude, the *Exegesis* is relegated to a scholarly curiosity, an archive for Dick scholars to use to attempt to explain his novels.

In response, we can clarify the relationship between these two forms of simulation by examining a similar footnote by N. Katherine Hayles, attached to the section (discussed above) on how this writing is "a change in me as to what I am" (710):

> Dick offers … the most striking rationale for his theorizing: the ability to formulate and conceptualize an experience so that the affect associated with the experience can be captured and re-evoked by meditating on the theory. Without doubt, a theory that does this would have utility for the person who evolved it; the question then is whether it would have the same or similar effect on people who did not have the original experience. I doubt that it would work

> this way for most people reading Dick's theories. By contrast, his fiction … clearly has this power. His theorizing is important, then, not so much on its own account as for the insight it gives into his creative processes and the deep unconscious motivations that drive his fiction. (*Exegesis* footnote, 710)

I sympathize with Hayles until the last sentence. The ability to induce an experience in others is a valuable rationale for the *Exegesis*, but Hayles fairly questions whether such writing can transfer the experience to someone else. Dick himself notes that his theorizing probably will not work this way for most people and would probably agree that his fiction "clearly has this power."[23] Hayles's final statement, however, suddenly echoes Erikson's; the fiction is no longer put in relation to this task expressed in the *Exegesis*; rather, the whole text is reduced to an archive for an aesthetic process.

Dick himself provides a bridge between a love for his novels and these larger contemplative themes when he states, "All that is needed is to perform the 'tat tvam asi' equation and remember that we ourselves thought these thoughts. Well, the reader who reads *Maze [of Death]* or *Ubik* can fill in the gaps" (778). Dick entrusts the task of exploration to the reader. How can one follow through on this task if the text is approached with such skepticism? Instead, Dick calls us to treat this work as a site to run our own simulations of moksha—to prod the possibilities of experience beyond our limited human categories, to practice handling ontological uncertainty without despair, and to find ways to re-articulate our world around the new configurations that may emerge.

To this end, it is worth demonstrating one more bridge between Dick's novels and his *Exegesis*. *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965) is also a novel about running simulations on cherished values and one's supposed sense of agency. The novel describes two drugs commonly used in colonies on Mars. The first, Can-D, presents a consumerist fantasy, transporting the user into the body of either Walt or Pat, where they can live out a normal day on an idealized Earth. Chew-Z, on the other hand, places you in a world that appears to be of your own making. The terrifying result is not some ideal world of fantasy but a strange reliving of parts of one's life, with alterations—particularly as the eponymous Palmer Eldritch shows up within your Chew-Z world as an invasive presence.

Dick notes in the *Exegesis* that *Three Stigmata* is a study of transubstantiation, the taking-in of the Divine (274). Can-D and Chew-Z are each a different kind of sacrament that yields a different communion. Can-D permits multiple users to share the same layout and share the experience. Their communion is with each other, over shared desires within the material world and funneled according to established social, economic, and gender norms. Dick speaks of this in the *Exegesis* as a "mass wish-fulfillment hallucination shared by everyone" (275). Chew-Z, on the other hand, manifests your own desires, with the added invasion of Palmer Eldritch, which forces the chooser to face their own desire-world. The communion with Palmer Eldritch is an internal communion with yourself as you are forced to navigate the depths of your desires and thoughts. This is terrifying for

everyone, especially for Barney Mayerson, the main protagonist, who has found himself exported to Mars after he has botched his relationship with his ex-wife, his new girlfriend, and his job.

As soon as he takes Chew-Z, Mayerson finds himself in the past with his former wife. When he argues with her and begins to mull over his corporate ambitions, an angry Eldritch appears: "You're perverse" he says. "I've never seen anything like it. I'll give you ten more minutes then I'm bringing you back.… So you better figure out very damn fast what you want and if you understand anything finally" (172). Mayerson is placing himself in a loop in which he repeats his mistakes; the presence of Eldritch signals that Mayerson has that chance to choose again, to change this past—after all, he is the "chooser." Something seems wrong about this conclusion: is the Chew-Z world not an illusion? Yet after he wakes up, we find the introduction of the ontological uncertainty: Eldritch has persisted and shows up again within that world. The attempt to be the chooser has broken the very sense of reality and fiction that might permit such choosing. And yet even though Mayerson insists he is trapped, Eldritch keeps implying that there is no trap at all. So when Mayerson declares that "what's missing here is a way by which we can be freed" (190), we are left wondering: freed from what, exactly?

Mayerson is trapped more than anything else by his own dissatisfaction. He selfishly forces more Chew-Z out of another hovelist and consumes it, only to be projected not into the past but into the future, where his ex-wife is quite happy without him. In response, he finally begins to yield his sense of choice to the alien agency, Palmer Eldritch, whom Mayerson now posits is the actual creator of these worlds. Eldritch denies Mayerson's deification, however, and offers some strange advice: "You're a ghost … try building your life on that premise" (398). Taking on the role of ghost—treating his identity as spectral—lets Mayerson encounter himself as he literally finds his future self within the Chew-Z vision. Yet his future self only wants to be rid of him. Finally, facing his own self-rejection, he stops struggling against Palmer Eldritch. The result: the communion becomes complete and Mayerson becomes Palmer Eldritch. Although it appears that Mayerson is the only one to perform this merger, the final pages reveal that the spread has been complete: "So it's spread. Without the use of the drug. He's everywhere" (230).

Despite the ontological uncertainty, the result of these simulations is, for Mayerson, tremendously positive. He goes from being dissatisfied, regretting the past, behaving terribly to the people around him, and being full of cruel ambition to actually getting to work on Mars rather than neglecting the hovel as the others have done while on Can-D. This is described in relation to the "three stigmata" that are signs of Palmer Eldritch: the artificial hand, the electronic eyes, and the "radically deranged jaw" (221) are said to equate to "alienation, blurred reality, and despair" (223). These signs show up to demonstrate that these worlds are a simulation and to signal that some alienation, blurred reality, and despair remain. In response, to see Valis or Ubik, the larger reality beyond limited human categories—to merge with

Eldritch—is to push beyond the attempt to hold to values and categories that will always be out of joint with the vast and varied productions of the Cosmos.[24] In this new encounter, as Dick notes in the *Exegesis*, "the categories of alienation, estrangement, and [despair] will be reversed and man will be again at home: moored" (53-59).

This is the antithesis of the embalming of values and cultural forms decried by Jack Bolan in *Martian Time-Slip*. Such transformation might help readers today face the disorientations of modern society that have wrenched us out of our comfortable human bubbles and forced us into contact with realities vast and small. Do not we too need to run simulations on our despair, blurred reality, and isolation? My argument is that both Dick's fiction and his philosophical writings provide surprisingly potent sites for such simulations, but only if we run the simulations on our own structures of values and categories, just as Chew-Z forced Mayerson to do. Although the process begins a disorienting and often distressing self-examination and may manifest in weird and seemingly contradictory possibilities, the basic operation of teaching ourselves to get beyond ourselves is clearly needed. The essence of Dick's oeuvre then is to teach us to get going on this mode of reflection. From there, as Dick already notes, we just need to "fill in the gaps" and "remember that we ourselves" are (running) the simulation.

NOTES

1. Passages from the *Exegesis* published in the 2011 volume edited by Jackson and Lethem will be cited by page number. Unpublished passages will be cited using folder and page number.

2. As part of the transcription process for the 2011 Jackson and Lethem volume, Richard Doyle and others put together a digital transcription site at Zebrapedia.psu.edu, which contains the bulk of the available material. Throughout this article, I will refer to these published portions as the *Exegesis* while also referring to unpublished portions made available through Zebrapedia.

3. Jackson and Lethem cite these concerns directly in their introduction to the *Exegesis* (xvi).

4. Dick writes: "I'm not sure these S-F concepts mean much. In terms of S-F yield, this is about as far as what my 3-74 experience gives. This is why I reject a S-F type explanation; a theological one yields so much more" (*Exegesis* 177).

5. Davis notes that critiques of perennialism can be a means to "paper over" the differences of cultures to "secretly nominate their favorite paradigm as the pinnacle of the hierarchy of spiritual states" (19). Undoubtedly some writers on mysticism are guilty of this charge, but this accusation does not warrant a disqualification of the term. Like any general category (e.g., "science fiction" or "religion" or "humanism"), "mysticism" selects certain attributes common to many different traditions and practices, attributes that are useful to highlight for particular reasons.

6. The relationship between mysticism and sf has been discussed in Kripal's *Mutants and Mystics* and in Pilsch's *Transhumanism*.

7. Dick begins using the term "moksha" around 1978, referring to it in a distinctively perennial manner as "the Eckhart-Sankara concept of moksa" (454).

8. Although spiritual liberation is often counterposed to political and cultural liberation, moksha can also be situated at the intersection of liberation in a spiritual and

political activity, as is exemplified classically in the *Bhagavad Gita* (c.200 BCE) and more contemporaneously in Aurobindo Ghose's reevaluation of yogic traditions in relation to the Indian liberation movement in *Synthesis of Yoga* (1990). Although it is beyond the scope of this article, the notion of mysticism here may also apply to the mysticisms that arise in Afrofuturism, such as those discussed in Ytasha Womack's *Afrofuturism* (2013; see 10, 80, 172) and in Sofia Samatar's "Towards a Planetary History of Afrofuturism" (2017; 183). Both are directed at the ossifications of value that bind one personally and politically.

9. Erik Davis's *Techgnosis* (1998) traces the confluence between mysticism and cybernetics.

10. Kripal defends mysticism as a comparative term, stating that "The purpose of such a comparative mystics is to expose all doctrinal claims as historically and culturally relative expressions of a deeper mystery or ontological ground that nevertheless requires these relative expressions for its self-revelation" ("Comparative Mystics" 489). After being widely critiqued, there has been a revival of the study of mysticism, following Robert K.C. Forman's edited collection *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (1990), which reviews and addresses the Katz-Stace debate in Forman's opening essay and throughout. More recent overviews include Versluis's *Platonic Mysticism* (2018; ch. 3) and Richard Jones's *Philosophy of Mysticism* (2016; ch. 2). Davis cites the debate somewhat in a footnote in the *Exegesis* (738). Dick himself starts to use the language of pure consciousness late in the *Exegesis* (at 728).

11. See, for example, Vest's *The Postmodern Humanism of Philip K. Dick* (2009). Umberto Rossi traces the trope of ontological uncertainty in Dick through Jameson. He defines it as "a condition in which characters (and readers) do not know what is real and what is not in the text, and must frantically search for the fictional reality behind the fictional simulation" (10-11). Rossi offers an extensive reading of Dick's novels based on this concept.

12. See, for example, Chris Rudge, "'The Shock of Dysrecognition': Biopolitcal Subjects and Drugs in Dick's Science Fiction" and Fabienne Collignon's "Cold-Pac Politics: *Ubik*'s Cold War Imaginary."

13. This is Dick's way of summarizing Stanislaw Lem's position in two essays of the 1970s: "Philip K. Dick: A Visionary Among the Charlatans" (originally published in *SFS* 2.1) and "Science Fiction: A Hopeless Case—with Exceptions" (originally published in *SF Commentary* 35-37. Both are republished in *Microworlds* in 1984.

14. The metaphor of the brain can be found throughout the *Exegesis* and is often the locus for this kind of scalar metaphor. Dick came to this early ("We are within a Great Brain, made up of countless cells as are our own" [154-55]) and it becomes part of this shorthand vocabulary. Perhaps the most elaborate articulation using this trope can be found on 354.

15. Before the passage just quoted, there is an essential qualifier not included in the *Exegesis*: "I briefly became one of them, Siddhartha himself (the Buddha or Enlightened me), but must never assert nor claim this. The true Buddhas are always silent, those to whom dibba cakkhu has been granted. Yet, buried in my 27 years of writing lies information; in these writings I have told what I know without knowing what I knew. I know now. This is the paradox: when I did not know what I knew (or who & what I am) I could speak, but now I am under the stricture of silence—because I know" (2:64). In other words, Dick is treating this moment as a private acknowledgment of an internal change in status that resonates with the descriptions he has read of others, not a claim of authority on his part. The silence may seem ironic given the amount Dick writes on the experience, but less so if we acknowledge that

Dick did more or less maintain his silence on this very point. Rather than publicly declaring himself an enlightened figure, he spoke frankly but also humorously and sometimes very nervously about the experiences.

16. David Golumbia reviews the arguments around whether or how Dick's writing can be read as a critique of Realism, ultimately martialing Dick for an argument that "such an Absolute Reality, in whatever fashion, does not exist." Rather, Golumbia takes Dick's "ultimate reality" as "a trope, an instrument, a way of speaking, or even a desired but, in principle, unattainable goal" (89). I would suggest, in response, that this argument is misplaced within the analytic philosophies of realism, since Dick's Real and the access to it do not look at all like the realisms described there. The problem is thinking that another "true" reality actually has positive content—a reality like our own, just a different one (much like Neo waking up from the Matrix into a world basically like his own). Golumbia argues that Dick's novels contradict the possibility of an "ultimate reality" since "Dick rarely if ever succeeds in showing the reader these worlds" (89). From my reading, this argument misses the basic fact that the experience of "ultimate reality" is already a Gestalt switch that reads this one differently.

17. This implies that early on, Dick considered himself heading towards a religious sect, but his later reflections directly refuse and even actively avoid this possible religious formation as antithetical to the task of exegesis (see, for example, note 15).

18. Even before 1974, Dick was fascinated by the difference between the idios kosmos (personal universe) and the koinos kosmos (shared world).

19. This point is also about whether Dick's work fits within a particular mystical, religious, or philosophical tradition, such as Gabriel McKee argues about Dick's Christianity. Ultimately, Dick's approach here also permits him to rail against religious structures. Thus, in December 1981 he writes, "Nietzsche was right about Christianity. It's the fucking hair shirt syndrome: always making me feel shame, guilt, always responding to duty and obligations of others" (847).

20. After an extensive review of the various diagnoses of Dick, Luckhurst suggests that Dick's self-diagnosis ought to be read as a kind of self-narrative in which one applies the contemporary categories of diagnosis to narrate one's status. From a different angle, Kyle Arnold, a practicing psychologist, suggests that Dick did indeed have paranoia, likely due to his extensive amphetamine use, but that this does not rule out the possibility of a genuine mystical experience (see 212-13).

21. Footnotes are not numbered in *Exegesis*, so they are linked here to the pages on which they occur. Hayles makes a similar argument earlier in *How We Became Posthuman* (1990; 90).

22. See, for example, David Gill's footnotes in the *Exegesis* (277 and 653). When Gill states that Dick was seeking to make the world "a safe place for him to share his fragile self with the world," he is rewriting Dick's radical transformation in simple humanist terms while also pathologizing the basic transformation.

23. "Yet this seems somehow to help a certain kind of sensitive troubled person, for whom I speak. I think I understand the common ingredient in those whom my writing helps: they cannot or will not blunt their own intimations about the irrational, mysterious nature of reality, and, for them, my corpus of writing is one long ratiocination regarding this inexplicable reality, an investigation and presentation, analysis and response and personal history. My audience will always be limited to these people.… However, viewed this way, what I have done is extraordinarily valuable, if you can endure the strain of not knowing and knowing that you don't know" (693-94).

24. This reading is, in a sense, inverted, as Dick noted early in the *Exegesis*: "But most of all I recall what I saw when I awakened: I saw Palmer Eldritch in the Sun—I saw God backward, but sure enough, in the daytime sun: at high noon, and knew him to be a god. *The Three Stigmata*, if read properly (i.e. reversed) contains many clues as to the nature of God and to our relationship with him" (148).

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ABSTRACT

This article reexamines and reframes Philip K. Dick's sprawling philosophical text, known as the *Exegesis,* in relation to his widely celebrated fiction, philosophies of mysticism, posthumanism, and transhumanism, and more generally, the difficult task of discovering means of transforming our personal and cultural values to be more adequately attuned to our changing environment. I consider how the ontological uncertainty produced in sf relates to an inevitable ontological disorientation produced by science and technology, and show how this leads to a particular (and particularly mystical, for reasons explained) task: the need to estrange ourselves from our traditional human concepts, values, beliefs, and cultures. Using passages from the *Exegesis*, I lay out how Dick sets up the task of the *Exegesis* as a kind of simulation of moksha (liberation, in a profound sense), reading the *Exegesis* as the venue for Dick to run philosophical and personal counterparts to the simulations of his fiction. Dick's remixing of mystical and transhuman rhetoric also clarifies mysticism's relationship to science fiction. Along the way, I reread *Martian Time-Slip, Ubik*, *Valis*, and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* through the frame and task set up in the *Exegesis*, resulting in a new reading of Dick's work that integrates with his post-1974 experiences and writing.