Copyright Statement

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand).

This thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author's right to be identified as the author of this thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from their thesis.

To request permissions please use the Feedback form on our webpage. http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/feedback

General copyright and disclaimer

In addition to the above conditions, authors give their consent for the digital copy of their work to be used subject to the conditions specified on the Library Thesis Consent Form and Deposit Licence.
PHILIP K. DICK’S SEARCH FOR REALITY

An investigation of Philip K. Dick’s metaphysical questioning, focussing on his 1960s science fiction novels

by

Richard D. D. Visković

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

The University of Auckland

2013
Abstract

Philip K. Dick is best known for creating novels and short stories that throw reality into question. This metaphysical thread in his writing resonated with readers, critics and commentators who noticed its relevance to the modern world, where technology and mass production make the concept of authenticity questionable. Despite his science fiction settings, his work seems to reflect important aspects of contemporary life. His writing became the subject of a large body of interpretation and criticism. Dick’s critics, and especially his early critics, favoured his critiques of reality over his attempts to find a reality worth believing in.

I propose that Dick be read as the fictionalising philosopher he considered himself to be. His works are more akin to Socratic inquiry than dogmatic adherence to one ideology or another. In the following chapters, I treat Dick as a questioner, explore the challenges he poses for reality and how he tries to build on his various revelations. I use his critics to inform my readings, but take his own writing to be the most important expression of his artistry and philosophy, while keeping in mind the ideological spin that has been such a blessing and a curse for him. I do not believe that this effort will reduce the writer to any one particular metaphysical reading. The certainty that would require is antithetical to the spirit of Dick’s writing, untenable given the sheer amount of work he produced, and unlikely when the many years between the start and finish of his writing career are taken into account. My object is to follow the path of his thinking with as open a mind as possible in order to fully explore the challenges for reality he offers and the solutions he attempts. Only by following his lead will it be possible to appreciate the nuances of his thinking and writing.

I read closely from the short story ‘Roog’ and the novels *Eye in the Sky*, *Martian Time-Slip*, *The Simulacra*, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *Ubik*, *Dr. Bloodmoney* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to develop a picture of Dick as both a questioner of and a searcher for reality.
Dedication

To Melanie Dougan,

Who makes dedications easy.
Acknowledgements

Brian Boyd was the primary supervisor for this project, and an exceptionally insightful reader. Without him, I couldn’t have written this thesis. His contributions are too numerous to list, but include making my torturous prose less torturous, unmixing my metaphors, and always pointing the way back to the primary text when I found myself lost in some false reality of my own creation. His support has been invaluable, his advice indispensable, and his contribution incalculable.

Tom Bishop acted as my secondary supervisor, and offered many useful comments on a late draft.

The University of Auckland PhD Writing Group and my fellow PhD students have been a strong support for me, especially in the early days of writing. In particular, they read and reviewed the manuscript that eventually became Chapter 6. Kirby Jane-Hallum, Heidi Logan, Zach Norwood, Maria Prozesky, Francisc Szekely, Lucy Treep, Evija Trofimova, Emma Wilson and others have all been a part of the insane journey that is being a PhD Student, and I’m grateful to have shared it with them.

Of the many supportive members of the English Department, Rose Lovell-Smith, Stephen Turner and Eluned Summers-Bremner each stand out. Rose joined the writing group to help review Chapter 6, and provided essential feedback. Stephen helped organise the PhD Writing Retreat where I developed my major argument under his injunction to be ‘controversial, but not too controversial’. Eluned helped move me toward publication, for which I am immensely thankful. I learned a great deal during the process of editing an essay with her, and appreciate her generosity.

Melanie Dougan has helped me develop most of the ideas in this thesis. She has read and reviewed throughout. She has picked me up when I’ve fallen, encouraged me when I’ve needed it, and cheered me on always. Thank you, Melanie.
Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... 3

Dedication .................................................................................................................... 5

Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................... 6

Primary Sources ......................................................................................................... 10

Introduction ............................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Philip K. Dick’s Literary Critics .............................................................. 13

Darko Suvin, ‘PKD’s Opus: Artifice as Refuge and World View.’ ......................... 21
Fredric Jameson, ‘After Armageddon: Character Systems in Dr. Bloodmoney’ ...... 26
Peter Fitting, ‘Ubik: The Deconstruction of Bourgeois SF’ ..................................... 29
Peter Fitting, ‘Reality as Ideological Construct: A Reading of Five Novels by Philip K. Dick’ .................................................................................................................................................. 31

Chapter 2: A Postmodern Prophet (1981-) ............................................................. 35
Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation ............................................................... 36
Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism ......................... 40
Slusser, ‘History, Historicity, Story’ .......................................................................... 44
Rossi, ‘Fourfold Symmetry: The Interplay of Fictional Levels in Five More or Less Prestigious Novels by Philip K. Dick’ ................................................................. 50
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>‘Roog’ and <em>Eye in the Sky</em></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roog: Establishing a Pattern</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eye in the Sky: Breaking Through to the Personal Universe</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Martian Time-Slip</em></td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Somatic World</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Time-Slip</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paranoia and Mechanical People</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>More Real?</em></td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>The Simulacra</em></td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Simulacra</em></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Television</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nitz, Papoolas and Advertising that Gets Under Your Skin</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘It’s becoming me and I have to be it!’ (<em>TS</em> 195)</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch</em></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Nightmare Vision</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Three Alterities of Palmer Eldritch</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estrangement and Science Fiction</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Familiar</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Hungry God/Machine/Alien</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘The evil, negative trinity of alienation, blurred reality, and despair’ (<em>TSPE</em> 229)</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ubik in a Can</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘The door refused to open. It said, “Five cents, please.”’ (<em>Ubik</em> 28)</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ubik: Now in Balm, Spray and Pseudoscientific-econo-deific Principle</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why put God in a Spray Can? ................................................................. 153

Chapter 8: *Ubik* .................................................................................. 157

Opposition, Competition, Balance .................................................... 159

Half-Life: Weightlessness, Entropy and Regression ....................... 163

‘It was the first Joe Chip money he had ever seen’ ......................... 173

And We Finish with Ambiguity. Possibly ........................................ 177

Chapter 9: *Dr. Bloodmoney* ............................................................. 179

How We Got Along After the Bomb ............................................... 182

(Where/When/How) Did the Bomb Drop? ................................... 184

The Aftermath: Inversion and Balance ........................................... 190

When Bluthgeld (Almost) Destroys the World... Again ................ 195

Chapter 10: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* ..................... 199

Dialectic ............................................................................................... 201

From the Heights of Euphemia to the Depth of the Tomb World .... 206

The Curse of Empathy ....................................................................... 212

Transcendence .................................................................................. 221

Conclusion ........................................................................................ 227

Bibliography ....................................................................................... 233
Primary Sources

This thesis uses the MLA style guide with a few modifications. The modifications are all in relation to citing Dick’s primary texts, and disobey the letter of the guide in order to follow its spirit.

Since the informed reader will already be familiar with Dick’s works, his name is generally omitted from the in-text citations as unnecessary and intrusive. The in-text citations contain short forms of his titles, usually the most natural acronym; MTS for Martian Time-Slip, for example. The exception is The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike, which is abbreviated to ‘Teeth’ instead of ‘TMWTWAEA’.

The first time the title is used in a chapter the full form is used followed by parentheses containing the abbreviation and the date of first publication to help the reader locate the text in its context; for example: Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (DADES? 1968). Please note this is the date of first publication, and not the date of the cited edition, which is given in the bibliography. If the date of first publication is over five years different from the date the book was written, this information will also be included: Gather Yourselves Together (GYT w.1950, pub.1994). Following MLA style, some or all of this information is omitted if present in the text of the thesis nearby.

Short or one-word titles are not abbreviated so as to avoid single-letter acronyms: ‘Ubik’ is used instead of ‘U’ and ‘VALIS’ – which is already an acronym for ‘Vast Active Living Intelligence System’ – instead of ‘V’. ‘The VALIS trilogy’ refers to the unofficial trilogy made up of VALIS (VALIS 1981), Radio Free Albemuth (RFA w.1976, pub.1985) and The Divine Invasion (DI 1981). ‘Ubik’ in italics refers to the novel with that title, while ‘Ubik’ without italics refers to the substance/being in the novel.

For the sake of clarity, a full table of abbreviations is included below as a reference, ordered alphabetically.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full Title</th>
<th>Abbreviation and Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Broken Bubble</td>
<td>(BB w.1956, pub.1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clans of the Alphane Moon</td>
<td>(CAM 1964)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confessions of a Crap Artist</td>
<td>(CCA w.1959, pub.1975)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cosmic Puppets</td>
<td>(CP 1957)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter-Clock World</td>
<td>(CCW 1967)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Crack in Space</td>
<td>(CS 1966)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deus Irae</td>
<td>(DI w.1964, pub.1976)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Divine Invasion</td>
<td>(TDI 1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?</td>
<td>(DADES? 1968)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Bloodmoney, or How We Got Along After the Bomb</td>
<td>(DB 1965)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Futurity</td>
<td>(DF w.1953, pub.1960)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye in the Sky</td>
<td>(ES 1957)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galactic Pot-Healer</td>
<td>(GPH 1969)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Game-Players of Titan</td>
<td>(GPT 1963)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ganymede Takeover</td>
<td>(GT 1967)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather Yourselves Together</td>
<td>(GYT w.1950, pub.1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humpty Dumpty in Oakland</td>
<td>(HDO w.1960, pub.1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Milton Lumky Territory</td>
<td>(IMLT w.1958, pub.1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lies Inc.</td>
<td>(LI w.1964, pub.1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Man in the High Castle</td>
<td>(MHC 1962)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Man Who Japed</td>
<td>(MWJ 1956)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike</td>
<td>(Teeth w.1960, pub.1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martian Time-Slip</td>
<td>(MTS 1964)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary and the Giant</td>
<td>(MG w.1957, pub.1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Maze of Death</td>
<td>(MD 1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick and the Glimmung</td>
<td>(NG w.1966, pub.1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now Wait for Last Year</td>
<td>(NWLY 1966)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Friends from Frolix 8</td>
<td>(OFF8 1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Penultimate Truth</td>
<td>(PT 1964)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puttering About in a Small Land</td>
<td>(PASL w.1957, pub.1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio Free Albemuth</td>
<td>(RFA w.1976, pub.1985)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Scanner Darkly</td>
<td>(SD 1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Simulacra</td>
<td>(TS 1964)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solar Lottery</td>
<td>(SL 1955)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch</td>
<td>(TSPE 1965)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Out of Joint</td>
<td>(TOJ 1959)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Transmigration of Timothy Archer</td>
<td>(TTA 1982)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ubik</td>
<td>(Ubik 1969)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VALIS</td>
<td>(VALIS 1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voices from the Street</td>
<td>(VS w.1952, pub.2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulcan's Hammer</td>
<td>(VH w.1953, pub.1960)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Can Build You</td>
<td>(WCBY w.1963, pub.1972)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The World Jones Made</td>
<td>(WJM 1956)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Zap Gun</td>
<td>(ZG 1967)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

In a dream, in a story, a young boy searches. The dreamer was the science fiction writer Philip Kindred Dick, and he recalls the dream in his novel VALIS (VALIS 1981):

In the dream he again was a child, searching dusty used-book stores for rare old science fiction magazines, in particular Astoundings. In the dream he had looked through countless tattered issues, stacks upon stacks, for the priceless serial entitled ‘The Empire Never Ended.’ If he could find it and read it he would know everything; that had been the burden of the dream. (VALIS 53–54)

It is an actual dream; Dick first records it in his non-fictional Exegesis in a short note: ‘Dream: store of rare old S-F magazines; I am searching for a serial (novel) called, ‘the Empire never ended’ (421).1 Despite the brevity of the initial note, the dream held endless fascination for Dick and the phrase ‘the Empire never ended’ recurs many times in VALIS and his Exegesis, where it became, as Dick put it, ‘his tag line’ (VALIS 53).

Dick wove an elaborate gnostic cosmogony around the four words ‘The Empire Never Ended’. ‘The Empire’ became the Roman Empire, which had never fallen, but remained in power by concealing its rule behind a veil of deception. He and a band of secret Christians opposed The Empire. These secret Christians were trying to end the Empire and restore the rule of VALIS/God, who sometimes communicated with Dick by beaming information into his brain using pink beams of light. The single dream and those four short words exploded in signification for the writer, a sad testament to his creative powers; once brilliant, outrageous and tightly-focused, but now turned to rambling and barely-coherent speculation.

Dick took a lot from the dream; it obviously held some fascination for him. However, the incredible story of secret Christians and beams of pink light from God communicating secret messages to the science fiction writer is less interesting to me than the dream itself

1 The Exegesis refers to notes written by Dick during and after his ‘mystical’ experiences of February and March of 1974, a period he referred to as ‘2-3-74’. He titled his notes his ‘Exegesis’, a word usually used to refer to interpretation of religious or literary texts. It numbered over eight thousand pages at the time of his death and, at this point in time, selections have been published in 1991 as In Pursuit of Valis: Selections from the Exegesis and in a more complete edition in 2011 as The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick.
and the image of the searching child. Dick suggests there is a sense of urgency in the dream, as the serial has to be found before the dreamer wakes. The import of the book makes it one of those strange dream cyphers containing an impossible significance: it is ‘priceless’ and if he reads it, ‘he would know everything’ (VALIS 54). Despite the incredible promise, Dick describes the possibility of knowing everything as ‘the burden of the dream’. A ‘burden’ suggests a message or main idea, but it also suggests a heavy load; a weight to be borne that presses down on the bearer. Why is the promise of knowing everything also a burden?

In this dream one can see a metaphor for Philip K. Dick’s life and works. Like the boy in the dream, he too was a searcher. He searched for reality. The assumption behind his search is the idea that the world as presented to our senses is not the real one. His search for reality took different forms through his lifetime, and his attitude toward phenomenal reality and what might lie behind it changed many times. Nevertheless, it remains one of the most consistent parts of his life and work, and the dominant thread in his writing.

Just like in the dream, Dick’s search for reality occurred in print and in the medium of science fiction. The question of ‘What is reality?’ dominates his fiction. It inspires his most archetypal themes; it motivates his most recognisable plots; it provides his works with depth; and it underlies his most recognisable stylistic features. It is what he is best known for. The question was more than just an intellectual one for the writer. He found it personally compelling, and it spilled from his fiction and into his life on a number of occasions, especially after the events of February and March 1974.

However, this is not Philip K. Dick as some of his critics, and especially his early critics, have portrayed and understood him. Part of the story – Dick the sceptic and questioner of phenomenal reality – has become a synecdoche for the whole story, and Dick the searcher for reality has become lost. Philip K. Dick is popularly represented as a prophet of deception; a master of suspicion and paranoia whose primary function is to puncture received reality purely to reveal its doubtful status. ‘Almost all of his work,’ writes Charles Platt in Dream Makers, ‘starts with the basic assumption that there cannot be one, single, objective reality’ (146). Tellingly, when quoted Platt’s statement is usually elided to omit the word ‘Almost’ from the beginning.
Questioning reality is not an end in itself in Dick’s novels. It is a means to an end, and that end is finding a reality that is more real than the one in question. To use the writer’s own words:

For absolute reality to reveal itself, our categories of space-time experiences, our basic matrix through which we encounter the universe, must break down and then utterly collapse. (‘Man, Android and Machine’ 218)

Commentators have, for the most part, neglected his search for absolute reality in favour of readings that emphasise his portrayal of the world as deceptive, a portrayal which found great resonance with contemporary and post-modern thinkers for whom the loss of authenticity and ‘reality’ in the modern world has been the major ideological event.

The subject of my thesis is how Dick interrogates reality in his fiction, and within that subject I have developed two main, interrelated lines of argument. Before I sketch out those arguments in this introduction, I will outline the topic area I have chosen and justify the texts that feature prominently.

My subject matter is Dick’s writing and the metaphysical thread woven through it; however, this is not a philosophy thesis and he did not possess the rigour most philosophers have. Instead, he took a multi-disciplinary approach, dipping into the subjects that interested him most in order to fuel his writing and to satisfy his personal interest. He had a dilettante attitude to philosophy, reading widely and unafraid to use interesting terminology and ideas, but unlikely to follow any one intellectual path very far without being distracted by another interesting idea.² He was not afraid to let his fiction range into serious questions of philosophy, theology or psychology and he applied his characteristically dark and playful intellect to all of them. His talent finds its clearest expression in the coruscating manifold of ideas he generously includes in his fiction and to appreciate the artistry of his writing, we need to engage at the ideological level with the same issues he did, without trying to integrate his work into some grand cosmogony.


---

² In a letter he describes his influences as ‘a hopeless hodgepodge’ (*Selected Letters, 1938-1971* 56).
Eldritch (TSPE 1965), Ubik (Ubik 1969), Dr. Bloodmoney (DB 1965) and Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (DADES? 1968). Two short stories, ‘The Electric Ant’ (‘EA’ 1969) and ‘Roog’ (‘Roog’ 1953), are also discussed in some detail. These texts have been chosen for special attention according to three criteria: their relation to Dick’s metaphysical thread, their quality, and their usefulness in developing my two main arguments. The majority of these texts were published during his middle period.

Choosing these texts means omitting others, an unfortunate but necessary step to ensure the right mix of scope and depth. Choosing texts predominantly from the middle of Dick’s output means omitting his early, mainstream novels and some excellent later novels, like those in the VALIS trilogy. Reading any of his texts in depth requires selectivity, even from within the middle period itself.

I balanced a number of concerns when choosing texts. One reason for a text’s exclusion or inclusion is how well it relates to the metaphysical thread in Dick’s writing. A secondary concern is the ‘quality’ of the text, and I tried to choose novels acknowledged as being high points in his career. I wanted to choose novels that other commentators had found interesting, but also texts that would benefit from more critical attention. Finally, I chose texts relevant to my arguments. Different factors weighed more or less heavily at different times; Eye in the Sky, for instance, is not usually ranked amongst Dick’s best work but offers a useful insight into the development of Dick’s metaphysical thinking. I will briefly address some of the more controversial choices.

The VALIS trilogy and the novels written after the 1960s do not feature heavily in my thesis. These novels clearly have strong metaphysical links. They are also, arguably, considered amongst his best works. Regardless of their comparative quality, they are also fascinating works and amazing insights into the mind of the author. They are not included because the metaphysics they present loses much of the epistemic subtlety I argue is present in some of the novels from the 1960s. The VALIS trilogy offers an unambiguous ontology: God (or Zebra, or VALIS, or Sophia) represents reality. The Empire (or Belial, or the government of Ferris Freemont, or the Adversary) represents deception and a false reality in competition with real reality. The strange theology expressed in these novels, which could be viewed as an extension of the on-going cosmological theorising of his
Exegesis, is Gnostic and unambiguously realist.\(^3\) It is also harks back to earlier novels like The Cosmic Puppets (CP 1957) where transcending reality means simply looking behind the curtain to discover the master manipulator. Were my intention simply to prove Dick’s attraction to realist metaphysics based on a simple dichotomy between deception and reality, they would be perfect. However, the main arguments of this thesis are pointed toward a subtle development in his work that seems to end around the same time the author began thinking God sent him messages from a satellite using pink laser beams.

Other selections were equally difficult. The mainstream novels of the 1950s offer amazing insight into Dick’s development as a writer and even some early hints at his metaphysical concerns. Most have been published posthumously, and are thus fresh and exciting for his comentators and critics. However, Dick finds more opportunity to play with metaphysics in his science fiction than his mainstream novels, and, again, the subtle metaphysical play of his sixties science fiction is not present.

Even within the focus on 60s science fiction, I have exercised some selectivity. Time Out of Joint (TOJ 1959) is a well-known, almost quintessential example of how Dick shows a fake reality. Time Out of Joint is not included because many of the observations that can be drawn from it also emerge in his other works. It has also received a large amount of excellent critical attention from people more insightful than me. This is only one example, but helps to show that the texts I have selected are chosen for a number of reasons, usually explicated when introducing them. Sometimes this has to do with their quality and influence, which is a large factor for including Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? At other points, I have seen an opportunity to advance my argument with a text that has not received the same acclaim as others, as is the case with my chapter on Dr. Bloodmoney.

\(^3\) Almost universally, I use ‘realism’ to refer to metaphysical realism. I understand this position to be that a mind-independent reality exists. Being mind-independent, it could also be described as ‘objective’. This is not to say that we do not experience a constructed reality or realities, nor is it the same as saying that we have access to a mind-independent reality or that it is possible to have access to such. Thus, a ‘realist’ or ‘metaphysical realist’ is someone who possesses this view. Thus, a Gnostic, who may believe that the world as we perceive it is a deception perpetrated on us by a deceiving God, is also a realist because they believe there is an underlying, mind-independent reality behind the deception.
I have not tried to integrate or place Dick’s works against the background of his contemporary science fiction writers. While a fascinating project, I believe Dick’s works are so idiosyncratic and distinctive they can meaningfully be discussed without this background, which is likely to already be familiar to most readers of this thesis.

I develop two main arguments in the course of this project. In the first, I suggest that there has been a systematic misreading, or skewing, of Dick’s metaphysical theme. He is commonly understood as a writer interested in questioning reality. This is accurate, but this understanding has come to eclipse the other aspect of his metaphysics: searching for something behind the false reality: an absolute reality that is not contingent on anything else. His oft-quoted definition of reality explicitly defines it as absolute and not contingent on subjective understanding; he defines reality as ‘that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away’ (‘How to Build a Universe’ 261).

I claim that to understand the metaphysical questing of Dick’s works, we also need to understand him as someone who searches for absolutes and as someone who is not satisfied with contingencies. He has been so closely identified with the shifting realities that dominate his works that much of the criticism written about his works assumes he held a neutral or positive attitude to the contingency of those realities. One of the more common, and extreme, characterisations of him is as some kind of religious ‘prophet’ who heralds postmodernity and champions subjectivity, contingency and groundlessness.4

While his academic commentators usually avoid describing Dick as a ‘prophet of postmodernity’ – leaving that characterisation to the blurbs of his books and newspaper articles – I argue that this portrayal of him is dominant in the academic literature too. Nevertheless, there are two sides to his writing about reality: questioning perceived reality, and searching for something absolute. In writing this thesis I hope to redress the balance to a degree and explore how understanding Dick as a searcher for reality is

---

4 Consider Jeet Heer’s description of Dick in Lingua Franca as ‘The laureate of radical postmodernism’; the title of Bradley Congdon’s 2008 MA thesis, Prophet of the Postmodern: The Problem of Authenticity in the Works of Philip K. Dick; the description of Dick as a ‘prophet of postmodernism’ from a retrospective article in the Cambridge student newspaper Varsity entitled ‘“The Martians are Always Coming”: Philip K. Dick, Twenty Years On’ and the blurb that graces many of the Vintage editions of Dick’s work which describes him as ‘an oracular postmodern’ which was sourced from Erik Davis’ 1989 article ‘Technomancer’ in The Village Voice.
fruitful in reading and interpreting his works, without overlooking his doubts about ever finding absolute reality.

My second argument is more complex, and derives from the first. In it, I argue that Dick engages in a dialectical process that attempts to resolve the contradiction between opposites. The main opposition when it comes to the metaphysical thread in his writing is between absolute, fundamental reality and subjective, contingent ‘reality’. I will suggest that a prominent stylistic feature in his work is to flick between competing explanations, moving swiftly back and forth between an explanation that assumes objectivity and one that assumes subjectivity. The result is to undermine the very notions of subjective and objective in order to attain a state where both explanations, arguably, can exist at once. This is a kind of transcendence, where the reader or protagonist rises above a dilemma while still affirming the paradox.

In this argument, I am using transcendence in a very specific, but not unique, way. To transcend something usually means to go beyond it, or, drawing on the word’s Latin derivation, to climb above it. Within the context of Western religion, transcendence is contrasted with immanence, and carries with it the overtone of going beyond the physical or phenomenal in order to enter a non-physical or spiritual plane, associated with the deity. This latter ‘transcendent’ reality is more important than the physical, and, in a sense, more real since the physical world is supposedly subsistent on it. This type of transcendence can often be seen in Dick’s fiction, where the phenomenal world is ‘transcended’ in favour of a more real world behind it. In my penultimate argument, I show that Dick also offers a model of transcendence where the very problem of reality and illusion is itself transcended – a unique approach to metaphysical problems.

My thesis is divided into ten chapters. The first two lay the groundwork by critically examining those of Dick’s commentators who have addressed his reality theme. From these commentators, who include Darko Suvin, Peter Fitting, Friedric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, comes a picture of Dick as an enemy of fixed ideologies and the very notion of a ‘real’ reality. However, these early commentators had ideologies of their own, and I contend that at times political interests pre-determined the thrust of some of the critical interpretation. A good illustration comes from the first special edition of Science Fiction Studies on Philip K. Dick, edited by the Marxist science fiction scholar Darko Suvin.

Suvin, who provided the introductory article for the issue, set the tone for both the special
Introduction

edition and for later scholarship. While surveying Dick’s published works, Suvin dismissed the metaphysical thread in Dick’s writing as a ‘falling off’ because Dick becomes overly interested in ‘unexplainable ontological puzzles’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 8). These very ontological puzzles are exactly what Dick is best known for, and are a unique and defining element in his writing. Suvin’s interest in Dick begins where he can be used to illustrate Marxist ideas, like the idea that a dominant ideology, which originates from those in power, will mystify its own origins in order to maintain economic relationships (Marx and Engels 65), just as the Yance-men in The Penultimate Truth (PT 1964) maintain the mode of production by completely hiding the origins and even the existence of their own ideological stance from the people living underground. Suvin’s interest ends when Dick departs from this political territory and into the airy lands of metaphysics – a subject Suvin closely associates with religion (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 15) and the supernatural (‘State of the Art’ 37), both contrary to the materialist basis of Marxism.

In Chapter 3, I examine how Dick structures many of his reality breakdowns around the notion of entering an isolated personal universe – an idea he would later refine and build on after reading Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology. Dick began exploring perspective and subjectivity from the start of his publishing career in the first story he successfully sold to a publisher: ‘Roog’ (1953). ‘Roog’ shows that Dick was interested in how subjectivity shapes reality long before he became immersed in existential psychology or Kantian philosophy. I suggest that ‘Roog’ is an early template for a pattern that recurs many times through his works, where the border between the personal universe and the shared universe is breached to suggest that the separation of the two is not entirely satisfactory.

From ‘Roog’, I move on to Eye in the Sky. Like ‘Roog’, Eye explores how perspective shapes reality, but I argue that it does even more than that. In Eye, the protagonist becomes lost in other people’s minds, moving through a series of personal universes, trying to return to reality. I contend that each personal universe represents a different form of totalising ideology or metaphysic, including theism, the excessively-systematising paranoid mind-set, and a radical reductivism. Dick takes the opportunity to refute each of these approaches to metaphysics – a remarkable display of sophistication for the twenty-two-year-old writer.
As a whole, Chapter 3 deals with how Dick questions the reliability of perception, and considers its role in ‘creating’ reality. He is well known for taking the internal world and making it external, challenging the idea that a clear division can be made between personal, internal reality and external reality. Chapter 3 begins to explore how Dick effaces the boundary between idios and koinos, before he even begins to use that terminology.

In Chapter 4, I turn to Martian Time-Slip where I continue to trace how Dick portrays reality lost to an idiosyncratic personal universe. By this point, Dick had read Existence and begun to use the terminology he found within, including ‘idios kosmos’ and ‘koinos kosmos’ which Dick defines as follows:

I have been very much influenced by the thinking of the European existential psychologists, who posit this: for each person there are two worlds, the idios kosmos, which is a unique private world, and the koinos kosmos, which literally means shared world (just as idios means private). (Selected Letters, 1938-71 263)

These are terms used by the existential philosophers included in Existence but originate in fragment B89 of Heraclitus: ‘The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own.’

The influence of the Existential Psychologists is readily apparent in Martian Time-Slip. I offer a close reading of the novel that focusses on how he portrays the personal universe as it is experienced by those he sees as cut off from it: schizophrenics and those with autism. Martian Time-Slip introduces the personal universe as both a place of despair and a locus for a different type of reality, or perhaps a different ‘perspective’ on reality. I suggest that Dick’s interest in the personal universe is motivated not just by the desire to explore how fallible and idiosyncratic the subject’s perspective on the world can be, but also by the possibility that the idios kosmos contains some grain of truth or insight into an absolute reality.

I use The Simulacra, which is the subject of Chapter 5, to introduce the concept of transgression. In my reading of The Simulacra, I show how Dick transgresses boundaries frequently, making them less and less distinct every time they are crossed. With the borders between things indistinct, Dick can create some of the most bizarre – and
Introduction

fascinating – events. The climax of the novel is an extraordinary scene where one of the characters, literally, flies apart as he becomes unable to distinguish himself from his environment. To use the terminology explored in chapters 3 and 4, the character’s idios kosmos becomes indistinguishable, in his mind, from his physical environment.

The frightening vision of a man, literally, flying apart as the outside world overpowers him and his personal universe becomes subsumed by his environment sets the scene for the next chapter. Chapter 6 is about the nightmare vision represented by Palmer Eldritch in The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch. The Three Stigmata is a dark vision of lost reality, where all attempts to return to normality seem doomed. This chapter develops the arguments of my thesis by showing how lost reality is a nightmare in Dick’s writing, and how the return to reality can be used as the major motive force to advance the narrative.

Chapters 7 and 8 are both about Ubik. Ubik is similar in many ways to The Three Stigmata. The characters lose touch with ‘real’ reality, and become trapped by a manipulative deceiver-character, who threatens control over their personal universes. Ubik has one major difference: it offers a return to reality through the power of Ubik itself. Ubik offers the characters a link to a deeper, ‘real’ reality. This is a novel that tries to restore a balance upset in The Three Stigmata by giving the deus deceptor some opposition. Despite its attempt to introduce balance, Ubik ends with uncertainty and further deception, undercutting Dick’s introduction of a deific principle to try and stabilise reality. Ubik therefore offers both an opportunity and a danger for my ongoing argument.

In the course of chapters 7 and 8, I also investigate some of the most prominent tropes Dick associates with the loss of reality, his use of dualisms, and the unusually complicated device of Ubik itself. Ubik combines together religion, commerce and technology – a very strange combination indeed. I unpack Ubik and explore the connections Dick makes between the three, and why he links them to his ontological theme.

Chapters 9 and 10 are about the moments of transcendence in Dick’s novels, and focus on apparently inexplicable plot elements. In these moments the binary oppositions that so fascinate Dick, and which allow him to structure the metaphysical thread in his writing into a dialectic, are overcome. The result is an event that seems inexplicable in terms of
the reality of the novel. Examples include when Bruno Bluthgeld summons atomic explosions in *Dr. Bloodmoney*, when the Intercessor appears at the end of *A Maze of Death (MD 1970)* and apparently spirits away the protagonist, and when Rick Deckard and J.R. Isidore experience visions of Wilbur Mercer in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* I suggest that these events are attempts to transcend the simple opposition between ‘real’ and ‘false’ or ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’. I illustrate this idea using *Dr. Bloodmoney* in Chapter 9 and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in Chapter 10.

In *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer (TTA 1982)*, Angel Archer reflects on the experience of reading Dante’s *Inferno*. ‘For me,’ she thinks, ‘books and reality are fused’ (*TTA* 145):

> So books are real to me, too; they link me not just with other minds but with the vision of other minds, what those minds understand and see. I see their worlds as well as I see my own. (*TTA* 146)

When reading Dick’s books, readers find themselves linked with a mind of paradoxical lucidity and opacity. Dick is also a writer who is flawed, human, kind, cruel, dark, and often funny. He is a writer driven to interrogate reality, but driven even more strongly to find something to believe in. His ‘great dream’ of looking for the serial ‘The Empire Never Ended’ is a picture of someone searching for the answers to ‘everything’.

However, the search and the knowledge are a ‘burden’ to the dreamer. Waking brings an end to the search, but then what truth could he hope to find in a dream, anyway (*VALIS* 53–54)?

Before he died, Dick’s search for reality obsessed and consumed him. Ironically, the deeper his obsession became, the further away from reality he went. The metaphysical thread in Dick’s writing is exciting, fascinating, perplexing, and often funny. However, it is also a sad reminder of how the brilliant writer became lost in his own false realities. I hope this thesis does justice to the metaphysical quest that was so important to him.
Chapter 1: Philip K. Dick’s Literary Critics

Philip Kindred Dick based a prolific writing career on creating false realities inside his novels. If there’s any stable truth in a Phil Dick novel, it’s that you can expect the reality at the start of the novel to be different from the reality at the end of the novel. In between, phenomenal reality will have broken down, been reassembled, collapsed again, been replaced innumerable times, and ultimately – after plenty of speculation, argument and counter-argument – have been found wanting. In an interview with Gregg Rickman where Dick discusses his novel *Time Out of Joint (TOJ)* 1959), he describes the importance of the false reality to his writing:

The world that you are reading about [in *Time Out of Joint*] does not exist. And this was to be the premise of my entire corpus of writing really.... The phenomenal world is not the real world, it is something other than the real world. It is either semi-real, or some kind of forgery. (Philip K. Dick, quoted in Rickman, *Philip K. Dick: In his Own Words* 138)

The ‘premise’ Dick describes has become so closely allied with his work that his fans and commentators coined the word, ‘phildickian’ to describe it. Dick’s close friend and fellow science fiction writer, Kevin Jeter, defines ‘phildickian’ as:

[...] the descriptive modifier for all situations and events characterized by an extreme difficulty in determining what reality is. Or to put it another way, if you’re having a hard time deciding whether you’re actually talking to your best friend or a giant bug from the Proxima system wearing a mask of your best friend – you’re having a phildickian moment. (Kevin Jeter, quoted in Clark)

Dick’s characters can’t help themselves. They have to look behind the curtain, even if all they find behind it is further deception. They are driven to escape the false realities that abound and seek out something – *anything* – they can depend on for truth and stability… for objective reality.

Philip Dick, the person, was also intensely interested in philosophical questions about the nature of reality, though it would be a mistake to assume that he held the same views on metaphysics as those expressed in his writing. As Dick put it, ‘It is one of the cardinal errors of literary criticism to believe that the author’s own views can be inferred from his
writing’ (Dick, quoted in Sutin 290). Eleven years after he made this statement, he observed that ‘every facet of my life, psyche, experiences, dreams and fears, are laid out explicitly in my writing [and] from the corpus of my work I can be absolutely and precisely inferred’ (Sutin 290). Even given the intervening years, it is still typical for Dick to present both sides of an issue and give them equal weight; this quality helps make him a challenging and exciting writer. His fiction writing, his personal life, his interests and his non-fiction writings are filled with evidence of his obsession for questioning perceived reality and finding something less contingent to replace it with.

Dick’s earliest explorations into how perception can help construct what we think of as reality came through the then-flourishing field of psychiatry. He had a life-long interest in the subject, most likely inspired by his early personal experiences with psychotherapy. His mother, Dorothy, sent him to a therapist while he was still in Junior High School to address his ‘academic apathy and anxieties’ (Sutin 37). Because of this he knew much more about psychiatry than most people his age, and even played games with friends based on the psychological tests he had been exposed to (Sutin 37). Dick’s youthful exposure to psychology and his awareness of how the mind can distort reality shows itself in his early works, many of which are concerned with the extent to which perception creates reality. This fascination with subjective reality continued throughout his life, moving beyond psychology and into the airy lands of metaphysics. It’s not unusual for the author to mention, in passing, Leibniz, Kant, Hume, Schopenhauer, Berkeley and various different religious theodicies.

Dick’s search continued throughout his life. He searched for meaning and truth in religion, drugs, a string of marriages and in the endless monologue of his writing. Nothing seemed satisfactory. Like the characters in his novels, Dick was left to get on with his life without the surety he craved. The solution he offers some of his characters, to embrace the practical act of living without the satisfaction of ever seeing behind the curtain, could never be enough for him. He returned to the same themes again and again with the self-destructive persistence of a moth banging against an incandescent light bulb.

By the end of Dick’s life, the quest for reality had consumed him. He would spend his days writing about people searching desperately for truth and meaning in a world that appears void of both, and would then spend the long evenings and longer mornings engaged in a personal search for the same. This search took place on paper, in his lengthy
Exegesis which he began writing soon after his experiences in February and March 1974. In it, he tried to make sense of the experiences, visions and realisations he came to call by the short hand ‘2-3-74’, referring to a stretch of two months rather than a single day. By the time of his death, his Exegesis numbered some eight thousand pages. During this late period in his life he would spend long hours with friends speculating endlessly about the nature of reality. Throughout this period he retained a rational scepticism, even of his own search. His inquiring mind wouldn’t let him be satisfied with the many, many explanations he offered himself in his Exegesis. In the last novel he wrote, The Transmigration of Timothy Archer (TTA 1982), he gives a sense that he suspected his own search, either in his novels, in discussion with friends, or in his Exegesis, would never satisfy him. In the following excerpt Edgar Barefoot, a spiritual authority, speaks with the protagonist Angel Archer about her craving for spiritual satisfaction:

‘Angel Archer,’ Barefoot said, ‘You are wrong about yourself. You are not sick; you are starved. What is killing you is hunger. Words have nothing to do with it. You have been starved all your life. Spiritual things will not help. You don't need them. There are too many spiritual things in the world, far too many. You are a fool, Angel Archer, but not a good kind of fool.’ (TTA 104)

Angel’s spiritual quest for meaning is comparable with Dick’s own search for reality. His frustration with the search and his frustration at not being able to discontinue the quest and be satisfied with the world around him are palpable in the quote.

Dick’s quest for reality was both a public obsession, as in his well-known novels, and a private one. One might gather from his playful and darkly humorous writing that he took the search for reality lightly. Sometimes he did. Sometimes he did not. Science fiction provided the perfect genre for his search for reality. Dick considered it ‘a medium in which the full play of human imagination can operate, ordered, of course, by reason and consistent development’ (‘Introducing the Author’ 9). Science fiction is also predicated, however loosely at times, on science, scientific speculation and integrating the scientific world view into human life. How, he asks over and over in his fiction, can there be authentic existence when technology allows reality and simulation to be indistinguishable? How can humans find a place in a universe composed of unfeeling atoms? How can we find meaning in the span of time between now and the inevitable heat death of the universe? Without the constraints placed upon the scientist or
philosopher for plodding and painstaking logical steps, he was allowed to fly. Without being subject solely to the dictate of logic and its cold, distant perspective, he was able to consider the possibility of hope in the dark cosmos: hope he found in human beings and in their warm compassion for one another.\(^5\)

Dick wanted to be taken seriously as both a fiction writer and a serious thinker about the nature of reality. At times he would privilege one over the other. Looking back over his life and career he wrote in his *Exegesis*, ‘I am a fictionalizing philosopher, not a novelist; my novel & story-writing ability is employed as a means to formulate my perception. The core of my writing is not art but *truth*’ (*Exegesis* 075, quoted in Sutin 5). Since the 1970s his writing has received a wealth of insightful criticism that has taken his injunction to heart, examining his themes and styles as the works of a ‘fictionalizing philosopher’ who found fullest expression in the science fiction genre.

In 1975 an entire special edition of *Science Fiction Studies* was devoted to Dick’s works. In France he received early popularity. His own terrible self-consciousness at being a genre writer is understandable given attitudes towards science fiction during the early and even the late parts of his career, but grossly stereotyping the whole of this large and rich genre on the basis of its parts has, for the most, been left in the past. He has been one of the few science fiction writers to be welcomed into the academic canon from an early point in the study of science fiction as a literary genre; 1975, the year of *Science Fiction Studies* special editions on Philip K. Dick and Ursula K. Le Guin, might fruitfully be posited as the year Dick began to emerge as a canonical figure in ‘literary’ studies of science fiction. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. even called Dick ‘the single writer most

---

\(^5\) Some might object to my characterisation of logic as possessing a cold, distant perspective and the knock-on implication that science and philosophy share this perspective. In response I would acknowledge that both science and philosophy possess very human perspectives that enrich the world around us. One need only recall Plato’s claim, through Socrates, that ‘wonder is the only beginning of philosophy’ (*Theaetetus* 155d) or read Richard Dawkin’s many examples of scientific understanding beautifying the world around us, as in his *Unweaving the Rainbow*, to refute the claim that they are inhuman disciplines solely built on logic. Nevertheless, I would contend that the beauty we perceive is something we bring to the table ourselves which can be enriched and informed by logic, but which logic itself does not necessarily include. Science and philosophy are as much human endeavours to understand the world as literature and poetry. The interplay of scientific rationality and human meaning has been a foundational quality of science fiction from Kirk and Spock’s inane arguments to James Blish’s more nuanced *A Case of Conscience*. 

16
responsible for the acceptance of SF as a dominant genre of literature in the second half of the 20th century’ (v). Recent years have seen Dick’s star continue its rise in the academic firmament as dissertations, theses, journal articles and collections of criticism are published with increasing regularity. This thesis contributes to the dialogue around that most fundamental of his themes: the quest for reality.

To follow the ‘what is reality?’ thread back in time, in the early 1970s Dick found his metaphysical themes taken up by a number of Marxist critics, including Peter Fitting, Fredric Jameson, Carl Freedman and Darko Suvin. These critics found in Dick’s works many of the same concerns that motivated them, including his critiques of totalising organisations and runaway capitalism and his depiction of the overwhelming alienation of human beings living in a technological society. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., one of the senior editors of *Science Fiction Studies* and an insightful surveyor of Dick’s works, says that Dick has been:

> the subject of more Marxist analyses than any other sf writer and [has] inspired some of the finest textual criticism by Marxist critics. In Dick they saw a writer who, although averse to all forms of political theory, reflected the paranoia, insecurity and mundane chaos that were the true social conditions of his society. Arguably, these works constitute a canon of the superior texts and writers of the age against which others should be measured. (‘Marxist Theory and Science Fiction’ 120)

Dick found their attention sinister, and in 1974 gave a number of these critics’ names to the FBI and claimed that they were part of a conspiracy trying to involve and recruit the poor, patriotic science fiction writer. Irrespective of his personal feelings about his strong left-wing following, they gave the first serious treatments of his metaphysical themes. Csicsery-Ronay characterises this early period of Philip K. Dick studies as one of ‘beatification’ in which the main project was to ‘justify why [Dick’s critics] consider him an important writer’ (‘Pilgrims in Pandemonium’ vii).

---

6 See Robert M. Philmus’ ‘The Two Faces of Philip K. Dick’ for a clear, if righteously outraged, account of these events.
Throughout this period, Dick’s works found a receptive audience in Europe, especially in France where science fiction had more academic respectability than in America. The Polish science fiction writer Stanisław Lem even went so far as to declare Dick a ‘visionary’ who distinguishes himself from the gross bulk of American science fiction which Lem considered ‘destitute of intellectual value and original structure’ (67). Dick denounced Lem to the FBI for his troubles. In 1981 some of the European theorising about Dick came to influence the Anglophone world. Baudrillard published his book *Simulation and Simulacra* in which he praised Dick’s works for anticipating and giving examples of what he considered the only possible type of science fiction available to the modern/postmodern world: science fiction that explores the ‘hyper-real’ of groundless simulation. Baudrillard drew more mainstream attention to Dick’s portrayal of reality and as later critics built on Baudrillard’s observation Dick became elevated in many people’s minds to the level of postmodern prophet, a description that graces the covers of many of his novels.

More recent attempts to deal with Dick’s metaphysical themes have grown from these earlier understandings, allowing him to flourish as a canonical writer of particular relevance to postmodern thinking who, despite his critique of stable reality, manages to maintain a poignant humanism throughout his works.

There is a beautiful irony at the heart of this brief overview of Dick criticism. Dick, first praised for his critique of totalising ideologies, has become so closely allied with certain intellectual ideologies that it is now very difficult to separate the ideas in his works from the formulations of his critics. The same critics who have been so heavily influenced by him have themselves moulded contemporary understanding of his writing. It is difficult to look at his challenges to reality without stamping the word ‘postmodern’ across them, even though he stands at an anticipatory point with regard to postmodernism in both a chronological and theoretical sense. It is also difficult to look at his works and not see a rebellious and revolutionary attitude to the *status quo*, even as he runs to the feds to protect him from the critics who first lauded this aspect of his writing.

---

7 For an account of Dick’s reception in France see Roger Bozzetto et al. ‘Dick in France: A Love Story (Dick en France: une histoire d'amour)’. For an attempt at explanation for Dick’s appeal in France, see Daniel Fondanèche’s ‘Dick, the Libertarian Prophet’.
In 1992 Csicsery-Ronay wrote that Dick has become so interesting, so often written about and interpreted, that readers can hardly come to his fiction without going through the thickets — indeed by now, the forests — of criticism, simulation and cultural propaganda. The margin has moved to the center. And even though that center is the shattered bullet hole of postmodernism, it is, like all centers, under the custodial care of cultural bodyguards. (‘Pilgrims in Pandemonium’ vi)

The blessing of critical attention and serious study is a mixed one. Dick’s works have been given to the care and protection of ‘cultural bodyguards’, but those same bodyguards want to keep him within the sphere of their care.

Dick’s left-wing and postmodernist critics have a specific requirement for him and his metaphysical theme. They require him to portray a world without fixed ideology or reality, one where the truth is contingent and Reality, graced with a capital letter to distinguish it from lesser realities, is indeterminate or impossible. The Marxist critics need Dick’s realities to be contingent so as to deliver a critique of the dominant capitalist ideology and its totalising and exclusionary power structures that efface their own traces. The postmodern thinkers need to show that Dick fully embraces the fragmentary nature of the modern world, where authenticity is impossible, truth is an ungrounded notion, and reality and deception reduced to a single level of hyperreality; otherwise he cannot fully occupy the role of postmodern prophet.

For the most part, the portrayal of Dick as a person who writes about and explores contingent realities is accurate, but is only part of the full picture and misses some of the subtlety present in his thinking and writing. He may portray contingent realities, but that is not to say that he has given up on the notion of a solid Reality underlying it all. His personal dedication to the search for Reality is an undeniable fact in his life, and it was a pursuit he persisted with despite the tremendous amounts of personal pain it caused him. His protagonists mirror his devotion, and their dissatisfaction with illusory realities is often a critically important element in driving the plot forward. Had he or his protagonists no belief in the possibility of a penultimate Reality, then they would never have bothered challenging the illusory ones they find themselves in. In his works, the loss of reality is ‘a negative event; it could be argued that it coincides with evil itself. It leads to isolation, to
solipsism, to the detachment from human community, i.e. to madness and death’ (Rossi 402). If Dick is a postmodern prophet, he is a dark prophet, who fears what he prophesies.

A truly postmodern thinker would embrace the fragmentation of reality, and would consider showing the contingency of a reality that purports to possess absolute value a performative act demonstrating the futility of all claims to totalising truth, and not a ‘break down’ to allow ‘absolute reality to reveal itself’ (‘Man, Android and Machine’ 218). Dick even defined reality as ‘that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away’ (‘How to Build a Universe’ 261). His definition expresses dissatisfaction with contingency – in this example, contingency on personal belief – and implies hope for something more substantial and objective.

Just as viewing Dick as a challenger of contingent realities partakes of the truth, so too does viewing Dick as a counter-cultural figure, and for this reason Dick’s early left-wing critics find fertile ground in his works. Dick delivers resounding, if fictional, blows to the establishment, to totalising systems and to tyrannies both political and ideological. However, far from escaping the capitalistic system, Dick’s protagonists will often create space for themselves within this system. Perhaps Dick’s most archetypal protagonist, the struggling repairman running his own small business, is not as interested in bringing the dominant ideology to its knees as he is in carving out his own market share.

In order to create the groundwork for this thesis, this chapter will engage with those of Dick’s academic commentators who tackle his challenges for Reality. The motivation for this is to gain a picture of what academic commentators have thought about the metaphysical thread in his writing and to identify where these commentators’ ideologies match their portrayals of his metaphysics. A more nuanced understanding of his works will offer less to a single ideology, but, this thesis aims to show, will help to interpret some of his labyrinthine ideas. This will then pave the way for close readings of his works with the specific goal of understanding the challenges he presents for reality and the solutions he offers. These readings will occupy later chapters in this thesis.


The first major academic treatment of Dick came in 1975 when the journal *Science Fiction Studies (SFS)* published a special edition devoted to his science fiction. The edition contains seven articles on Dick. Of the seven, none is exclusively targeted at his
Chapter 1

metaphysical theme. Each makes mention of it, and some are more closely tied to it than others.

Some main stylistic and ideological themes emerge in these articles. All assume Dick’s status as an important writer. Some of the articles adopt a structuralist approach, pointing out the structural elements of Dick’s novels and highlighting them as important. Suvin and Jameson, in particular, make use of this approach. Fitting uses structure as part of his deconstructive analysis of *Ubik* (*Ubik* 1969). Some of the articles highlight ideology as important, and relate Dick’s shifting realities to a critique of the prevailing and dominant ideology of capitalism. Fitting and Suvin take this approach. Lem and Aldiss give readings that are less focussed on ideology and are more idiosyncratic.

**Darko Suvin, ‘PKD’s Opus: Artifice as Refuge and World View.’**

Suvin, the editor of *SFS* in 1975, sets the tone for the issue. He offers an overview of Dick’s works, dividing them into rough groupings. In the first section, Suvin makes use of structural analysis to examine Dick’s narrative foci and relates those foci to power relations within the novels discussed. In the second section, ‘AM-WEB: POLITICS AND ONTOLOGY’, Suvin links Dick’s political ideologies with metaphysics, primarily through discussing *Martian Time-Slip* (*MTS* 1964), *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (*TSPE* 1965) and *Dr. Bloodmoney* (*DB* 1965). The third section is concerned with Dick’s characterisation. The fourth concludes the article. It is the second section that is of most interest here, as it represents one of the earliest approaches to Dick’s metaphysical themes.

Politics dominates the ‘Politics and Ontology’ section. Ontology doesn’t make an entrance into the section until near its close. This choice of focus reflects Suvin’s personal interests. As a Marxist literary critic, Suvin naturally highlights the elements of Dick’s writing that match Marxist themes. In addition, in 1975 when this issue appeared a number of Dick’s novels had yet to be written. For the most part these novels, which include the VALIS trilogy, represent a shift away from politics and into ontology and religious speculation – a trend Suvin anticipates.

Suvin identifies a shift in Dick’s focus from politics to ontology, beginning in *The Man in the High Castle* (*MHC* 1962) and culminating in *Ubik*. Suvin sees *The Three Stigmata* as the tipping point between these two themes and the first novel ‘to allot equal weight to
Chapter 1

politics and ontology as arbiters of its microcosm’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 12). He concedes that the ontological theme is present from very early on in Dick’s opus and recurs often, but places its origins in Dick’s political dilemmas where they have a ‘clear genesis’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 15). *Three Stigmata* offers Suvin the opportunity to compare Dick’s political and ontological themes, and his judgement is that ‘Politics, physics and metaphysics combine to create in 3SPE a fascinating and iridescent manifold,’ but that the three interests over-determine the themes and ultimately ‘makes for an insufficiently economical novel’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 15). Suvin sees the novel begin with political and physical problems, but then says that Dick ‘drags across the red herring of ontico-religious speculations [...] which shelve rather than solve the thematic problems’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 15).

Suvin’s reading of the ontological themes, as he calls them, is dismissive. He sees Dick’s ontological concerns as subsidiary off-shoots of his political interests and, ultimately, dead ends. To Suvin’s way of thinking, Dick’s ontological interests do not solve any problems or answer any questions and are therefore pointless. They make the novel unwieldy and detract from the important issues in ‘the political and physical field’ it began in (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 15).

Suvin acknowledges that the novel fully supports both a ‘religious’ reading – presumably Suvin is eliding religion and ontology here – and a ‘politico-economic’ one. In judging the novel’s referents as ‘over-determined’, Suvin makes the point that while both political and ontological themes and readings can exist side by side, it is not necessary for both to exist. It is clear that he considers the politico-economic reading superior to the ‘red herring of ontico-religious speculations’, speculations which raise more questions than they answer, as if the goal of fiction were to answer questions. However, Suvin’s criticism seems based more on his personal interests than any objective standard: Dick stopped writing about politics, Suvin’s primary concern, and started writing about something he had less interest in: religion and metaphysics. In a later essay, Suvin argues stories with a metaphysical bent are ‘not SF but a metaphysical or (to translate this from Greek to Latin) a supernatural story’ (‘State of the Art’ 37). The novel is certainly ‘insufficiently economic’, but Suvin’s dismissal of the ‘ontico-religious speculations’ seems too quick. Is Suvin’s concern that they do not lead to solutions, as is implied by his criticism that they ‘shelve rather than solve thematic problems’? Suvin’s desire for neat answers – or for political questions – does not match up with Dick’s writing. Dick has
difficulty giving a firm answer to a question without raising more questions about the answer he gave. This is an admirable quality in anyone engaged in theoretical enquiry. It denotes devotion to truth and an honesty in facing up to difficult problems without glossing over them – admirable qualities in a fictionalising philosopher, and qualities that exist in the best of his novels.

Suvin criticises Dick’s tendency to multiply explanations in part because Suvin sees similarities between Dick’s method and that of science fiction pariah A.E. van Vogt. Van Vogt fell from early critical respectability when Damon Knight wrote ‘Cosmic Jerrybuilder’ and brought readers’ attention to van Vogt’s shaky plots, random plot turns and frequent *deus ex machina* resolutions. Dick was one of the many writers profoundly influenced by Van Vogt’s style and ideas. In an interview with Charles Platt, Dick said that ‘a lot of what I wrote, which looks like taking acid, is really the result of taking Van Vogt very seriously’ (Platt, ‘Philip K. Dick’ 151). Suvin associates the metaphysical twists with Van Vogt’s arbitrary plot twists and claims that ‘the abstracted plots are often borrowed’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 9) from Van Vogt and that ‘Vanvogtian plotting’ is one of the things that ‘meant the most to [Dick]’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 12). Suvin clearly intends his comments as criticisms; like van Vogt’s, Suvin suggests, Dick’s narrative twists are arbitrary and ultimately pointless.

In an article collected later in the same issue, Ian Watson takes the opposite position. He sees Dick sharing some of Van Vogt’s ideas and styles – in particular the paranormal science fiction tropes of espers, pre-cogs and time-shifters – but suggests that Dick uses them in a ‘meaningful’ way to address ‘real problems: ethical, psychological, epistemological, and practical’ (Watson 69). In contrast, Watson describes Van Vogt’s use of the same tropes in his own work as ‘seductive nonsense’ (69). Thirteen years later, John Huntington added to the dialogue by offering a much more nuanced understanding of Dick’s metaphysical plot twists. Huntington suggests that Dick uses Van Vogt’s device of introducing a new idea every eight hundred words for a number of genuine authorial purposes that accord with the philosophical statement Dick is trying to offer. Huntington says Dick’s plot twists match Dick’s thematic intentions because they mirror ‘the arbitrariness that he sees in the universe itself’ (155). The device allows Dick to explore relative and absolute values by giving equal weight to both (Huntington 156). However, the device also gives the impression of complexity and profundity where there might only be contradiction (Huntington 154). This is the only point from Huntington’s nuanced
analysis that Suvin explicitly takes on board in his 2002 follow-up article (‘Goodbye and Hello’ 393). Most recently, in 2004, Umberto Rossi took up the challenge of Dick’s complicated back-and-forth plots again by offering a close analysis of *The Game-Players of Titan* (*GPT* 1963) to see how closely it follows the ‘800 word rule’. In a twist that ironically mirrors the subject of this discussion, Rossi concluded that Dick doesn’t follow this ‘rule’ at all and that Dick’s twists and turns are the result of intelligently directed artistic decisions designed to enhance the dialogue of the novel and a ‘diegetic engine’ powering the discussion (‘The Game of the Rat’ 220).

Suvin dismisses Dick’s metaphysical twists by labelling them ‘Vanvogtian’ and ‘arbitrary’ without engaging with them any closer. Huntington and Rossi both defend Dick from these charges. Huntington shows how the supposedly ‘arbitrary’ twists are an intentional component of Dick’s thematic explorations. Rossi explores how the twists are elements of authorial artistry. Both writers are able to offer justification in the form of close reference to Dick’s works, while Suvin levels his charge in an all-encompassing way and without engaging with specifics. Dick’s metaphysical twists take the form of a complicated dialectic and are reminiscent of the method of *elenchus*, a method used by philosophers ever since the days of Socrates. The target of *elenchus* is truth found through testing ideas. The motivation Dick’s characters have for rejecting the reality they are presented with is that they are dissatisfied with it and wish to have something more solid. The speculative twists they experience are a consequence of the search. Most often, the result is a series of blind alleys, but the only way to find out if they are dead ends is to travel down them. Suvin dismisses this process too quickly.

Suvin’s neglect of the ontological theme and his judgement that it is subsidiary to the political theme is more indicative of his personal preferences than any genuine criticism of Dick. By labelling it ‘vanvogtian’ Suvin avoids dealing with the theme more closely. The Marxist attitude toward religion might also explain why Suvin distrusts a theme that blends so easily into religious speculation, and Suvin plainly sees the religious elements of the story as being closely allied with the ontological theme, and with some justification.

Suvin’s preference leads him to make some sweeping judgements, many in the face of significant counter-evidence. His preference for the political over the ontological causes him to rate Dick’s early works more highly than his later works. It causes him to
designate Ubik and Stigmata ‘heroic failure[s]’ and Do Androids Dream an ‘outright failure’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 21). Suvin thinks that what he sees as the downward trend of Dick’s writing is caused by Dick’s developing interest in ‘increasingly private and psychoanalytical problems’. The problems Dick turns to in these later works, issues about the nature of reality and how to live a life in a world where modern technology throws the very nature of authenticity into question, are anything but personal. These are perhaps the most fundamental and universal questions, even if they are not always of immediate or practical concern. Suvin calls these metaphysical problems ‘private’, implying that they are issues of interest only to Dick, but it would be more accurate to say they are not of interest to Suvin.

Suvin concludes by saying Dick’s metaphysical speculations are ‘less felicitous’ than his other themes, and that they are best done when they are ‘still clearly grounded in sociology’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 22). Without further justification, Suvin’s judgements can only be viewed as expressions of personal taste.

When in 2002 Suvin returned to the ideas in this earlier article, he aimed to add those of Dick’s works that had not been written at the time to his earlier survey and to:

[...] clarify my 1975 thesis that in P.K. Dick’s opus we can see an oscillation between the horizons of transitive epistemology, where reality is undoubted but the character’s or reader’s approach to it is in question, and intransitive ontology, where the reality itself is in question. (Suvin, ‘Goodbye and Hello’ 371)

This clarification is very much necessary; try as I may, I cannot find any trace of this thesis in the earlier article, which does not even mention epistemology. Regardless of its heritage, Suvin’s distinction is a useful one. Suvin clearly identifies a fact many of the people writing about Dick’s metaphysical themes neglect: in most of Dick’s early novels reality itself is not in question; people’s ability to find it and recognise it is. However, it can be difficult to separate an epistemological question from an ontological one. At some point the one slides into the other.

Ultimately, Suvin’s conclusion to this later article coincides with his earlier ones. He judges Dick’s speculations about reality to be relevant only when they come down to earth. Because of this, Suvin tries to read Radio Free Albemuth (RFA w.1976, pub.1985) and the VALIS trilogy as ‘parable[s] of collective earthly matters’ (‘Goodbye and Hello’
Chapter 1

375). Suvin again elides ontology and religion, perhaps understandably given Dick’s approaches to his metaphysical theme in his late novels. Finally, Suvin again deems Dick’s ontology to be inferior to his politics, or, to use the clarified thesis, Dick’s ‘intransitive ontology’ to be inferior to his ‘transitive epistemology’.

**Fredric Jameson, ‘After Armageddon: Character Systems in Dr. Bloodmoney’**

Suvin is not the only well-known name in the 1975 special edition. In the same issue Fredric Jameson offers his own take on Dick’s late ‘metaphysical’ novels, describing them as Dick’s ‘most striking novels’ (31). While Jameson’s ostensible goal is to analyse the character systems in *Dr. Bloodmoney*, his choice of this novel is motivated by following the metaphysical thread in Dick’s works. Jameson identifies the ‘reality fluctuation’ and the ‘nightmarish uncertainty’ it causes Dick’s characters as a ‘familiar’ part of Dick’s novels (32). Jameson describes the reality fluctuations as moments when Dick unseats the categories of subjectivity and objectivity by causing ‘the psychic world’ to ‘go outside’, using devices such as drugs, schizophrenia and sometimes the sf trope of special super-human powers.

In general, the effect of these passages, in which the narrative line comes unstuck from its referent and begins to enjoy the bewildering autonomy of a kind of temporal Moebius strip, is to efface the boundary between real and hallucinatory altogether, and to discredit the reader’s otherwise inevitable question as to which of the events witnessed is to be considered ‘true.’ (‘After Armageddon’ 32)

In the above extract, Jameson describes an effect in Dick’s writing, and suggests its purpose is to blur the lines between objective and subjective, real and hallucinatory. This then allows Dick to ‘transcend the opposition between the subjective and the objective’ (‘After Armageddon’ 32). According to Jameson, Dick doesn’t merely erode the boundaries between subjective and objective, or knock down the so-called objective reality in favour of the subjective; Dick *transcends* the two, affirming the truth of both, apparently contradictory, understandings of the world, making the question of truth moot.

Jameson’s account has much to recommend it. For one thing, Dick’s novels tend to end in profound ambiguity. The objective/subjective, absolute reality/contingent reality
dilemmas are usually left unresolved by the final pages. Jameson’s account matches this observation, since the intention of transcending the divide between objective and subjective would be negated if one were privileged over the other. Dick’s protagonists are left to go on living without the certainty of knowing what is inside their heads, what is outside them and what the difference really is. They can only do so by transcending the two categories, accepting both as important and true. Generally speaking, this is how Dick’s novels tend to end: they often close on a protagonist who, after a long pursuit for the truth, is forced to be satisfied with the mix of subjective and objective understanding that has been allocated to him or, in the case of The Transmigration of Timothy Archer, her. Of necessity, the protagonist is required to transcend these categories in order to go on with his or her life. For instance in Eye in the Sky (ES 1957), after a speedy tour through four different subjective universes, the protagonist, Jack Hamilton, having been confronted with the terrifying contingency of his universe, resolves to start a hi-fi equipment business. Rather than becoming immersed in the problem, the protagonist transcends it. Similarly, at the close of Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? the protagonist, Rick Deckard, emerges from a bewildering maze of simulacra and simulations only to find that what appeared to be a transcendent sign of a higher power – the discovery of a live toad in the desert, a sacred animal in the Mercerist religion – is not a genuine toad but an artificial copy. Deckard is forced to accept the false toad as his miracle and go on with his life knowing that at the heart of his spiritual revelation lies a falsehood, turning a piece of transcendental surety into the same ambiguity that characterised his previous existence. Rather than trying to work out the truth of the matter, Deckard goes to bed, the issue of truth and simulation indefinitely postponed as the novel ends before he wakes. Jameson’s description of Dick’s method explains the tightrope Dick seems to walk in every novel, carefully avoiding leaning too far in any direction, and careful to unseat any explanation that seems to offer certainty. Jameson considers Dick’s ‘solution’ to the problem of objective and subjective to be perfectly in tune with ‘our fragmented existence under capitalism’ in which we have a ‘simultaneous presence in the separate compartments of private and public worlds’ (33). It seems strange that Jameson would consider existing in both the ‘private and public worlds’ unique to capitalism, but it makes no difference to his argument.

Jameson’s contention that Dick is trying to make the question of truth irrelevant and transcend the categories of subjective and objective has some problems. If Dick wants his
Chapter 1

readers to transcend the question of what is real, wouldn’t the driving force of the novels be weakened? Why do Dick’s characters engage in so much speculation about the question? Jameson’s contention is not as straightforward as it might initially seem. Jameson acknowledges this when he turns to the main target of his article: *Dr. Bloodmoney*.

Jameson sees *Dr. Bloodmoney* as a problem for Dick and the tightrope of ambiguity and transcendence Dick walks when dealing with the question of reality. The atomic blast is a unique referent; it can’t be dismissed as ambiguous possibility because such a dismissal ‘lies outside the range of Dick’s aesthetic possibilities’ (33). The bomb confronts Dick with its reality and its finality, and he is forced to deal with it. Jameson suggests that Dick deals with the problem by setting up several structural oppositions in order to create self-cancelling structures in the novel and ultimately to create an opposition capable of negating the terrible reality of the terminal moment.

As is typical for one of Dick’s early commentators, Jameson is engaged in the beatification – to use Csicsery-Ronay’s term – of the science fiction writer and as such wishes to show the artistry of Dick’s work. By taking a structuralist approach, Jameson is able to identify what are often hallmarks of intentionality and artistry: structure and pattern. However, the results of his analysis seem to go beyond the available evidence. He sets up a single ‘semantic rectangle’ structure for the characters of the novel, following A.J. Greimas. This involves Jameson stretching his reading of the text in order to make the semantic rectangle work out the way he desires. For instance, the category of ‘the dead’ is defined by Jameson as ‘lacking organs’ (35). This particular definition flies in the face of our intuitive understanding of the category. Jameson uses this odd definition so Hoppy Harrington, who lacks organs, will fit along the correct side of the rectangle. Since Hoppy kills the titular Dr Bloodmoney and hence cancels out the effect of the terrible atomic referent, Jameson needs Hoppy on this side of the rectangle, opposite Bloodmoney. Hoppy would probably fit more naturally along the side defined as ‘mechanical/human’ since Hoppy is a human with mechanical prostheses.

---

8 Jameson is not alone in suggesting that the nuclear bomb presents a unique textual problem. See also Jacques Derrida’s ‘No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)’ which is discussed further in Chapter 9.
With the central opposition of Hoppy and Bloodmoney so important to Jameson’s reading, everything else is squeezed into the remaining parts of the rectangle as well as possible. Bill, who eventually – to use the jargon of the semantic rectangle – ‘negates’ Hoppy, is placed not opposite Hoppy, but opposite Dangerfield with whom Bill has little interaction. Jameson’s structural analysis fails to account for the realities of the novel, and where it has been made to work this has been accomplished by twisting the text to fit the reading.

Despite the violence Jameson’s structuralist reading does to the text, he makes a number of fascinating observations in the course of the article. Of most relevance to the work of this thesis is his contention that in comparing objective reality with subjective reality, Dick wishes to break down these categories in order to transcend them and accomplishes this by switching quickly between the two and giving them equal, but never definitive, treatment.

**Peter Fitting, ‘Ubik: The Deconstruction of Bourgeois SF’**

*Ubik* is probably Dick’s most unambiguously ambiguous novel when it comes to the reality problem. It works like a whodunit, where the mystery the characters have to solve is the mystery of their eroding reality. Eventually they come to the realisation that they are all dead, and have been since fairly early in the novel. With the revelation, many things become clear and the strangest facets of the novel become comprehensible. However, in the final page Dick performs one more reversal and reveals that the character the readers thought was alive is in fact dead and opens up all the questions that had apparently been resolved.

*Ubik* offers the critic the best opportunity to argue that Dick’s intention is to completely undermine the notion of a static, objective reality. Fitting takes this opportunity and goes one step further. Following Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jean Ricardou and Philippe Sollers, Fitting contends that the ‘classical bourgeois novel’ is ‘a metaphysical construct’: it presents itself as ‘a representative medium’ with an objective truth that can be discovered by ‘looking through’ the text to its “real” meaning, whether that meaning be empirical reality, the author’s conscious design or his unconscious intentions’ (50). This kind of construct privileges the signified over the signifier. The signifier is a means to an end, a code to decipher in order to get to the true meaning,
whether that meaning be the author’s conscious intentions, unconscious intentions or a truth about empirical reality. This in turn, argues Fitting, acts as an ideological support for capitalism. A representational novel ‘reinforces a transcendental conception of reality which mystifies the actual reality of the capitalist mode of production and the resultant repression and alienation’ (Fitting 50). *Ubik*, in contrast, refuses ‘any such final, definitive interpretation’ (Fitting 51). In doing so, it prevents reading *Ubik* as ‘opening onto a transcendental meaning,’ and *Ubik*’s extremely subjective ending causes the realisation that ‘the position of the observer is an extremely subjective perspective from which to deduce universal laws; that “reality” is a mental construct which may be undermined at any time’ (Fitting 52).

As with Suvin and Jameson, Fitting’s ultimate target is political. Unlike the representational novel, Fitting argues, *Ubik* undermines capitalism by remaining closed to transcendental meaning and thus draws our attention to the text itself, instead of its meaning. This is in contrast to the capitalistic mode of production where the means of production is mystified while the object itself is brought to the fore. In this way *Ubik* is a very considerable achievement, one ‘so deviously clever’ as Dick points out in an interview with *Science Fiction Review*, that ‘I never mention politics’ (‘An Interview with Philip K. Dick’). Fitting was aware that Dick did not fully agree with the article’s thesis, but ultimately was not worried that his article might not ‘agree with the author’s conscious intentions’ (‘Statement by Peter Fitting’ N.pag). Fitting showed Dick the article in 1974, prior to its publication. Fitting described the meeting containing ‘discussion and even disagreement about the “meaning” of his work’ (‘Statement by Peter Fitting’ N.pag). In turn, Dick described himself routing Fitting and his friends ‘in fierce debate’ (*Selected Letters, 1974* 110). Whatever the truth, both accounts suggest disagreement. In this article and his later writing, Fitting makes sure to emphasise that his reading is not based on any facts about the author’s life or beliefs – these are typical of ‘bourgeois novels’ which look past the text to ‘the author’s conscious design of his unconscious intentions’ (‘Deconstruction’ 50). Without any mention of politics in *Ubik*, without any support from the author’s conscious intentions and with the unlikelihood of divining Dick’s unconscious intentions, Fitting’s reading seems arbitrary. Fitting argues that *Ubik* lacks transcendental meaning and thus serves to highlight the neglected signifier and the ‘reality of the capitalist mode of production and the resultant repression and alienation’ (‘Deconstruction’ 50). Equally, one could argue that by not allowing a clear interpretation
Ubik mystifies the signifier and thus acts to reinforce the capitalist mode of production. Fitting’s conclusion requires a large leap. The fact that it is possible to take the same premises and jump from them in completely the opposite directions makes his conclusion suspect.

In this discussion, Fitting represents one of the extremes. He has also had great impact on the issue of Dick’s metaphysics because, unlike Suvin and Jameson, Fitting has been one of the few people to tackle the topic head-on. Fitting claims that Dick rejects ‘the metaphysical solution’ and that ‘for Dick there can be no single, final reality’ (‘Deconstruction’ 52). Fitting does not define what the metaphysical solution is in this article, but eight years later he will define it as finding ‘an answer “behind” phenomenal reality’ (‘Construct’ 222). Ubik is an excellent choice to support this reading. However, Fitting’s reading relies on his own treatment of Ubik as a representational work. In this case, he reads Ubik as an implicit critique of the bourgeois representational novel. Fitting catches himself in a regression: he cannot maintain that Ubik denies the possibility of a transcendental or representational reading while, at the very same time, giving it such a reading by suggesting it represents the denial of representational reading. Fitting obliquely acknowledges this when he notes that there ‘is no satisfactory single interpretation of Ubik, my own included’ (‘Deconstruction’ 51), although this acknowledgement makes it sound like simple humility rather than a nod to the implicit contradiction he establishes.

Regardless of Fitting’s contention that Ubik implicitly criticises the bourgeois novel, of most relevance in this context is his belief that in the ‘SF of Philip K. Dick’ there is ‘no final answer then to the question of what reality is’ (‘Deconstruction’ 52). Fitting occupies one extreme: his contention in this article is that Dick’s works represent a radical subjectivism in which reality is a mental construct and where there is no possibility for knowledge of external reality from the perspective of subjective and fallible observers. Fitting elaborates on his contention in an article published eight years later in the same forum.

Peter Fitting, ‘Reality as Ideological Construct: A Reading of Five Novels by Philip K. Dick’
Chapter 1

In ‘Reality as Ideological Construct’, published in 1983, Fitting increases the ambition of his original thesis. He increases his scope from analysing *Ubik* and critiquing the bourgeois novel to analysing five Dick novels and offering a critique of the ideological construction of reality. Fitting uses the term ‘ideology’ in the Marxist sense that emphasises ideology’s role in affirming the dominant power structure and maintaining the current mode of production while effacing its own traces. The dominant ideology portrays itself as natural, inevitable and static. To the Marxist notion of ideology, Fitting adds the idea that perceived reality is, in part, socially constructed, an idea he attributes to *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Bergman and Thomas Luckman (‘Construct’ 234).

Fitting contends that the five novels he analyses – *Eye in the Sky*, *Time Out of Joint*, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *A Scanner Darkly* (SD 1977) and *VALIS* (VALIS 1981) – all ‘put into question our “common-sense” acceptance of reality as given’ (‘Construct’ 220). These novels bring ideology to the fore, raising ideology as a question where it might have been assumed to be inevitable. Fitting is careful to situate his reading away from Dick’s conscious intentions, which he knew were not in line with his own political views.

Fitting chooses his material carefully. He is most interested in the *mise en scène* moments in a Dick novel when reality breaks down. These moments, Fitting argues, are ‘in a spontaneous and unconscious way, a representation of the discovery of ideology itself’ (‘Construct’ 220). Note Fitting’s emphasis that the role of the reality breakdown is ‘spontaneous and unconscious’, separating the breakdowns from their ostensible purpose in the novels and Dick’s conscious use for them. In highlighting these moments of breakdown, Fitting chooses to neglect other aspects of the reality dynamic of the novels. Specifically, he neglects ‘the various answers Dick gives to his doubts and anxieties about the nature of reality’. These ‘attempts to posit a reality “behind” “phenomenal reality”’ (‘Construct’ 220) do not fit Fitting’s agenda, and so they are ignored.

Fitting closely analyses Dick’s approach to reality in these five novels. In doing so he only wishes to look at the moments where reality breaks down, and he does not devote any attention to Dick’s attempts to rebuild reality or to account for the reality breakdowns. Within this limited context, Fitting is able to claim that Dick’s work supports the idea that ideology helps to form people’s personal reality and situate them
within a shared reality. He also claims that the repeated *mise en scène* moments in Dick’s novels where reality is seen to break down call into question the idea that reality is static and unchanging. Fitting then relates this observation to a political motive: by destroying the idea that reality is fixed, Dick’s writing challenges the dominant ideology which hides itself from the people who live under its sway. Fitting sees a tool for social transformation and casts Dick’s works in a revolutionary light.

Within this limited context, Fitting’s arguments might have some interest. However, Fitting’s approach brings his conclusions into question: as in his earlier article, Fitting has a clear political target and he uses the most convenient elements of Dick’s works – the reality breakdown – to support his reading, but does not give a full account of Dick’s works because he omits Dick’s attempts to rebuild reality. To draw an analogy, this would be like arguing that Shakespeare’s comedies are actually tragedies... so long as you don’t read the last act.

Dick’s early left-wing critics vary in their approaches to his metaphysical theme. Suvin considers the theme a subsidiary element, one that is subservient to Dick’s sociological writing. Jameson sees Dick attempting to transcend the division between phenomenal reality and absolute reality by breaking down the barriers between the two with the repeated device of reality breakdown and post-breakdown speculation. In this he anticipates Dick’s postmodern commentators. Fitting portrays Dick as a complete subjectivist, knocking down reality in order to implicitly critique the dominant ideology of American society. All three see the theme as important and all three relate it, to a greater or lesser degree, to the political views that motivate them. They found fertile ground in Dick’s writing to support their ideologically inspired readings, but ultimately their concerns were not in accurately portraying Dick’s works, but in highlighting those elements supportive of their own goals. They created a certain picture of Dick and his approach to the reality breakdown, one that influences his modern critics.

Overall, these early critics see Dick as a revolutionary figure. They place more emphasis on his attempts to break down reality than his work to build it back up. This emphasis highlights an important aspect of Dick’s writing, and allies his work with their ideological project.

These Marxist readings highlight Dick’s critiques of ‘objectivity’. In doing so, clear links emerge between the Marxist readings and the next wave of criticism and interpretation to
Chapter 1

take on Dick’s writing. Dick’s concerns with authenticity, replication, simulacra, subjectivity and the construction of reality are essentially postmodern concerns. It is as a result of his exploration of these postmodern themes that Dick has attracted the attention of postmodern thinkers.
Chapter 2: A Postmodern Prophet (1981-)

Postmodernism is a notoriously difficult complex of ideas to define. One reason is that postmodernism finds different expression in different fields. There is also the difficulty of defining who or what should fit inside what are, essentially, a number of loosely-linked and heavily-contested concepts. The postmodern movement does not have a fixed chronological beginning or end, and the people who are involved in postmodern theory are, inevitably, themselves complex human beings with many different beliefs and ideas who would reject any simplistic classification of postmodernism. Declaring a work ‘postmodern’ inevitably means simplifying the concepts involved and pretending that the word ‘postmodern’ has a univocal meaning, while also pretending that the work itself has a univocal theoretical underpinning.

Postmodern thought typically challenges the possibility and desirability of an ‘objective’ standpoint. With objectivity in theoretical decline, subjectivity becomes more important. In metaphysics, postmodern thinkers tend to embraces the idea that reality is in some ways socially constructed. A critical part of the postmodern worldview is the belief that the reality we live in is fragmented and decentred. Reality is no longer a reference point to which other ideas can be moored; it is a concept adrift in a sea of inauthenticity, simulation and fragmentation. The postmodern attitude to the destabilisation of reality varies, but generally the very groundlessness of being becomes a new kind of grounding – albeit a shifting and uncertain one.

Jason Vest comments that a number of prominent critics treat Dick as ‘the quintessential postmodern author’ because his ‘peculiar, fragmentary, and paranoid fiction perfectly expresses the tensions, ambivalences, and dislocations of twentieth-century American life’ (xi). In the following chapter, I investigate this claim.

Philip K. Dick offers many of the same challenges for reality that postmodernism is inspired by. He envisions worlds in which simulation and replication have become perfect. The possibility of a perfect duplicate raises questions about the nature of authenticity. If such duplication is possible, then what value can there be said to be in the original? If a human being, subject to imperfect perception and understanding, can be fooled about the authenticity of their reality, then can anything be called ‘real’ with any
surety? These are some of the questions that arise in the postmodern world and they are questions Dick raises compulsively in his fiction.

Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation

The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard raised many of these questions in his book *Simulacra and Simulation*. In a chapter entitled ‘Simulacra and Science Fiction’, he relates these postmodern concerns to science fiction as a genre. Baudrillard argues that contemporary culture has become a culture of hyperreality, where ‘real’ has been replaced with the ‘hyperreal’. Hyperreality is more real than reality itself, even if it paradoxically only consists of simulation and fakery. Consider the vibrant colours and settings of the *Avatar* movie and the phenomenon of fans made disappointed with the world outside the cinema as a contemporary example (Piazza). Baudrillard raises the question: if reality has been replaced by the hyperreal, then what place can science fiction have? Science fiction is, at a basic level, more akin to simulation than reality. If the ‘real’ world is a world of simulation filled with the infinite possibility of the imagination, then science fiction has become mundane or worse. Without the real to ground it, the imaginary becomes irrelevant.

Baudrillard theorises that the age of hyperreality is one where transcendence is impossible. The signifier has not only become more important than the sign, it has replaced it. Thus, it is impossible to move past the hyperreal. Baudrillard asks:

Where would the works be that would meet, here and now, this situational inversion, this situational reversion [where the fantasy of science fiction has become mundane and the mundane world hyperreal]? Obviously the short stories of Philip K. Dick “gravitate” in this space. (124)

Baudrillard describes the universes of Dick’s short stories as already being loci of hyperreality:

One does not see an alternative cosmos, a cosmic folklore or exoticism, or a galactic prowess there – one is from the start in a total simulation, without origin, immanent, without a past, without a future, a diffusion of all coordinates (mental, temporal, spatial, signaletic) – it is not about a parallel universe, a double universe,
or even a possible universe – neither possible, impossible, neither real nor unreal: hyperreal – it is a universe of simulation, which is something else altogether. (125)

Baudrillard’s characterisation of Dick’s short stories is clear, straightforward, and does not bother to cite any specific examples to support it. To defend Baudrillard’s lack of specificity, he is not engaged in close reading; he is just giving an example of an author whose science fiction writing accords with what Baudrillard considers to be the future of science fiction in a postmodern world. Even without citing textual support Baudrillard’s characterisation is not without merit, but like all such broad summations it glosses over the details to serve his argument.

When brought down to specifics, Baudrillard’s grand claims for Dick’s short stories come unravelled. Those of Dick’s stories that are engaged with his metaphysical themes are not univocally set in cosmoses that are ‘total simulation, without a future’ (125). The ones that are not explicitly engaged with metaphysical themes are much less likely contenders, and often occur in standard science fiction possibility space. To read Baudrillard charitably, he sacrifices accuracy for the sake of argument. To read him less charitably, his reading of Dick’s works is superficial and hasty, and less wide-ranging than it could be. Jorge Martins Rosa argues on the basis of a number of fairly simple mistakes made by Baudrillard – including calling the author ‘K. Philip Dick’ in the original French text; confusing the plot of *We Can Build You* (*WCBY* w.1963, pub.1972) with that of *The Simulacra* (*TS* 1964); and mistaking the Nitz commercials in *The Simulacra* for the Martian papoolas which, through a translation error, became ‘papulas’ – that Baudrillard’s reading ‘may have resulted from a recommendation by someone who had a deeper acquaintance with Dick’s material’ (62). Rosa’s scholarship is excellent, and he points out a number of clear inconsistencies between Dick’s works and how Baudrillard understands them. To add to Rosa’s examples, consider Baudrillard’s description of the ‘papula’ as a ‘broadcasting leech, an electronic parasite that attaches itself to the body and that is very hard to get rid of’ (89). However, *not once* in the source text does a papoola or a Nitz commercial attach itself to a body.

Following the principle of charity, let’s briefly look at two excellent contenders for stories that contain the sort of total, atemporal simulation that Baudrillard suggests Dick’s works portray: ‘Adjustment Team’ (1954) and ‘The Electric Ant’ (1969). Like most of Dick’s short stories, ‘Adjustment Team’ challenges reality in a fairly straightforward way when
compared to the complex metaphysical problems in his novels. Ed Fletcher is in the wrong place at the wrong time, and discovers a secret team of people dedicated to keeping reality on the right track – the titular ‘Adjustment Team’. To keep reality on the right track, they occasionally intervene and alter reality as most people know it. This is done by ‘de-energizing’ a sector and the people in it and altering it according to the larger plan before re-energising it. While this story puts phenomenal reality into question, it does not completely remove the possibility of a deeper, underlying reality, as Baudrillard would contend it should. In fact, it even presents that deeper reality by showing the Adjustment Team at work and having the local head of the Bureau delivering a clear exposition of the nature of the world Ed finds himself in (‘Adjustment Team’ 89–91).

The world of ‘Adjustment Team’ is practically the opposite of what Baudrillard suggests. Baudrillard claims that in a modern (or postmodern) world, ‘the grace of transcendence was taken away from us’ (123). Reality has become unitary: the reality of simulation, fakery and hyperreality. In ‘Adjustment Team’ Dick presents a perceived reality with a transcendent reality, one that is more real, lying behind it. The perceived reality may be ‘total simulation’, but the underlying one is not questioned in the story. In addition, rather than ‘Adjustment Team’ taking place in an a-temporal space as Baudrillard suggests it would, the world of ‘Adjustment Team’ is heavily grounded in time and space. The Bureau operates to manipulate the future as it arises out of present events. The Bureau exists in a world of clear cause and effect, where a simple mistimed act – a dog barking one minute too late – provides the irreversible complicating incident of the story.

‘The Electric Ant’ presents a more hospitable environment for Baudrillard’s account of hyperreality, but again the case is not clear-cut. In the story the protagonist, Garson Poole, discovers he is an organic robot, an ‘electric ant’ to use the story’s terminology. His phenomenal reality is not the result of sensory data entering his neurological system; it is the result of a small punched tape being fed through a reader in his chest cavity. By altering the tape, Poole is able to change the world he perceives.

Poole certainly exists in a world of perfect simulation. In some ways it is a world that is ‘without origin’ and ‘immanent’ (Baudrillard 125). Because Poole’s experience of reality depends on holes punched in a piece of metal tape, his link to a real world is tenuous – if the real world can be said to exist in the story at all. Poole’s senses are epiphenomenal and based on the metal tape, which itself has no necessary link to an underlying reality. It
could be that the sensory data Poole receives is arbitrary and not related to anything; he could just as easily be reading fiction on his metal tape as non-fiction. One of the other characters says near the end of the story, ‘[Poole] had never been plugged into the real world; it had “lived” in an electronic world of its own’ (‘The Electric Ant’ 308). Because of this Baudrillard might be right in characterising this particular fiction as one that takes place in a world that is not a ‘double’ of an existing world, but a world ‘without exteriority’ (125).

On the other hand, Poole’s world relies on the existence of the metal tape which itself exists in the real world. This is a clear example of a subsistence relationship. The tape might not accurately relay the real world to Poole, but nevertheless exists in it. To update the analogy, if someone were inside a computer-simulated virtual reality, this wouldn’t be a situation of Baudrillardian hyperreality because the computer itself exists in the real, exterior world. Hyperreality is predicated on an absence of the real. But once more there is a potential problem: Poole only knows of the existence of the tape through the evidence of his senses – senses that rely on the tape itself. So can Poole or the reader know that the external world even exists in the story? Perhaps the sheer entanglement of reality and unreality supports Baudrillard’s claims. Perhaps it only complicates them.

The ending of the story only obscures matters more. Poole decides to cut the tape. Since small holes in the tape represent sensory perceptions, by cutting the tape Poole perceives everything at once. Could it be that by cutting the tape, Poole transcends his limited and subsistent world? By perceiving everything at once, is he perceiving the world as it actually is when not limited by the perception filtering systems of the mind? Could he have glimpsed the infinite, an idea Blake also plays with in his poem ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’ when he writes that ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.’ Dick and his co-author Ray Nelson play with the same idea in The Ganymede Takeover (GT 1967) when they imagine terrible weapons that cause imaginary beings to come to life. The explanation given in Takeover is that these so-called imaginary beings actually exist, but are filtered out by whatever processes go into forming shared reality. If Poole is experiencing a deeper reality, represented by the blinding white light, then Baudrillard’s reading of Dick’s short stories as without transcendent truth would be inaccurate.
The last moments of the scene switch the point of view. Poole lies in smoking ruin on the floor, his circuits burnt out. The new narrative point of view comes from Sarah Benton, who starts to make arrangements to dispose of Poole’s body. Before much time elapses, her world tatters, frays and blows away before her eyes, producing yet more questions without answers about the nature of the story’s reality. In this story, Baudrillard has more fertile ground. Dick doesn’t just question reality or present a simulation of reality; he creates a space familiar to any reader of his writing where there is no stability or solid ground and no possibility of either. Benton’s experiences at the end of the story destabilise any simple reading and make ‘The Electric Ant’ a good contender for science fiction of hyperreality.

So, perhaps in ‘The Electric Ant’ Baudrillard’s grand claims about Dick’s short fiction might have basis, but they do not apply to all, or even most, of Dick’s short fiction. Nor is this reading without its problems even in this story. No doubt Baudrillard’s statements are intended as polemic rather than serious textual comment. As Denis Dutton points out, Baudrillard’s style is full of bold, bombastic and brazen claims that tend not to stand up to serious analysis (Dutton). Mark Poster makes a similar observation in his introduction to Baudrillard’s Selected Writings when he says that Baudrillard’s writing tends to be ‘hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking in sustained, systematic analysis when it is appropriate’ (8). These two claims about Baudrillard’s writing could have been written to describe Baudrillard’s proclamations for Dick’s short fiction.

**Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism**

Baudrillard’s work has had tremendous influence. Regardless of Baudrillard’s lack of specifics, Dick and postmodernism are linked in the minds of many interpreters and critics of Dick’s works – and not without justification. Soon after Baudrillard published Simulacra and Simulation with its tantalising references to Dick, Jameson turned to the themes of postmodernism. In a 1984 article for the New Left Review that became one of the most important essays in his seminal book, Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jameson describes postmodernism in ways that bring Dick clearly to mind. Jameson identifies four ‘constitutive features of the postmodern’ (‘Postmodernism’ 58):
a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary ‘theory’ and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum; a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose ‘schizophrenic’ structure (following Lacan) will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts; a whole new type of emotional ground tone – what I will call ‘intensities’ – which can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime; the deep constitutive relationships of all this to a whole new technology, which is itself a figure for a whole new economic world system. (‘Postmodernism’ 58)

Depthlessness, according to Jameson, describes the peculiar flatness of the postmodern world, along with its preference for surfaces and images of no real depth. Distinctions between inside and outside, signifier and signified become reduced to a single level (‘Postmodernism’ 60–63). History disappears as it becomes colonised by the present in movies and stories that re-enact and re-invent the past, just as the present disappears when historical trends and fashions are reprised (‘Postmodernism’ 67). With the breakdown of history comes a re-evaluation of our place in time and a new approach to temporality that Jameson likens to Lacan’s description of schizophrenia where the chain of signification is broken, leaving the subject lost and isolated in a swollen, vivid present that effaces temporality (‘Postmodernism’ 72–73). All these features are figured in modern technology which is involved in reproduction rather than production. Modern technology is enormous, threatening but at the same time only ‘dimly perceivable’ (‘Postmodernism’ 80).

In Reading by Starlight, Damien Broderick suggests at least one close relation between Jameson’s contentions about postmodernism and Philip K. Dick’s writing: the schizophrenic detachment. Broderick suggests that ‘Even the slightest familiarity with sf since the 1950s pinpoints this trope as the patented territory of Philip K. Dick’ (110). However, many more links can be made between Jameson’s account of the postmodern and Dick’s favourite tropes and themes.

Consider the idea of depthlessness produced by the image and the simulacrum: Dick frequently grapples with these issues, especially through the idea of a perfect reproduction or simulacrum. In Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said (FMT 1970) both
Felix Buckman and Alys Buckman are collectors, interested in the distinction between real and fake and aware of the thinness of the boundary between a good fake and the real thing. In *The Man in the High Castle* (*MHC* 1962) the protagonist works making fake objects of the dying American culture. Dick returns several times to the idea of an alien being able to reproduce objects, such as in *A Maze of Death* (*MD* 1970), *Nick and the Glimmung* (*NG* w.1966, pub.1988) and the short story ‘Pay for the Printer’ (1956). By challenging the notion of authenticity and sprinkling his worlds with fakes and counterfeits, Dick mirrors the ‘depthlessness’ described by Jameson where real and fake become interchangeable commodities. In ‘Pay for the Printer’, the replicas become so common and so much easier to produce than original items that replication becomes the norm and original creation all but disappears. In this short story, the idea of an original object represented by the copy literally disappears: there is nothing except the replica and only a single, depthless reality.

Counterfeits challenge the idea of history and temporality. When history can be faked and changed, how can we trust it? Most of the counterfeits in *The Man in the High Castle* are historical artefacts that intermingle the past with the present. At the same time, the present is made problematic as it occurs in the context of an alternate universe with an alternate history – one that, Dick suggests at the end of the novel, might not be the real world of the novel at all. *MHC* is a work that takes place in its own space, outside the history of our world. The novel exemplifies the disappearance of historicity Jameson considers characteristic of postmodernism. *MHC* is reminiscent of Baudrillard’s description of the atemporal space he believes postmodern science fiction should occur in.

Jameson claims that a postmodern relationship to time is less linear and more fragmented, mirroring Lacan’s description of the ‘private temporality’ that occurs in the schizophrenic relationship to time. Private temporality is one of Dick’s many interests. His intense interest in schizophrenia and the schizophrenic’s relationship to time helped inspire *Martian Time-Slip* (*MTS* 1964), a book which is structured to mirror the disconnected and idiosyncratic world of private temporality. Nor does Dick limit private temporality to his schizophrenic characters: the time-slips of the title are experienced by all as private, internal relationships with time become external and shared.

Jameson mentions a waning of affect that occurs in the era of postmodern living.

Consider the beginning of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (*DADES?* 1968) where
the protagonist, Rick Deckard, makes deliberate decisions about the moods he would like to experience. Alienated from his real feelings, he dials ones he chooses from a machine, making a shallow mockery of emotional affect. Later on in the novel, he uses tests that measure affective response to stimuli as a way of testing a person’s humanity; tests whose unusual questions and unintuitive answers suggest that regular human affective response is very different in this future world. In *We Can Build You* the flat, affect-less human Pris compares unfavourably to the highly empathic robot simulacra. In the world of *We Can Build You*, Pris is not an anomalous creature. Her lack of affect is portrayed as symptomatic of a general societal trend. Both novels explore the idea that the (post)modern world helps to generate people whose affective relationship with the external world is, at best, flat, and at worst, completely disconnected. In *Martian Time-Slip* Dick even goes so far as to suggest that the values and beliefs that disconnect people from their environment and cause an absence of appropriate affect can even come from schools, parents and learned culture.

Both Baudrillard and Jameson recognise Dick as an important writer. Baudrillard explicitly links Dick to the postmodern movement, suggesting that Dick’s works represent the only kind of science fiction that can occur in the postmodern era. Jameson fruitfully uses Dick to illustrate his theorising about postmodernism. Csicsery-Ronay’s identification of Dick as one of the central postmodern writers has clear justification, both in the themes and ideas Dick presents and in the reactions of postmodern commentators to his works.

It would be a mistake to apply a single label like ‘postmodernist’ to any writer and expect it to categorise and define with perfect accuracy. Dick may have his head in the postmodernist clouds, but he has his feet in modernism. His major influences are modernist authors such as Franz Kafka, James Joyce, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway (Vest ix). His style, with its multiple narrative points of view, streams of consciousness and disjointed chronology, gives evidence of his modernist roots. However, as a result of his work being taken up by postmodernist thinkers, the postmodern elements of Dick’s writing have been given a great deal of attention. In particular, Dick is portrayed as a prophet of fragmented, hallucinatory realities where attaining the truth or access to a deeper reality is impossible. Again, this is not a bad or incorrect reading, but one that would benefit from a more nuanced approach.
Chapter 2

Following the lead of both his Marxist and postmodern admirers, a great deal of recent literature about Dick’s writing has focussed on the theme of simulation and the postmodern ideas that accompany it. Umberto Rossi observes the same when he comments on the ‘interpretive trend’ which ‘deems simulation to be the main issue in [Dick’s] opus.’ Within the works that compose this trend there are a number of different approaches, both to simulation/simulacra ‘and post-modernism, because usually those who focus on simulation herald post-modern ideas or try to include Dick in the post-modern canon’ (‘Fourfold Symmetry’ 399). One of the essays that constitute this trend, and one that Rossi comments on, is George Slusser’s 1988 ‘History, Historicity, Story’.

**Slusser, ‘History, Historicity, Story’**

In ‘History, Historicity, Story’ Slusser suggests that Dick replaces the idea of history, in the sense of a chain of ideas fixed in time and place with a linear order, with the more flexible notion of historicity. The article is made somewhat perplexing because of the use of the already loaded word ‘historicity’. Slusser derives the word from Dick’s own usage in *The Man in the High Castle* and not explicitly from German philosophy. Historicity, according to Dick, is when ‘a thing has history in it’ (*MHC* 59). It is a property that, according to the Japanese in the novel, exists both in the subjective viewpoint of the viewer and in the object itself (*MHC* 168). According to the American forgers in *MHC* that make their living replicating these objects, historicity exists only in the mind. Historicity is part intrinsically recognisable authenticity – an aura of genuineness – and part personal relationship with and attitude to the object. Slusser notes that defining historicity in this way inverts the historical object’s relationship with history. Rather than the object being part of history, history is part of the object. By inverting the relationship of history and object, Slusser says, the idea of history itself is challenged with mass-produced ‘historical’ objects and clever forgeries. Some of these mass-produced pseudo-historical objects are so far divorced from history that they are inspired by a reality not in the novel: a vibrant American post-WWII culture. So, according to Slusser, historicity is a quality that, rather than fixing something in place and time, unseats it.

In Slusser’s view, historicity means the opposite of what it ostensibly means in the novel. Dick uses historicity to refer to a quality of authenticity; Slusser takes historicity to be a quality an object can possess without having a genuine place in history. For Slusser, it is the quality of historicity and the object’s relationship with history that are important.
Historicity, as Slusser reads it, is an ahistorical quality. Slusser’s prime example of an object with historicity but no history is the small pin made by the artificer Frank Frink. It is a precious object that possesses ‘wu’… and at this point Slusser’s reading becomes even stranger. Wu is defined by one of the characters, Paul Tagomi, as being the opposite of historicity:

To have no historicity, and also no artistic, esthetic worth, and yet to partake of some ethereal value – that is a marvel. Just precisely because this a miserable, small, worthless looking blob; that, Robert, contributes to its possessing wu.

Meditation on the blob-like pin causes Mr Tagomi to become unseated from his own timeline – the timeline of MHC – and enter briefly into another. It is an object Tagomi’s superior wishes to mass produce; although when asked, Tagomi does not say whether the wu will remain in the object. His silence is telling. This object, Slusser says, ‘both sticks and unsticks, originating in so many replications that all sense of its original location is lost’ (195). The question remains though, why does Slusser think that a pin that possesses the opposite to historicity should be the metric by which historicity is defined? Slusser’s argument is akin to saying that people are mistaken when they’ve said the North Pole is cold, because really it’s hot like an ice cube.

Slusser clearly takes his place in the list of postmodernist-inspired articles. He uses Dick to challenge the authenticity of history, which Dick himself does, and tries to replace the idea of history with a more a-temporal and a-historical quality, which Slusser argues is historicity. This aligns closely with the postmodern project to challenge any monumental and fixed structure while embracing the resulting fragmentation. This reading also follows Rossi’s description of the postmodern method of creating a dualism – as Slusser does with historicity and history – and then reducing the dualism to a monism – as Slusser does when he says historicity detaches an object from history and time. Slusser goes on to argue that Dick’s writing and American writing in general are better understood in the light of historicity rather than history which is monumental, fixed and – worst of all – European. Historicity, which is as much about the subject and her or his ever-changing relationship to history, is a more useful way to situate Dick’s works.

Dick challenges the concepts of history and authenticity in MHC, but his challenges are not as one-sided as Slusser portrays. Slusser achieves his univocal argument by eliding
three different ideas together and then using observations about any one of them to refer to the whole. Specifically, Slusser uses the word historicity, defined in MHC as when an object possesses a perceptible aura of genuineness that is partly intrinsic to the object and partly the result of the viewer’s perceptions, to refer to a purely contingent quality that exists independently of history. He then associates this quality with wu, despite the fact that wu is described in MHC as being the opposite of historicity. Having then associated wu – which unseats history, bends reality, is original and ahistorical – with its opposite, he assumes that the quality of wu can be replicated like the historical objects of the novel are.

Slusser’s conclusions are suspect. For one thing, the prime evidence he gives to support his reading of historicity is an object that possesses historicity’s opposite. Dick associates wu with uniqueness. The pin that possesses it is an original creation. It is flawed, unique, and the product of the creative, tinkering spirit Dick so admires. It is so young as to not yet have a history. Pushing the three ideas together and ignoring their resistance to this treatment, Slusser is able to create a unified postmodern vision from a text that has a nuanced and complicated relationship to the postmodern qualities that appear in it.

Golumbia, ‘Resisting “The World”: Philip K. Dick, Cultural Studies, and Metaphysical Realism’

In his 1996 article ‘Resisting “The World”: Philip K. Dick, Cultural Studies, and Metaphysical Realism’, David Golumbia, like Slusser, creates a unified vision of Dick as a postmodern writer who believes reality is subjective and fragmented. Also like Slusser, Golumbia does so by ignoring certain pieces of evidence. Golumbia directly engages with Dick’s reality themes, beginning with the observation that manipulations of reality are ‘the most prominent formal devices in Philip K. Dick’s science fiction’ (83). Combined with his contention that ‘the critical literature seems to me not yet to have developed a full-blown theory of what Dick was trying to get at in returning to these devices so persistently’, Golumbia establishes the void he will try to fill. This is the same void I hope to begin to fill. Golumbia states that he wishes to use ‘tools that are explicitly meant for metaphysical analysis – that is, philosophical tools’ (88). This approach is very similar to mine: I aim to treat Dick as the ‘fictionalising philosopher’ he claimed himself to be (Exegesis 075, quoted in Sutin 5). Golumbia’s conclusions, however, are very different from those I reach.
Golumbia sets up an opposition between ‘realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ as two threads in philosophical theory. He associates metaphysical realism, or ‘realism’, with the view that the world consists of mind-independent objects, and truth involves some sort of correspondence. Realism does not make any claims about whether metaphysical truths are knowable. A position of agnosticism toward metaphysical truths is consistent with realism defined this way, although it would not point exclusively toward realism. The anti-realist position simply says that the realist position is false. Golumbia ties the anti-realist position to prominent analytical philosophers Michael Dummett, Hilary Putnam and Crispin Wright, from whom he also takes his definitions of realism.

Golumbia begins with ‘Reality as Ideological Construct’ by Peter Fitting, discussed earlier, which deals with the same topic. Golumbia considers Fitting’s reading important, but limited because ‘the complex of oppressive and manipulative practices we associate with late capitalism cannot always be fully apprehended through an attention too narrowly focused on issues of class’ (86). Fitting’s argument rests on the idea that ideology can operate in oppressive ways, and that an ideology tends to ‘correspond to the interests and vision of a specific group or class’ (‘Construct’ 233). Golumbia’s statement of the limitations of Fitting’s reading is appropriate. In many of the later novels, reality moves away from political control and into wider areas of speculative metaphysics. Fitting’s reading is too limited because it cannot deal with those novels that become involved in what Suvin dismissively describes as ‘unexplainable ontological puzzles’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 8). Golumbia aims to tie together all Dick’s manipulations of reality as part of a ‘grounding metaphysical and political problem’ (88). Golumbia defines the problem this way:

...what I am here, following Dick and the anti-realist philosophers, calling ‘Reality’ (with a capital ‘R’), informs and supports the large-scale power structures of the West, including late capitalism as well as patriarchy, racism, nationalism, the construction of ‘objective’ sexuality, and so on. It is in this critical spirit that Dick’s writings present their sustained attack on the very idea of Reality. (Golumbia 88)

It is at this point in the article that Golumbia makes some large leaps. Firstly, the main contention and the largest leap is his claim that metaphysical realism supports existing Western power structures, along with the patriarchy, racism, nationalism and the construction of ‘objective’ sexuality. This extremely large claim comes with no
Chapter 2

supporting evidence or explanation. Most likely this is a Marxist concept with a long critical pedigree, but at this point it comes as a non-sequitur; even as a fallacious ad-hominem argument against realists who, Golumbia implies, are patriarchal, racist and sexist. It is not part of the arguments employed by the anti-realists Golumbia cites at the start of the article and occurs outside the dialogue of their critical tradition. It even seems at odds with aspects of Marxism, which is, for the most part, realist and materialist.

Secondly, Golumbia places Dick firmly in the camp of the anti-realist philosophers and claims his writings present a ‘sustained attack’ on the idea of mind-independent Reality. There’s more to recommend this contention; Dick offers many objections and problems for the realist position. However, I would not characterise what Dick does as a sustained attack, but rather as a sustained critical investigation: one that offers challenges and criticisms for realists in the hope of discovering the truth, whatever that may be. Dick’s later works, like VALIS (VALIS 1981) and Radio Free Albemuth (RFA w.1976, pub.1985), even seem to hint at the existence of a mind-independent transcendental reality. Consider Dick’s definition of reality: ‘that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away’ (P. K. Dick, ‘How to Build a Universe’ 261). Dick’s definition is the quintessential realist definition. It stipulates independence from the mind. My point in recalling Dick’s statement about reality is not to characterise Dick as a realist – Richard Nixon said he wasn’t a crook – but to suggest that he is better understood as an inquirer than someone with an ideological axe to grind.

Golumbia even acknowledges that Dick’s writings can, in some readings, ‘be construed as intensely Realist’ (88) and that ‘it is possible, in perhaps both biographical and theological senses, to take Dick’s posit of an “ultimate reality” seriously’ (89), but says this reading should be ‘put aside’ (89). Golumbia sets up a false dilemma and a straw man argument to justify his dismissal. Firstly he distinguishes two ways of reading Dick: the first is that Dick is someone who believes Absolute Reality exists, that he has access to it and that ‘we all should strive for such access and be able to achieve it’ (89). The contrasting position is that Absolute Reality does not exist and that it is a trope or way of speaking or, at most, ‘a desired but, in principle, unattainable goal’ (89). I say this argument is a false dilemma because there are more ways to understand Dick’s approach to reality than the two listed. For instance, as suggested earlier, it might make sense to read Dick’s works as inquiry rather than as didactic works: inquiry that does not necessarily come to any sure conclusions. Another possible reading is to view Dick’s
works as searching for an Absolute Reality that exists, but is not found either by Dick, his characters or his readers. This latter reading would not exclude the possibility that access to Absolute Reality is conceivable. These two examples are sufficient to show that Golumbia’s two propositions are not completely exhaustive, and form the two poles of a false dilemma. Secondly, the first proposition is deliberately problematic, and I would suggest it is a straw man argument designed to force acceptance of the second part of the false dilemma. Dick’s attitude to reality might be contentious, but I doubt anyone could say that he univocally believes he has clear access to Absolute Reality and that we should all strive for the same. This reading would cast Dick in the role of proselytising zealot, trying to convert people to his point of view – a tortuous interpretation. It would neglect those common elements of uncertainty and groundlessness that infuse his works. In short, it is a straw man argument set up as a caricature of the realist elements in Dick’s works.

It is good that Golumbia acknowledges that there is evidence to recommend reading Dick as a realist, just as there is evidence for reading him as an anti-realist; but Golumbia’s argument that the former aspect should be ignored is not well-grounded. Ultimately, Golumbia’s main objection to realism seems to be a moral one. He associates it with oppression. At the same time, like every sympathetic commentator, he wishes to place Dick in the role he sees as most worthy: opposed to oppressive realism and aligned with the counter-culture freedom fighters. Golumbia even incorporates Dick’s use of the word ‘Empire’ to enhance this positive, but flawed, reading. Dick uses ‘The Empire’ to signify a malevolent, oppressive and manipulative power structure that maintains its own power by concealing its nature from its subjects. To Dick, the Empire is a terrible evil and is closely tied to his Gnostic beliefs and the religious speculation that occupied his later years. Golumbia associates the Empire with realism, which is both ‘untenable and oppressive’ (90). Golumbia’s article is divided into five sections and at the close of this third section of his article he turns away completely from the arguments he used in the section and toward a moral statement with hidden premises that are assumed to be valid and sound – which he also did at the end of his second section. When he describes anti-realism in the last sentence of the section as ‘the general understanding that it is wrong to believe in the existence of the One Real World’ (90), one can’t help getting a sense that the interpretive and metaphysical arguments in the section have been replaced with a
moral repugnance that makes belief in a ‘One Real World’ not only incorrect, but ‘wrong’.

Interestingly, Dick is at his most realist when he writes about the Empire. After all, in Dick’s exegetical cosmogony the Empire exists to conceal the existence of the ‘One Real World’, and Dick’s objections to the Empire are precisely because of this. Golumbia’s assertion that the Empire represents realism is paradoxical because the Empire, as Dick conceives it, exists in a realist metaphysic that Dick endorses. To draw an analogy with Golumbia’s argument so as to attempt a reductio, imagine I were someone who hated and feared the Satan of Christian religion, just as Dick hates and fears the Empire of his own cosmogony. Golumbia’s argument is that because Dick hates the Empire he also objects to realism. This would be the equivalent of saying that because I fear Satan, I must disbelieve in Christianity; a false conclusion.

Golumbia’s arguments may be flawed, but his subject and approach are very much in line with mine. His observation that Dick’s challenges to static reality haven’t been properly accounted for in the critical literature is apt. His method of approaching this theme as a philosophical one and not a purely literary device resonates strongly with Dick’s own attitude to the theme. Golumbia’s characterisation of Dick as an anti-Realist who challenges realism at every turn is not completely without merit, but does not account for certain elements in Dick’s opus – a fact Golumbia acknowledges. Golumbia’s reading takes its place in a fairly well-populated field of scholars who use Dick’s postmodern fixations to place him within the canon of postmodern writers and offer readings that emphasise Dick’s postmodern allegiances but neglect his points of difference.

**Rossi, ‘Fourfold Symmetry: The Interplay of Fictional Levels in Five More or Less Prestigious Novels by Philip K. Dick’,**

The discourse has not been completely one-sided. Umberto Rossi, in his cumbersomely titled 2002 article ‘Fourfold Symmetry: The Interplay of Fictional Levels in Five More or Less Prestigious Novels by Philip K. Dick’, criticises aspects of the postmodern reading. Rossi takes issue with the tendency for a postmodern reading to insist on ‘the semantic opposition reality vs. delusion/simulation/fakery’ and then reduce this dualism to a monism because ‘post-modern critics believe it is impossible to individuate a reality beyond the appearance of simulacra’ (‘Fourfold Symmetry’ 403). Rossi’s primary
criticism of these types of readings is that the binary opposition between appearance and reality is too simplistic to account for the nuances of Dick’s writing. Rossi proposes a model of interpretation based on a fourfold structure. His fourfold structure consists of two binary models, each with a primary reality and a secondary reality; the first binary exists in the text and the second outside it. Rossi concludes that his structuralist account is immanent in some of Dick’s novels and short stories. His intention is not to say that the fourfold structure should be applied to all of Dick’s novels – in fact he states that it will not work well for Dick’s later novels – but to suggest that it is difficult to give a proper reading of Dick if the different levels of reality are reduced to a single level, as a postmodern reading would suggest (‘Fourfold Symmetry’ 412).

Rossi’s approach is about understanding the text and not necessarily about engaging in metaphysical discussion. His criticism of a postmodern reading that reduces the reality levels within a Dick novel to a single level of simulation is that such a reading will not help us understand the novel. How is it possible to understand a book like Time Out of Joint (TOJ 1959) with its two clear binary realities if we reduce reality to a single level? How can we understand the complicated play of historical levels in The Man in the High Castle if we claim history is a senseless concept? How can VALIS make any sense if its intricate speculation about the nature of reality is reduced to a postmodern monism?

Even those articles that treat Dick as if he were only interested in false realities will often acknowledge this might not be the whole picture. Columbia states Dick’s works can ‘be construed as intensely Realist’ (88) and ‘it is possible, in perhaps both biographical and theological senses, to take Dick’s posit of an “ultimate reality” seriously’ (89). However, he chooses to ignore this reading for his own reasons. In his early article on Dr. Bloodmoney (DB 1965) Jameson claims Dick manages to ‘efface the boundary between real and hallucinatory altogether’ (‘After Armageddon’ 32). This reading is mirrored by Baudrillard who believes Dick exemplifies the science fiction of hyperreality where reality and appearance become irrelevant categories. Neither situate Dick as an anti-Realist; rather they avoid the categories of Realist and anti-Realist altogether. Suvin refuses to be drawn on the matter altogether, and considers Dick’s metaphysical speculation only of interest when it acts as metaphor for politics. He does, however, identify Dick’s early works as ones where ‘reality is undoubted but the characters’ or reader’s approach to it is in question’ (Suvin, ‘Goodbye and Hello’ 371). Even Fitting’s reading, which explores the interplay of ideology and constructed reality, takes place
‘Despite the author’s attempts to posit a reality “behind” “phenomenal reality”’ [my italics] (‘Construct’ 220). These various small acknowledgements help to show that these readings have something in common: they take place ‘despite’ some of the qualities of Dick’s works. They take place, in the case of Fitting, ‘despite’ the author’s stated intentions and some of the events in the novels discussed. For Suvin, the readings occur ‘despite’ Dick’s later works. For Golumbia, his reading occurs ‘despite’ the possible alternate, and opposite, interpretation. Baudrillard’s reading takes place ‘despite’ the omission of any explicit textual support.

Dick owes a tremendous debt to his Marxist and postmodernist interpreters and critics. They recognised qualities in his works of great relevance to their theoretical projects. In exchange, Dick gained recognition and close attention to his ideas from many excellent minds. They mined his most frequently recurring theme, the nature of reality, for its – genuine – relevance to Marxism and postmodernism. His Marxist critics associate ideology with power and, in particular, with power used oppressively. They emphasised Dick’s critiques of totalising ideology and stressed the proliferation of contingent and personal realities in his works in order to align him against the oppressive use of ideology and power that Marxists see occurring in the functioning of Capitalism.

As a result, Dick’s early criticism is dominated by readings that emphasise the importance of his early works and ignore his later works where the question of reality becomes a more obviously metaphysical problem; what Suvin calls ‘unexplainable ontological puzzles’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 8). These readings also diminished Dick’s attempts to posit an objective reality, as such attempts would, according to some Marxist interpretations, indicate sympathy with the totalising agenda of Capitalism. Dick’s postmodernist critics demonstrated his relevance to the modern world in which technology and simulation continue to erode an authentic relationship with the real – assuming such a thing is possible or desirable. Dick’s postmodernist admirers created readings that highlight the fragmentation of reality in Dick’s novels and the difficulty he has in positing a reality he won’t immediately knock down. These readings minimise Dick’s discomfort with contingent realities and his continuing efforts to find something larger than himself.

Both the Marxist and postmodernist interpretive approaches place similar demands on Dick’s metaphysical theme, and have resulted in a preponderance of readings that emphasise the fragmentation and uncertainty of realities in his novels. However, his
works are larger than this interpretation. These readings do not do justice to Dick’s works. They minimise the elements that do not fit into this schema, and exclude those novels that defy such reduction.

I propose to read Dick as the fictionalising philosopher he considered himself to be. His works are more akin to Socratic inquiry than dogmatic adherence to one ideology or another. In the following chapters, I will treat Dick as a questioner. I will explore the challenges he poses for reality, and how he tries to build on his various revelations. I will use his critics to inform my readings, but will take Dick’s own writing to be the most important expression of his artistry and philosophy and I will keep in mind the ideological spin that has been such a blessing and a curse for Dick. I do not believe that this effort will reduce Dick to any one particular metaphysical reading. The certainty that would require is antithetical to the spirit of Dick’s writing, untenable given the sheer amount of work he produced, and unlikely when the many years between the start and finish of his writing career are taken into account. My object is to follow the path of his thinking with as open a mind as possible in order to fully explore the challenges for reality he offers and the solutions he attempts. Only by following his lead will it be possible to appreciate the nuances of his thinking and writing.

The first challenge for reality that Dick explores, both chronologically and in logical primacy, is that of subjectivity. On the level of practical living, we know that one person sees the world differently from another. Small variations of physiology can result in vastly different perceptions of reality; the schizophrenic lives in a different subjective world from the paranoid person and even two aberrantly ‘normal’ human beings can experience two wildly different worlds. Tiny differences in disposition can change everything about a person’s subjective experience of the world, and the social and biological imperative to look after one’s self and one’s genetic kin ensures every individual a different outlook; other people probably take less delight in my children than I do. Ideology, as the Marxist critics emphasise, can also affect the way we perceive reality. A religious person might listen to Mozart’s music as part of a divinely inspired miracle. A non-religious person might enjoy it for its artistic qualities. A tone-deaf person might not enjoy it at all, and a young autistic boy like Manfred Steiner might hear nothing but atonal and overwhelming screeching. If we all live in such different worlds, how can we say anything for sure about the world that, one assumes, is the inspiration for such divergent sensory conclusions? Is subjective reality the only true reality?
Chapter 3: ‘Roog’ and Eye in the Sky

YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE IDIOS KOSMOS

Writers are petty gods in their own microcosmic universes. They control the destinies of their characters, dispensing justice or caprice at their whim. This is especially true of the science fiction writer, who, thanks to the conventions of the genre, is given a grander scope for creativity and world-building. Dick emphasised this aspect of his role when he hyperbolically declared that ‘[it] is my job to create universes’ (‘How to Build a Universe’ 262). When we enter a fictional world contained within one of his novels, we are, in a sense, entering Dick’s idios kosmos, a personal and private universe made public. He takes control of our senses and guides our perception. The reader sees things as Dick might have seen them – with a feeling that reality is not as stable it might have seemed before the pages were opened.

The metaphor of writer as creator of worlds holds a great deal of fascination for Dick. It ties in with his curiosity about the nature of the universe, his interest in perspective as it shapes perceived reality, and his interest in philosophy, psychology and the writings of the existential psychologists and their view that one facet of reality is the personal, subjective universe. This chapter addresses how Dick uses and abuses the idea of a personal universe to help generate the shifting realities of his novels. In the first part, I explore an early short story, ‘Roog’ (1953), and the way Dick first suggests that subjectivity is highly fallible, but then undermines the doubt he casts on subjectivity by hinting that after all subjectivity might hide some truth within it. I suggest that this is a pattern Dick will continue to use through his career.

In the second part, I look at Eye in the Sky (ES 1957), which goes even deeper into the personal universe by causing the characters to, literally, enter each other’s personal realities. I contend that Dick uses these strange violations of the personal universe’s isolation to critique different attitudes to reality.

Roog: Establishing a Pattern

---

9 Dick did not start using the terms ‘idios’ and ‘koinos’ until after 1963
Right from the start of Dick’s writing career, and some eleven years before he encountered the existential psychiatry of Ludwig Binswanger in the Point Reyes Station Library, Dick was interested in how perspective shapes perceived reality (A. Dick 93–94). ‘Roog’, the first story he sold, is based on this idea.10 The story centres on the family dog, Boris, who sees himself as the family’s Guardian. Boris believes that he and his human family are under perpetual siege by the abominable ‘Roogs’. Only Boris seems to be able to detect the Roogs, who plot and scheme within his earshot. Boris’ attempts to warn his human family fail, as they misunderstand his cries of ‘Roog!’ as simple barking. In the end, the Roogs succeed in their vile plot to take the family’s precious offerings from their metallic urns, or, as the humans in the story might see it, the trash collectors come and collect the garbage.

The premise of ‘Roog’ is simple: the dog sees the world differently. He sees menace where the humans see convenience. The dog’s point of view is not necessarily wrong, it is merely different. Dick was very proud of ‘Roog’, even much later in his career. In 1976 he wrote, ‘I love this story, and I doubt if I write any better today than I did in 1951, when I wrote it; I just write longer.’ Aside from his obvious pride, he thought ‘Roog’ established a pattern much of his later work followed:

So here, in a primitive form, is the basis of much of my twenty-seven years of professional writing: the attempt to get into another person's head, or another creature’s head, and see out from his eyes or its eyes, and the more different that person is from the rest of us the better. You start with the sentient entity and work outward, inferring its world. Obviously, you can’t ever really know what its world is like, but, I think, you can make some pretty good guesses. I began to develop the idea that each creature lives in a world somewhat different from all the other creatures and their worlds. I still think this is true. (BLTW 402)

There are two different thematic threads Dick traces back to this story, and it should be acknowledged that they are interrelated. Firstly, ‘Roog’ demonstrates Dick’s interest in empathy and its power to allow a person into someone (or something) else’s head. Secondly, the story shows Dick’s interest in how subjectivity helps create the world each creature lives in. Aside from these thematic threads, the story is an excellent example of

---

10 He sold the story to Fantasy and Science Fiction in October 1951; see Sutin 70.
Dick’s approach to writing. It is filled with kindness, sympathy, humour, and a playful challenge to readers to step outside their own heads and see the world in a completely different way.

‘Roog’ is not just making the point that we all have a different outlook on life; the story implies something more fundamental. This is done by giving Boris’ point of view the flavour of objectivity. One way Dick achieves this is by not writing the story in the first person.

One would naturally expect a story of this kind, one that explores a subjective reality, to be written in the first person; yet ‘Roog’ is narrated in the third person. It is an objective narration in that it only describes the events and dialogue, without ever going inside the characters’ heads to explicitly reveal their thoughts, although it does give rich descriptions of events that make the characters’ mental states clear to the reader. Jason Vest describes it as ‘unadorned prose that fails to probe the dog’s deeper motivations’(14).

Despite the ‘unadorned prose’ and lack of first person narrative, Dick still manages to evoke readers’ sympathies for Boris and to create a richly realised world for him. Boris is personified throughout the story: he does not bark the sound ‘Roog’, he is described variously as saying and crying it. His role garners sympathy for him. He is the family’s protector, guarding them from perceived threats:

Then, slowly, silently, the Roogs looked up, up the side of the house, along the stucco, to the window, with its brown shade pulled tightly down.

‘ROOG!’ Boris screamed, and he came toward them, dancing with fury and dismay. Reluctantly, the Roogs turned away from the window. They went out through the gate, closing it behind them. (‘Roog’ 16)

In this brief excerpt, the Roogs turn their attentions from the ‘offering urns’ to the window and, one assumes, the humans sleeping inside. The menace is palpable, and Boris reacts strongly. He is described as ‘screaming’ and ‘dancing’ – more personification. His actions deflect the attentions of the Roogs, and Boris’s status as guardian is confirmed, at least from the perspective of the narrative.
Boris’s world is an exciting one, by turns both romantic and terrible. It is reminiscent of the science fiction pulp magazines Dick enjoyed as a teenager, with their simple tales of a brave man, armed only with his trusty ray-gun, saving beautiful Earth-maidens from bug-eyed monsters. In Roog, Boris is the hero, a ‘Guardian’, protecting the humans from the Roogs, who seem to be pale with wobbly legs and necks: alien in every way. The initial capital letter of the word ‘Guardian’ indicates the word is a proper noun, hinting that it is a title, and Boris is a member of some larger organisation of Guardians. Boris is large, strong and brave, and the Roogs pallid and weak, scared of his strength, as shown when they leap away from the fence when he leaps towards them. He is every inch the hero, and they every inch the cowardly villains.

Dick is having some good-natured fun at the expense of the magazines he took so much guilty pleasure from. Instead of the noble human hero, there is a large dog. Instead of space aliens and evil galactic emperors, there are garbage collectors. Instead of a beautiful Earth-maiden, poised to give up her virginity to her rescuer, there is… garbage? Poised to…? Only a dog could imagine such value in rotting food scraps and pungent-smelling wastes.

Dick is also having some fun with Boris. Boris must possess considerable hubris to cast himself in the role of Guardian and to imagine his enemies so nefarious and powerful when he is just the family pet, and all his efforts to protect the humans and their trash serve only to annoy the neighbours. However, one can imagine the mischievous Phil Dick asking, Is there anything different in our own attempts to cast ourselves as heroes in our own lives? Surely it’s all relative? A beautiful Earth-maiden might appeal to some, but to Boris she’d be much less interesting than a silver urn of trash. This story is definitely from Boris’s point of view, and our sympathies lie with Boris.

The third person limited point of view enhances the sympathy readers have for Boris. The story mostly presents a limited point of view, flicking between Boris and his owners, Alf and Mrs Cardossi, until the very end of the story. By limiting the point of view to Boris,

---

11 Dicks ‘files and stacks of [sf] magazines’ no doubt contained many examples of such clichéd plots (Shifting Realities 9). Consider Dick’s admiring description of his first encounter with the pulp magazine Stirring Science Stories which contained many such stories: ‘Here were ideas, vital and imaginative. Men moving across the universe, down into subatomic particles, into time; there was no limit’ (Shifting Realities 9).
Mrs Cardossi and Alf for most of the story, Dick marginalises the only group whose point of view is not explored: the trash collectors/Roogs. By limiting the narration in this way, Dick helps readers sympathise closely with Boris, whose attitude mirrors the narration: he sees himself allied with the humans against the predations of the Roogs, who are menacing outsiders. Thus, despite offering a third-person objective narration, which can potentially distance the reader from the subject, Dick clearly and sympathetically presents Boris’ point of view to the reader.

Why does Dick go to the trouble of using the third-person to convey a subjective reality? What advantage does it give? I think it gives Boris’s subjective world an appearance of objectivity that would be lacking in a straightforward first-person narrative. Dick is implying more than just that Boris sees the world differently than others do, or that real reality differs from reality as Boris sees it; Dick is showing the reader that Boris’s world is the reality of the story. In the story, Boris’ world possesses as much objectivity as any character’s, or even our own – implying a more radical perspectivism than it might initially appear.

In ‘Roog’ Boris’s perception of things dominates... and perplexes. The Roogs talk within Boris’ hearing, discussing their plans to take the offerings, and the point of view they present seems to be the dog’s. Boris apparently considers himself a protector, a Guardian – but the reader learns of this through the Roogs’ dialogue: ‘I’ll be glad when this particular Guardian is done. He certainly causes us a lot of trouble’ (‘Roog’ 19). Within the story there is no indication that this is Boris’s personal universe; ‘Roog’ gives us an internally consistent world. The only reason to believe that the third-person narration is unreliable is its content, which does not gel with the reader’s knowledge of reality. For instance, near the end of the story, Boris watches one of the Roogs take an egg shell from the trash and consume it. It seems unlikely that a garbage collector would eat an egg shell, and this provides a moment of unexpected humour in an otherwise dark moment in the story. It matches the internal reality of the story, but not the reader’s reality. Eating the egg shell seems singularly inexplicable, since a narrative from Boris’s perspective should only interpret events as they occur, not generate them. So how can the Roogs converse and plot, detailing their plans? Did one of the garbage collectors really eat some trash? It is these questions that imply the story is saying something quite radical about the personal universe. It is not a story written from Boris’ point of view, it is a story written from his world.
‘Roog’ concludes with four short paragraphs that both break the rules of the story and confirm the idea that Dick wants Boris’ personal universe to dominate completely. In these paragraphs the Roogs talk frankly about the ‘offerings’ and the ‘guardians’ in the same way they have done throughout. The difference is that have moved away from the fence and ‘walked up the path’ (‘Roog’ 17), while Boris has retreated’ to ‘the bottom of the porch steps’ (‘Roog’ 16). Earlier when they ‘went off down the path’ (‘Roog’ 15), Boris was no longer able to hear or see them. If, as is implied, the Roogs are no longer within earshot or sight of Boris, as they have been on every other occasion, then whose point of view are the readers witnessing? Suddenly, it seems the objective third-person narrative is no longer limited, and takes on new implications. Perhaps Boris has it right. Perhaps what he sees is reality as it is. Maybe the Roogs are really there, but only Boris has the perspicacity to perceive them. All these questions suddenly become available... right at the end of the story, when we can seek no further corroboration or insight. Dick, the master trickster, has played a clever game with his readers. Where before it was possible to read the story with a metaphorical (or literal) smirk of condescension at the dog’s naïve interpretation of a reality we understand much better than him, after this point the question becomes available: who has it right? Boris or us? Could it be hubris on our parts that characterises our noble Guardians as pets?

Dick sets up a perspective. He disrupts the simple interpretation that what he presents is a single perspective of true reality. In ‘Roog’ he achieves this by carefully manipulating the narrative point of view. Finally, he adds a final kink in the narrative path, upsetting judgements a reader may have formed by the end of the story. In ‘Roog’ this kink is the Roogs’ final conversation, in which Boris’s perspective is maintained even though Boris has retreated and the Roogs have walked up the path. This, I will later argue, is a pattern that Dick will follow and elaborate on throughout his writing career.

It is hard to say whether, at this early point and even well into his career, Dick was consciously aware of the subtle interplay of relative and objective truth. He could take notice of the difference, and was even interested in their interaction, but even late in his life – perhaps more so later on in his life – Dick had a way of blending objectivity and subjectivity, inference and deduction, without acknowledging that he had changed the
Regardless of his intentions, Dick plays with the different levels of reality he portrays. One of ‘Roog’s’ critics, an anonymous anthologiser who was offered ‘Roog’ for publication and chose to reject it, objected to the portrayal of the garbage collectors, and pointed to the differences between their portrayal in ‘Roog’ and what they are like ‘in real life’. Dick responded, arguing that she had missed the point of the story and that, to a dog, this is what the garbage collectors would look like. He went on to say that:

We’re not just dealing with a dog and a dog’s view of garbagemen, but a crazy dog – who has been driven crazy by these weekly raids on the garbage can. The dog has reached a point of desperation. I wanted to convey that. In fact that was the whole point of the story; the dog had run out of options and was demented by this weekly event. And the Roogs knew it. They enjoyed it. They taunted the dog. They pandered to his lunacy. (BLTW 402)

Interestingly, this passage shows Dick changing the grounds of his argument just as he does in his fiction. Initially, he argues that the unusual account of the garbage collectors as sinister and ‘Roogs’ who want to take the offerings and take pleasure in taunting Boris is formed by Boris’ idiosyncratic perception of the world. Then he changes tack, explaining that Boris’ unique perspective is caused by the cruel taunting of the Roogs, who enjoy ‘pander[ing] to his lunacy.’ Dick seamlessly moves from an explanation predicated on Boris’ subjectivity – Boris sees Roogs because that’s his subjective view of garbage collectors – to an explanation that requires the Roogs to exist objectively – Boris sees Roogs because the Roogs have deliberately caused him to go crazy, and they enjoyed it. How can the dog’s view of the garbagemen as Roogs be caused by the Roogs’ taunting? The two propositions seem to support each other, but because one assumes the

12 See VALIS (VALIS 1982) for a multitude of examples of Dick changing reference frames in order make an apparently logical argument. Consider, as one example, his claim on page 132 that the conditions of his 2-3-74 vision were perfect for perceiving the truth because he was under the influence of sodium pentathol, the ‘truth’ drug (VALIS 132). This argument has a hidden premise: ‘sodium pentathol is called the truth drug because it makes you perceive the truth.’ Of course sodium pentathol is known as the truth drug because it makes a person less capable of deception, and probably less capable of distinguishing truth. Dick changes reference frames from ‘telling the truth’ to ‘perceiving the truth’ without acknowledgment.
objectivity of Boris’s perception of the Roogs and the other does not, they only undermine each other.

Ironically Dick later complains about this kind of logic in the text of VALIS (VALIS 1981): ‘That is a logic which Freud attacks, by the way, the two-proposition self-cancelling structure. [...] The second statement does not reinforce the first. It only looks like it does’ (VALIS 31). He offers as an example the two propositions: ‘1) God does not exist. 2) And anyhow he’s stupid.’ Compare this to the argument Dick defends Boris with: 1) Boris sees Roogs because he is crazy. 2) Boris is crazy because the Roogs have been taunting him to drive him mad. Like the subtle shifting reality of the story ‘Roog’, Dick’s shifts the grounds of his arguments while talking about the story.

Empathy provides Dick with the motive and method for exploring personal universes, and his interest in how perspective shapes reality persisted throughout his writing career. Some four years after writing ‘Roog’, Dick returned to the idea of the personal universe in his 1957 novel Eye in the Sky, his first novel-length exploration of the nature of reality, and his self-described ‘breakthrough novel’.

**Eye in the Sky: Breaking Through to the Personal Universe**

Eye shows a considerable advance in Dick’s thinking from ‘Roog’. By the time he wrote Eye in 1955, Dick had absorbed the Kantian distinction between noumena and *phenomena*, along with Kant’s notion that the phenomenal world as we perceive it is passed through the filter of our personal perception, and does not necessarily reflect reality as it is. He had encountered George Berkeley’s Idealism and Berkeley’s arguments that we can only ever know our *perceptions*, and not whether they have an objective or physical cause. Plato’s allegory of the cave is an important influence on Eye, as are Vedic and Buddhist philosophies (Sutin 90). When combined with Freud’s psychological concept of projection as elaborated by Jung – the idea that people can possess unconscious attributes, thoughts or emotions they mistakenly ascribe to other people – the groundwork of Eye becomes clear.

*Eye in the Sky*, whose very title prefigures the importance of perspective in the novel, is based on an industrial accident. A tour group of eight people are accidentally irradiated

---

13 Dick described *Eye* in this way to Don Wollheiem (Ace Books) in a 1969 interview: see Sutin 90.
when an accident occurs at the Belmont Bevatron. The group are knocked unconscious. While lying on the floor, they together hallucinate that they are back in reality. Instead, they are trapped in layered personal universes, each shaped by the psyche of a member of the group. The only escape is to incapacitate or kill the dominant person whilst inside the hallucination in order to work back up to real reality. While they are trapped in each other’s minds, real time passes extremely slowly. Dick’s treatment of the personal universes is filled with philosophical sophistication, and one piece of philosophical naïveté.

Early in the piece, Dick offers us his characters’ speculation as to what has befallen them. Realising that, despite what they hear and see, they are lying unconscious on the floor of the Bevatron, Bill Laws offers an explanation: ‘Maybe we’ve sunk down to the real reality. Maybe this stuff has been there all the time, under the surface’ (ES 45). This observation, made so early in the piece while the characters are still coming to terms with the events that have befallen them, rings with meaning that is not available to the characters at this point. There is a sense in which Laws is right, the personal universes have been there all the time, unacknowledged, under the surface. Laws’ speculation that the world they are in is more ‘real’ than the one they have left is interesting. His reasoning is that the world they have entered is hidden under the one they have left. They have sunk through the old reality and found themselves in a world that was previously concealed by the old reality. There is some truth to the contention that the worlds they find themselves in represent a deeper reality. The personal universes were concealed beneath the real universe they all used to share, and they have sunk through the old reality to get where they are, but this does not necessarily make the worlds they find themselves in more fundamental or more real than the universe they have left. However, it may indicate an inclination on the part of Dick himself to believe that concealed things are truer than that which conceals them, a presumption he makes again and again. 

14 Probably based on the local Berkeley Bevatron, which was commissioned in 1954, one year before Dick wrote the novel. Typically for Dick, the science provides a plot device rather than ‘hard’ scientific speculation.

15 Consider the typical structure of a Dick novel, in which the protagonist is somehow removed from their regular reality, and attempts to find a ‘real’, ‘underlying’ or ‘fundamental’ reality by peeling back layers of reality to find what, one assumes, lies at the bottom, and is therefore ‘the most real’. Examples include Ubik (Ubik 1969) and The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch (TSPE 1965).
Chapter 3

The first universe is that of Arthur Silvester, a war veteran and Babist. In this world, miracles have effective power. God punishes sin and rewards piety as they occur. Heaven and hell are respectively above and below a geocentric earth. Silvester’s world shows the reader how extensively Dick believes personal frames of reference affect subjective reality. Silvester sees nothing strange in a world where God can be reached by floating up to him with an umbrella, or in a world where God is akin to an angry, petulant child concerned only with smiting unbelievers. Silvester’s world even forces some of the characters to change to match his view of them. Marsha Hamilton becomes his perception of a feminist political activist, complete with bobby socks, stained tweed skirt, wool sweater and tennis shoes. Similarly, Bill Laws turns into a racist’s view of a black man, with shambling gait and colloquial dialect. Even the laws of physics seem to have changed in this universe: it is a closed subject in which ‘everything about the material universe is known – was known centuries ago. Physics has become an abstract side of engineering’ (ES 53). Very little in Silvester’s world has not felt the touch of Silvester’s idiosyncrasies.

Dick creates some grounds for comparison between the different worlds. Certain events and situations are mirrored, and each revision offers an insight into the nature of the world the characters are currently trapped in. The first repeated event is Hamilton’s attempt to find work. Some things within the event remain constant. Hamilton approaches a man named Doctor Guy Tillingford. Tillingford runs a research company called EDA, an acronym that, in the real world, stands for ‘Electronics Development Agency’. Dr Tillingford is an old friend of Pete’s father, and is interested in hiring Hamilton. These elements help the reader recognise the encounter, and give them a frame of reference to judge the encounter. In Silvester’s world, Tillingford is a devout Babist. Tillingford interviews Hamilton, but is only really concerned by the quality of Hamilton’s piety. The EDA in this world is dedicated to opening up electronic communications with God.

---

16 Babism is today better known as the Baha’i faith. Dick initially intended Arthur Silvester to be a Christian, but his editor requested a change to a Muslim religion to offend as few of his readers as possible. Dick complied, making Silvester a member of the Babist faith, a Persian religion that combines elements of Mohammedan, Christian, Jewish and Parsi faiths (Sutin 90). Dick’s portrayal of Silvester’s belief possesses more Christian than Babist elements.
Another significant reference point is the cat, Ninny Numbcat. Dick had a soft spot for cats, and an even softer spot for mongrel cats others didn’t appreciate. His third wife, Anne Dick, tolerated a foul cat affectionately named ‘Tumpey’, ‘an ear-torn, dingy grey and white tom from some Berkeley alley’ whom Philip Dick doted on (A. Dick 32). When it died, she gladly replaced it with purebred Siamese kittens (‘I preferred pedigreed animals’), misunderstanding the nature of Philip’s attachment (A. Dick 118). Silvester does not bear any particular malice or love towards Ninny Numbcat, who goes about his business as usual in Silvester’s world.

Berkeley claimed in his 1710 *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* that ‘[the] existence of an idea consists in being perceived’ (3). Existence, thusly formulated, is predicated on an observer. The mind is the place ‘wherein they [the ideas] exist’ (Berkeley 2). *Eye* takes these propositions seriously. Everything the characters see exists, literally, within someone’s mind. The main problem, for Bishop Berkeley, has historically been how the world is given sense and regularity if all it can contain are ideas and perceptions with no common cause of physical reality. Berkeley concluded that the only possible resolution is that there exists ‘some other Will or Spirit that produces them’ (29), that Will being God’s. Since God is omnipresent, it can exist as a constantly vigilant observer, maintaining the reliability of reality. As an anonymous wit put it, ‘the tree / Will continue to be / Since observed by, Yours faithfully, God.’ In *Eye*, and in Silvester’s personal world, God takes the form of a gigantic observer:

It was the biggest lake he’d ever seen. It was big enough to contain the whole world. As long as he lived, he didn’t expect to see a bigger lake. He wondered, idly, what the cubic capacity of it was. In the centre was a denser, more opaque substance. A kind of lake within a lake. Was all Heaven just this titanic lake? As far as he could see, there was nothing but lake.

It wasn’t a lake. It was an eye. And the eye was looking at him and McFeyffe!

He didn’t have to be told Whose eye it was. (*ES* 95)

Dick takes Berkeley’s argument literally, portraying god as an enormous ‘eye in the sky’, a colossal observer, ‘big enough to contain the whole world.’ If Bishop Berkeley was
taken literally, then the world would exist because of God’s perception. God’s ‘eye’, when taken as a piece of metonymy, would be big enough to contain the world.

This event is important in *Eye* because it prefigures one of the main ideas of the novel, that reality is created by perception. By representing God as a giant observer, Dick implies that the importance of God is not the act of creation, it is the act of observation, a view very much in line with Bishop Berkeley’s.

Peter Fitting, in one of the few articles that looks at *Eye* in any detail, considers Hamilton and McFeyffè’s visit to God to be an ‘irrelevant’ scene that is, ultimately, a ‘superfluous incident’, one whose main importance lies in showing Dick’s ‘uneasiness and ambivalence towards the metaphysical solution’ (‘Construct’ 221). By ‘metaphysical solution’, Fitting is referring to what he calls ‘the appeal to metaphysics’ which he defines as a tendency on the part of Dick’s characters to ‘react to the discovery of a breakdown in reality by attempting to find something or someone “behind” phenomenal reality’ (‘Construct’ 221).

While Fitting is accurate when he says that the event is not strictly necessary in terms of the narrative – a strange sort of criticism that would easily cut a swathe through many of the finest moments in literature – I believe he is in error in dismissing this scene so quickly. Dick must have considered the scene in some way important to choose it for the title. As to being unnecessary for the narrative, I think Fitting would agree that narrative progression is not the only, or even the most important, aspect of a writer’s craft. The fact that the scene is a digression from the narrative arc of *Eye* may even heighten the importance of the scene in the novel. That Dick would choose to interrupt the story arc to portray this event shows that he considered it an important moment.

Fitting’s view that the event shows Dick’s uneasiness with the ‘metaphysical solution’ is problematic. Firstly, if Dick were so uneasy with his characters seeking ‘someone or something “behind” phenomenal reality’, then why do they do so with such regularity and success? As a matter of fact, the narrative arc that Hamilton and McFeyffè’s visit to God interrupts is their discovery that Arthur Silvester is ‘“behind” phenomenal reality’! Not only that, but Hamilton expressly states that the purpose of visiting god is because ‘he’s the only one who can tell us what’s happened’ (*ES* 89 my italics). It is not because they think god is *behind* this reality, they want to visit God because they recognise that, in this world, He is omnipotent, omniscient and available to be asked questions, and so they
want to ask him what, or possibly who, is behind the reality they find themselves in. This
does not indicate ‘uneasiness and ambivalence towards the metaphysical solution’
(Fitting, ‘Construct’ 222), rather it accords perfectly with the search for a ‘metaphysical
solution’.\textsuperscript{17}

Fitting also claims that the event reveals ‘The possibility of an answer “behind”
phenomenal reality is more of a temptation than a resolution’. Fitting’s argument seems
incongruous, since the metaphysical confusion within \textit{Eye} is resolved with the characters’
realisation that they \textit{are} trapped in layered personal universes. The realisation explains
the events of the novel fully, and is never seriously in doubt.

Perhaps Fitting is picking up on the sublime ridiculousness of the scene, and drawing
from it the idea that Dick is uncomfortable with Hamilton and McFeyffe’s search for
solutions to the metaphysical confusion they face. While I agree that the scene is
deliberately comic – how can it not be when Hamilton and McFeyffe float up to God on
an umbrella in a weird echo of \textit{Mary Poppins}? – I disagree as to the reason Dick makes it
a comic scene. Dick is showing the reader what Silvester thinks God is like – this is
Silvester’s world, after all. Silvester has a particularly naïve view of God. He thinks of
God as being bigger than everyone else, and conflates size with power and importance.
He sees God as a roaring, blustering presence; a ‘childish, nebulous personality that
\textit{r[e]quired constant praise} – and in the most obvious terms’ (\textit{ES} 105). If Dick is making
fun of anything, he is making fun of people who have a simplistic view of God as a giant
person who loves all the things they love and hates the things they hate. Dick is showing
that this type of God is an idiosyncratic creation, and not a rational metaphysical account
of things.

Silvester’s world is a caricature world. Dick portrays it as shallow and unbelievable. It
represents one kind of answer to questions of a metaphysical nature: a shallowly theistic\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} I am uncomfortable with the terminology ‘metaphysical solution’, since Fitting is really only referring to
one very specific kind of solution, when there are a plurality of possible solutions. Dick does not limit
himself to one solution, although the solution of finding agency behind phenomenal reality is an important
one to him.

\textsuperscript{18} Not to say that theism is necessarily shallow, simply that Silvester’s brand of theistic explanation is
shallow.
answer. Dick’s criticism is not levelled at mature and considered religious thought, but at the blind faith of a religious extremist. In contrast, Edith Pritchet’s world presents another kind of resolution to metaphysical problems: reductivism. Pritchet eliminates whole categories of being that do not fit her highly sanitised world-view. Take, for example, the two main reference points: Jack Hamilton’s interview with the EDA, and the treatment of Ninny Numbcat: Pritchet’s interest in art and culture turns the EDA into an entity whose stated purpose is ‘raising the cultural standards of the masses’ (ES 132). Ninny Numbcat, mirroring Pritchet’s treatment of all inconvenient categories of being, is eliminated, as are all cats. Her modus operandi is denial; she is a person who ‘wouldn’t notice if no world existed’ (ES 117). Dick’s method here resembles that of Socratic irony. He gives Silvester, Pritchet, Reiss and McFeyffe the power to create worlds ruled by the principles they adhere to. When those worlds are obviously flawed, Dick is able to imply criticism of the originating principles. Just as Silvester’s world is ridiculed, and, by implication, his brand of theism, so too is the reductivist approach to metaphysics criticised. Pritchet removes categories of being so indiscriminately that nothing is left, leading to her downfall. Dick implicitly criticises the reductivist on the same grounds: if you start to eliminate things, where do you stop?

The third world they enter is in the mind of a paranoid young woman: Joan Reiss. Reiss’s is initially the most functional of the personal universes. She is prepared to be God, everything ‘was planned out in advance, a long time ago’ (ES 186). Reiss recreates the outside world, wanting the characters to act normally while she maintains her power over them. She is clever and in control – Dick has a lot of respect for the paranoid.\(^\text{19}\) Initially, the metaphysical question Dick is exploring is whether a world, phenomenally identical to ours, but provably a fabrication, would be satisfying to us. If phenomena are everything, he seems to be asking Berkeley and Kant, why can’t they be happy in Reiss’s world?

Dick explores this idea only superficially. He is much more interested in how Reiss’s paranoia will affect the world. While he has an interest in the metaphysical, in Eye he is much more interested in exploring phenomenal worlds, and paranoia is a subject of continuing interest for him. Before long, cracks begin to appear in Reiss’ world, cracks

\(^{19}\) See, for instance, Dick’s novel Clans of the Alphane Moon (CAM 1964) in which the clan of paranoid schizophrenics act as an efficient and effective ruling class.
caused by her paranoia and her desires, leading the readers back to Dick’s interests. Reiss, who hates and is scared of cats, turns Ninny Numbcat inside out – but keeps her alive. Reiss’s malice towards them all becomes evident when the house the characters return to becomes animate and tries to consume them. Indeed, almost everything inanimate turns against them, fulfilling what Dick considers to be the ultimate in paranoia: ascribing motive and purpose to inanimate things.\(^20\)

Reiss, like Silvester and Pritchet, represents a philosophical position concerning the nature of reality. Dick, following Jung, sees the paranoid as someone who excessively systematises the world.\(^21\) They are unable to look out at the world without ascribing malign motive and purpose to it. In Reiss we have Dick’s criticism of this world view: the world she lives in is the creation of her own projection. She is projecting, in the sense of the word used by Jung and Freud, her own internal states outward onto others. She is filled with malice, possibly caused by fear, and projects that same malice outwards, first into inanimate things, like the house, and then into the other characters. Since it is her world, the characters change to match her projected feelings. They turn into malevolent insectile creatures that fulfil her every paranoid expectation. Thus Dick attempts to refute the systematising viewpoint. Like the paranoid, the systematising person seeking a unified account of reality is really only projecting what they perceive inside themselves outward, and is no closer to true reality.

The final world view is that of Charlie McFeyffe, a secret communist sympathiser whose job is to root out communists in a re-enactment of the McCarthyist witch-hunts. His world is filled with malicious, vampiric capitalists and staunch, salt-of-the-earth workers. The EDA in this world is the Epidemic Development Agency, and its head, Dr Guy Tillingford, is a ‘bloated, blood-smeared capitalist’ (\textit{ES} 218) who is opposed to the

---

\(^{20}\) ‘The ultimate in paranoia is not when everyone is against you but when everything is against you’ (\textit{BLTW} 404).

\(^{21}\) ‘[M]aybe all systems – that is, any theoretical, verbal, symbolic, semantic, etc., formulation that attempts to act as an all-encompassing, all-explaining hypothesis of what the universe is about – are manifestations of paranoia’ (‘The Android and the Human’ 208). See also Carl Jung’s essay ‘Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies’ for Jung’s contention that the paranoia shown in the modern myth of UFOs can be seen as a desire for ‘a modern symbol of order, which organizes and embraces the psychic totality’ (20).
Chapter 3

‘heroic, clear-eyed, joyfully singing workmen’ (ES 234). McFeyffe’s world is like the others in that it represents another approach to understanding reality: in this case, reality constructed on the basis of political ideology, albeit a political ideology that itself has a lot to say about metaphysics and the nature of reality. Dick is plainly critical of this ideologically inspired world – it seems laughably out of touch with regular reality.

All of the personal universes Dick portrays in Eye are unsatisfying. They are caricatures that mimic, but do not replace, true reality. Fitting observes that the worlds shown are totalising worlds, inconsistent both with each other and with consensual reality, and imply that consensual reality ‘does not prevail’ (‘Construct’ 223). In this respect, I agree with Fitting. The four worlds are so different, so extreme, that one clear conclusion from the novel emerges: people perceive the world in vastly different, and sometimes incompatible, ways. DiTommaso in his article on Gnosticism and Dualism in Dick’s early works, represents each personal universe as being ‘a shadow-image of reality’ (59). Ultimately, each of the personal worlds represents a facet of the larger whole that is reality and is, individually, ‘incomplete and lacking something essential’, a point, DiTomasso says, in agreement with Fitting’s earlier article.

Taken in the wider context of this thesis as a whole, at this point in his writing career Dick seems to believe that the world is perspectival, but has problems with saying it is nothing more than perspective, since our personal universes can be so limited. At the same time, he criticises other metaphysical positions, including those of the shallow theist, the reductivist, the unifying systematiser, and the ideologue. These metaphysical positions are totalising systems that sacrifice important facets of reality in order to create a unified picture of reality.

I claimed earlier that Eye in the Sky is a book filled with philosophical sophistication, and, possibly provocatively, one piece of philosophical naïveté. I hope I have pointed to some of the sophistication Dick brings to the problem, and now I would like to discuss what I consider to be the biggest flaw in this early work.

In Eye, neither Dick nor the characters seriously question the existence and reliability of ‘real’ reality. They know that once they have escaped from the personal realities they are climbing out from, they will return to the world as they know it, intact, and hopefully a little wiser. The worlds they are in are not real; they are poor reflections of the real world, passed through personal filters. The worlds are dreams from which the characters need to
‘wake up’ (*ES* 224) in order to re-enter the ‘real’ world. The only reason they are in these worlds is because of an arbitrary plot device, the Belmont Bevatron. Unlike in his later works, Dick is not making any terribly interesting metaphysical claims and he is leaving many interesting questions unanswered: if our phenomenal worlds are all we have access to, why does there need to be a real world? What proves that there is a reality beyond sensory objects? How can we have access to other people’s minds? How can we even know they have minds like ours? How would we know if we weren’t in the real world? That he does not address these ideas is interesting in terms of his development as a writer, but is no real criticism unless we judge him according to his later works, a tremendously unfair criterion.

At this point in his writing and thinking, Dick is interested in how perspective *helps* to shape reality, and in how differently people think. He is trying to suggest that there is no way we can truly know someone without entering their world, as shown by the revelation that McFeyffe, the FBI socialist witch-hunter, is actually a Marxist. The point that we can’t know a person’s thinking is a not-so-tacit criticism of the McCarthyists who, Dick points out, were attempting to legislate and monitor people’s thinking.

When Dick wrote *Eye in the Sky*, he had not yet discovered Ludwig Binswanger and the concept of the *idios kosmos* that came to be so important in his writing. In later works, including *Martian Time-Slip* (*MTS* 1964), the subject of the next chapter, Dick addresses many of the questions he leaves unanswered in *Eye*, and explores the limits of the personal universe in greater detail.
Chapter 4: Martian Time-Slip

YOU ARE NOW TRAPPED IN THE IDIOS KOSMOS

*Martian Time-Slip* (MTS 1964) is, according to Darko Suvin, one of ‘Dick’s major works’, part of a ‘high plateau in his opus’, a ‘generally accepted’ judgement also shared by prominent Dick scholars Carlo Pagetti and Fredric Jameson. Dick wrote *MTS* in 1962. It was a year of great personal success for him. *The Man in the High Castle* (MHC 1962) was published that same year to positive reviews, and a year later, won the Hugo award. Prior to *MHC*, Dick had been struggling to break into the mainstream, and with the vindication of the Hugo award came a renewed interest in writing science fiction. However, it would be misleading to suggest that *MTS* is one of his best simply because it was written during a good period. Along with some of the best works in his œuvre, he wrote some of his most poorly received: *The Crack in Space* (CS 1966) was written only a year after *MTS* and represented a break from his familiar themes of shifting realities and defining what human is. *The Unteleported Man* was written a year later, complete with baffling plot errors that some ascribe to his creativity, but are more likely the result of a fragmented composition process.

*Martian Time-Slip* possesses most of the qualities that have become associated with ‘classic’ Dick novels. His dearest themes find expression in the novel. His shifting realities appear in layers of schizophrenic delusion. His interest in defining what is human enters the stage with a clever comparison between Arnie Kott, the outgoing trade union

---

22 Quotes from Darko Suvin are, respectively, from ‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 21, 8 and ‘Goodbye and Hello’ 373. That the same judgement is made by Carlo Pagetti and Fredric Jameson is observed by Kim Stanley Robinson in his published PhD thesis ‘The Novels of Philip K. Dick’ 102. Note that Suvin’s first two comments were written in 1975, before many of Dick’s works were completed. Nevertheless, I believe his qualitative judgements of this period in Dick’s opus lose no force because they are not relative judgements, and because he reinforces his opinion in ‘Goodbye and Hello’ written in 2002.


24 See Andrew Butler’s ‘LSD, Lying Ink, and Lies, Inc.’ for a clear description of the novel’s fragmented publishing history and a spirited attempt to ascribe the apparent errors to Dick’s genius instead of his hasty writing practices.
leader, and Manfred Steiner, the autistic child; a comparison reminiscent of his early story ‘Beyond Lies the Wub’ (1952), and with the same moral message that ‘human may not be what you think it is’. Jack Bohlen is one of his most sympathetic protagonists. Like so many of Dick’s protagonists, Jack is a mostly passive character. Despite being blown about by fate, he is firm when it comes to important things, such as his desire to help those who cannot help themselves: Manfred and the Bleekmen. MTS is a novel of surprising structural complexity and depth, as Aldiss notes in his article ‘Dick’s Maledictory Web: About and around “Martian Time-Slip”’ (42–47). Dick’s Mars is richly realised and completely unlike the boys’ playground of Mars that blights so much science fiction before and during this period. Dick creates a Mars that is filled with mundane detail and suburban reality. This is a Mars not seen before in science fiction; a colonial Mars isolated from the nucleus that is the Earth and plagued with poor plumbing and scarce resources. It is a setting he will revisit in another of his great novels, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (*TSPE* 1965).

MTS, unsurprisingly when considering the speed with which Dick felt he was forced to write, still has its less-than-brilliant moments such as the poorly drawn ‘castrating wife’ character of Silvia Bohlen, or the infidelities on both sides of the marriage that are brushed aside in a psychologically unconvincing reconciliation at the close of the novel. Nevertheless, when Dick wrote the novel in 1962, he was at a high point in his powers, his talents honed, and with many of his best novels soon to come.

A little earlier, Anne Dick, Philip’s third wife, had found a book in the local Point Reyes Library. She recalls it being entitled *Existential Psychiatry* by Ludwig Binswanger (A. Dick 94). Since a book by this title does not exist, it is more likely she was thinking about *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology*, published in 1958 and containing the first English translation of, amongst others things, Binswanger’s ‘The Case of Ellen West’ (May, Angel, and Ellenberger). Dick read this case with great interest. Binswanger diagnosed Ellen West with schizophrenia (266), a condition Dick had great interest in. Dick claimed at various points in his life that he too had been diagnosed with the condition, although no medical records to this effect have been located (Sutin 9).\(^{25}\)

\(^{25}\) In *MTS* itself Dick writes that ‘a concern with schizophrenia was a symptom of a person’s own inner struggle in that area (*MTS* 111).
Dick educated himself thoroughly on the subject of schizophrenia. His understanding of the condition differs slightly from our modern definition, as is to be expected for a concept within the rapidly changing field of psychiatry. For the most part, the differences between what Dick portrays and the modern understanding can be accounted for by changes in the field itself. Some differences can be attributed to his interest in existential psychiatry. Still others can probably be accounted for by Dick’s enquiring and creative mind, along with his desire to explore unusual personal universes.

The most noticeable difference between Dick’s understanding of schizophrenia and the modern conception of the condition is his use of the word ‘autism’ to help him describe schizophrenia. Today, autism is considered a completely separate condition from schizophrenia. When Eugen Bleuler determined the psychopathology for schizophrenia, he coined the word ‘autism’, derived from the Greek αὐτός meaning ‘self’, to describe a subset of the symptoms. Bleuler defined autism as ‘detaching oneself from outer reality along with a relative or absolute predominance of inner life’ (Bleuler quoted in Stotz-Ingenlath 157). Hans Asperger retasked the word to denote a separate condition in a 1938 lecture, but the subtleties of his work and his notion of a spectrum of autistic conditions didn’t reach the English speaking world until 1981, well after Martian Time-Slip was written and published (Wolff 204). Dick used the word autism to refer to schizophrenia and to that subset of symptoms Bleuler identified.

Dick placed emphasis on the works he was personally exposed to, and particularly on the existential psychologists and on the information in ‘The Case of Ellen West’. He was also strongly influenced by the collection of papers titled Language and Thought in Schizophrenia. When Dick talks about schizophrenia, he sometimes uses the word as a catch-all phrase denoting many different kinds of mental illness. Andrew Wolk traces this to Dick’s reading of Language and Thought in Schizophrenia (103), and in particular Kasanin’s essay ‘The Disturbance of Conceptual Thinking in Schizophrenia’ which identifies five different examples of schizophrenia (46–47). A prime example of Dick’s wide interpretation of the condition known as schizophrenia is his novel Clans of the Alphane Moon (CAM 1964), in which a society has been formed by a number of mentally ill ‘clans’, many with different forms of schizophrenia, including paranoid schizophrenia and hebephrenic schizophrenia, both distinguished from the purely schizophrenic. Gregg Rickman, in his article “‘What Is This Sickness?’: “Schizophrenia” and We Can Build You’, points to confusion on Dick’s part, claiming that ‘Dick confused various illnesses in
his depiction of ‘schizophrenia’ (149) and gives as evidence Pris Frauenzimmer from We Can Build You (WCBY w.1963, pub.1972), who suffered a host of mental problems and was ‘Schizoid by ten, compulsive-obsessive neurotic by thirteen, full-blown schizophrenic by seventeen’ (WCBY 90). Certainly, Dick seems to include a lot under the general heading of ‘schizophrenia’. ‘The Case of Ellen West’, from which Dick derives many of his insights into schizophrenia, does not present a clear-cut example of schizophrenia. While Binswanger’s diagnosis of Ellen West was of schizophrenia, he based this diagnosis on ‘a case which shows “no intellectual defect,” no secondary schizophrenic symptoms such as delusion and hallucinations, blocking or stereotypy, and which exhibits a multitude of apparently nonschizophrenic features, in addition to showing a predominantly manic-depressive heredity’ (‘Abstract’ Binswanger, Mendel, and Lyons). Binswanger’s diagnosis is controversial, and it is probable that Dick was either unaware of the possible critiques, or agreed with Binswanger’s conclusion. Either possibility would explain some of Dick’s symptomatic inclusiveness when it comes to schizophrenia.

Aside from these traceable influences, much of Dick’s portrayal of schizophrenia is based on speculation. His speculations are based on wide reading in psychology, personal intuition and his gift for getting inside a person’s head, but they represent fictionalisations. One example of this is Dick’s exploration of schizophrenic isolation—autism to use the word then in vogue. He understood that schizophrenia was a condition that isolated an individual from the koinos kosmos, leaving them alone in their own idios kosmos, and sought to explore this isolation.26 Given Dick’s passionate belief in the power of empathy to let us enter another person’s world and his belief that empathy is a defining quality for human beings regardless of whether you belong to the species of Homo sapiens sapiens or not, his personal fascination with schizophrenia is easily traced: here is a challenge for the writer who places so much faith in empathy. Dick is interested in getting ‘into another person’s head’ and ‘the more different that person is from the rest of us the better.’ (BLTW 402) What could be more different than someone who is completely cut off from perceiving the warm human reality around them, the reality we

26 See Dick’s ‘Schizophrenia and the Book of Changes’ in The Shifting Realities for a clear expression of how he believes the categories of personal and private universe accurately describe the schizophrenic condition.
might call, in line with Dick’s influences, the *koinos kosmos*? With Binswanger’s and Kasanin’s insights at the forefront of his mind, Dick decided to engage with the issue of schizophrenia in *MTS*, and to this end he created Manfred Steiner and his world.  

Manfred Steiner is both schizophrenic and autistic. There is an abyss between him and the rest of humanity caused by his interrelated conditions. Schizophrenia and autism, as Dick understood them, involve an inability to perceive agency outside oneself, making Manfred unable to perceive the humans around him as people rather than things.  

Jack Bohlen, who provides the reader with greater and greater insights into Manfred’s world as the novel progresses, believes that Manfred is a ‘mute creature who [does] nothing but rake over and inspect his own private world again and again.’ Manfred experiences ‘the utter alienation of perception from the objects of the outside world, especially the objects which matter: the warmhearted people there’ (*MTS* 181). The internal and external worlds that are ‘splitting apart’ in this account can easily be equated with the *idios kosmos* and the *koinos kosmos*, although he avoids this terminology in the novel.

The private universe Jack describes Manfred as living in is the world inside Manfred’s head, preoccupied with physical, bodily experiences on a very narrow level and without understanding or proper perception of the outside world and the ‘warmhearted people’ there. Dick’s choice of the adjective ‘warmhearted’ is significant in his description of Manfred. Being warmhearted means that one possesses strong empathy for other people. Manfred is cut off from these people and from the empathy that links them and helps

---

27 ‘He continued talking about the awful case histories, I can remember them still, casting a somber atmosphere over our household. A morbid atmosphere. This book [*Existential Psychology* by Ludwig Binswanger] was the major influence in *Martian Time-Slip* in which Phil put forth his ideas about the nature of schizophrenia’ (A. Dick 94).

28 Consider the etymologies of both words. Schizophrenia is from the Greek roots σχίζειν ‘to split’ and φρεν ‘mind’, giving a literal translation of ‘to split the mind’, perhaps leading to the erroneous equating of schizophrenia with dissociative identity disorder. To Dick, schizophrenia splits the individual universe away from the shared one, not the mind from itself: ‘they’re wrong when they say it’s a split in the mind’ (*MTS* 119). Similarly, autism’s root word is αυτός ‘self’ and was originally intended to refer to people who are focussed intently inward on the private universe and away from the shared universe.

29 Despite avoiding the terminology, he pays homage to the existential psychologists early in the book, describing ‘the Swiss at Bergholzlei, the existential psychiatrists, who dominate the field’ (*MTS* 113) as the greatest living psychiatrists.
them bridge the epistemic abyss, just as he is cut off from the rest of the outside world. Dick deliberately describes Manfred as alienated from the *koinos* and from everything except his own narrow ‘private world’, a world in which his ‘coagulated self [...] occupies the whole field’ of perception (*MTS* 181).

In Manfred, Dick sees a small, lonely boy living in a private universe, an *idios kosmos*, one untouched by other human beings. In breaking into Manfred’s universe, Dick is giving us an opportunity to see inside the *idios kosmos* of someone for whom others do not exist at all. The reader becomes able to see how Dick envisions a solipsistic universe would play out. In the process, Dick will also explore those issues of perspective and the nature of reality that he started addressing from the very start of his writing career.

Why is it such a unique challenge to enter an isolated universe like Manfred’s? Dick has Dr Glaub, the resident psychiatrist in *MTS* answer this question. Empathy is a tool that allows us, as readers and human beings, to see from another person’s point of view. However, in the case of autistic people, their points of view are devoid of this characteristic, ‘the autistic can’t take our roles, see the world as we do, and we can’t take his role either. So a gulf separates us’ (*MTS* 116). Since entering Manfred’s world requires both the use and abandonment of empathy, a paradox is generated. The paradox, at least for Glaub and Arnie Kott, is resolved by hiring Jack Bohlen. Bohlen has, in the past, suffered recurring bouts of schizophrenia, bouts that he travelled to Mars to escape and which he has not experienced for some time. Arnie hopes that Bohlen will be able to enter Manfred’s world since Bohlen has already, in a sense, been there. In this more mature piece, Dick spurns the cheap gimmickry of the Bevatron. The method by which the reader is able to enter Manfred’s world itself becomes of significance, with its own philosophical implications. By initially using only Bohlen’s empathy and the common ground between him and Manfred, Dick explores the limits of empathy. This is an interest Dick shows his readers in many different places, and he has shown a particular interest in the implications of feeling empathy for things that cannot feel it back. Consider, for instance, the androids of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (*DADES?* 1968) who are *defined* by their lack of empathy and for whom both the readers and the primary and secondary protagonists, Rick Deckard and John Isidore, feel empathy for at various points in the novel. Similarly, an important scene in *DADES?* centres on the proper emotional response towards a suffering spider, a solitary predator itself devoid of empathy.
Mars provides a perfect backdrop for Dick to explore the workings of the *idios kosmos*. As is so frequently the case in science fiction, travel to outer space is used as an exploration of inner space. Dick creates his own unique vision of Mars, one that ‘is neither the Mars as adventure-playground of Edgar Rice Burroughs nor the Mars as parallel of Pristine America of Ray Bradbury’ (Aldiss 46) – although I would object to Aldiss’ characterisation of Bradbury’s Mars as pristine since it depicts a post-colonial reality. Instead, ‘this is Mars used in elegant and expert fashion as metaphor of spiritual poverty’ (46). Predominantly, Mars represents isolation. The Martians are far away from the spiritual centre of Earth, on a world in which new values must emerge to fill the spiritual void. Just as Manfred is isolated from the shared reality of the other characters in the novel, so too is Mars isolated from the shared values of Earth. Mars presents an opportunity for greater exploration of the internal world away from the *omphalos* of civilisation.

So, how does Dick envision Manfred’s isolated *idios kosmos*?

**A Somatic World**

It is a place where the epistemic gap between self and other remains intact, and the people all around appear as reified creatures devoid of humanity. It is a somatic universe, dominated by the body and its perception of physical objects.

The following quotation from *Martian Time-Slip* is Dick’s account of a dinner party as seen through the filter of Manfred’s perception. It is an account that is retold three different times over the next two chapters, each time from a different point of view. None of these accounts is explicitly from Manfred’s point of view, but the reader is left in little doubt that each account has ‘imbibed, on some level, of Manfred’s world-view’ (*MTS* 180). Each account is longer than the last, as if the regular world is breaking down and being replaced more and more thoroughly by Manfred’s perceptions. The repetition of the account provides some of the ‘time-slips’ of the title. This first description of the dinner party is from an ambiguous point of view. It is a third-person limited perspective, most likely Manfred’s because of the unusual world-view it presents.

> Inside Mr. Kott’s skin were dead bones, shiny and wet. Mr. Kott was a sack of bones, dirty and yet shiny-wet. His head was a skull that took in greens and bit
them; inside him the greens became rotten things as something ate them to make them dead.

He could see everything that went on inside Mr. Kott, the teeming gubbish life. Meanwhile, the outside said, ‘I love Mozart. I’ll put this tape on.’ (MTS 158)

Manfred’s perception is commensurate with regular perception of the world, but impossibly bleak. The objects of his perception are the same as ours: he sees people eating and talking. However, that is the limit of our shared perception. He sees the world in purely mechanical terms. Rather than seeing a person eating, he sees a dead thing taking green things inside itself and leaching them of nutrients. Manfred is unable to perceive a person in this arrangement. He sees processes but is unable to perceive the life-forces animating them. He sees the ‘greens become rotten things as something ate them to make them dead’ (MTS 180 my emphasis). The metasyntactic variable removes agency from the process and highlights the limits of Manfred’s world. He sees things happening, but not unique subjects moving in the same physical world that he inhabits.30

Everything in this account is dead. Mr Kott’s head is described as being a ‘skull’, a familiar symbol for death. The only element of the description that even implies life is the green of the foods before ‘something makes them dead’ (MTS 180). The implication is that they were alive before the process occurred. Dick avoids describing anything as alive in the passage, but he does want to emphasise the entropic processes in play. He walks a fine line since he needs to make certain things appear alive and vital so that entropy can leach those qualities from them, while avoiding describing them as living. By describing the food as ‘green’ he highlights a living quality apparent to a reader, but does not make the food seem so vital that its description disrupts the morbid tone of the prose.

Manfred’s vision is an almost cosmological perspective on the dinner party: factually accurate but almost completely devoid of human meaning; it is as if Manfred is viewing

30 It is always possible that Manfred is not referring to the person eating the food and making it dead, but to the intestinal bacteria that breaks down the food. At this point in the narrative Manfred is describing Mr Kott’s insides, which lends support to the agent being bacterial and not human. However, it would not invalidate the point I am making here because, regardless of whether the agent is bacterial or human, Manfred is unable to perceive it as anything other than a physical process. The very ambiguity highlights the depth of Manfred’s inability to perceive living agency.
the party through a microscope. He can see the fine biological detail, but the human meaning and warmth disappears through the lens. This might seem a highly objective perspective, however, Manfred’s *idios kosmos* is neither neutral nor objective. He focuses closely on certain elements, like death and entropy, and neglects others, like life and human warmth. Thus, the passage gives an unbalanced viewpoint. His focus on entropy and dissolution neglects the pattern and order it acts upon.

One way Dick shows that Manfred’s viewpoint is not purely objective is by using the neologism ‘gubbish’. Dick takes on board Kasanin’s observation that ‘[schizophrenics] often use words and sentences the meaning of which is not familiar to the normal or average person. Many if not most of these words are peculiar to the patient and usually have a special significance’ (Lewis viii). Manfred frequently uses the word ‘gubbish’ to characterise his world-view. Initially ‘gubbish’ is used as just as a noun, but later on in the novel it is expanded and modified to replace many more parts of speech, such as in the sentence, ‘Gubble, gubble, gubble, the room said. The Gubbler is here to gubble gubble you and make you into gubbish’ (*MTS* 171–72). The portmanteau ‘gubble’ is likely formed by fusing the words ‘garbage’, ‘rubbish’, ‘rubble’, ‘gabble’, ‘gibber’ and ‘gobble’. The result has a wonderful onomatopoeic effect, evoking a cacophony of garbled voices babbling incomprehensibly about trash. ‘Gubble’ and ‘gubbish’ are most commonly used in the novel to represent, respectively, the entropic forces and the final result of those forces. Manfred sees entropy as a living being, a malign entity that permeates everything. It is the ‘Gubbler’, a ravenous entity that gobbles as it gobbles the

---

31 I am not saying that I know what a purely objective viewpoint is, or whether it would even be possible for a human being to occupy this standpoint, but I am able to recognise some of the things that show a subjective bias and thus could not possibly be part of such a perspective. Viewing the world as ruled by death and entropy is only a partial and subjective truth.

32 Compare how Dick uses the word ‘gubble’ in *MTS* with how he later uses the word ‘kipple’ in both *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *A Maze of Death (MD* 1970). ‘Kipple’ has a similar sound and purpose to ‘gubble’, and refers to a kind of domestic entropy which results in the proliferation of household junk. Just as entropy tends us toward the heat death of the universe, kipple pushes ‘the entire universe […] toward a final state of total, absolute kippleization’ (*DADES?* 57). This similar neologism helps reinforce the idea, more clearly expressed when talking about kipple, that the gubbler might represent an entropic process. See David Langford’s ‘Have You Ever Kippled?’ for more information about Dick’s use of the word ‘kipple’.
world. Dick shows the reader that Manfred’s viewpoint is not an objective one by showing that Manfred does perceive agency, but not where the rest of us do. Manfred sees agency in the Gubbler. He sees it in the room which talks to him with the voice of the Gubbler. Entropy is foregrounded, and because of this it is the most vital force he perceives.

‘Gubbish’ is a word that only becomes clear in relation to Manfred’s perceptions. It refers to the physical process of entropy. In Language and Thought in Schizophrenia, Kurt Goldstein claims schizophrenics are excessively focussed on the concrete and the immediate. He argues that the schizophrenic lacks ability when it comes to abstract thought and is ‘bound to reality as he experiences it, in a pathologically concrete way’ (23–24). Manfred is consumed and obsessed by the concrete entropic forces he perceives and ‘this concreteness also finds its expression in the language of schizophrenics’ (25).

‘Gubble’ encapsulates Manfred’s concrete world-view, by turning the abstract processes that constitute entropy into something tangible.

Manfred’s world is a somatic world, a sensory universe in which the only important things are inside him: physical things like the input of his senses, and the experiences of his mind in its reactions to the stimuli. His world is a change of focus from the big picture world most people live in, to one in which the smallest iota of sensory information expands to fill the world. Manfred’s world is that of ‘a coagulated self, fixed and immense, which effaces everything else and occupies the entire field’. Within his almost static, physical self ‘the most minute change is examined with the greatest attention’ (MTS 181). His world is the ultimate in introversion. He examines every aspect of his personal self in close detail since the frame of his universe is more tightly focussed than the average person’s and encloses a different aspect of the world. The frame of his perspective surrounds the personal world, a world magnified by this attention to a point where nothing else is able to enter.

The intensely personal inner-world/somatic world Manfred lives in permeated by the outer world. Goldstein in his ‘Methodological Approach’ speculates that ‘[t]he demarcation between the outer world and [the schizophrenic’s] ego is more or less suspended or modified in comparison with the normal’ (23). In this sense, Manfred’s isolation is not from the universe around him – if anything, he is too bound up in the outer world. It is only the shared world he cannot perceive. Consider a similar, but more
concrete, example from a different novel. In *The Simulacra* (*TS* 1964) – the subject of the next chapter – the famous composer, Richard Kongrosian, has struggled with his schizophrenia throughout the events of the novel and finally, at the close, succumbs. His body, literally, begins to flow into the outer world while the outer world begins to permeate his: “I no longer can keep myself and my environment separate; do you comprehend how that feels? It’s awful!” (*TS* 194). Manfred, similarly, has trouble separating his psychological being from the physical world around him – leading to his fear of the Gubbler.

Manfred’s world-view foregrounds some things and backgrounds others. It backgrounds interpersonal relationships and it foregrounds the physical processes of death and entropy. It shows only ‘reality in its most repellent aspect’ (*MTS* 155). Manfred’s world is the tomb world Dick will later re-use in *DADES*? to describe the lowest point of Mercer’s spiritual journey.

Dick appropriates the metaphor of the tomb and a world filled with death and rotting from Ellen West, who uses it in her poetry to describe her outlook during moments of despair (Binswanger, ‘The Case of Ellen West’ 239). She expresses a fear of being trapped, and a sense of being surrounded by death, dying and the processes of decay (284). Ludwig Binswanger coined the phrase ‘tomb-world’ in his sustained analysis of West’s journal writing and poetry to refer to her depression (296). Neither Binswanger nor West specifically mention entropy in this context, but it is not a large leap for Dick to associate ‘withering, decaying, and moldering’ with entropy (282).

Dick uses the analogy of the tomb three times in *MTS*. On each occasion, he uses it to relate Manfred’s mental illness and provoke horror. On the first two occasions he uses it to describe a picture Manfred draws, one that evokes Manfred’s personal world. Thanks to instances in the novel where Manfred’s point of view is used, readers know that the picture is an accurate reflection of Manfred’s personal perception. Jack, and later Doreen, each view the picture and independently recognise it as the tomb world. Jack sees the picture and Manfred’s illness as ‘a mouldering, dank tomb’, a ‘place of total death’ (*MTS* 155). Doreen recognises it instantly, even using the words as proper nouns: ‘It’s the Tomb World, isn’t it? […] And that’s what he sees, and through him, that’s what you’re beginning to see’ (*MTS* 175). The final reference to the tomb world occurs when Arnie travels to ‘Dirty Knobby’, an oblique reference to Uluru, to use Manfred to travel back in
time. Arnie notices that everything near the rock appears dead or dying, and the path makes him feel ‘as if they were treading within a great tomb’ \((MTS\ 248)\). This section foreshadows that Arnie will soon be entering into Manfred’s world, and that Dirty Knobby will be, for Arnie, the gateway to the tomb world where the living, breathing outside world has vanished, and all that remains are the close confine of the internal tomb world.

However, Manfred does have some connection to the social world. He can communicate with Jack, who to some extent shares his world-view, and he has a bond with the Bleekmen. The Bleekmen are natives to Mars, whom Dick describes as being ‘closely related’ to ‘aboriginal Negroes, like the African Bushmen’ \((MTS\ 151)\). When Manfred first sees them, he becomes uncharacteristically excited, pointing, running, peering and muttering – extraordinary actions on the part of a nearly catatonic child. The second time Manfred sees a Bleekman, it is Heliogabalus, Arnie Kott’s personal servant. Manfred, for the first time in the novel, speaks aloud, saying ‘Hello’ to him. Heliogabalus establishes a quick rapport with Manfred. Heliogabalus suggests that he has a great insight into Manfred’s mind: ‘His thoughts are […] as clear as plastic to me, and mine likewise to him’ \((MTS\ 228)\). At the close of the novel, Manfred joins the tribe of the Bleekmen, communicating easily with them from ‘inside his mind, in a way for them to hear and understand’ \((MTS\ 273)\).

These small lines of contact with the world outside his body offer Manfred hope for escape from his somatic prison. They also offer a challenge for readers: why do the Bleekmen have such a powerful link with Manfred?

Jack Bohlen speculates that the Bleekmen’s world-view, and in particular their relationship to time, might be similar to Manfred’s own, allowing greater interaction between them. Jack’s speculation is corroborated later in the story when, for a short period, the novel looks out from Manfred’s point of view. Manfred finds it difficult to understand or even perceive the other humans who he sees as moving too fast to view. In contrast, Heliogabalus appears to move normally, and even with grace.

In this scene – which is recapitulated several times in the novel, before being told explicitly from Manfred’s point of view – he sits in a room with Arnie, Doreen, Jack and Heliogabalus. He cannot bear to look at Jack and Doreen who are on the couch in a passionate embrace – their nearness to each other makes him uncomfortable. To Manfred
it is ‘as if their separate identities had flowed together’ (MTS 210). His mistake is a product of his world-view. Manfred’s physical and cosmological perspective makes him unable to perceive fine-grained distinctions, such as Jack and Doreen’s continuing individuality in spite of their proximity, and anticipates Richard Kongrosian’s inability to distinguish himself from his environment in The Simulacra (TS 1964). Manfred perceives Arnie as moving too fast to follow, vanishing and reappearing unexpectedly. Only Heliogabalus maintains a discernible individual existence in Manfred’s world. The Martian appears as a ‘dark figure’, filled with ‘rhythmic grace’ (MTS 210). Manfred is able to follow his movements and look directly at him, at which time the figure directly addresses him – a direct link with the outside world:

‘You must die,’ the dark man said to him in a far-off voice. ‘Then you will be reborn. Do you see, child? There is nothing for you as you are now, because something went wrong and you cannot see or hear or feel. No one can help you. Do you see, child?’

‘Yes,’ Manfred said. (MTS 210)

Heliogabalus’s address to Manfred, quoted above, both simplifies and complicates matters. Heliogabalus confirms Manfred’s isolation, revealing that, ‘something went wrong and you cannot see or hear or feel.’ Manfred does see, hear and feel, but he is blind and deaf to the existence of other living people who appear to him as dead. Essentially, Heliogabalus is enlightening Manfred, who might never have known that the universe he lives in is unique to him and not shared with others. However, the interaction itself presents a problem. If it can be taken as genuine – and given the Martians’ deep understanding of Manfred, revealed throughout the novel, I see no reason why it shouldn’t – then doesn’t this constitute Manfred seeing, feeling and hearing something real, something outside his body? Heliogabalus’s question, ‘Do you see, child?’ to which Manfred responds ‘Yes,’ gives the dialogue a concrete contradiction to reinforce the implied one. Perhaps this dialogue with its concrete and implied contradictions also foreshadows that another of the claims Heliogabalus makes will be contradicted by the events of the novel: Manfred can be helped, and Heliogabalus and the Martians will be the ones to do it (MTS 210).
None of the others present perceive this interaction. Perhaps, as Jack speculated, Heliogabalus and the Martians have a relationship to time more in line with Manfred’s. This would explain the contrast between how Manfred perceives Arnie and how he perceives Heliogabalus. Where Arnie flashed in and out of view as if he were on time-lapsed film, Heliogabalus moves smoothly, flowing from frame to frame. It would also explain why the quoted interaction isn’t perceived by Jack, Doreen and Arnie. I will discuss Manfred’s relationship with time in more depth in the next section.

The denouement of the novel sees Manfred join a tribe of Bleekmen. While Manfred and the tribe do not understand each other’s words, they do understand each other’s thoughts. Manfred’s communications are described as taking place ‘inside his mind’ and ‘within himself’ (MTS 273), so while the Bleekmen are able to understand and communicate with him, Manfred is still turned inwards. However, this does not appear to be a barrier for the Bleekmen, enabling Manfred to participate in a community despite his apparent isolation.

Manfred and the Bleekmen share the experience of alienation and marginalisation. The Bleekmen are a marginalised people, made outsiders in their own country. Manfred is alienated from almost everything outside his personal world, including the human community he was born within. Manfred’s commonality with the Bleekmen binds them together, but tears them away from human society, and they remain outsiders. As Jack theorises, contact with the Bleekmen may not be a way for Manfred to end his isolation from human beings, instead it may have the opposite effect and ‘draw him so far away from us that there would be no chance of our ever communicating with him’ (MTS 151). Ultimately, and despite his apparently aberrant connections with those outside his personal world, Manfred remains isolated – even though he, bafflingly, shares his isolation with others. Nothing in a Dick novel is straightforward. So, in the final moments of the novel, Manfred’s isolation from the human community remains, although he does find a community to become part of, one which shares some of his unusual perceptions, including his strange perception of time.

The Time-Slip

In the outside world, time is a constant, an unvarying process you can... set your watch by. In the inside world, time can change pace. It can run fast or slow, and it can even seem to stop. Dick believes schizophrenics live fully in their own idios kosmos and are
even more alienated from time than the rest of us are. Dick said, ‘What distinguishes the schizophrenic existence from that which the rest of us like to imagine we enjoy is the element of time. The schizophrenic is having it all now, whether he wants it or not’ (‘Schizophrenia and the Book of Changes’ 176). In MTS Dick explores this supposition in detail. The driving plot element is the speculation that the schizophrenic mind, Manfred’s in this case, is unhinged in time. Manfred is portrayed as having a different perceptual relationship with time from the rest of us and is described as having a ‘derangement in [his] sense of time’ (MTS 46) that results in him perceiving time as vastly accelerated. This then renders the world as the rest of us see it bewildering and incomprehensible to Manfred, alienating him from us and it.

Since Dick believes the ‘schizophrenic is engulfed in an endless now’ (‘Schizophrenia and the Book of Changes’ 176), he portrays Manfred as living in a single, endless perceptual instant. He sees the past, present and future all rolled into one. When looking at a proposed building site, he sees a completed building, long since fallen into disrepair and now ‘a decaying slum’ (MTS 153). When he perceives people, he sees them eroding and rotting, and can only watch as they turn to leather, dust and crawling insects before his eyes (MTS 170). Entropy, thus sped up, becomes immediate and apparent, a more vital force than the people around him.

Dick plays with time in the novel, which helps to evoke Manfred’s world-view. The most obvious derangement of time occurs in the form of ‘time-slips’. These are three repeated accounts of the same event: a dinner party. There are no cues in the novel to alert the reader that something unusual is happening, other than the repeated event itself. The narrative jumps backwards to the same point like a needle skipping on a dirty record. The reader’s own sense of time might be disrupted – didn’t I just read this? Is this déjá-vu? When I first read the novel I had to flick back the pages to check whether I had lost my place or whether my edition was misbound. This repetition helps Dick bring the reader further into Manfred’s personal world. Dick escapes boring his readers by varying the account each time it he repeats it, by lengthening the proportion of narrative that represents Manfred’s perceptions and by changing the narrative point of view.

The final time-slip in the novel occurs near the end when Arnie Kott’s manipulative plans to use Manfred’s condition to make him money come to unexpected fruition. Arnie wants to go back in time so as to make some shrewd investments. With Manfred’s help, he is
able to travel back three weeks, to the exact place where we, as readers, first encountered Arnie. From there, events occur as they did the first time around, with one major difference: Arnie now experiences the world the same way the schizophrenic does. He feels a sense of paranoia. He starts to view people as semi-mechanical processes, as creatures rather than people. His sense of time is disrupted – at one point he hears a phone ringing and between it starting to ring and him answering it, he fantasises an elaborate betrayal. In an act of desperation designed to help him escape the world he sees crumbling around him, he attempts to kill Jack Bohlen and is in turn killed and sent back to his own normal reality.

Like the characters in *Eye in the Sky*, Arnie finds himself trapped inside another person’s personal universe, a universe from which he is desperate to escape. Arnie’s personality is almost the polar opposite of Manfred’s. Arnie is charismatic and outgoing. He is a business man, an entrepreneur, someone for whom navigating the waters of society has brought wealth and success. In contrast, Manfred is completely withdrawn, and so distant from society that he is almost catatonic. By bringing Arnie into Manfred’s world, Dick creates the greatest contrast and shows how much perception affects reality. Arnie is transformed by seeing the world as Manfred does. His physical self becomes more dominant in his perception: an ulcer he had, in an earlier echo of the scene, dismissed as a reminder to eat, causes such pain as he had ‘never felt from it before’ (*MTS* 252). He becomes unable to function as he previously had. Even the simplest thing, like calling an old friend and asking for a favour, becomes impossible when that old friend senses that something is different about Arnie. Arnie becomes crippled by his fear of other people, a fear that is also very much a part of Manfred’s *idios kosmos*. Where before Arnie had displayed a small amount of paranoia in selfishly protecting his interests, it begins to takes control of him. He sees all the people around him as threats, and contact with other human beings as terrifying – the closer the contact, the more threatening it seems. A secretary from a pool, who previously he had barely noticed, becomes terrifying to him as he looks at her teeth: ‘white and sharp… made for rending’ (*MTS* 255). Her physical touch repels him. His paranoia causes him to drive people away from him, to hang up the phone and dismiss the secretary. Arnie begins to create for himself the isolation that Manfred experiences.

**Paranoia and Mechanical People**
Manfred is not the only schizophrenic in the novel. As I mentioned earlier, Jack Bohlen has, before the events of the story, also fallen prey to a schizophrenic vision of the world and, by implication, a vision of the world as seen from an isolated *idios kosmos*. Bohlen’s vision is similar to Manfred’s view of the world. This is the account of his first breakdown:

And then the hallucination, if it was that, happened. He saw the personnel manager in a new light. The man was dead.

He saw, through the man’s skin, his skeleton. It had been wired together, the bones connected with fine copper wire. The organs, which had withered away, were replaced by artificial components, kidney, heart, lungs – everything was made of plastic and stainless steel, all working in unison but entirely without authentic life. The man’s voice issued from a tape, through an amplifier and speaker system.

Possibly at some time in the past the man had been real and alive, but that was over, and the stealthy replacement had taken place, inch by inch, progressing insidiously from one organ to the next, and the entire structure was there to deceive others. To deceive him, Jack Bohlen, in fact. He was alone in this office; there was no personnel manager. No one spoke to him, and when he himself talked, no one heard; it was entirely a lifeless, mechanical room in which he stood. *(MTS 83)*

Bohlen’s vision is similar to Manfred’s in that Bohlen becomes unable to perceive the warm human reality around him; he sees himself as being alone in the office. Jack becomes the only living thing in the frame, accompanied only by the suggestion of a deceiver that caused the ‘stealthy replacement’ and set the structure ‘there to deceive them’ *(MTS 83)*, enriching Dick’s portrayal of the personal universe as isolated, cold and hostile. The horror of the situation is made bleaker by Jack’s, and the reader’s, knowledge that there should be life in the personnel manager.

The personnel manager is portrayed as both dead and mechanical. The manager is similar to Manfred’s vision of himself, trapped in the decaying AM-WEB building, kept alive by mechanical means; both are people portrayed as existing in this kind of living death. By blending the human and the machine, Dick is implicitly asking: where does the one begin and the other end? If we can splice an artificial heart into a person without changing their
fundamental being, in what sense can we say there is any ontological difference between the mechanical and the organic? If a person is composed of chemical processes that are not, themselves, alive, what gives the person their life force? Jack and Manfred’s visions are both literal and figurative. They ask the reader what we, looking out from our idioi kosmoi, can really be sure is alive and vital like ourselves.

At the same time there are differences between Jack’s and Manfred’s visions, although I believe that the differences are surface features and that there is a fundamental unity between the two views. The prime difference is that Manfred’s visions are of people as animate corpses, animated in part by the organic processes of the Gubbler, while Jack’s visions are of people who are mechanical in kind. Jack sees a person as a thing ‘composed of cold wire and switches, not a human at all, not made of flesh’ (MTS 116). He sees through the ‘fleshy trappings’ to the ‘mechanical device beyond’, while Manfred sees ‘dead bones, shiny and wet’ (MTS 178). The fundamental unity of the two visions is that both portray people as not being truly alive. Manfred’s are not alive because they are rotting corpses. Jack’s are not alive because they are mechanical. Both perceptions take agency away from the people and reveal them as un-living things with living façades. The idiosyncrasies of Jack and Manfred’s visions can in part be linked to their own individual natures. Jack is a repair man, and understands the workings of mechanical things. It is a meaningful metaphor to him. Manfred, in turn, is scared of entropy and decay and of his own extended half-life in a home of assisted living, and so the metaphor of rotting corpses holds the most meaning for him. Their visions are appropriate to each of them, but they convey the same revelation that the people around them are not living.

At the same time, and despite the claim that the visions represent ‘the aspect of absolute reality’ (MTS 118), the visions are not without judgement and are not objective viewpoints. Just as Manfred views his entropic future with horror, Jack sees the personnel manager as a deception, something deliberately used to trick him. Jack posits a deceptive agency behind the vision, just as Manfred posits the existence of the horrible Gubbler causing entropy, although the Gubbler is not portrayed as a deceiver. Perhaps Dick is trying to convey the paranoia that often accompanies the schizophrenic world-view. Perhaps he is making a deeper point. Perhaps what Dick is implying is that once human agency is removed from the frame, something still remains: the inhuman other that causes these deceptions to appear.
More Real?

Schizophrenics, according to Dick, retreat from the shared universe and into the personal universe. By retreating in this way, their perceptual focus changes. They become engulfed in the world of their minds. Time becomes unreliable as they pore over their sensory experiences repeatedly, trying to make sense of them. Other humans vanish from the frame and are replaced by some malicious agency that animates otherwise non-living things so as to deceive the onlooker.

A question remains: in MTS, where does Dick show reality to reside in this morass of private and shared perception? On the surface, it resides in the shared reality. This is the reality we all have access to, unless we are cut off in some way as Manfred is. Shared reality dominates the novel and is the reality to which everyone, except Manfred, returns to; it is what we are used to thinking of as ‘normal’ reality.

However, in MTS shared reality is not the same as real reality. I think Dick believes there is truth in the schizophrenic’s vision, and he tries convey this idea in his writing and in MTS. The first element I will address is the paranoia of the schizophrenic vision. In the fictional world of MTS, certain things have been ‘discovered’ about schizophrenia. These discoveries represent, to varying degrees, Dick’s knowledge of and speculation about the condition. This is then combined with even more fantastic speculation that is in line with the science fiction context. To illustrate, consider Manfred and Jack’s paranoia. Dick knew that paranoia is one of the manifestations of schizophrenia. He speculated that this paranoia is caused by cutting off the personal and private universes and thus removing human agency from the perceptual frame – speculation based on his readings of Jung, Freud and Binswanger combined with his own personal philosophical and psychological musings. He then posits that the schizophrenic picks up the unconscious hostility of other people, which causes his or her paranoia (MTS 121), and that the schizophrenic has a degree of psychic ability – knowledge, speculation and fantasy all blended into one. Dick draws the idea of unconscious motivations, including hostility, from Freud and Jung; the schizophrenic being unnaturally sensitive to hostility is speculation; and the schizophrenic as telepath is science-fantasy. As with all of his portrayals of the condition, fact and

33 Freud develops the concept of the unconscious mind, based on earlier work, in The Interpretation of Dreams. Jung’s major addition is from The Archetypes and the Collected Unconscious.
fiction blend until they are almost indistinguishable. This is a common element of Dick’s science fiction speculation, and one that makes him uniquely difficult to pin down as a thinker.

By claiming that the schizophrenic can ‘pick up on other people’s unconscious hostility’ (MTS 121) because they possess a ‘telepathic factor’, Dick shows that he believes their paranoia is, in some ways, justified. He believes people really do feel ‘sadism and aggression’ towards each other, even if it is ‘repressed’. He intimates that schizophrenic people are not deluded but are unusually perspicacious. They are ‘accustomed constantly to ignore the surface and look beneath’ (MTS 198). Perhaps their perception is skewed, but, at least according to Dick, it is not wrong. In addition, his tendency to privilege the hidden over what conceals it leads me to speculate that he may believe the schizophrenic’s vision is the more accurate one.

The perspective of the schizophrenic, which is to say the perspective from the isolated *idios kosmos*, is portrayed as a cosmological one. It does not deal with the normal human focus, but shows reality as seen from an immense distance. Jack comments after one of his visions that he would like to tell the person whom he saw in the vision that ‘I can see you under the aspect of eternity and you’re dead’ (MTS 119). Strictly speaking, Jack is right. When looked at from under ‘the aspect of eternity’, a human is a finite life bounded on both sides by infinite oblivion. Which ‘aspect’ is more real? That of eternity, or that of the infinitesimal, illusive instant? The answer is not straightforward. As human beings we do not live in the aspect of eternity, we live in a world bounded on all sides by the limited frame of our perception. Dick seems to suggest that the schizophrenic has no such boundaries and thus is privy to a different and perhaps deeper reality than our everyday world.

It might seem a contradiction that Dick views the schizophrenic perception as both minute in detail and cosmological in scope, and it is not my intention to recast his writing into a coherent whole if the groundwork for such unity is not present. However, I also

---

34 To corroborate this interpretation, consider this passage from *We Can Build You*: ‘When I consider the brief span of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and behind it, the small space that I fill, or even see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces which I know not, and which know not me, I am afraid’ (WCBY 60). In this passage, Dick quotes Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* (36), possibly by way of *Existence* (May, Angel, and Ellenberger 18).
think it is important to employ the principle of charity in these situations. I would speculate that Dick thinks that while schizophrenics focus on the minutiae of their own internal realities, and ignore many things that seem obvious to ‘normal’ mentalities, by concentrating on what is physical and present, and by not going beyond this, Dick might be implying that schizophrenics have a more objective view on things. It is a physicalist perspective that ignores other categories of being, and so resembles the more distant, ‘cosmological’ perspective. To illustrate, imagine viewing a human being through three different perspectives: the first through a microscope, the second on our normal perceptual scale, and the third from a great distance. The second perspective would show things at a human level, and would reveal a social reality that we are familiar with. The first and third perspectives, analogous to the schizophrenic and cosmological respectively, are similar because, despite their extreme differences of scale, they only reveal physical processes devoid of human meaning.

Dick portrays the schizophrenic as privy to a different – and I have suggested he might also imply deeper – reality than our everyday world; consider Jack’s vision of Dr Glaub as a machine which he describes it as seeing him ‘under the aspect of absolute reality’ (*MTS* 116). To Jack, his vision is of absolute reality, but it is not shared reality. So, despite representing personal, private universes, Dick hints that the world as the schizophrenic sees it represents ‘eternity’ and the ‘absolute’ and taps into something deeper than what the shared universe usually allows access to. In these passages, Dick shows schizophrenic introversion, where the schizophrenic turns inwards towards an increasingly isolated personal reality, as a route to greater knowledge of the ‘absolute’.

This represents quite a shift from *Eye in the Sky*, in which there was never any real doubt about the validity of the shared world, just as there was no doubt that the worlds of the private universes they travelled through were skewed versions of the real/shared world. Manfred and Jack’s visions are not poor shadows of reality. Manfred’s vision is described as a re-framing of reality, one that represents only a small part of the whole: ‘he does not perceive the rest of reality, which we do. And it is a dreadful section which he does see: reality in its most repellent aspect’ (*MTS* 155).

However, despite framing the schizophrenic vision and the world of the *idios kosmos* as being only one aspect of reality, Dick implies that it is an important aspect, perhaps even more important than the world of the *koinos kosmos*. He suggests the *koinos* is not based
on truth or reality, it is based on learned values that are, ultimately, arbitrary. The *koinos* is ‘forced’ onto a person, and only fully takes over when “psycho-sexual maturity” strikes’ (‘Schizophrenia and the Book of Changes’ 175). The *koinos* reality is ‘the reality of interpersonal living’ and is a life ‘which [is] learned’ (*MTS* 76–77). It has to be ‘picked up bit by bit from those around one, parents and teachers, authority figures in general... from everyone a person came in contact with during his formative years.’ Not only are the values of the *koinos* learned values and not the result of ‘biological life or any form of inherited life’, but they are in ‘ceaseless flux’ (*MTS* 76–77).

In *Martian Time-Slip*, social values are taught by a large, mechanical school, filled with teaching machines. The teaching machines are androids, each with a different scholastic lesson to teach. Many are based on famous historical figures. They operate on an essentially simple principle, with millions of pre-programmed responses available to them, chosen on the basis of the stimulus given. This gives the teaching machines the appearance of intelligence, but shows how far they are from real sentience: essentially, they mindlessly follow a pre-prepared script.\(^{35}\) Jack reacts poorly to the machines, since they remind him of his own schizophrenic vision of a human being with mechanical components. His fear adds tension to the scene. It also gives his earlier vision a hint of prescience – his fear has come true: here are mechanical beings masquerading as humans in a way that horrifies him... and Dick:

> Within the universe there exists fierce cold things, which I have given the name ‘machines’ to. Their behavior frightens me, especially when it imitates human behaviour so well that I get the uncomfortable sense that these things are trying to pass themselves off as humans but are not. (‘Man, Android and Machine’ 211)

\(^{35}\)Interestingly, Dick’s teaching machines bear remarkable similarity to the ‘Blockhead’ thought experiment. In this experiment, a machine has a conversation with a person based on a script and a set of rules governing what portions of the script to read. This arrangement, Ned Block speculated in his article ‘Psychologism and Behaviorism’, would be able to pass the Turing test for intelligence, despite its obvious lack of intelligence, thus proving a deficiency in the Turing test. Dick’s teaching machines resemble the ‘Blockhead’, in that readers would notice the teaching machines’ veneer of humanity, but would not ascribe sentience to them.
The teaching machines impose many of the shared values the colonists have brought with them from Earth on the children in their care. These *koinos* values and concepts are out of place in the colony.

Jack speculates that the *koinos* values the children on Mars are taught are not suited to Martian living as they are grounded in Terra-centric concepts of no use on Mars. The teaching machine represents a fixed milieu that not only does not exist on Mars, it doesn’t exist on Terra either. The teaching machines are oblivious to their external environment: when Jack asks the ‘Kindly Dad’ teaching machine what a Bleekman is, the machine does not know. At the same time, the ‘Whitlock’ teaching machine uses parables involving raccoons, the nearest of which would be at least 54.6 million kilometres away. In an ironic twist, the *koinos* reality the school imparts to the children is split from the real reality of Mars and, recalling the etymology of ‘schizophrenia’ in ‘splitting the mind’, schizophrenic. This revelation leads Jack to speculate that the school is ‘going to rear another generation of schizophrenics’ (*MTS* 88). His choice of the word ‘another’ indicates Jack believes the present generation to be schizophrenic because they too possess a shared reality that is detached from their environment.

The children fight a battle between the ‘composite psyche’ (*MTS* 74) of the mechanical school and their own ‘individual psyches’, a battle which, if they win, will cause them to be deemed autistic or schizophrenic, while if they lose, they will become out of touch with the external world. Dick shows his readers that the *koinos* can be mutable, arbitrary, unrelated to external reality, and, in a certain sense, schizophrenic. He casts light on the relativity of schizophrenia, which is defined in relation to society and the *koinos*. By relating schizophrenia to the physical environment instead of the *koinos* he makes it possible for someone fully integrated with the *koinos kosmos* to be schizophrenic, while someone who is out of touch with the *koinos* may be more in touch with actual reality.

Dick speculates that the world in the *koinos* may be more like an illusion, a veil of *maya* that must be stripped away to reveal that the *idios kosmos* is not so individual after all. ‘Who can say’, speculates Dick through the vehicle of one of the Martians, Heliogabalus, ‘if perhaps the schizophrenics are not correct? Mister, they take a brave journey. They turn away from mere things, which one may handle and turn to practical use; they turn inward to *meaning*. There, the black-night-without-bottom lies, the pit. Who can say if they will return? And if so, what will they be like, having glimpsed meaning? I admire
them’ (MTS 98–99). Heliogabalus’ speech is dense with philosophical resonance. The schizophrenic’s inward-turning journey is comparable with the journey of the person seeking enlightenment in Plato’s myth of the cave. Like the person seeking enlightenment, the schizophrenic is described as turning away from the things before them and seeking the truth and, like the enlightened person, the schizophrenic is profoundly changed by the experience and may find herself unsuited to the reality she turned away from. Heliogabalus’ name corroborates this reading, ‘helio’ being the Greek word for ‘sun’, and Heliogabalus the name of a Syrian/Roman sun god, while ‘gabalus’ has a sound like the nonsensical ‘gubble’. However, instead of facing the sun of truth and absolute reality that Plato describes, the schizophrenic revelation is ‘a pit’ and more akin to the abyss Nietzsche describes in Beyond Good and Evil. As with Nietzsche’s abyss, there is an implication that the vision of truth the schizophrenic sees is harmful, possibly a nihilistic revelation caused by the cosmological perspective, one that cannot leave her unchanged, should she survive the vision.

Another difference between the schizophrenic’s journey to revelation as Dick describes it and the journey of Plato’s enlightened person to see the form of the good is that the journey Plato describes is a journey outward. Ultimate reality in the shape of the true forms is to be found by seeing beyond the mundane to find the truth behind it. The revelation Dick describes is a journey inward, and involves turning away completely from the objects of perception to explore inner reality and the meaning to be found there. It is not completely alien; after all, both methods require rejecting the surface features of the world. Platonic/Socratic wisdom is achieved through self-knowledge which leads to knowledge of the forms, an inward-turning similar to that which Dick describes.

So, at this later point in his writing and thinking, Dick gives more credence to the idios kosmos than he did earlier in his life. Rather than being isolated from reality, Dick has started to view the idios as a privileged part of reality, one that accesses some things not available to people limited to existing in the koinos kosmos. One way he shows its importance is to invert the dominance of koinos over idios. He does this by allowing, at certain points in the story, a single person’s idios kosmos to invade either the koinos kosmos or the idioi kosmoi of others. These invasions occur in intensifying stages throughout the novel. The first invasion is when Jack Bohlen is overcome by his own

---

36 ‘When you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you’ (Nietzsche 146).
schizophrenic visions, visions he had escaped by travelling to Mars. Being near Manfred causes them to re-emerge. This process is unusual, but explicable. Jack is influenced by Manfred. He sees him, and thanks to the empathy he possesses, he senses how Manfred is isolated by visions similar to the ones he used to have. This causes him to ‘relapse’ and have visions of his own. However, the later invasions are not so easily explained.

The next three invasions – invasions of reality that represent violations of the normal order of things and of the independence of the idios kosmos from the koinos kosmos – occur during the three repeated visions of the dinner party described earlier. Each involves a character, normally outside Manfred’s isolated idios kosmos, experiencing the events of the party as if through Manfred’s eyes. The first person to experience this is Jack (MTS 168). Since Jack already has ‘unstable tendencies,’ that are ‘allied to his [Manfred’s]’ the invasion is not so strange (MTS 173). It is feasible that instead of Jack drawing Manfred into the koinos kosmos as planned, Manfred has drawn Jack into his idios kosmos. If this is the case, then it represents a more substantial violation of the workings of idioi and koinoi kosmoi. Manfred isn’t just affecting Jack’s idios, he is taking it over.

However, the visions don’t stop with Jack. Doreen is the next to experience the party through Manfred’s eyes (MTS 178). Since Doreen is not and has never been schizophrenic, this is a more substantial reality violation. Doreen lacks Jack’s vulnerability, and so her vision is particularly inexplicable.

The last person to experience this same reality shift is Arnie Kott. In the section where Doreen experiences Manfred’s world, the perspective changes to encompass Arnie’s point of view. Since everyone involved in the scene is, essentially, viewing it from the same perspective, the transition is seamless. One moment we are closest to Doreen, inside her skin and feeling that ‘her clothing itched her’, the next moment we are looking at Doreen from the outside and from Arnie’s point of view: ‘He turned and saw her as she stripped herself of the last of her clothing’ (MTS 178–79). By including Arnie as one of the participants in Manfred’s idios kosmos, Dick further increases the level of reality violation. Arnie is a highly extroverted man, concerned very much with the world and material possessions. Unlike Doreen, he seems to lack empathy, despite having a good intuitive understanding of people, placing him at an opposite extreme from Manfred. Of anyone in the novel, Arnie lives the most firmly in the koinos kosmos. Arnie’s
susceptibility to Manfred’s strange ability shows how invasive Manfred’s vision has become. Just being near Manfred has caused them to begin ‘sinking into his reality’, a reality, Jack worries, that has started to ‘seep over us and replace our way of viewing things’ (MTS 173).

The final reality disturbance is the most extreme. It follows the pattern of escalation set by the previous invasions, but is not a reiteration of the dinner-party scene. Arnie Kott becomes completely engulfed in Manfred’s world, trapped inside it and unable to escape. He revisits some of the key events of the novel, but now sees them as Manfred would have, and reacts to them as a full-blown schizophrenic. These events take place in an ambiguous space – perhaps in an alternate timeline that vanishes when Arnie returns to the real world; perhaps only inside Arnie’s imagination. In the course of these events, Dick forces Arnie, the most unempathic character, to walk a mile in Manfred’s shoes.

By using the categories of idios and koinos to help formulate his world-view, Dick is able to create a backdrop of stability against which his complicated play with perspective and reality can occur. By causing violations of Manfred’s idios kosmos into the koinos and the idioi kosmoi of the other characters, Dick shows the reader how powerful he believes the isolated idios kosmos to be. For Dick, it is a revelatory space in which truth, meaning and absolute values can be found. By escalating the violations, Dick helps his readers follow him down the rabbit hole into greater acceptance of the importance of the idios kosmos and the revelations to be found there. In escalating the invasions, Dick also begins to break away from the theory that initially informs his writing and propose his own modifications that embrace the ideas especially close to his heart, such as the importance of empathy and the power of inward reflection to allow insight into the workings of the world.
Chapter 5: The Simulacra

As boundaries are crossed, Richard Kongrosian finds it harder and harder to prevent himself from merging with the outside world.

The previous two chapters dealt with a number of Dick’s works where he questions reality on the basis of perspective. In these texts, he implies two apparently contradictory arguments: he first challenges the possibility of objectivity by showing how subtle, fallible and all-encompassing our subjective perception of the world is, but then implies that it can offer insight into a deeper reality. I pointed to an escalation over time in how ‘violently’ Dick violates perspective. In ‘Roog’ (1953), the first story Dick sold, he uses a simple point-of-view narrative with a twist at the end to show how important perspective is in creating reality. In his early novel, Eye in the Sky (ES 1957), Dick goes a step further and portrays realities that are, literally, created from individual perspectives, themselves shaped by strong ideologies. This helped him critique certain metaphysical and political world-views and at the same time allowed him to show how powerfully ideology can affect perception. Eye gives strong evidence of Dick’s debt to Kant, Berkeley and the philosophy of idealism. I used Martian Time-Slip (MTS 1964) to give an example of Dick escalating his critique of ‘objective’ reality, based on the observations that the reality breakdowns in Martian Time-Slip were both more extreme, since they involved entering the personal universe of someone isolated from shared reality, and more significant because they weren’t caused by an arbitrary plot-device, like the pseudo-scientific Bevatron accident of Eye in the Sky. The analysis of Martian Time-Slip was grounded in the works of the existential psychologists whose writing influenced Dick so strongly and, as Anthony Wolk puts it, ‘gave Dick a world view, which in turn he gave to his characters as novels’ (102).

Dick thoroughly explored the idea that our perception as human beings may be fallible. He explored the idea that our subjective reality could be out of touch with external reality. He even questioned whether shared reality is necessarily in touch with the real world. However, in these early explorations into perspective, perspective is a lens through which objective reality is distorted – but not dismissed. In Eye in the Sky, reality exists throughout, and the only difficulty is in returning to it. Martian Time-Slip is more subtle,
Chapter 5

and I suggest that Dick uses it to try and open a new window onto reality, one that incorporates the perspective of the *idios kosmos*.

Perhaps arising from Dick’s observations regarding human fallibility is the question: how would we know if the reality we perceive is a *deliberate* deception? The modern world is filled with ways to keep reality at bay and, keen cultural commentator that he was, he was aware of the possibilities for misuse: ‘unceasingly we are bombarded with pseudo-realities manufactured by very sophisticated people using very sophisticated electronic mechanisms. I do not distrust their motives; I distrust their power’. He saw manufactured realities in the world around him, created by ‘the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, [and by] political groups’ (‘How to Build a Universe’ 262) and, in his fiction, magnified what he saw into even more grand and all-encompassing deceptions.

This chapter is about *The Simulacra (TS 1964)*. Unlike ‘Roog’, *Eye in the Sky* and *Martian Time-Slip*, the main deception of *The Simulacra* is perpetrated on the public by a manipulative and powerful government, a familiar device in many of Dick’s works. In *Martian Time-Slip* he breaks down the boundary between an isolated *idios kosmos* and the *koinos kosmos*, and I suggest that he uses the opportunity to try and reveal something about the nature of reality. In *The Simulacra*, a great many barriers are broken down. I would even go so far as to characterise the novel as being filled with examples of things overflowing their normal bounds. I offer several examples and then relate them to the penultimate – and most unusual – example of crossing boundaries, the disintegration of Richard Kongrosian.

**The Simulacra**

The heart of *The Simulacra* is a fairly simple disjunction between reality and deception perpetrated by the government on the people. However, in *The Simulacra*, deception and reality overspill into each other more fluidly than they do in earlier novels. *The Simulacra* provides a fascinating middle step between novels where reality and deception are kept at a distance, such as in *Eye in the Sky*, *The Cosmic Puppets (CP 1957)*, *The Penultimate Truth (PT 1964)* and *Time Out of Joint (TOJ 1959)*, and later novels which blend the two categories more thoroughly. Written in the white heat of 1963 – the period Carlo Pagetti describes as ‘the highest moment in Dick’s fiction both in the quality of the works and the
richness of their motifs’ (24) – *The Simulacra* concludes with the nightmare vision of a person melding with their physical environment, absorbing it just as it absorbs him. This vision is, perhaps, at the centre of what Dick fears most, which leads into the next chapter: The Three Alterities of Palmer Eldritch.

This reading of *The Simulacra* is directed toward the ideas of overflowing, intermingling and mixing. Almost every element of the novel contains something of this theme. The climax of the novel contains a literalised piece of intermixing, where the psycho-kineticist pianist, Richard Kongrosian, becomes unable to distinguish between himself and his environment. Because he possesses psychokinetic powers, his psychic problem turns into a physical one as his internal organs move outward into the environment while physical objects flow into him. It is a nightmare vision of amalgamation and the loss of individuality, which is explored more completely in *The Three Stigmata*, and which seems inextricable, for Dick, from the loss of reality.

Surprisingly little has been written about *The Simulacra*. Baudrillard mentions it briefly in his *Simulacra and Simulation*, but only to cherry-pick some choice examples which, as discussed in section 1.2.1 and more thoroughly in Rosa’s ‘A Misreading Gone Too Far? Baudrillard Meets Philip K. Dick’, only demonstrate Baudrillard’s lack of familiarity with the source text. However, despite its haphazard inclusion in Baudrillard’s famous book, *The Simulacra* has generally only been mentioned in passing, as in early surveys of Dick’s works, like Suvin’s ‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ and Pagetti’s ‘Dick and Meta-SF’. Jameson describes it as a companion piece to *Dr. Bloodmoney* (*DB* 1965) (‘After Armageddon’). Rossi uses *The Simulacra* to illustrate his elaboration of a structuralist analysis based on Pagetti’s, observing that *The Simulacra* has a more fluid structure of reality levels over time than *The Penultimate Truth*, making it more similar to *Time Out of Joint* in kind. Otherwise, *The Simulacra* has received very little critical treatment.

The central deception of *The Simulacra* is a political deception. The president, or ‘der Alte’ is not a human, but the simulacrum of the title. The real power is held by the first lady, Nicole Thibodeaux. Society is stratified between those who know one or more state secrets and those who do not; the *Ge*, short for *Geheimnisträger* or ‘secret-bearers’, and the *Be*, which is short for *Befehlträger* or ‘instruction-carriers’. This is almost exactly the same device as that used in *The Penultimate Truth*, where the upper class bear the secret that the war is over and the surface of the Earth inhabitable, while the lower class are kept
in underground factories maintaining their heavy production schedule by the use of a simulacrum of the Protector Talbot Yancy. The clear division between those in the know and those being kept in the dark is the same, as is the use of a simulacrum to maintain the illusion. However, as Rossi observed, the structure is more fluid. Rossi borrows a linguistic metaphor, describing the relationship between Be and Ge as ‘syntagmatic’ and contrasting it with the ‘paradigmatic’ relationship between surface and sub-surface in The Penultimate Truth (‘Fourfold Symmetry’ 409–410).

In addition, as time goes on in the novel, it becomes obvious the simulacrum president is not the only secret. The first lady does not actually possess power. She is simply an actress, the fourth one to portray Nicole Thibodeaux to the Be. Real power is held by a council of nine secretive individuals. Much of the narrative movement is driven by the characters’ and readers’ desire to uncover the many secrets of the novel. The final revelation is that the novel’s major antagonist and leader of a reactionary and anti-government religious movement, Bertold Goltz, is actually a member of the council of nine. This final revelation serves as a twist. The people who were Ge are themselves being deceived and Goltz, who is described by Nicole – herself supposedly the quintessential Ge – as ‘as Be as it’s possible to be’ (TS 47) and by himself as ‘forever on the outside’ (TS 73), is the ultimate insider.

Dick creates what appears to be a static oppositional system, but transition from one group to another is possible, and the opposition itself is not as clear-cut as it might be. This novel illustrates the flexibility of the opposition between reality and deception with a number of motifs, including the use of television as a multi-directional medium, the fluidity of history, and the arbitrary distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’.

**Television**

Dick’s lifetime saw the widespread adoption of television into American homes. He was plainly interested in television and its implications in human life, and sometimes featured television sales and repair shops prominently in his plots, especially in his mainstream works.\(^37\) Television makes its way into his science fiction, but profoundly transformed. In

\(^{37}\) *Voices from the Street* (VS w.1952, pub.2007) and *Dr. Bloodmoney* both feature salesmen working at Modern TV Sales and Service, while one of the narrative threads in *Puttering About in a Small Land* (PASL w.1957, pub.1985) follows a man wanting to open his own television repair store.
this Dick anticipated some of the developments of modern media. Under Dick’s pen, television often turns from passive technology into something active and malicious, like a robot assassin in *The Penultimate Truth*. It turns from one-way communication to two-way. It can be intrusive and invasive and can enter people’s lives forcefully. Like the sinister telescreens of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it can be a vehicle for propaganda. Unlike Orwell’s telescreens, they are not univocally treated as government tools, and there are occasions where Dick turns them into surprisingly effective tools for religious communication, as in *A Maze of Death* (*MD* 1970), and even religious and psychic communion, as in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (*DADES*? 1968).

In *The Simulacra* television is under the sway of the government. It is used to broadcast the speeches of *der Alte*, as well as Nicole’s many interests. As the primary mechanism by which the simulacrum *der Alte* is presented to the public, television is portrayed as primarily a tool for deception and political control; one character describes it as Nicole’s ‘planet-wide instrument of persuasion’ (*TS* 88). It is used as a political tool to keep the *Ge* and *Be* separated.

Television in *The Simulacra* is also a tool for pacification. It turns viewers away from reality and from the reality of living in a thinly-veiled dictatorship in a number of different ways. Nicole’s shows, which feature her many bizarre but highly abstract interests, focus the public on a higher level of thought and prevent them from considering practical realities. One of Dick’s everyman characters, Ian Duncan, bemoans the situation as Nicole appears on screen to present a special on the undersea world:

> I don’t have a head for abstractions; I mean, all this religio-political philosophy – it makes no sense to me. Couldn’t I just concentrate on concrete reality? I ought to be baking bricks or turning out shoes.’ I ought to be on Mars, he thought, on the frontier. (*TS* 19)

A moment later, just as he becomes engrossed in the programme, Duncan has an epiphany:

> This is part of the deliberate propaganda line, Duncan realized. An effort to take our minds off Mars and the idea of getting away from the Party – and from her. (*TS* 19)
Chapter 5

In *The Simulacra* television presents simulation, but its esoteric content deliberately pushes attention away from the real, immediate and practical world and into a world of abstract thought. Duncan’s realisation in the above passage is that abstraction and abstract thought can be used to conceal reality from people. Just as Dick so often portrays practical solutions to metaphysical problems and shows great sympathy with the person who just wants to find a simple reality, he also criticises the level of abstraction that causes a person to turn away from practical reality.

Nicole’s broadcasts contain political topics, but also in-depth analyses of her many hobbies and interests, which turns her into ‘the woman who had come to monopolize their attention, on whom an entire nation, almost an entire planet, dwelt obsessively’ (*TS* 18). She transforms herself using the television from a real person into a fantasy. Her cultivated image – ‘synthetic in so many goddamn respects’ (*TS* 89) – is another tool for government control. Nicole is not just the leader of the country, she is also the most popular thing on television and a powerful media commodity. Her popularity is the contrived popularity of the television celebrity which has been transmuted into political power – as contrived as Ragle Gumm’s minor celebrity, which is purely a product of the government’s manipulation.\(^{38}\) The commutability of television celebrity and political celebrity is also explored in *The Crack in Space* (*CS* 1966) where America’s first black president is also a popular television ‘newsclown’.\(^{39}\) A proportion of the public in *The Simulacra* is kept mollified by the possibility of themselves joining the fantasy-world of television that Nicole and der Alte inhabit through strange, talent-show type recruitments. Duncan, who in the two recent block quotes complains about the status quo, is motivated by his desire to perform for Nicole and the television audience.

\(^{38}\) Ragle Gumm is the protagonist of *Time Out of Joint* (*TOJ* 1959). His minor celebrity is due to regularly winning a newspaper competition. However, the competition is government invention intended to make use of Gumm’s unique abilities without alerting him.

\(^{39}\) Sometimes it seems the most bizarre ideas in Dick’s stories are the most prophetic. The comic juxtaposition of news and ‘clowning’ is not unknown to a modern audience: Jon Stewart’s *Daily Show* would be a good example. The movement from ‘newsclown’ to president seems less ridiculous when considering how well-informed and insightful that particular humourist is. The transferral of big-screen celebrity into political power is familiar to modern readers who have seen first Ronald Reagan and then Arnold Schwarzenegger successfully run for public office.
Like Orwell, Dick portrays television used as a tool for propaganda, but adds to it the allure of celebrity and entertainment. Would Winston Smith have rebelled against Ingsoc if there had been more interesting programmes on the telescreen, or if Big Brother looked a bit more like Marilyn Monroe? Dick goes a step further still, creating a television experience that is both unusually intrusive and demanding, but also, paradoxically, responsive to the viewer. It is out of the viewer’s control both explicitly – it turns itself on and off without any input from the viewer (TS 18) – and more subtly in that its content is controlled by the government.

Dick also conveys the importance of authenticity. Nicole, who is one of the best examples of a media creation in the novel, is an object of idealisation and fascination. She is worshipped from afar, and is even described as ‘the most synthetic object in our milieu’ (TS 94) – arguably an ironic description, it turns out, because the President is a robot simulacrum. Much of the novel hinges on her authenticity. The novel’s main plot, along with most of the sub-plots, relies on seeing Nicole – the real Nicole – in the flesh. Richard Kongrosian is desperate to see her, and his tenuous sanity and sense of reality are predicated on her being real; the denouement where she is revealed to be an actress precipitates his break with the real world. Al Miller and Ian Duncan, along with most of the working class in this strange America, hope to have an audience with Nicole by cultivating an esoteric musical talent. Unlike her media image, and despite being an actress, she is described as bearing a singular quality of authenticity:

In comparison with her TV image she was much more distinct. That was the cardinal difference, the fabulous authenticity of her appearance, its reality to the senses. The senses knew the difference. (TS 155)

Nicole in person possesses ‘fabulous authenticity’ and the quality of being ‘distinct’. Behind the media creation is a person whose reality seems greater than that of those around her. At one point, a character describes his reality as contingent or subsistent on Nicole’s own reality: ‘we’re brought into being, validated consensually, by Nicole’s gaze’ (TS 110). However, she is still an actress. Nevertheless, the simple fact that Dick’s characters feel the need to pierce past the media image and through to some perceptible reality speaks again of Dick’s metaphysical interests. His characters want reality, and this is the driving force in the novel. This is what motivates people to seek out Nicole.
Chapter 5

Television becomes even more intrusive because the government uses a system of public testing to ensure the populace is paying attention to the broadcasts. Not only can the television be turned on without viewer input, but even her attention is coerced, and her thoughts and awareness forcibly directed at this abstract level of thought by means of the tests. Dick’s parodic intermingling of education and television emphasises some of the problems of both; it shows education devoid of anything except esoteric and useless content, and television used as a distraction from reality but without the entertainment. Television is intrusive both to the person on screen and to the viewer. In an early scene, Dr Egon Superb is hounded by robotic reporters who act just as intrusively as human reporters.

In *The Simulacra*, television exceeds normal boundaries by forcing itself into people’s lives, a point emphasised when Vince clicks his heels together and gives his television ‘the ancient Nazi salute’ (*TS* 26). It is clear, at this point, that Vince is saluting the television itself rather than anything on the screen, as the moment he chooses to salute it is not when *der Alte* gives one of his broadcasts, but when the screen is blank and a banal piece of music comes on. Vince salutes the power of television over his life. However, in the same novel, television is also more susceptible to the power of the viewer. As Vince watches a droning speech by *der Alte*, he fiddles with three knobs on the television. In response to the feedback Vince gives the set by way of twiddling the knobs, he hopes *der Alte* will change the content and tone of his speech. However, no change occurs. Vince speculates that the settings provided by everyone else in the building will offset his own influence, and, resigned, thinks ‘anyhow, that was democracy’ (*TS* 22). Soon after, he tries to end the speech and switch the television off, but again is stymied by the tyranny of the majority.

Dick shows a television that is susceptible to the will of the majority but, at the same time, plays with the futility of that notion. The knobs Vince adjusts might as well do nothing for all the influence they seem to exert on the television and its content. At the same time, the idea that *der Alte* would change his political speech according to what people select on their television screens suggests his speech is meaningless, and designed only to pacify people. If *der Alte*’s speech is, indeed, controlled by the will of the listeners, then he is, quite literally, telling them only what they want to hear. As the reader later learns, *der Alte* is a simulacrum, and irrelevant to the running of the government.
Thus, the influence the public places on a speech is unlikely to have any effect on the reality of the country.

By making television a more interactive technology – even if that interactivity is more illusion than anything else – Dick anticipated trends in modern media. Computers are highly interactive, and some modern television programming attempts to mimic that interactivity by connecting media provider and media consumer more directly. ‘Reality’ shows that make use of audience feedback are one example, as are some experiments in user-directed plots, where the next ‘episode’ of a show is chosen by the viewers – not unlike pick-a-path novels. Other shows that use social media to connect presenters and audience are not uncommon, allowing a more fluid interchange than earlier ‘call-in’ shows. In New Zealand, there is even the example of ‘the worm’, a rating system used to gauge the reaction of an audience to a political debate. Viewers register their approval or disapproval of what is being said at any instant, and a line graph is created – the line being ‘the worm’ – which climbs when the majority of viewers like what they hear, and dips when they don’t like it. Since the politicians can view the worm as it climbs and falls, they can, if they are sufficiently quick on their feet, tailor their speech according to the level of approval they see. This latter example is almost identical to the interaction Vince has with *der Alte’s* speech.

Despite their supposed malleability, *der Alte’s* speeches are pure propaganda. Dick demonstrates this aspect by showing how that supposedly static field, history, has been subtly changing under the influence of the *Ge*. The major example is the period of Nazi Germany which has become sanitised and transformed into ‘the Days of Barbarism’ (*TS 24*). Barbarism pushes away ideas of culpability or responsibility and ameliorates the atrocities that occurred in the period. The permeability of history is also shown by the influence of Germany on the modern United States. With Germany incorporated as the 53rd State in the Union, history must have been forgotten to such an extent that these former enemies have become the same political group. At the same time, the fusion of German and North American society shows how permeable even culture can be. The United States is represented as being dominated by the German elements in its culture. *Der Alte* is supposed to hold political power, and both the title and the people occupying it – the current *Alte* is Rudi Kalbfleisch – seem to be German. The largest corporation in the novel is A.G. Chemie, which exerts enough political power to cause psychology to be made illegal. A.G. Chemie is located in Berlin, and is described as a ‘powerful German
cartel’ (TS 6). The name ‘A.G. Chemie’ is similar in structure and sound to ‘I.G. Farben’, the real German pharmaceutical cartel. Farben’s full name, ‘I.G. Farbenindustrie AG’, even possesses the suffix ‘AG’ – short for Aktien Gesellschaft and denoting a company listed on the stock market – which Dick uses as a prefix in ‘A.G. Chemie’. I.G. Farben was closely involved in many of the atrocities of World War Two, including patenting and manufacturing the Zyklon B used in Holocaust gas chambers.

By showing a German-dominated society which has reduced the horrors of World War II to platitudes, and which is even influenced strongly by a successor to I.G. Farben, Dick portrays history as malleable and susceptible to time and propaganda. He does not stop there. The freedom of the science fiction genre allows him to make his symbols literal. The government he portrays has altered history, but also plans to alter history more directly. Using time travel equipment, those in power plan to make contact with the Third Reich. In exchange for weapons and technology to sustain the Reich, they hope to prevent the holocaust.

Dick shows past and present in an intimate and plastic relationship. Far from being dead and gone, the past has an active role in the plot of the novel, and enters the present with startling vivacity and a sense of threat. Just as Dick erodes the boundary between television and watcher, he also erodes the boundary between past and present. But the most invasive element in the novel, and arguably the most hostile, is neither government propaganda nor the threat posed by the Third Reich. Instead, it is advertising.

**Nitz, Papoolas and Advertising that Gets Under Your Skin**

In *The Simulacra*, advertising has escaped. Like so much in the novel, it has overflowed from its usual containment and become (even more) invasive, both physically and psychologically. It has escaped the television screen – which seems to broadcast only government propaganda – and moved physically into the real world. Two types of technology are used to represent advertising in the novel. The first examples are commercials created by the Theodorus Nitz Agency. These seem to be insectile creatures, although they are never described in detail, with an excellent facility for squeezing through small gaps to broadcast their message to an unwilling audience. They are small – one is described as being ‘fly-sized’ (TS 41) – and unusually persistent. Generally the characters try to destroy them when they appear; they are crushed (TS 41) and shot (TS
101, 201) when found, and only Richard Kongrosian seems insane enough to keep one in his pocket like child catching a cricket (TS 60). The second examples are simulacra of an extinct Martian life-form called a papoola.

The Nitz commercials are abundant and overflowing with life. Not only will they come in through open windows like a fly or mosquito (TS 201), but they will even force entry (TS 41). The metaphorical connection between one of these commercials and living pest animals can be no coincidence. The name, ‘Nitz’ is suggestive of human head lice, and their abundance suggests the insect swarms of nature. Even their mortality seems part of the natural world. They are, at one point, described as being ‘alive, terribly mortal; the ad agencies, like nature, squandered hordes of them’ (TS 41). Thus, the Nitz commercials overspill the boundary between non-living technology and organic life form – a boundary already put into question in the first pages of the novel with the example of an amplifier system with a living component.

Once the Nitz commercial has physically intruded into a person’s space, it will broadcast an advertisement in a tinny voice. The commercial can even broadcast an image straight into the subject’s mind. As Kongrosian listens to a commercial, an accompanying scene unfolds in his mind’s eye:

In his mind appeared the full-color image of a scene unfolding: a good-looking black-haired man leaning toward a blond, full-breasted girl in a bathing suit in order to kiss her. On the girl’s face the expression of rapture and submission all at once vanished, was replaced by repugnance. And the commercial shrilled, ‘He was not fully safe from offensive body odor! You see?’ (TS 60)

The scene is a comic one and ludicrously obvious in its message. It would be a caricature of advertising, if the subject of such satire were not equally bald in its attempts at manipulation.

However, the Nitz commercials are unusual, even for satire. Each plays with the idea of being perceived. Some even seem oddly ontological in their approach. In the first, the listener is confronted with the problem of being perceived at all:
Chapter 5

‘Say! Haven’t you sometimes said to yourself, I’ll bet other people in restaurants can see me! And you’re puzzled as to what to do about this serious, baffling problem of being conspicuous...’ (TS 41)

The commercial takes a trivial facet of existence – being perceived – and makes it sound like an unusual and serious problem. The logic involved can only be described as paranoid; it is a combination of hyper-vigilance towards others, narcissistic belief that one is the subject of attention, and an assumption that attention towards the subject is in some way malicious. That this logic influences Kongrosian so heavily speaks to his state of mind. By taking an almost a priori facet of existence and making it out to be a problem, the advertisers generate a massive market for themselves.

The second ontologically-directed ad takes the opposite approach:

‘In the presence of strangers do you feel you don’t quite exist? Do they seem not to notice you, as if you were invisible? On a bus or spaceship do you sometimes look around you and discover that no one, absolutely no one, recognizes you or cares about you and quite possibly may even –’ (TS 101)

Instead of being conspicuous, this ad asks its target to worry about not being seen or noticed by others. The contradiction between these two ads is obviously intentional. Dick wants the reader to witness the distorted logic of advertising that will make any argument – even contradictory ones – for the sake of selling something. At the same time, the topic of these ads is Dick’s stock-in-trade of ontological questioning. The question of reality is, in The Simulacra, more psychological than metaphysical.

The ads are physically invasive, but as the above examples show, they are also psychologically invasive. They play on people’s fears, distorting the world into something hostile for the sake of selling something. In this, Dick makes some of the slightly more subtle features of advertising explicit. Many ads pry open some of the typical vulnerabilities in the human psyche. In this, Dick is not creating something out of nothing. His shrill and bug-like ads might move very quickly from squeezing in through the window to telling you that ‘absolutely no one, recognizes you or even cares about you’ (TS 101), but they convey exactly the same type of suggestive message as pimple ads that inform teenagers that when they have acne ‘they just don’t feel clean’. Like real nits, the Nitz ads are annoying and persistent, and have both a somatic and psychosomatic
component. Long after an infestation of nits has disappeared, people can still feel an itch at the thought of head lice, and the Nitz ads have a similar ability to irritate the psychic skin. By turning the ads into insect-like creatures, Dick highlights the parasitic nature of advertising.

*The Simulacra* is not the first of Dick’s novels to explore advertising’s unique – and annoying – power. In *The Broken Bubble (BB)*, which he wrote in 1956 but which was not published until 1988, six years after his death, Dick wrote about a radio disc jockey who is forced to read commercials for a large chain of discount car lots called ‘Loony Luke’s’. He hates these commercials, and especially hates their inclusion in his classical music show where the ads seem particularly out of place. These commercials become the novel’s main catalyst for action, as they cause the protagonist to quit his job in protest and thus create the main complicating incident. Loony Luke’s returns in *The Simulacra* with a similarly insidious advertising campaign, but a benign product. Loony Luke’s provides humanity’s one escape from Earth’s powerful government by selling jalopies capable of flying to Mars. They use small simulacra based on a Martian animal: the papoola. Like the Nitz commercials, the papoolas seem to occupy a middle ground between life and artificial life. They are also insectile, with an ‘orange, bug-shaped body’ (TS 48). They seem to be comical creatures, with eyes that cross and uncross, and a silly hat. The comical appearance is juxtaposed with their power to influence, giving them a surreal aspect. Under the control of a used car salesperson, one can broadcast its thoughts into its target’s mind, influencing them and even controlling them. Using the papoola, the salesperson is able to reel customers in like fish.

Like the Nitz commercials, the papoolas overflow traditional boundaries. Where normal advertising persuades and cajoles, the papoolas are more direct, beaming directly into the mind. By including the papoolas, Dick presents a sliding scale of propaganda, from the more subtly invasive on the television screen, to the physically and psychically intrusive Nitz commercials, to the papoola, which is capable of directly and psychically influencing a person. Each, it seems, is capable of piercing a person’s psychic skin. They are examples of advertising set free from limits, and represent Dick’s most explicit criticism of advertising’s twisted logic and invasive approach. The difference between an ad that plays on a person’s pre-existing dispositions, fears, and hopes is, it seems, not all that different in effect from a mind-controlling simulacrum papoola operated by a used car salesperson.
Chapter 5

‘It’s becoming me and I have to be it!’ (TS 195)

The psychic invasions of advertising have their greatest effect in the novel on the psychokineticist pianist, Richard Kongrosian. Kongrosian believes his body odour is lethal, an idea suggested to him by one of the Nitz commercials. Just as the commercials overspill their traditional limits, Kongrosian’s delusion centres on an idea of escaping boundaries. He thinks his body odour is extraordinarily potent, capable of travelling far and of contaminating other people. He thinks it might be able to travel over a phone line or even a telegram, and that it could, theoretically, ‘contaminate the entire world’ (TS 61). Kongrosian is surprisingly lucid about his delusion. He knows it is a delusion, but is still unable to shake it. He talks about it using the psychological terminology Dick found so interesting, describing his delusion as one of a ‘phobic body odor’ that is not just a physical odour, but an ‘idea type odor’ (TS 63), and saying he is in ‘an advanced compulsive-obsessive state’ (TS 62). His reaction to the delusion is to isolate himself completely so as to try and protect others – as he does so, he ‘feels his world contracting’ (TS 64) around him. To simplify, his ‘idea type’ delusion breaks boundaries between himself and others, causing him to create more boundaries to prevent it from happening: ‘He needs – seeks perpetually – isolation’ (TS 127). His isolation allows him to keep his own world, and the delusion he thinks is contagious, away from the shared world.

Kongrosian suggests that his delusion has a more fundamental cause. To do so, he makes direct reference to the existential psychologists, saying ‘they really understood me and my problem’ (TS 63). He mentions three by name, ‘Minkowski, Kuhn and Binswanger’ (TS 63) and makes use of their critical jargon, Umwelt, Mitwelt and Eigenwelt, to help illustrate his delusion. Eigenwelt and Mitwelt translate quite directly to idios kosmos and koinos kosmos, but Umwelt is an additional category referring to the world around the subject, and, in particular, the biological environment. Kongrosian’s problem, he thinks, is that the underlying cause of his delusion is ‘a more serious disorder, one which would disintegrate my comprehension of the Umwelt, Mitwelt and Eigenwelt’ (TS 63).

So, just as Kongrosian’s idée fixe is centred on the idea of crossing boundaries, he suspects that the underlying cause will similarly cause his mind to cross boundaries. In Chapter 2 I suggested that one of the primary ways Dick deforms reality is by allowing the different categories of reality to bleed into each other. At this point in his oeuvre, he is
plainly still playing with the idea and, as can be seen in the final scene, Kongrosian’s mental problem soon spills into the shared universe.

Even Kongrosian’s special psychokinetic ability – an ability not possessed by anyone else in the novel – provides an example of overflowing boundaries. Using his mind to affect the physical universe, Kongrosian has already demonstrated that the personal universe of his own thoughts and will is capable of spilling outward onto the physical world around him. In this, Kongrosian resembles Bruno Bluthgeld in *Dr. Bloodmoney*; he possesses a special power to affect the physical world, but one that seems to be related to his peculiar mental disturbance.

The nadir of Kongrosian’s insanity occurs at the climax of the novel. Kongrosian, as foreshadowed earlier with his mention of the *Eigenwelt, Mitwelt* and *Umwelt*, becomes unable to distinguish himself from his environment:

> ‘Something terrible’s happening to me,’ Kongrosian wailed, as soon as he spied the two of them. ‘I no longer can keep myself and my environment separate; do you comprehend how that feels? It’s awful!’ (*TS* 194)

Soon after, Kongrosian’s mental problem becomes physical. Things in the outside world begin to drift into him, while things in his body move outward to replace them. A vase floats into his body and is replaced by some of Kongrosian’s organs, which continue to function. While it is not said explicitly, the best explanation for these events is that Kongrosian has lost control of his psychokinetic power, which is causing his delusion to become enacted in reality.

The scene is horrible, surreal and grotesque, but it also possesses a degree of humour. His stern lecture to a piece of lung tissue that ‘You’re part of the I-world, not the non-I. Understand?’ (*TS* 196) is as comic as it is bizarre. Dick sets the scene up with an obvious incongruity – the source of so much humour – between the seriousness of events and the timing of Kongrosian’s breakdown. Like so many of Dick’s climactic scenes, it is a moment when a number of different plot lines that have previously run parallel – often mirroring, but never touching – finally come together. Thus, it is a crowded and tense scene, and Kongrosian’s breakdown is anomalous beside the other apparently more serious issues being resolved. While Kongrosian is falling apart in a very literal fashion, the others view him as a distraction and try to ignore or dismiss him and his concerns.
One character holds another at gunpoint while Kongrosian tries to convince everyone of the seriousness of his mental illness, an elegant contrast of gravity and inanity.

However, Kongrosian’s breakdown is as much philosophical as psychological. Far from being anomalous in the final scene, it is the culmination of a thematic drive as strong as any of the major plot lines: the theme of overwhelming boundaries. The examples given thus far only scratch the surface. Other significant thematic precursors include the use of time travel, which violates the boundary between past and present and allows the two to affect each other directly, and the presence of genetic throwbacks – the Neanderthal-like ‘choppers’ that have appeared from the evolutionary past to threaten the present. These themes culminate in Kongrosian’s inability to distinguish himself from the outside world, and when one looks at it dispassionately, what is there, objectively, to distinguish the atoms called Richard Kongrosian from the atoms in the vase? This seems a particularly postmodern illness, where the difference between opposites is effaced and a levelling has occurred. This might even be the culmination of Norbert Wiener’s arguments regarding the monistic nature of information, arguments that Dick had read and found compelling.

The vision of Kongrosian coming apart is a terrible one. It is rife with Dick’s dark humour, but, if the above reading has any truth to it, it is a negative vision of the levelling effect of postmodernism. It contains within it one of the major horrors in Dick’s works: the fear of homogenisation and the loss of individuality. Kongrosian fears that, if the process continues, he will incorporate the entire universe inside him:

‘I’m turning inside out!’ Kongrosian wailed. ‘Pretty soon if this keeps up I’m going to have to envelop the entire universe and everything in it, and the only thing that’ll be outside me will be my internal organs – and then most likely I’ll die!’ (TS 194)

The prospect of absorbing, and being absorbed by, the physical universe is a terrible prospect for Kongrosian. While it is a purely physical prospect in The Simulacra, in other

---

40 This idea is characteristic of but not unique to postmodern thinkers; the Roman poet Lucretius and his fellow Epicurians provide earlier examples, and G. W. F. Hegel a more recent one in his Phenomenology of Spirit.

41 See Hayles’ discussion of the link between Dick and cybernetics in her article ‘Schizoid Android: Cybernetics and the Mid-Sixties Novels of Philip K. Dick’.
novels and stories, the absorption becomes more explicitly psychological or metaphysical as individuals become lost in another’s personal universe or in a world of deception. Perhaps the best example of this is *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

*The Three Stigmata* represents a turn in Dick’s works towards more explicitly metaphysical themes. It also contains Dick’s most memorable and disturbing character: Palmer Eldritch. *The Three Stigmata* is a nightmare vision of lost reality and lost individuality. It shows, very clearly, that the loss of reality is not a positive event, and that returning to reality is a major driving force in Dick’s writing.
Chapter 6: *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*

OR: THE THREE ALTERITIES OF PALMER ELDritch

*The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (TSPE 1965) was written during Dick’s most creative and productive period, a mid-career phase that occurred after receiving the Hugo Award for *The Man in the High Castle* (MHC 1962) in 1963 and when he had fully embraced science fiction as the most appropriate medium for his style and themes. *The Three Stigmata* is a quintessential Philip K. Dick novel. In it, the ‘what is reality?’ question that underlies his entire oeuvre finds full expression. *The Three Stigmata* and *Ubik* (*Ubik* 1969) – the book discussed in the next chapter – were both chosen for inclusion in the first volume of Dick’s works in the prestigious *Library of America* series, itself the first volume of science fiction in the series.

*Ubik* and *The Three Stigmata* share many qualities. Both feature objects and things given malevolent will, and both novels involve a breakdown in reality caused by having personal reality completely subsumed by a hostile being. The narrative force in both novels is provided by the main characters’ drive to escape from a deceptive and hostile false reality and regain control over their own life and, hopefully, return to a real reality – assuming such a thing is possible.

As well as intensifying the paranoia and suspicion already present in his earlier novels, *The Three Stigmata* and *Ubik* violate personal reality on a larger scale than previously. The early novels, for the most part, maintained the idea of an inviolate personal reality. In those novels the challenge for reality lay in how extreme the difference between personal reality and shared reality can be, even to the point of the subject experiencing a schizophrenic break from reality. Dick’s early and mid-period novels challenge reality by positing hostile manipulation, but again the personal universe remains apart from the manipulation which, if removed, would restore reality. The real world is still there, even if it is hidden by drugs, simulacra or elaborate media productions. However, one of the things that distinguishes his mid-period novels from his early novels is that the return to reality is not a given. In *The Three Stigmata* and *Ubik*, personal reality is subsumed, or consumed, by another being: Palmer Eldritch in *Three Stigmata* and Jory Miller in *Ubik*. Both are God-like beings who revel in deception.
With their respective deceptive gods, *Ubik* and *Three Stigmata* demonstrate the influence Gnosticism had on Dick. Philip K. Dick’s gnostic tendencies are widely acknowledged, especially in his later works. His personal gnostic revelation of 2-3-74 is a tempting biographical event at which to locate the source of gnostic theory in his writing, and certainly the semi-autobiographical VALIS trilogy written following those revelatory months has clear gnostic influences. However, his early works also bear the imprint of a long philosophical interest in gnostic thought, as a number of scholars have observed.

Written in 1964 and published the following year, *The Three Stigmata* is probably his most Gnostically-inspired novel and predates his supposed gnostic ‘turn’.

Gnosticism provides Dick with a particularly troubling challenge for reality: the *deus deceptor*. The argument is simple: what if there was a god-like being who, for whatever inscrutable god-like reason, wanted to deceive us about the nature of reality? Would we, or could we, ever know we were being deceived?

The argument is simple, while its ramifications are immense. Descartes used the premise of an existent and powerful evil spirit as the most extreme part of the thought experiment that ultimately led to his *cogito*. The Christian church viewed Gnosticism as a heresy, recognising it as a major challenge to the assumed benevolence and omnipotence of the Christian god, and to the monolithic metaphysical realism represented by Christianity. Dick also found Gnosticism deeply troubling. The argument represented by Gnosticism might have interested and inspired Dick, but it also caused him a great deal of personal doubt and torment, which are writ large in his novels. *The Three Stigmata* and *VALIS* (*VALIS* 1981) reveal an author respectively frightened and concerned for his own sanity in the face of a possible gnostic revelation.

If we briefly recall my main argument – that Dick can be understood as a frustrated metaphysical realist as well as a writer exploring the possibility of existence without grounding in absolute values – the gnostic influence in Dick’s writing represents an opportunity for my thesis. It shows Dick’s interest in challenging reality, but also his interest in finding something underneath phenomenal, contingent reality. The classic gnostic revelation is not just that ‘reality’ as we know it could be false; it is also that an

---

42 See Jean-Noël Dumont’s ‘Between Faith and Melancholy’ and John Garvey’s ‘A Real Gnostic Gospel’.

43 See in particular Lorenzo DiTommaso’s ‘Gnosticism and Dualism in the Early Fiction of Philip K. Dick’.
underlying truth exists. The knowledge – *gnosis* – of Gnosticism is both awareness of deception and the desire to obtain knowledge of underlying reality which is both more primal and more important than the world of appearances.

Dick might have been influenced by Gnostic ideas, but that does not mean he agrees with every aspect of Gnosticism, just as he was influenced by the sixties and seventies drug culture, without becoming a proponent of drug use. It would be possible for him to truncate the usual gnostic argument and stop before positing an underlying reality. Close readings of the *Three Stigmata* and *Ubik* will reveal both his attitude to the gnostic revelation and how far he is willing and able to take that same revelation.

*The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* in particular owes a heavy debt to Gnosticism. The antagonist, Palmer Eldritch, establishes himself as a direct competitor to God, even advertising the fact in a leaflet drop: ‘GOD PROMISES ETERNAL LIFE. WE CAN DELIVER IT’ (*TSPE* 150). Like the gnostic creator-deity, Eldritch creates a false world for his followers and claims it is the real one. The question is: once lost, can the real world be regained? Did it exist to begin with?

*The Three Stigmata* offers its own answers to these two questions. The latter question is answered in the affirmative. There is no doubt that a real world exists in *Three Stigmata*. It is the world before the characters succumb to Eldritch’s manipulations. The answer to the former question is less clear. The conclusion of the novel offers hope that a return to reality is possible, but undermines that hope at the same time. One of the protagonists, Leo Bulero, expresses confidence that a return to normalcy will be possible but, having lost so much of his own identity to Eldritch, forgets his own name and assumes, one infers, that he is Palmer Eldritch, thereby undercutting his own statements.

Dick’s attitude to the loss of reality in *Three Stigmata* is clear. It terrifies him. *Three Stigmata* represents a nightmare vision for Dick: the nightmare of alterity, familiarity turned unfamiliar, absorption, loss of individuality and, ultimately, loss of faith in the existence of a real world. The novel is filled with longing for stability and a return to reality and, far from being liberating, the loss of reality is portrayed as a nightmare.

At the centre of the nightmare is Palmer Eldritch, who is the originary point for most of the deception in the novel. However, the fears the mysterious and disfigured figure of Palmer Eldritch represents are not limited to the loss of reality. Palmer is a complex
character, and one who represents a great many different horrors for Dick, horrors the
author deliberately fuses. Taken individually the connexion between the different fears
would seem weak, but by uniting them with each other and Palmer Eldritch, Dick creates
a more intricate character and a more interesting play of ideas, constructing a network of
fears that join together to create the unique aesthetic experience of lost reality Dick is
known for.

The Nightmare Vision

_The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch_ (TSPE 1965) was inspired by a waking nightmare
of a ‘vast visage of perfect evil. […] It had empty slots for eyes – it was metal and cruel
and, worst of all, it was God’ (qtd. in Sutin 127). This visage haunted Dick for a number
of days. At the time he felt isolated and lonely. He maintained a punishing work schedule
fuelled by his lifelong work ethic, amphetamines and a desire to exorcise the terrible
vision.

Dick believed the vision in the sky was inspired by the memory of his father, Edgar, who
would wear his World War One gas mask while recounting gruesome stories of death and
war to the young Philip. In Dick’s imagination ‘that metal, blind, inhuman visage’ turned
into something ‘transcendent and vast, and absolutely evil’ (Sutin 127). In the process of
exorcising the vision, Dick created a book he considered the ‘most vital’ in his oeuvre,
but one he personally feared because it deals with ‘absolute evil as personified in the
person of a “human”’ (Shifting Realities 17).

The story Dick relates of Edgar wearing the gas mask and scaring his young son is
familiar. A similar tale occurs in _The Iliad_ when the Greek hero Hector returns from the
battlefield to visit his family (Homer, _The Iliad_ 6.467-482). He forgets that he is still
wearing the intimidating war-helm, with its metal slots for eyes, cold bronze sheen and
horsehair plume. Confronted with this inhuman mask Hector’s son reacts with fear – what
is this terrible apparition, come for him in the dim light of dawn? Hector, seeing his son
flinch from him, remembers he is wearing the helmet. He removes it, revealing the
familiar face underneath. Relieved, the son runs to Hector, who dandles him in his arms.
Dick’s account of Edgar wearing the gas mask parallels the ancient tale to a remarkable
degree.
The story of Hector and his son is easily comprehensible to a modern audience. We do not need to be classics scholars to understand the psychology involved. This event can happen without the use of masks and war-helms in moments of psychological estrangement. Think of times when you might have looked at someone familiar and seen, if only for an instant, something unfamiliar. In these moments a familiar face can turn into individual and incommensurate features that make up a strange – even frightening – whole. Dick’s parallel personal tale shows the story of Hector and his son is not a unique artefact of history. The story expresses a near-universal fear. On the surface the fear appears to be of something obviously frightful: the apparition in the mask. However, the real fear lies behind the mask in the realisation that someone so near can become so alien.

Freud described this affect as an experience of the uncanny, or unheimlich. In his 1919 essay ‘The Uncanny’, Freud defines the unheimlich in psychological terms, though he considered it primarily an aesthetic quality, as ‘something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it’ (222). Freud links the uncanny with the notion of doubling (225). Hector’s tale represents the psychological forces literally, turning the familiar into the familial and repression into the trope of a mask. Since Hector’s tale taps into something common in human experience, it makes it a story with surprisingly universal resonance.

Dick claimed his horror at the vision in the sky was the fear of something ‘absolutely evil’ (Sutin 127). Could the real terror of the vision be that it is not of transcendental evil, but the possibility that a human face lies behind the mask? Dick connects the vision in the sky with masks in his short essay ‘Man, Android and Machine’, where he associates Palmer Eldritch both with the vision in the sky and with the war mask of Pericles – one assumes from context that he is referring to Hector – concluding that ‘What I glimpsed and then wrote about was in fact not a face; it was a mask over a face’ (‘Man, Android and Machine’ 213). He does not associate the underlying familiarity of the vision with the horror it caused him, instead limiting his analysis to observing that he should never have

---

44 Freud’s insight seems to apply well to Dick’s works, where the uncanny and the double appear frequently. One need only look to Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? to see doubling and the uncanny occur with startling synchronicity. The androids are uncanny creatures who cross back and forth from apparent humanity to inhumanity with transgressive ease. They are ‘doubles’ of human beings and, as with Pris and Rachel, can be doubles of each other.
been afraid of the mask since it hides something familiar and is only used to intimidate. He apologises to his readers: he should never, he writes, have been terrifying us with these campfire tales of monsters that are ultimately harmless.

At this point it seems appropriate to depart from Dick’s own introspective analysis of the demons in his writing, leaving him claiming there was nothing to be scared of. He identifies the terror engendered by the terrible appearance of Palmer Eldritch and the monster in the sky and, with the realisation that the appearance is a deception, identifies a human face and concludes that there was nothing to be scared of. This is a common pattern for Dick: he takes something, identifies it as a deception, and then ‘attempts to posit a reality “behind” phenomenal reality,’ as Peter Fitting put it (‘Construct’ 220). But, except in his early works, this pattern is usually not a satisfying one for Dick since the reality ‘behind’ is as dissatisfying as the original deception. His acceptance of the simplistic explanation in this case smacks of denial. Why was this such a striking terror in the first place?

The narrative of The Three Stigmata demonstrates the vision of Eldritch cannot be dispelled by recognising the face ‘behind’ it. Dick repeatedly tries to remove Eldritch’s insidious power over reality, but each time Eldritch usurps the writer’s supposedly

45 Earlier works such as The Cosmic Puppets (CP 1957), Eye in the Sky (ES 1957) and Time Out of Joint (TOJ 1959) have a simple dualistic opposition of deception and reality, where, once revealed, the underlying reality is not questioned. Dick’s later works go further by questioning even the revealed reality. Ironically, Fitting makes the opposite claim:

The possibility of an answer ‘behind’ phenomenal reality is more of a temptation than a resolution – albeit a temptation which recurs frequently in Dick’s novels. Moreover, until his last works, this temptation is almost always rejected in as much as whatever or whoever stands behind the reality of the novel usually turns out to be even more questionable than the character’s original ‘illusory’ reality. (‘Construct’ 222)

To my way of reading these novels, the earlier works tend to show more satisfaction with revealed reality than the ‘last works’ Fitting refers to, where revealed reality is constantly contested and never determined with any finality. Compare, for example Time Out of Joint and VALIS (VALIS 1981). In Time Out of Joint the illusory reality is pierced and a ‘real’ reality substituted but never questioned. In contrast, in VALIS the main character, Horselover Fat, searches for a reality behind his own, but is not satisfied with what he discovers, and engages in a process of unending speculation and doubt that leads him to question his own sanity. These typical examples illustrate the opposite of Fitting’s claim.
universal power over the story. The narrative is reminiscent of people who repeatedly wake, only to realise that they are still dreaming. In her 2005 book, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*, N. Katherine Hayles insightfully describes the novel’s vision of Palmer Eldritch and the Chew-Z world under his command:

This is the nightmare vision that, once articulated, the narrative tries to draw back from by a series of strategies, none of which is entirely successful. The narrative reacts as if the vision is too horrific to bear, but any attempt to mitigate it is unsatisfactory because then the narrative has failed to do justice to the strength of the vision. (*My Mother Was a Computer* 74)

Dick’s claim in ‘Man, Android and Machine’ to have resolved the issue seems like another strategy, and its success is doubtful. Palmer Eldritch is too complex a creation to simply deny his uncanny affect.

**The Three Alterities of Palmer Eldritch**

So, who is Palmer Eldritch and why does he possess so much fascination and power for Dick? Eldritch ties together theology, otherness and rampant capitalism. His first name, ‘Palmer’, is a reference to Christian pilgrims of the Middle Ages who would travel to Palestine and return with a palm leaf as a token of their journey. Eldritch is a word that means ‘strange’ or ‘unearthly’. Its etymology from the Old English ‘el-rīce’, literally meaning ‘strange-country’ or ‘from a strange country’, links its meaning more closely to the words ‘stranger’ or ‘foreigner’. So Palmer Eldritch is a pilgrim who returns with a token, and is an unearthly person, a stranger and a foreigner. Palmer Eldritch’s name gives broad hints about the character and his role in novel.

Despite his familiarity as an industrialist and human being, Eldritch is an alienated creature who represents a radical alterity. Eldritch’s pilgrimage is to Proxima Centauri – you don’t get a stranger country than a neighbouring star system – in search of business opportunities, but when he returns from Prox he is a changed being. Like Icarus he is daring and because he is ‘too wild and dazzling a solo pro’ (*TSPE* 13) he flies too high
and too far. From the moment of his return, his humanity is put into question. Leo Bulero, Eldritch’s business rival, thinks that by going so far ‘He’d find God’ (TSPE 26). Others worry that he might bring back some taint from the Prox aliens who are notable by their absence in the novel and by the few tantalising crumbs of information we are given about them. We are told they are ‘grisly’ and that there are humanoid types of Prox aliens who wear wigs and false teeth (TSPE 11). The description associates them with deception, one of Dick’s personal anathemas. The description’s paucity alienates the Prox aliens, putting them personally outside the events of the novel, despite the significant impact of their agent, Eldritch.

Eldritch is tainted with three types of alterity, just as he bears three stigmata. The first is the alien taint he bears with him from Proxima Centauri; it is suggested that Eldritch has been possessed or replaced by the aliens from ‘Prox’, or by an unknown alien being somewhere between Sol and Prox. Proxima Centauri is a useful place for Dick who probably enjoyed the rich word play involved in situating these aliens. His characters playfully call it ‘Prox’, a single-syllable nickname that suggests nearness and familiarity, despite its alienating distance from Earth of 4.24 light years, and its distance from the events of the novel. Eldritch has become a ‘proxy’ for these alien beings, acting as their agent on Earth. Eldritch has changed, and is no longer fully human. He is more of an ‘approximation’ of humanity than a proper human. He is also extremely dangerous, a ‘proximate’ threat whose power lies in his ability to become close – so close that his victims begin to inhabit a world of his creation, and begin to merge with Eldritch in an unholy communion that sees various characters begin to manifest Eldritch’s stigmata, synecdochal representations of their union with him.

The first part of Eldritch’s alterity is that most science fictional form of alterity: the literal alien. The second part of Eldritch’s alterity is a deific taint. It might seem odd to describe this as a taint, but Dick’s insight is good. Neo-platonic religions like Christianity, Islam and Judaism divide existence into spiritual and physical and privilege the spiritual above

---

46 Darko Suvin claimed the plot was filled with ‘Vanvogtian plot gimmicks’ and that the ‘ontologico-religious speculations’ were taken from Leigh Brackett’s The Big Jump (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 16). While Dick would certainly have read and been familiar with The Big Jump, as it was published dos-à-dos with his first novel, Solar Lottery (SL 1955), the few similarities seem incidental, while the differences appear innumerable.
This simple dualism sets up spiritual things as Other to the physical world and attributes to God alterity from the physical – or, more accurately, attributes to this world alterity from the spiritual. This deific alterity is reflected in certain cultural attitudes. People who are supposed to have been ‘touched’ by God are historically distanced from the rest of humanity by their contact and sometimes made unfit to live at ease in this world at all. Consider the alterity of madness, which was sometimes described as caused by close contact with God. Consider also the this-worldly denial of hermits and religious seekers who strive for closeness to God by distancing themselves from the familiar things of this world through fasting, meditation and isolation. Eldritch’s religious otherness is symbolised in a number of ways. Eldritch’s stigmata are a visible manifestation of his contact with God, as is the palm he returns from Prox with: the lichen that forms the basis for the ‘Chew-Z’ drug. The lichen and the drug both act to efface the familiar and plunge the user into an altered world: a world in which Palmer Eldrich is God.

The third aspect to Eldritch’s trinity of alienation is the three mechanical ‘stigmata’ that visually reinforce his alienation: ‘enormous steel teeth’ welded to his jaws by ‘Czech dental surgeons’, an artificial right arm with ‘a specialized variety of interchangeable hands’, and ‘horizontally slotted artificial eyes’ installed by ‘Brazilian oculists’ (TSPE 161–162). His stigmata give him a mechanical appearance that makes him as much machine as human and associates him with the world of the mechanical. Dick feels a degree of horror toward people with artificial implants and prostheses. Consider Dr. Bloodmoney (DB 1965), where one of the antagonists, Hoppy Harrington, is a wheelchair-bound cripple with manual extensors instead of hands; The Penultimate Truth (PT 1964), in which the evil dictator Stanton Brose personally stashes and uses all the available artificial organs to prolong his already unnaturally long life; and even Martian Time-Slip (MTS 1964), in which Manfred’s personal hell is a long senescence supported by artificial organs and life-support machines. By giving Eldritch mechanical stigmata and thus tarnishing him with the taint of metal, Dick makes Eldritch a recognisable ‘Other’, alienated from his own humanity and the rest of humanity. As if his mechanical

---

47 The separation of physical and spiritual might seem a common quality in most religions, but consider henotheistic religions like Hinduism where physical and spiritual are merely aspects of the same thing and pantheistic religions that view the physical and spiritual as inextricable from each other.
taint were not enough, he sources each of the stigmata from countries foreign to the United States. The mechanical monster doesn’t even support local business.

Eldritch is an industrialist: he is known for his skill in setting up automated and autonomous factories (‘autofacs’) on various colony worlds, an expertise that caused him to travel to Prox. If any criticism can be made of his work, it is that he is too zealous an industrialist. The reader is told of goods piling up ‘in unlikely places where no colonists existed to make use of them’ until they formed ‘mountains of debris’ (TSPE 13). The astute reader will notice familiar motifs from Dick’s short stories. The autofac is, to Dick, the pinnacle of alienated production, detaching not only the workers from the means of production, but consumer demand from the product itself. Dick’s image of an autofac busily producing mountains of useless consumer goods stands as a powerful image of mechanisation gone too far. The autofac also adds a large degree of autonomy to the functioning of the machine. Given Dick’s suspicion of what he characterises as ‘fierce cold things’ whose ‘behavior frightens me’ (‘Man, Android and Machine’ 211) and his description of production gone wild in ‘Autofac’ (1955), this autonomy is something to be feared. Eldritch is associated with the alienation of production Dick sees in industrialisation gone wild, as well as with the machines themselves through the device of the mechanical stigmata. His alienation is complete, his taint total. He is alien, machine and god, and represents total alterity.

Estrangement and Science Fiction

Eldritch’s alienation recalls Darko Suvin’s 1972 definition of science fiction as ‘the literature of cognitive estrangement’ (‘Poetics of SF’ 372). It is significant that what Suvin considers the most defining characteristic of science fiction should also be one of the most prominent features of The Three Stigmata. Suvin uses the term ‘estrangement’ to signify the element of science fiction that ‘differentiates it from the “realistic” literary mainstream of 18th to 20th [sic] century’ (‘Poetics of SF’ 375). In doing so, he creates an almost circular definition for the word, where it delineates science fiction, but is defined as the quality that separates science fiction from naturalistic fiction. Over time, Suvin moved away from the term estrangement, replacing it with the idea of a novum, a ‘new thing’ (‘What Is SF?’ 45), which points more accurately to his intended referent, if still not directly at it, as there are a great many ‘new things’ in life and literature which would not be sufficient to classify them as science fiction.
Suvin adopts the term ‘estrangement’ because of its historical use in structuralist literary theory. He acknowledges that his use of the term comes by way of the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky and the German playwright, Bertolt Brecht (‘Poetics of SF’ 345). However, Brecht and Shklovsky use the word estrangement very differently to the way Suvin employs it (see Spiegel 372; Parrinder 39) and much more in line with Dick’s handling of estrangement in Palmer Eldritch. Shklovsky used the term ‘ostranenie’ – translated variously as ‘estrangement’, ‘defamiliarisation’ and even ‘enstrangement’ – in his 1917 essay ‘Art as Device’ to separate literature and other forms of ‘poetic language’ from mere communication (13). Brecht first uses the term in his 1935 essay ‘On Chinese Acting’, and later incorporated estrangement as a deliberate technique in his own work, naming it the ‘Verfremdungseffekt’ or ‘defamiliarisation technique’, and using it to encourage new modes of thinking in his audience and to prevent complacent or passive observation (Carney 14; Brecht). Both Brecht and Shklovsky use ‘estrangement’ to refer to the device of making something that is normally familiar appear new or strange, allowing the reader or audience to look anew at something they might have otherwise taken for granted.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss whether estrangement is or is not one of the ‘necessary and sufficient’ features of a science fiction text, as Suvin claims (‘Poetics of SF’ 375). However, it is certainly a common feature in the genre. One of the pleasures of science fiction is discovering the familiar in a vastly different context, like the humanity of creatures living in a two-dimensional space as in E. A. Abbott’s Flatland or as pure information in Greg Egan’s Diaspora. There is also an intellectual pleasure in discovering how unfamiliar certain supposedly familiar institutions can be when viewed from a different perspective, like the English class system reflected as an arbitrary shape-based system in Flatland, or the equally arbitrary dictates of fashion projected into the future in Three Stigmata, where business people are distinguished by their bright red shorts and grey pith helmets (TSPE 10–11).

Thus, estrangement is (ironically) familiar in science fiction. Dick takes it a step further by turning estrangement into one of the main thematic foci in The Three Stigmata. By doing so, he foregrounds what is, arguably, the genre’s most prominent formal feature.

The Familiar
Chapter 6

Eldritch is a human being, estranged by his contact with a deity, aliens and the mechanical. His humanity is repressed. His otherness appears so profound that his return to familiarity might seem impossible, but he does make his return, thereby, I would argue, performing the necessary second step required to be described as ‘uncanny’ in the Freudian sense. His return to familiarity is as profound as his alienation.

Dick might not have deliberately used Freud’s account of the uncanny to mould Eldritch, even though he had a good familiarity with Freud’s writing. However, it seems Eldritch could have been used as a case study to help define the uncanny in Freud’s usage. The useful connection between the fear evoked by Eldritch and the Freudian uncanny shows both the usefulness of Freud’s terminology in this particular context, and helps us understand the terror Eldritch represents.

The ostensible threat Eldritch poses in the plot of the novel is his ability to take over an individual’s idios kosmos – her personal universe – by bringing the individual inside Eldritch’s own idios kosmos. Ironically, this terrifying power is also the device by which Eldritch is returned to the familiar. Eldritch’s alienation isolates him from humanity. His power brings him into intimate contact with other beings, to the point that they literally share his world. Eldritch desires this contact because he is lonely. He wants to ‘draw others along the route he had followed’ (TSPE 202) in order to end his isolation. In this way, he brings himself into a position of intense closeness – perhaps the most intense closeness possible. Eldritch and his victims meld in intimate ways. Closer than friends, closer than lovers, but as close as your own thoughts, Eldritch and his victims share a personal universe, an intimacy only currently possible in fiction.

Eldritch not only subsumes his victims, in a very real sense he also becomes them, taking on their qualities just as they take on some of his. The monster removes its mask and reveals... your own familiar features underneath. One might argue that this is the ultimate apotheosis of the uncanny: seeing not only the familiar, but one’s self in the Other. Could this be the most primal terror in Dick’s vision? Consider what is probably the climactic moment of the novel:

He heard, then, a laugh. It was Palmer Eldritch’s laugh but it was emerging from –

Himself.
Looking down at his hands, he distinguished the left one, pink, pale, made of flesh, covered with skin and tiny, almost invisible hair, and then the right one, bright, glowing, spotless in its mechanical perfection, a hand infinitely superior to the original one, long since gone [....]

Now I am Palmer Eldritch. (TSPE 200)

In the above quotation, Barney Mayerson experiences a vision of himself transformed into Palmer Eldritch. The event is particularly remarkable because Palmer Eldritch, who has been established as the ultimate Other, becomes ontologically entangled with Barney and as close to Barney as it is possible to be. In this scene, the reader can see a metaphor for the working of empathy. Dick venerated empathy from the very start of his career, in ‘Beyond Lies the Wub’, and in some of his most important works, with *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (DADES? 1968) an obvious example. Empathy causes an individual to ‘feel with’ another being, the Greek translation of the word’s roots. Barney’s transformation causes him to ‘feel with’ Eldritch in the most extreme fashion. However this is no ordinary act of empathy. Using Eldritch, Dick pushes empathy to its extreme. The alterity is radical and the familiarity unbearably intimate. The repression of Eldritch’s humanity is replaced by realisation that not only is he human, but he is, in a sense, part of Barney’s own personal identity. Dick closes the circuit of the Freudian uncanny, but does so in an extreme way, making his vision of Palmer Eldritch remarkably powerful, horrible and uncomfortably close.

The ultimate paradox in this vision of unity with the other is that Dick associates the being metaphorically empathised with – the machine-like creature in the mask – with a lack of empathy. In the following excerpt from ‘Man, Android and Machine’, Dick associates the mask with a lack of empathy:

I fear the cold, the weariness; I fear the death of wearing out on endless upward stairs, while someone cruel, or anyhow wearing a cruel mask, watches and offers no

---

48 ‘Beyond Lies the Wub’ was Dick’s first published story, *Planet Stories* in July 1952 (Broderick, Transrealist Fiction 135). ‘Roog’ was the first story he sold, in October 1951 (Sutin 70), but was published after.
While in this passage Dick is referring to Joe Chip’s upward climb in *Ubik* (*Ubik* 1969) – discussed in more depth in Chapter 8, the association he makes with Eldritch is clear from the reference to a mask and the mention of the mechanical. Perhaps one of the fears represented by Eldritch is the self-overcoming of empathy. By becoming entangled with Eldritch, the human characters find themselves experiencing the uncanny and, potentially, the self-destruction of what Dick considers intrinsic to being human: empathy.

### The Hungry God/Machine/Alien

Christopher Palmer considers Eldritch’s ability to absorb and integrate with others the source of his horror (331). There is a great deal of support to indicate that the threatened loss of individuality is one of the terrors Eldritch represents and that this terror is recurrent in Dick’s oeuvre. For instance, each part of the trinity of alienation described earlier shares a feature with the other two. Each threatens a loss of individuality. The mechanical threatens humans by ‘reducing them to mechanism’, while ‘deities threaten humans by absorbing them into a unity’ (331). Dick’s short story ‘Rautavaara’s Case’ gives this dread a voice. In the story a reverse communion is described in which the deity, literally, consumes the devotee, thereby absorbing her into the godhead. Dick’s gory, gorgeous reverse communion allows a classic piece of defamiliarisation to occur, causing the reader to look with fresh eyes at something that recently appeared normal. Why should it be normal that many believe eating the flesh and blood of their maker brings

---

49 Dick often sets machines in opposition to entropy. This is clearly expressed in ‘Autofac’ where, after supposedly destroying the autofac machine, Morrison ruminates on the charred ruins:

‘Entropy,’ Morrison breathed, oppressed. ‘The thing it always hated. The thing it was built to fight. Random particles everywhere. No purpose to it.’ (*Paycheck* 198)

Thus, there is some tension in Eldritch’s odd combination of pattern-creating machine and pattern-destroying deific absorption. On the other hand, the excessive production of machines like the autofac is an excellent example of ‘kipple’ and ‘kippleization’, linked in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* with entropy and the heat-death of the universe. The tension exists, but does not overwhelm.
them closer to God? The reverse communion shares important similarities with a ‘normal’
communion: both link consumption, absorption and spiritual integration together. Both
supposedly remove the differentiation between mortal individual and eternal godhead.
Dick’s portrayal is akin to an argument by analogy taken to the point of absurdity: if
spiritual closeness is achieved by eating God, why can’t the reverse be true? Dick’s
description of himself as a ‘religious anarchist’ seems apposite (‘Interview with Slash
Magazine’ n.pag).

In Dick’s portrayal, both the mechanical and the divine are forces of unification,
removing the status and uniqueness of the individual and melding them with the
collective. The alien life form that has taken control of Eldritch also embodies the threat
of homogeneity. Already it has proved the danger it poses by taking over Eldritch and
threatening others with the same insidious invasion. The ever-present threat of entropy
presents a similar peril to individuality, perhaps one of the reasons Dick is so drawn to
foreground entropy in in his works.

Eldritch’s ability to absorb another into his world, thereby destroying individuality, is a
large part of the threat he poses. Eldritch dissolves the boundaries between people. The
dissolution works in both directions: as he takes over their world, he is also affected by
those he infects. As Anne Hawthorne tells Leo Bulero, ‘Part of you has become Palmer
Eldritch [...] And part of him became you. Neither of you can ever become completely
separated again’ (TSPE 332). This is a familiar event in Dick’s works. We might look, as
Christopher Palmer does, to Martian Time-Slip and the threat to individuality posed by
the terrible Gubbler (332). We might look, as Durham suggests, to The Simulacra (TS
1964) and the final culmination of Richard Kongrosian’s mental dissolution: he becomes
unable to distinguish himself from the outside world and materially manifests his delusion
using his telekinesis (175). We might even look to Our Friends From Frolix 8 (OFF8
1970), which possesses remarkable similarities to The Three Stigmata. Like Eldrich,
Thors Provoni travels to the edges of space and encounters an alien being – in this case
the Frolixian Morgo Rahn Wile – which he brings back with him. Morgo possesses the
ability to merge with another being or thing, replacing it with Morgo’s own ‘ontological
substance’ (OFF8 119). The being or thing thus replaced exists almost exactly as before,
only it is now a part of the alien’s being and subsistent on it.
Durham allies this process with the postmodern ‘death of the subject’ and describes a familiar pattern this ‘death’ takes. First, the subject moves outward, becoming one with the familiar world around. The newly dissolved subject moves easily through a benign world, as the ‘object-world offers no resistance to the passage of the desiring subject’. Second, the subject is invaded by its objects, and loses control over the outside world as ‘raw matter which seems paradoxically endowed with an antagonistic subjectivity of its own’ takes over. Durham nicely summarises the process, calling it the ‘strange oscillation of the desiring subject from absolute sovereignty to absolute abjection’ (176). Durham utilises politico-economic jargon, akin to Fredric Jameson or Michel Foucault’s, to describe the process, jargon that is more or less appropriate for different examples of the process of oscillation. The example of Richard Kongrosian, despite being the example offered by Durham, is difficult to frame in terms of ‘desire’. The dissolution of Kongrosian’s ego skips the first phase of desiring subject moving through a world of benign objects, moving straight to his domination by the seemingly hostile objects around him.

Nevertheless, Durham’s description has good explanatory force, especially in the case of Palmer Eldritch. The desiring subjects, usually those trapped on the barren colony of Mars, wish to conquer the object-world around them; an object world that otherwise has control over them, as they have been forced into the situation they exist in. They are promised control of their reality through the purchase and use of Eldritch’s drug, Chew-Z, and are driven by their bleak everyday reality to take advantage of the drug. Initially the drug takers find they are, indeed, rulers of their reality. This corresponds nicely with Durham’s description. The second phase occurs when the reality becomes hostile. Eldritch is the one in control, and rather than the new reality being a domain of the colonisers’ ultimate control, it is one of ultimate subjection. The dream turns into a nightmare for the trapped colonist.

Durham’s description omits the final arc of the story. Durham does not examine The Three Stigmata in its relationship to the oscillating pattern he observes. Instead he uses the novel to add to his arguments regarding late capitalism. Had he analysed The Three Stigmata for this pattern, he would have noticed another stage where the subject, having become dominated by the object-world, regains a semblance of control, recognising her own agency in the apparently hostile world around her.
The plight of *The Three Stigmata*’s characters as they gradually lose control over their reality is not unlike that experienced by an author in the act of creation. Having created a world of ultimate freedom in which she or he possesses powers of creation and control, the creation almost immediately imposes some limits over the creator. Once invented, a character must act consistently with their own nature or seem arbitrary and ill-conceived. Characters chase their personal goals, tangled plots require dénouement while obstacles need to be overcome. For Dick and with *The Three Stigmata*, this minor dilemma becomes a major facet of the work. *The Three Stigmata*, particularly, has the feel of a novel that requires a certain justice be done to the content that moves it beyond the author’s control. His various attempts to disarm Eldritch’s power fall flat against the demands of doing justice to the threat Eldritch poses.

Dick was no doubt aware of how much autonomy the ideas in *The Three Stigmata* had for him. Just as he found himself powerless to dispel the vision in the sky that inspired the novel, Eldritch seems similarly resistant to his control. In the following excerpt from a note Dick wrote to himself, he describes the act of writing as akin to being transported into the fictional world.

As to my own writing. Reading it does not mean anything to me, all considerations as to how good it is or isn’t, what I do well and what I do badly (such as putting in the kitchen sink, as Ted Sturgeon phrased it, in regard to *The Three Stigmata*). What matters to me is the writing, the act of manufacturing the novel, because while I am doing it, at that particular moment, I am in the world I’m writing about. It is real to me, completely and utterly. Then, when I’m finished, and have to stop, withdraw from that world forever – that destroys me. The men and women have ceased talking. They no longer move. *(Shifting Realities 18)*

Dick likens his creative process to living in a world that ‘is real’. His writing, to him, seemed more like description than outright creation, suggesting that he conceived of his role as slightly passive in relation to his work – more reporter of events than master of them. He mentions *The Three Stigmata* explicitly in this regard, suggesting that its creation was, in some sense, beyond his influence, and that its clunky inclusiveness (‘putting in the kitchen sink’) was a result of his powerlessness. Plainly, Dick was aware of the power a work can have over its creator and especially the power *The Three Stigmata* possessed over him.
‘The evil, negative trinity of alienation, blurred reality, and despair’

*TSPE 229*

The blurred reality Leo Bulero describes in the section title above links Eldritch with what is probably the most familiar Dickian device: the loss of stable reality. Eldritch’s stock-in-trade is deception. Everything around him is surrounded in layers of illusion. Is he the industrialist? Is he a Prox alien? Is he an alien from elsewhere? Is he God? Is he a god? Is he all and none of these?

What I earlier described as his triple taint of alienation – alien, machine and god – and then later as a triple taint of homogeneity is also the triple taint of deception. His bond with the Prox aliens, themselves already linked with deceit and the hidden threat of alien invasion, chains him to treachery. The mechanical stigmata Eldritch possesses link him to the deceptive world of artificial simulacra that troubles Dick so greatly. Eldritch’s power to absorb others into his personal universe makes him akin to the deceptive creator deity of Gnosticism. The triple taint stands for triple terrors: the discovery of the self in the Other, the loss of individuality and the fear of deception.\(^50\)

Deception and, in particular, the realisation that the phenomenal world is not the real world is really, as Dick puts it, the ‘premise of my entire corpus of writing’ (Philip K. Dick, quoted in Rickman, *Philip K. Dick: In his Own Words* 138). Because it is such a common premise, it has also been one of the most thoroughly analysed facets of his

---

\(^50\) The number of triadic arrangements in *The Three Stigmata* recalls structuralist attempts to find elaborate patterns in Dick’s novels: as, for instance, in Fredric Jameson’s ‘Character Systems in *Dr. Bloodmoney*’ or Umberto Rossi’s 2002 ‘Fourfold Symmetry’. Jameson imposes the structure of a semantic rectangle, as described by A.J. Greimas in ‘The Interaction of Semiotic Constraints’, upon the characters in *Dr. Bloodmoney* with mixed results (as discussed in Chapter 1), and Rossi imposes the divisions of zero text, primary text and secondary text suggested by Carlo Pagetti in his introduction to *The Man in the High Castle on Time Out of Joint* and *The Simulacra* (Rossi, *The Twisted Worlds of Philip K. Dick* 84). These efforts have something in common: they try to make Dick texts fit into pre-existing structures. In contrast, the simple triadic structures of *The Three Stigmata* arise organically in the novel, and the triad announced in the first substantive word of the title, suggesting they might be the result of tight authorial control instead of (over)active critical interpretation.
writing. As a theme, the loss of reality taps into prominent elements of modern alienated culture. For this, Dick has been admired for his perspicacity and touted as a keen observer of the (post)modern world. Sometimes this latter reading pushes his discomfort with deception and the loss of reality it entails to the side. When his characters discover the deception their world is built on, they do not act with acceptance; they strive to find a deeper, reliable reality, and in many novels they find it. Even in those novels where no lasting reality can be reached, the characters are compelled to reject deception and seek truth. In fact, the reason Eldritch is initially welcomed back to Earth and allowed to sell his reality-deforming drug is the belief that his drug allows ‘the user to penetrate to concrete reality’ (*TSPE* 196).

Why do Dick’s characters react with such abhorrence to the loss of reality? Where does the terror lie? Dick’s reaction is not the only possible one. We might look to the existentialist philosophers who take contingent, phenomenal reality detached from the notion of an absolute as a necessary precondition for radical freedom, self-determination and the personal creation of meaning and worth. In *The Three Stigmata* there are a number of objections to Eldritch’s destabilisation of absolute reality. The first is loss of personal control and self-determination: Eldritch is in charge and can, on a whim, turn the subsumed characters’ reality into one of torment. In the face of his power, the characters find themselves impotent. The very world around them can become hostile. David Golumbia considers loss of self-determination in reality a critical part of the threat Eldritch poses.

Golumbia observes that Dick sets up a contrast between two different types of contingent reality. Can-D transports its user into a world that is mostly self-determined, even if it is as divorced from reality as Eldritch’s. Chew-Z, in comparison, ‘specifically and determinedly eliminates the participation of its users in the construction of its reality’ (Golumbia 92) – ironically Chew-Z users lose their ability to choose, let alone be ‘choosy’. In setting up the contrast between the two drugs and their resultant realities, Dick shows that not all contingent realities are equal. Thus, Golumbia suggests, the real terror is not the loss of reality, but the loss of control over reality.

Nevertheless, the self-determined world of Can-D is, while not an obvious source of fear, not described in positive terms. Like the lotus-eaters, the colonists abandon the ‘real’ world in favour of a world that, from the outside, appears childish and pointless. The
tableaux of inert figures huddled around a doll-house with ‘a thin trickle of shiny brown syrup’ emerging from their ‘slack, will-less mouths’ is not an image of empowerment and self-determination (*TSPE* 48).

Golumbia argues Eldritch’s real menace lies not in his deceptiveness and attempts to deform reality but in his Metaphysical Realism:

> For all his deformation of fictional Reality, Eldritch is a card-carrying Metaphysical Realist, and that is precisely the thing which we as readers, like the characters of the novel, are supposed to most fear about him. (Golumbia 94)

Golumbia bases his argument on two things Eldritch does. Firstly, Eldritch employs the language of metaphysical realism to criticise his competition, Can-D. Secondly, he promotes his own drug, Chew-Z, as allowing access to absolute reality, therefore positing that such a thing exists. This, Golumbia argues, makes Eldritch a ‘card-carrying Metaphysical Realist’ and is the source of his terror.

However, Golumbia’s argument rests on the assumption that Eldritch is being sincere when he claims Chew-Z gives the user access to the ‘Real World’. This seems a large assumption to make, especially when Eldritch is set up from the start as a kind of trickster-figure. He employs the language of the metaphysical realist, but only to trap people into his own non-reality; Eldritch does not genuinely believe that the reality created by the combination of Chew-Z and his *idios kosmos* is the only one or the real one. Eldritch admits as much to Barney Meyerson when he says, ‘It’s not real, of course. That’s the truth. I’m letting you in on the innermost secret; it’s an hallucination’ (*TSPE* 204). We do not need to assume Eldritch is telling the truth this time either; his contradictory statements show his sincerity is questionable and the Golumbia’s argument inadequately grounded.

Loss of self-determination in the face of a totalising power is a potent concern in Dick’s writing. We might link the loss of self-determination, as others like Fitting, Suvin and Slusser do, with totalising political ideologies. This associates Eldritch with a very potent and real fear: the fear of being at the mercy of a large and dominant power with no concern for the individual or her rights. Golumbia associates metaphysical realism with
totalising ideologies, perhaps leading him to the conclusion that Eldritch’s metaphysical realism is the main source of his threat.\(^{51}\)

Eldritch’s reality-blurring power opens the reader up to another fear: the fear that the only reality we can have access to is as contingent and arbitrary as Eldritch’s. Eldritch shakes the characters’, and the readers’, faith in stable reality and, once lost, belief in the stability and groundedness of reality cannot be regained. In the novel this is represented by the inability to escape from Eldritch’s world and evade the stigmata. Barney Mayerson expresses the fear most clearly when, stranded on the miserable colony world of Mars, he contemplates taking his first taste of Can-D, gulping ‘it down because there is nothing else, only darkness. It is this or the void. And not for a day or a week, but – forever’ (TSPE 144). The barren existence of the colonists on Mars described as ‘darkness’ and ‘the void’ highlights the paucity of the ‘real’ world to deliver meaning and worth to its inhabitants. Escape into the false realities of Perky Pat or Palmer Eldritch can only show how dissatisfying these life-denying strategies can be, and how hard they are to separate from everyday existence.

\(^{51}\)Golumbia claims the notion of ‘Reality’ as the metaphysical realists would have it ‘informs and supports the large-scale power structures of the West, including late capitalism as well as patriarchy, racism, nationalism, the construction of “objective” sexuality, and so on’ (88). There are numerous problems with Golumbia’s statement, and two are outlined here. The first is why a metaphysical position needs to be justified according to its supposed political ramifications. As a statement about the nature of the world, metaphysics is ontologically prior to politics; a good analogy – and useful reductio ad absurdum – would be claiming that atomic theory supports the class system. Even were it possible to maintain this connection, disagreement with the latter would not invalidate the former; only relevant contradictory evidence or a lack of supporting evidence would invalidate the former. The second problem is why there would be a connection between reality as mind-independent and racism, nationalism, the patriarchy and so forth. One suspects that Golumbia’s hidden argument is that if reality is objective, then it supports those who claim their moral/political/ethical beliefs are justified by facts about reality – although why this would support racism and not its opposite is not clear. This latter position is based on a misapprehension about what metaphysical realists claim. Metaphysical realism only claims reality is mind-independent, and does not necessarily make any claim about knowing what that mind-independent reality is. Nor does it claim that all things are mind-independent; to illustrate, a metaphysical realist might believe there is an objective truth about reality, but not know what that truth is. He or she might also believe, consistent with his or her metaphysical beliefs, that preference for certain foods is relative to the individual, and sexuality is, in part, socially constructed. Being an objectivist about reality is not the same as being an objectivist about political, moral or social claims.
Chapter 6

Palmer Eldritch arouses a great many fears, of which this chapter has only scratched the surface. Some of these fears are not hidden and lie on the surface for all to see. Other fears even the author is unwilling to acknowledge as he uses strategies that smack of denial to exorcise the demons he has raised. Nevertheless, in the novel Dick does not make out that Eldritch or the threat he presents has been categorically defeated. The conclusion is both a victory for the characters and a victory for Eldritch. Leo travels back to Earth from Mars. He feels optimism and hope. He is ready to accept reality, however dissatisfying that reality may be because, as Anne Hawthorne puts it, ‘Isn’t a miserable reality better than the most interesting illusion?’ (TSPE 143). Leo’s memo at the start of the novel, chronologically succeeding the events of *The Three Stigmata*, expresses the paradox of hope in the face of meaninglessness:

I mean, after all; you have to consider we're only made out of dust. That’s admittedly not much to go on and we shouldn't forget that. But even considering, I mean it's a sort of bad beginning, we’re not doing too bad. So I personally have faith that even in this lousy situation we're faced with we can make it. You get me?

( *TSPE* unpaginated preface)

The memo offers hope from within the abyss. Eldritch has not been defeated, and the fears he represents have not been dispelled. Leo Bulero carries Eldritch’s taint, even to the point of forgetting his own name and, one assumes, thinking his name is Palmer Eldritch. Dick cannot exorcise the demon, he can only try to accept it and hope his humour and humanism – charmingly present in a stumbling inter-office memo, a communication form usually associated with terseness and formality – will triumph.
Chapter 7: Ubik in a Can

GOD IN A SPRAY CAN, AND WHY IT’S SO HARD TO RETURN TO REALITY AFTER SPENDING ANY LENGTH OF TIME IN A PHILIP K. DICK NOVEL

_The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch_ (TSPE 1965) presents a nightmare from which there is no escape, only coping strategies. Fundamentally, Eldritch represents radical alterity and the fear of lost reality. _Ubik_ (Ubik 1969), like _The Three Stigmata_, describes a future where a hostile and inhuman power – an Eldritch-like being named Jory Miller – takes control of an individual’s personal reality, pulling the individual into a world of deception where Jory has control.52 As Dick wrote _Ubik_ in 1966, two years after _The Three Stigmata_, it is useful to think of _Ubik_ as another attempt at the same problem that inspired _The Three Stigmata_. Hayles’ insight that the nightmare vision of lost reality in _The Three Stigmata_ is one the narrative repeatedly but unsuccessfully tries to draw away from might apply here, too (see _My Mother Was a Computer_ 74). _Ubik_ is a novel that seeks to escape from a similar nightmare vision, perhaps in order to find a new path to redemption. Like _The Three Stigmata_, _Ubik_ represents some of Dick’s best writing and most quintessential themes.53

I begin by exploring the hostile physical world the protagonist, Joe Chip, finds himself in when he first appears in the novel. From there, I move on to explore the major differences between _The Three Stigmata_ and _Ubik_ in order to give a sense that both have the same nightmare vision of deception and lost reality at heart, which is perhaps also in the author’s heart. Ubik offers new narrative strategies to return to reality. I will evaluate the success of these strategies in liberating the characters, and perhaps the author, from the nightmare of lost reality. The major differences discussed are Ubik itself and the addition

52 Jory even alludes to a playful link with Eldritch in his first dialogue: ‘Did they send that big ship to Proxima?’ he asks. ‘I’m very interested in that’ (_Ubik_ 20). In _The Three Stigmata_, Palmer is the man on that ship.

53 ‘A rich and provocative novel’ (Suvin, ‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 8) and ‘one of the most important SF works of the 1960s’ (Fitting, ‘Deconstruction’ 47). In France, ‘_Ubik_ put Dick in the limelight’ (Fondanèche 141). Stanisław Lem selected _Ubik_ from Dick’s oeuvre and shepherded it for publication in his native Polish, as well as providing a foreword, and named it one of the three novels he considered constitutive of Dick’s ‘main sequence’ (59) along with _The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch_ and _Now Wait for Last Year._
of competition and balance. Following this discussion the focus will shift to the tropes and literary devices Dick uses in *Ubik* to represent the loss of reality. These devices do not occur in a vacuum – they appear throughout his works, and while *Ubik* will provide the gravity well around which this discussion orbits, note will be made of the satellites. These devices offer insight into the nuances with which Dick portrays the loss of reality.

The loss of control over reality that occurs in *Ubik* is prefigured when Joe Chip makes his first appearance in the novel in Chapter 3.

**‘The door refused to open. It said, “Five cents, please.”’ (Ubik 28)**

When Joe wakes, it is to find that his credit rating has been downgraded. The maintenance circuit of his conapt informs him that, from now on, Joe will have to operate on a strict cash-only basis. In an instant, Joe finds the things around him become hostile and difficult, impeding his every movement through the world. His conapt is filthy, and will not be cleaned until he pays what he owes to the conapt’s cleaning robots – he, personally, has no cleaning equipment. He can’t afford to pay for his shower, and cannot even scrape together enough money to pay the door to let him out. When he argues with the door, which is supplied with its own individual intelligence, the door becomes litigious, asking Joe to read the conapt purchase contract. In frustration, Joe starts to unscrew the door’s hinges with a knife. In retaliation, the door threatens to sue him.

The scene is a microcosm of later events, with physical things standing in for spiritual and metaphysical concerns. Joe Chip, whose plain, unadorned name singles him out as our everyman protagonist, but hints at modern technology and the silicone chip invented only a few years earlier in 1958, is obviously a member of the working class and lives from pay check to pay check. Like Philip K. Dick during most of his life, Joe struggles to make ends meet. The scene establishes Joe as one of Dick’s passive protagonists, someone who is just trying to survive while the world around him goes mad. It paints Joe as something of a loser. One of the reasons he is strapped for cash is that he got drunk the night before and splurged on real Kenyan coffee (*Ubik* 27). In a later short story, ‘The Day Mr. Computer Fell out of its Tree’, the scene recurs with Joe Chip turned into ‘Joe Contemptible’ suggesting, if not Dick’s view of Joe, one of the possible attitudes to take toward him (392).
Hayles observes of *Ubik* that ‘at the novel’s heart is the idea of vitality: who (or what) has it, who can steal it, who is losing or gaining it’ (62). In this initial section, we find objects imbued with vitality. However, their liveliness imposes a cost on Joe, who finds himself rendered immobile. Donna Haraway’s comment in her ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ that ‘Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert’ (152) could have been written about this scene, as could the rambling speculation of a recovering drug addict in *A Scanner Darkly* (*SD* 1977): ‘Living and unliving things are exchanging properties’ (*SD* 194). Hayles agrees, noting that one of Dick’s most ‘deep-seated’ fears is ‘that as things became animate, people tend towards the inanimate’ (62). In the conapt scene, people and things are in direct competition, with doors and apartment managers exercising their freedom at the cost of Joe’s.

Money, it has been said, opens doors, and this early scene highlights the difficulties that can come to a person without that most desirable of social lubricants. The catalyst that tips Joe’s objects into supremacy over him is when his credit rating is downgraded. Suddenly, the world of objects becomes hostile, and technology, designed to make life easier, becomes an impediment. The intelligences present in the objects around him must have been originally created to make these things more ‘user-friendly’, but without money they become decidedly antagonistic.

Dick introduces money as a metaphor for smooth passage through reality and the object-world. In doing so, he sets the tone for the rest of the novel, which mixes economics and metaphysics freely. When Joe is trapped in half-life – a state experienced by the dead where they can be contacted by those still living, but are disconnected from the physical world – the objects around him begin to regress into earlier and more primitive states, one of the first things to regress is money. Without money, Joe finds himself trapped, unable to phone for help or travel freely. At the same time, some of the money turns into ‘Runciter’ money, bearing his boss Glen Runciter’s likeness on it. 54 This latter type of money is universally recognised and connected, as Runciter is, with the real world. The characters even make the connection between the two types of money and two different, and opposed, metaphysical forces:

---

54 ‘Runciter’ is probably a variation on Edward Lear’s nonsense word ‘runcible’. Dick uses ‘Runcible’ as a surname, first in *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike* (*Teeth* w.1960, pub.1982), and later in *The Penultimate Truth* (*PT* 1964), which corroborates this derivation.
‘Manifestations of Runciter’ – that’s the second process, along with the decay. Some coins get obsolete; others show up with Runciter’s portrait or bust on them. You know what I think? I think these processes are going in opposite directions. One is a going-away, so to speak. A going-out-of-existence. That’s process one. The second process is a coming-into-existence. But of something that’s never existed before. (*Ubik* 112–113)

Thus, money is both hindrance and freedom, making the object world traversable, but offering the potential for impediment.

Consider Dick’s comments on his 1953 short story ‘Colony’ where he defines the ultimate of paranoia as when things, rather than people, are perceived as hostile, which he describes thus: ‘Objects sometimes seem to possess a will of their own anyhow, to the normal mind; they don’t do what they’re supposed to do, they get in the way, they show an unnatural resistance to change’ (*BLTW* 404). The objects in Joe’s conapt, quite literally, possess a will of their own and act against him. Thus, the scene can be described as a moment when the paranoid mind-set, as Dick conceives it, becomes instantiated in reality. Objects which hindered innocently – the sticking door, the light cord which is not where you expect it – become deliberate in their obstruction, and demand money from him.

Freedman connects the paranoia of the conapt scene, and the paranoid mind-set of much of the novel, with commodity fetishism. Drawing on Freud, Freedman links paranoia with an obsessively systematising rationality, which he then connects to his own ‘Marxist theory of paranoia’ (16). Under this latter theory, capitalism turns a commodified object into ‘an interchangeable atom in the total system of exchange’ (17). Capitalism is, therefore, paranoid in the sense that it systematises objects into its own hegemonic logic. Both Marx and Lacan use the metaphor of animate objects to illustrate how objects gain a life of their own in such systems, participating in a much more active way than would be expected from an inanimate object. Freedman contends that Dick, in the conapt scene and in *Ubik* as a whole, literalises the metaphor by bringing objects into active life.

While Freedman’s argument gives an added dimension to *Ubik* and the conapt scene, it is hard to view his logic as anything other than a detour in understanding. The primary way to read this scene is, of course, for its humour value. The scene is sublimely ridiculous.
and mixes the surreal – a talking door – with the banal – a fiscal dispute. Freedman’s reading causes him to emphasise the role of objects in *Ubik* as commodities – necessary in order for him to underscore their role as part of the hegemonic/paranoid system of capitalism. However, the argumentative and litigious door, coin-operated coffeepot and stubborn cleaning robots do not act as commodities with an exchange-value brought to the fore; they act as participants in the economic system, offering services and labour in exchange for a fee with their exchange-value a distant or non-existent factor – Joe could no more sell his door than he could sell his neighbour. This scene offers almost the polar opposite of Freedman’s portrayal. The objects have entered the system as active participants, and threaten to unseat human beings from their privileged place in the capitalist system by acting more like litigious union members protecting their rights than things. Hayles’ observation that as things become more animate, people become more inanimate is more useful to understanding this scene. As things become more active in the capitalist system, Joe finds himself forced into the more inanimate roles left vacant by his animate things.

Joe is made inanimate because he, literally, becomes trapped in his conapt which transforms from a home into a cage. The tone of the scene is light; there is never any real danger that Joe will be trapped for good, but the scene is an early evocation of what will later become a much more sinister dynamic. The external world is hostile to him, but not as hostile as it will become when he is being preyed upon by Jory Miller. The filthy conapt has a ‘miasma’ of ‘debris and clutter’ (*Ubik* 29) which prefigures the experiences Joe has when under the sway of Jory Miller; in fact, the only other times in *Ubik* when Dick uses the words ‘debris’ and ‘clutter’ are when describing a victim of Jory’s (*Ubik* 163) and when Jory first tries to consume Joe (*Ubik* 184). Using simple economic realities anyone can recognise and sympathise with, Dick foreshadows the metaphysical terror Joe will later experience when his whole world becomes hostile. In this scene, objects seem unusually resistant to Joe’s will and desires, but once he comes under Jory’s sway, the resistance becomes worse, as things regress to earlier states and it seems nothing can help, except Ella Runciter, Glen Runciter and Ubik.

**Ubik: Now in Balm, Spray and Pseudoscientific-econo-deific Principle**

Ubik is one of the most captivating and puzzling elements of the novel. Ubik breaks boundaries. It is ubiquitous and central to the text, but utterly mysterious. It is ‘associated
both with the worst kind of hucksterism for predatory capitalism and with the divine force that, its name suggests, is ubiquitous and eternal’ (N. K. Hayles 65). The name ‘Ubik’ itself illustrates Hayles’ point, turning a grand-sounding four-syllable Latinate word with deep theological connotations into a catchy four-letter slogan word with easy phonetic spelling like ‘foto’ or ‘kwik’. Ubik is first mentioned in a meta-textual context, in a short epigraph at the start of the first chapter. Each chapter has its own epigraph. Initially, Ubik appears only in these epigraphs and in the title of the novel and is not mentioned in the body text until Chapter 10 – well over half-way through. Until that point, the reader is only given strange and seemingly contradictory hints about the nature of Ubik in the epigraphs.

Ubik provides a puzzle that helps engage the reader and push the narrative forward. Each preface, except for the last, follows the same structure while varying the content. Below are two typical examples taken from Chapters 2 and 12:

Instant Ubik has all the fresh flavour of just-brewed drip coffee. You husband will say, Christ, Sally, I used to think your coffee was only so-so. But now, wow! Safe when taken as directed. (Ubik 23)

Pop tasty Ubik into your toaster, made only from fresh fruit and healthful all-vegetable shortening. Ubik makes breakfast into a feast, puts zing back into your thing! Safe when handled as directed. (Ubik 166)

The word ‘Ubik’ appears to stand in for a product, usually an easily recognizable and mass-produced commodity like razor-blades, bras or, in the above examples, instant coffee and pop-tarts. Freedman describes Ubik as ‘the ultimate and universal commodity and the symbol of the ubiquity of the commodity structure’ (21). The tone of the ads is sprightly and up-beat, the overly-enthusiastic language of advertising with its bad puns, annoying alliteration, cliché phrases, repetition, slogans, catch-phrases, and simple rhymes. Most of the ads finish with a word of warning about using the product as directed. These warnings initially seem like the normal sort of cautions mandated by lawmakers that occur on packaging. However, the repeated warnings quickly become ominous, and jar when contrasted with the generally harmless nature of the products Ubik seems to represent and the up-beat tone of the ads. After all, what’s so bad about using a bra, pop-tart, instant coffee or even bowl of cereal in a way other than directed? How will
they stop being ‘safe’? The regularity of the warnings implies that something about Ubik itself is dangerous or needs to be handled with care.

The contrast between harmless ‘product’ and dire warning lends the ads a grotesque quality and imparts a mordant and self-reflectively humorous tenor to them. The substitution of the product with the word ‘Ubik’ highlights the artificiality of the ads and the reader becomes more aware of the structural features typical of advertisements; a form of communication so prevalent (or ubiquitous) it usually fades into the background. The ads themselves are also subtly inappropriate and ever-so-slightly ‘off’. At first glance they seem to be typical examples that could have been lifted directly from real life, but further inspection reveals Dick’s satirical mind and keen humour. The Ubik pop-tart ‘puts zing into your thing!’ (*Ubik* 166); a harmless but vaguely obscene promise. The husband given Ubik instant coffee is blasphemous, insulting and twee by turns in his enthusiasm: ‘Christ, Sally, I used to think your coffee was only so-so. But now, wow!’ (*Ubik* 23). The Ubik bra’s promise that if you ‘Lift your arms’ you’ll be ‘all at once curvier!’ is made twice in only a short period, emphasising what an odd kind of sentence and promise it is.

Peter Fitting comments that the epigraphs are detached from their chapter contents, arguing that they are ‘a prelude to a more complex refutation of teleology and metaphysics in *Ubik*’ (‘Deconstruction’ 50). The refutation he speaks of is his interpretation of *Ubik’s* ambiguous ending. Since the ending defies interpretation by undermining the *dénouement*, and thus makes interpretation of the novel as a whole difficult, Fitting claims it prevents the text from ‘opening onto a transcendental meaning’ and is thus ‘a deconstruction of the metaphysical ideologies and the metaphysical formal implications of the classical bourgeois novel’ (‘Deconstruction’ 51). Fitting’s argument contains the seeds of its own destruction. His interpretation of the epigraphs and the novel’s ending is, itself, an interpretation that takes the text as a vehicle for conveying a meaning beyond its pages, and his *caveat* that ‘There is no single, satisfactory interpretation of *Ubik*, my own included’ fails to defuse the contradiction.

Nevertheless, Fitting is correct in noticing the epigraphs’ disconnections. Like the people in half-life, they are on another plane of existence, untouched by the events in the ‘real’ world. However, they still have a viable function in the working of the novel as a whole. The epigraphs give us clues about the nature of Ubik before we ever encounter it in the body of the text. Hayles admires these sections because they associate Ubik with ‘the
worst kind of hucksterism for predatory capitalism’, which heightens the contrast when, later, Ubik is associated with ‘the divine force that, as its name suggests, is ubiquitous and eternal’ (65). As already discussed, they offer humour, and a puzzle to help drive the narrative forward. Since the novel, on one level, has the structure of a quest narrative with Ubik as the prize, the epigraphs give tantalising glimpses of this ubiquitous but elusive commodity.

The ads use Ubik to replace goods that are commonplace, which reveals the word’s derivation from ‘ubiquitous’ meaning ‘present everywhere at once’. At first it seems this meaning points to the commercial nature of the Ubik ads and the things they represent. Advertising is a ubiquitous feature of modern life. Similarly, the goods Ubik replaces are also ubiquitous commodities of the modern age. Fitting and Freedman suggest Ubik emphasises how interchangeable these commodities are, and thus comes to represent something similar to Marx’s notion of a fungible exchange-value ‘totally independent of their use-value’ (Marx, qtd in Fornäs, *Capitalism* 32).

Ubik first appears in the text of the novel early in Chapter 10. Joe Chip has been experiencing strange things. The world around him has been devolving. Inanimate objects inexplicably revert to antique versions of themselves. Food becomes ancient and decayed. Technology becomes obsolete. Joe Chip sees his supposedly dead boss, Glen Runciter, appear in a TV commercial for Ubik:

‘Tired of lazy tastebuds?’ Runciter said in his familiar gravelly voice. ‘Has boiled cabbage taken over your world of food? That same old, stale, flat, Monday-morning odor no matter how many dimes you put into your stove? Ubik changes all that; Ubik wakes up food flavor, puts hearty taste back where it belongs, and restores fine food smell.’ On the screen a brightly colored spray can replaced Glen Runciter. ‘One invisible puff-puff whisk of economically priced Ubik banishes compulsive obsessive fears that the entire world is turning into clotted milk, worn-out tape recorders and obsolete iron-cage elevators, plus other, further, as-yet-unglimpsed manifestations of decay. You see, world deterioration of this regressive type is a normal experience of many half-lifers, especially in the early stages when ties to the real reality are still very strong.’ (*Ubik* 134).
The first appearance of Ubik in the main text is transgressive in a number of different ways. Firstly, Ubik has broken free from the para-textual space of the epigraphs and moved into the body of the novel. It does so in a way that clearly links it to the earlier sections, appearing in an ad superficially like those before, but with significant underlying differences. The Ubik product in this ad is not immediately apparent as a substitute for something else; rather it claims to be a unique product that will solve the specific problems Joe has.

The promises the ad makes about Ubik give it another transgressive quality: it promises to be a *deus ex machina* to rescue Joe from his quandaries, which the ad specifies in detail. Ubik, it seems, knows everything that has gone wrong for Joe and will save him. The ad gives information Joe does not, at this point, know but which later turns out to be true, such as his status as a half-lifer. It is almost as if the author has suddenly popped in to break the fourth wall and deliver his protagonist some useful information. The easy resolution Ubik promises seems to disrupt the tacit undertaking of most narratives that conflicts and problems will be resolved in a way that will do them justice about twenty pages before the final word. However, instead of undermining the force of the novel, the untimely appearance of Ubik as a potential *deus ex machina* helps to drive it forward. By this point in the novel there have been so many anomalously coincidental events that seem to defy the dictates of chance that this latest and most extreme violation does not destroy the world of the novel, even while it lets us know the boundaries are very thin.

Dick uses the medium by which the Ubik ad is transmitted to further add to the transgression. The ad appears on a TV set – a frame within the frame of the novel, and one with its own narrative rules. The TV switches itself on and tunes itself to a channel, already exceeding our expectations of the medium. The ad is, as mentioned, unusually specific and well-directed in a way most advertisements are not. The final transgression of the TV ‘frame’ occurs when Runciter, from within the TV set, holds what appears to be a back-and-forth conversation with Joe, impossible in a pre-recorded medium, even when an implausible reason for the possibility is offered.

Everything about Ubik is transgressive. Dick uses Ubik as an opportunity to exercise his dark and delightful sense of humour. Humour is often irreverent, and Dick’s is no exception. The humour he exercises with Ubik relies on breaking expectations and juxtaposing incongruities. The ads for Ubik are ridiculous and tacky. In them, Dick
Chapter 7

demonstrates his intimate knowledge of the laughable extremes of advertising. He gained this knowledge from his brief stint working in retail before he became a full-time writer, and expressed it in his early mainstream novels that commonly follow salesmen and small business owners as they go about their day-to-day business. The ad for ‘Ubik savings and loans’ (*Ubik* 99) trails off at the end as the narrator gets mired down with some tricky and pointless arithmetic: ‘Suppose, for example, you borrow fifty-nine poscreds on an interest-only loan. Let’s see, that adds up to – ’ (*Ubik* 99). When the Ubik ad is for a razor blade, the result is a ‘self-winding Swiss chromium never-ending blade’ (*Ubik* 66), an ambiguous picture resulting from the reader trying to imagine, first, a blade without end that requires winding, then one that is self-winding and finally a self-winding never-ending blade capable of giving a man’s face ‘a little loving’ (*Ubik* 66). The personification of the blade as a caring person and the analogy made between scraping the whiskers off your face with a blade and love is ghastly, but not uncommon.

The tone of the ads is humorous, and gently derisive of the ridiculous claims of advertising. This all changes with the penultimate ad:

> I am Ubik. Before the universe was, I am. I made the suns. I made the worlds. I created the lives and the places they inhabit; I move them here, I put them there. They go as I say, they do as I tell them. 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. (*Ubik* 223)

The final ad alters the tone completely. Where readers might have expected humour and the flashy language of advertising, they are instead given what appears to be the direct address of a deity, or a section from a religious text. The use of a first-person narrator – the only instance outside character dialogue – is shocking. Ubik, which has been absent and only present through proxies, is given a voice; and not just any voice, but the voice of God. The passage mimics biblical phraseology; for instance, the play with tenses in the second sentence is similar to John 8:58 where Jesus declares ‘before Abraham was, I am!’ Like the Judeo-Christian god, Ubik does not reveal its real name, instead using a tetragrammatical formation not unlike ‘YHWH’. Fitting points out the similarity of the passage to John 1:1: ‘In the beginning was the Word’, and, as in the previous passages,
Ubik has been substituted for something else: in this case God, or the *logos* ('Deconstruction’ 48).

Dick categorically states that Ubik is the *logos*: ‘It is obvious from this who and what Ubik is; it specifically says that it is the word, which is the Logos’ (‘How to Build a Universe’ 277). Dick’s categorical declaration is, in context, not designed to give a definitive statement of the nature of Ubik throughout the novel, but to highlight how something that is a clear reference to a religious text can be misunderstood, as it was in an early German translation of Ubik that translated ‘word’ from this section as ‘brand name’ (‘How to Build a Universe’ 277–278). The translator’s lapse highlights just how anomalous the suddenly religious preface is, and brings a certain humorous insight into the historical translation issues that have surrounded the word *logos*. Fitting even manages to demonstrate Ubik’s ambiguity by first claiming that ‘Ubik is also an analogue to Christian “Grace,” the divine assistance given man to help him’ and then stating that it ‘is a *human* invention [...] rather than an image of divine assistance’ (‘Deconstruction’ 49). Ubik is both a human invention and a divine intervention at the same time – perhaps appropriate given its similarities to the Christian *logos* which is itself associated with the Christ who is meant to be human and divine.

By linking Ubik to religion and, specifically, to the *logos*, Dick portrays Ubik as the guarantor of reality. In the Judeo-Christian worldview, reality issues forth from God, Who both created and maintains reality with the effective power of the *logos*. Ubik has a similar function in the novel, maintaining the stability of reality while still making blatantly unreal advertising promises. The melding of religion and commerce gives Ubik a delightfully sacrilegious feel, and creates a very original approach to the fundamental metaphysical question of ‘what is reality?’ Dick prefigures the link between commerce and religion in *The Three Stigmata*, but in that novel the commercial aspects emanate from Palmer Eldritch, who is connected with deception and illusory realities and portrayed as a competitor to God, while God leaves the advertising to Eldritch. *Ubik* brings the commercial element closer to God and the associated notion of an objective, real reality. The combination is surreal: the idea that the gaudy spray can have anything to do with the Judeo-Christian God seems, *prima facie*, absurd.

55 For more discussion of Dick’s use of the Logos, see Umberto Rossi’s ‘Just a Bunch of Words’ and Lorenzo DiTommaso’s ‘A Logos or Two’.
Chapter 7

Ubik in its ‘brightly-colored spray can’ (*Ubik* 134) is one of the most powerful and lingering images from Dick’s entire career as a writer. The spray can juxtaposes a number of incongruous elements. Firstly, like the ads, it is gaudy and ostentatious. It draws attention to itself with its bright colours. However, its gaudy exterior hides the fact that Ubik itself is a cypher. There are no satisfying answers about what is in that can; it’s certainly not a pop-tart or a razor blade. At one point Ubik is described as ‘a portable negative ionizer’ that ‘gives negative ions a counter-clockwise spin by a radically biased acceleration chamber’ which in turn ‘diminishes the velocity of anti-protophasons’ and means ‘for a specific time, anyhow – an increment in the net put-forth field of protophasonic activity’ giving half-lifers greater vitality (*Ubik* 221). The pretentious jargon reveals rather than conceals the explanation’s inadequacy. If Ubik is a scientific invention to help restore those in half-life, why does it only seem to exist *inside* half-life where science and physical laws do not appear to rule as they do in the real world? Even Joe has to chip in: ‘To say ‘negative ions’ is redundant. All ions are negative’ (*Ubik* 221). The description does reveal one, simple, physical property. Ubik acts to counter the accelerated entropy experienced by half-lifers. The caveat offered, that it can only work for ‘a specific time’, reminds the reader that the levelling power of entropy can be halted or even ostensibly reversed in specific area or time, but not without the overall victory of entropy in the closed system as a whole.

Ubik is a puzzle because it brings together so many disparate elements. It is (pseudo-) scientific, spiritual, psychical, theological and, most oddly of all, commercial. By placing Ubik in so many different realms, Dick emphasises the one quality Ubik always has: ubiquity. It replaces modern products that are, themselves, ubiquitous. One of the definitional characteristics of the Judeo-Christian God is ubiquity, and in the final, religious, preface, the aspect of the divinity most exemplified by Ubik is omnipresence and existence. Most of the sentences in the section possess and repeat the deceptively simple existential verb ‘to be’ in the first person singular. The verb is repeated with reference to the past, present and future, but, for the most part, without changing the tense of the verb itself, making it seem as if Ubik exists in an eternal present, as in this example: ‘Before the universe was, I am’ (*Ubik* 223). As a physical thing, it acts to support reality and counter the entropy Joe experiences. In a sense, Ubik is like canned reality, keeping everything working properly, a ‘reality support’ (*Ubik* 134).
Perhaps the clearest function of Ubik in the novel is to represent hope for a return to reality; it is a link to ‘real reality’ (Ubik 134). It provides hope for the protagonist, and a lifeline which he can cling to in order to maintain his connection with the outside world. This makes Ubik unusual in Dick’s oeuvre. Dick has become well-known for his ability to shake the pillars of metaphysical surety, but not so well known for providing hope for a return to reality. The conclusion of the novel casts further doubt on the possibility of finding reality, but with Ubik in the picture, there is hope, however faint.

Ubik’s role in the novel is foreshadowed early on. One of the inertials, Francesca Spanish, prefigures Ubik’s final ‘speech’ when she responds to her name by saying ‘I am; I have always been; I will always be’ (Ubik 61). Having established a connection between this woman and Ubik, albeit one obvious only in hindsight, Dick gives Spanish insight into recent events:

‘Someone,’ Miss Spanish said, ‘just now moved us, all of us, into another world. We inhabited it, lived in it, as citizens of it, and then a vast, all-encompassing spiritual agency restored us to this, our rightful universe.’ (Ubik 62)

Her utterance, at the time, seems a mix of insanity and revelation, and only later is it revealed to contain nothing but truth. Joe knows that he was moved into another world by Pat Conley, but the ‘all-encompassing spiritual agency’ of Ubik has not yet made an appearance in the plot, and Joe assumes Spanish’s insight is simply coincidence. Even at this early point, long before reality is lost, Ubik’s role as a link to real reality is alluded to.

Ubik, which is both physical object and spiritual agency, is an uncommon device in Dick’s works, but there is at least one precedent. If we look back through his works the only reasonable comparison is with The Man in the High Castle, where a small pin is invested by its maker with the property of wu. The pin is authentic in a way other things are not, and is a link to ‘an entire new world’ (MHC 168). By meditating on it, one of the characters in The Man in the High Castle, Tagomi, is transported – perhaps physically, perhaps only mentally – into a different world from that of the novel. The world Tagomi visits is later revealed to be the real world; or at least a world more real than the world the characters live in. Thus, the pin represents a link to an ontologically superior reality, a ‘real reality’ (Ubik 134), just as Ubik does. Also like Ubik, the pin’s power is in part transgressive. The real world the pin transports Tagomi to is the readers’ world, breaking
the boundaries between real life and fiction. Its shape suggests its nature: it punctures and pierces.

Ubik’s form as a spray can is both commercial and symbolic. The aerosol spray is an image of consumerism and modern technology. To the modern world, it has come to represent the rapacious mentality of capitalism, with the spray’s close historical association with chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and their devastating effect on the ozone layer. At the time *Ubik* was written and published, James Lovelock had already invented his Electron Capture Detector and was engaged in experiments detecting the ubiquitous distribution of CFCs and pesticides in the atmosphere (‘Atmospheric Fluorine Compounds as Indicators of Air Movements’).

Symbolically and literally, an aerosol spray turns a concentrated substance into a ubiquitous one; invisible but still present. Lovelock’s experiments, which began in the late 1950s and eventuated in the first detection of CFCs in the atmosphere, showed how wide such sprays can spread and how long their effects can linger. Dick’s pseudo-scientific description of how Ubik works as a ‘portable negative ionizer’ that causes ions to ‘cohere rather than dissipate’ (*Ubik* 221) bears some similarities to Lovelock’s description of his Electron Capture Detector which through the ‘absorption of ionising radiation’ causes atoms and molecules to be ‘excited but unionised’ (‘A Sensitive Detector for Gas Chromatography’ 35). Dick might not have been directly aware of Lovelock’s work – Lovelock’s discovery of CFCs in the atmosphere occurred contemporaneously with the writing and publication of *Ubik*, but would not have reached the public consciousness until the results of his work were published in *Nature* in 1971, two years after *Ubik* was published – but Dick would certainly have been aware of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Published in 1962 – a good four years before Dick wrote *Ubik* – *Silent Spring* went onto the *New York Times* best-seller list and became the seminal text in the environmental movement. *Silent Spring* analysed the use of pesticide sprays and the knock-on effects they can have on the wider environment. When Dick wrote *Ubik*, public awareness of sprays, their ability to become ubiquitous, and their tendency to have impact beyond initial expectations would have been at a peak.

However, unlike the CFCs Lovelock would discover and the sprays Carson brought to people’s attention, the effects of Ubik are short-lived. This might seem to be a minor point, but it has profound implications when considering the role of Ubik in the novel and
what it means for Dick’s reality theme. Ubik is a connection to reality, but it is not a strong or reliable one. It needs constant reinforcement. Ubik’s connection to consumerism is relevant; for a modern product, consumption, expiration and obsolescence are a boon. The gears of contemporary economics require a constant flow of goods and money to keep turning. Ubik, it seems, partakes of the transient qualities of modern consumer goods.

**Why put God in a Spray Can?**

Why does Dick pull God down into economics? Why does he put the *logos* in a spray can? The choice to do so could be justified aesthetically and Dick is obviously aware of the humour inherent in his ironic juxtaposition of modalities. Consider the character Francy’s dream about Ubik, in which commercialism and ridiculous religious symbolism are combined:

‘A great hand came down from the sky, like the arm and hand of God. Enormous, the size of a mountain. And I knew at the time how important it was; the hand was closed, made into a rocklike fist, and I knew it contained something of value so great that my life and the lives of everyone else on Earth depended on it. And I waited for the fist to open, and it did open. And I saw what it contained.’

‘An aerosol spray can,’ Don Denny said dryly.

‘On the spray can,’ Francesca Spanish continued, ‘there was one word, great golden letters, glittering; golden fire spelling out UBIK. Nothing else.’ *Ubik* 162

Francy’s import-laden dream, which she describes with awe and reverence, is juxtaposed with Denny’s short and ‘dry’ interjection, underscoring the huge difference between the style of delivery and the content; God and spray can; religion and commercialism; authority and rebellion. What more potent symbol of authority is there than the hand of God? What more iconic symbol of the counter-culture than the spray can and its associated graffiti?

The surreal humour of God-in-a-can completely validates the combination on an aesthetic level, but there are other thematic and structural concerns that also validate the combination. Prior to putting Ubik into a can, Dick had already discovered and explored
in his fiction the complex economic, social and political controls people can exert over their own and other people’s reality; we might look to Fitting’s 1983 article ‘Reality as Ideological Construct’ for an account of this. In *The Three Stigmata* Dick brings a theological element into the process of reality-creation, but he chooses to introduce the theology on an almost purely economic level. Palmer Eldritch’s attempts to take over reality begin with direct economic competition with Leo Bulero. Eldritch is an industrialist, already highly successful on an economic level. Initially his control over reality is established through the use of a consumer good: Chew-Z. Eldritch might have more inexplicable powers than the regular capitalist, but he initially exercises control over external reality with advertising. It is only later that the metaphysical themes come to the fore, and the commercial ideas begin to drop away.

The mix of commercial and metaphysical in *Ubik* creates a cross-pollination of ideas. One example is the idea of competition. In *The Three Stigmata*, Eldritch competes with God, but God ‘simply sits passive’ (*TSPE* 150). Part of the reason Palmer Eldritch presents such a dire threat in *Three Stigmata* is that he acts without any real competition. Eldritch runs a monopoly at both a fiscal and theological level, against which neither the human industrialist nor God can compete. As evidenced in his early mainstream novels, most written early in his career but published later, Dick demonstrates a consistent sympathy for small business owners and a dislike of the monopolistic or oligopolistic chains that were gaining prominence during the fifties and sixties.\(^{56}\)

If we view *Ubik* as, in part, another attempt to resolve the nightmare of lost reality represented by Palmer Eldritch, then Ubik must compete with the reality loss on all levels and, for Dick, Ubik *has* to work at an economic level, because this is the first place where Dick portrays reality being lost.

---

\(^{56}\) Dick has been portrayed by critics like Fitting, Suvin and Jameson as someone critical of the excesses of modern capitalism, but in almost all of his fiction, Dick shows his sympathy for small businesses and small business owners and disapproval of practices that limit their freedoms. Dick’s early mainstream novels express these themes: for instance, in Jim Briskin’s refusal to play the large chain ‘Looney Luke’s’ commercials in *The Broken Bubble (BB w.1956, pub.1988)*; Bruce and Susan Stevens’s desire to hold out against the big discount houses in *In Milton Lumky Territory (IMLT w.1958, pub.1985)*; and the many, many characters inspired by Dick’s first boss, Herb Hollis, who run their own small businesses with passion, honesty and conviction. Jeet Heer observes that ‘unlike most science fiction heroes, [Dick’s] protagonists are ordinary working folks who struggle against corporate cartels’. 
In linking Ubik to both the God and gross consumerism, Dick creates a picture of a pantheistic deity, one who exists and infuses reality at every level. Dick suggest the same thing in his *Exegesis*:

This is perfectly epitomized in the UBIK commercials; [God] can exist at any trashy layer – sincerely – he wants to be, in any trashy form. But in the end he remembers (as witness the ad over the final chapter of UBIK). Purpose? This way he can permeate his creation with the divine, at all levels, and sincerely (i.e., without even him knowing, while he’s doing it!) (*Exegesis* 409)

The element of competition introduced by Ubik provides the most fundamental difference between *Ubik* and *The Three Stigmata*. In *The Three Stigmata*, once reality is lost the characters become completely adrift with no hope of return. Ubik offers the characters a tether they can reach from the human world of commerce and economics; something they can rely on even when reality has been lost and something that might offer a return to the real world. Ubik represents hope for the existence of and a return to reality for both the characters and for Dick himself, no less lost in his nightmare vision. Like Ubik, his hope is more optimistic than assured, even if under constant siege from the forces of deception and entropy.
Chapter 8: *Ubik*

COMPETITION, BALANCE, AND THE PARANOID HORROR OF LOST REALITY

With the addition of competition and the potential for balance between two opposed forces, Dick returns to an idea he first introduced very early in his writing career, and continued to write about later in his VALIS trilogy. The primary duality, and the one Dick repeatedly returned to, is reality versus deception. Dick plainly sympathises with the forces acting to restore reality, portraying those against reality as manipulative, malicious and evil. Starting with *Ubik* (*Ubik* 1969), Dick associates the forces acting for reality with the notion of an all-powerful creator. *Ubik* places the forces in balance, but later works offer a more traditionally omnipotent deity who, although the inevitable victor, has succumbed, at least temporarily, to deception.

Dick’s fondness for dualistic cosmogonies began very early in his writing career with novels such as *The Cosmic Puppets* (*CP* 1957), *Time Out of Joint* (*TOJ* 1959) and *The Man in the High Castle* (*MHC* 1962) (DiTommaso, ‘Gnosticism and Dualism in the Early Fiction of Philip K. Dick’). One of his earliest novels, *The Cosmic Puppets*, pits a young boy and girl, Peter and Mary, against each other. Each is the vehicle for larger powers. Peter and Mary respectively represent the opposing deities of Zurvanism, a branch of the Zoroastrian religion. Zurvanism dispenses with the all-powerful creator of monotheism and posits a balance between two competing deities. In *The Cosmic Puppets* Peter acts to conceal reality by replacing the small town of Millgate with a false and altered replica. Mary wishes to restore reality. The dynamic is startlingly similar to *Ubik*, which also posits a dualistic balance with opposing agents acting to respectively conceal and reveal reality.

The same dynamic reappears in the Dick’s late novels. *VALIS* (*VALIS* 1981) and *The Divine Invasion* (*TDI* 1981) set up dualisms between forces of deception – Belial in *Invasion* and the Empire in *VALIS* – and forces of truth and absolute reality – Zina and Emmanuel in Invasion and Sophia and Zebra in *VALIS*. For the most part, Dick associates deception with masculine agency and reality with female agency. An exception appears in *The Divine Invasion* where Emmanuel and Zima, male and female respectively, both represent true reality.
Chapter 8

One potential reason for Dick’s fascination with dualist systems, and his tendency to feature gender prominently in his cosmogony, is the early loss of his twin sister. Jane Charlotte Dick died in early infancy, an event that evidently had a huge impact on Dick, whose letters and personal writing are riddled with mentions of Jane. Lawrence Sutin posits the early loss of Dick’s twin sister as ‘the central event of Phil’s psychic life’ which results in ‘a fascination with resolving dualist (twin-poled) dilemmas’ (12). Dick’s frequent use of twins in his many novels shows how important the idea of twinship is to him, as does the motif of a living twin and a dead or half-dead twin, as in *The Crack in Space* (CS 1966) and *Dr. Bloodmoney* (DB 1965).

It is hard not to read powerful representations of Dick’s feelings about his dead twin into these novels. The novels indicate the depth of emotion Dick felt and the impact Jane’s death had on him. In *The Crack in Space* George and Walt (‘George Walt’) are conjoined twins, but at some time in the past one of them died. They are so entwined in each other’s existence that the living twin creates a simulacrum of the dead twin – it is necessary for his psychic survival. The key biographical elements are all present: one twin is alive and the other is dead. The surviving twin still feels a deep bond with the dead twin. By making George and Walt conjoined twins, Dick entwines their existences even closer. It is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins and we never find out for sure which of the twins is dead and which is alive.

In *Dr. Bloodmoney* – which will receive more sustained analysis in the next chapter – Edie’s twin brother Bill, a name close to ‘Phil’, was never independently born, and subsists inside her. No-one else can see or hear him. Separated from the living world that exists outside his sister, Bill becomes able to speak with the dead. As in *The Crack in Space*, the closeness of the twins is emphasised by a literal joining of their flesh. Edie’s bond is invisible and incomprehensible to those who cannot feel the presence of her brother – not unlike the way an outsider might not understand or ‘see’ the bond Philip Dick could feel for a long-dead infant sister he could not possibly remember. Again, one twin is connected with the living world, and the other twin with the world of death. However, it would be a gross simplification to say one is alive and the other dead. With George Walt, one twin is literally dead and a simulacrum – but there is a Schrödinger’s cat-like uncertainty about which twin is dead, casting a pall of ambiguity over the state of George and Walt that is never dispelled by observation (CS 76). In the case of Edie and Bill, one twin has never truly been born into the world and has a bond with the dead that
gives him a foot in both worlds. To use a term with scientific overtones and one Dick uses in *Ubik*, the twins have a half-life existence.

These biographical details suggest some of the appeal dualisms hold for Dick and the unique importance they have in his writing. Ella Runciter and Jory Miller, whose surname reminds the reader of Millgate in *The Cosmic Puppets*, are part of an on-going discussion in Dick’s writing.

**Opposition, Competition, Balance**

Ella and Jory provide the primary duality in *Ubik*, but the overall structure of the novel is based on oppositional pairs. The novel begins as it ends, with a situation of precarious balance between two opposing forces. *Ubik* fits Tzvetan Todorov’s structuralist model of a novel beginning in equilibrium and undergoing a ‘period of imbalance’ before finding a different equilibrium (75).

Characteristically, Dick begins with a classic science fiction device, psionic powers, but creates his own spin by adding an equal and opposite force: the inertials. Matching these two groups of people are the larger business interests of Runciter Associates and Hollis Talents. On every level, these forces are matched. Individual telepaths are matched – and cancelled out – by individual inertials: ‘an anti-talent for every talent’ (*Ubik* 42). Joe Chip describes the situation as a natural one of ‘Balance, the full circle, predator and prey. It appears to be an eternal system; and, frankly, I can’t see how it could be improved’ (*Ubik* 31). The complicating incident in the novel occurs when Hollis’s top telepath, S. Dole Melipone, disappears from Earth. The balance tips, and only tips further as events proceed.

Dick’s portrayal of psionic powers and his introduction of a countervailing force in the form of inertials is, in part, a reaction to the editorship of John W. Campbell Jr., the guiding hand in Golden Age science fiction. Campbell’s strong preference when selecting stories was that they include some element of psionic power portrayed in a positive light. Dick, in an interview with Richard Lupoff, said he ‘had a very strong prejudice against psionics’ and ‘thought it was a form of the occult and should not be allowed to invade science fiction’, an attitude which prevented him from selling to Campbell in those early years (‘A Conversation with Philip K. Dick’). By the time Dick wrote *Ubik*, he had
overcome his aversion, but still tended to portray those with mutant abilities as ‘dangerous to us ordinaries, a view which John W. Campbell Jr. deplored’ (‘Story Notes’ in GM 332). Thus, Dick gave a balancing view to Campbell’s, just as his inertials balance the psionics in *Ubik*.

The initial balance between telepath and inertial, Hollis and Runciter, is never explicitly restored. Instead the battle shifts onto new fields. The action moves from the waking world to the half-life world of those stored in cold-pac where new binary patterns of balance and imbalance appear. Jory and Ella emerge as the prime movers in this field, and by the end of the novel a new balance is found between the predation, deception and regression Jory employs and the vivifying, stabilising power of Ella and Ubik. Just as Joe Chip characterises the balance between telepath and inertial as inevitable and eternal, so too does Ella characterise the balance between herself and Jory, and the forces they represent, as ‘a verity, a rule, of our kind of existence’ (*Ubik* 215).

Ella and Jory represent fundamental cosmic forces and so are of unusual significance in the novel; a fact I will return to. However, there are many more examples of dualistic structures throughout *Ubik* than those that provide the complicating action – inertial and telepath – and final balance: Ella and Jory. By interweaving binary patterns throughout the novel, Dick turns what might initially appear a simple structure into one of rich complexity. Each instance of duality suggests to the reader further associations. To illustrate using an idea introduced a little earlier, Dick makes use of the simple dualism of gender. He then associates gender with another dualism, reality and deception.

The logic is poetic more than analytic. There’s no reason gender should be associated with these other two categories, but there is a pleasing symmetry to the association and one not unique to Dick. Gnosticism also associates ‘female’ with ‘reality’ and ‘male’ with ‘deception’, describing the deceptive creator-God Samael as male, and the redemptive truth principle, Sophia, as female. Gnosticism reverses the Christian creation story, transforming Eve into a force for redemption instead of damnation.\[57\]

---

57 See Karen L. King’s collection *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, and especially Elaine Pagel’s chapters ‘Pursuing the Spiritual Eve’ and ‘Adam and Eve and the Serpent in Genesis 1-3’ for an excellent analysis of how the Gnostic texts treat with the feminine.
Once a dualistic pattern is established, there is a temptation to categorise each new dualism in terms of the old dualism. Good/evil, male/female, black/white, sun/moon, life/death, knowledge/ignorance; each new dualism becomes associated with the two polarities of another dualism, and the interplay of meaning between the many categories becomes rich and dense. This poststructuralist analysis and the implicit prioritisation of one of the binaries are familiar, especially, to feminist thinkers. Each new dualism adds exponentially to the complexity of the system. The problem with a system built on multiplying binary relationships and associating them with each other is that there is no real reason two different sets of binary opposition need to be equated, even assuming the two polarities do not represent a form of false dilemma, excluding the middle ground in favour of clear categorisation. Philosophically, logically and even ethically, dualities can be something to be suspicious of, but in terms of aesthetics and the rich interplay of meaning in fiction, they help to make Dick’s novels vivid and complex.

Dick creates a division between the ‘real’ world and the strange world of ‘half-life’. The two worlds also possess their own balance with people dying in the real world and entering half-life then leaving their half-life existence to be reborn into the waking world (Ubik 17), in one account, or to float off into the universe (Ubik 16), according to another. The two worlds are not isolated. People in the real world can communicate with those in half-life and vice-versa. Glen Runciter and his wife straddle the divide. Their relationship persists beyond death, as she lives on in a half-life and he survives in the real world. She takes an active hand in the business they own together, while he offers a link to the real world. Complementing the Runciters’ dual-world existence, Glen is also Joe Chip’s link to the real world, transmitting messages across the divide to Joe’s confused consciousness. Ella also acts to stabilise reality for Joe, looking out for him in half-life just as Glen tries to help him in the real world.

While not literal twins, Ella and Glen live mirrored existences that stretch between life and half-life. Each manages their joint business from across the boundary. Similarly, Glen and Joe form a twinned pair. Glen helps Joe from the real world and acts as a link to

---

58 Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* or Cixous and Clément’s *The Newly Born Woman* are the classic examples of such analysis.
Chapter 8

reality by causing Joe’s *anamnesis* with messages and intrusions into half-life.\(^{59}\) Joe and Glen have an complementary pairing for most of the novel. When Joe thinks he is alive, he thinks Glen is dead. When he realises he is in half-life, he also realises Glen is alive. The conclusion of the novel inverts the relationship one final time, suggesting Glen is in half-life while Joe is the link to reality.

As discussed earlier, Dick often returns in his work to the idea of a twin relationship where one twin is alive and the other is in an uncertain state, neither fully alive nor fully dead. In the case of George and Walt, one of them is dead and has been replaced by a simulacrum, but we never find out which one. In the case of Edie and Bill, Bill is alive, though he has not been fully born into the world. He straddles death and life, and is able to communicate with both the living and the dead. *Ubik* perpetuates this dynamic, creating ersatz twin relationships between Glen and Joe and Glen and Ella that stretch between life and half-life. While not literal twins, their similarities with the other twin relationships establish Glen and Ella’s connection as part of the same pattern.

There are correlations between the half-life world and Dick’s earlier illusory realities. In half-life, personal reality becomes detached from objective reality, as in *Eye in the Sky* (*Eye* 1957) or ‘The Electric Ant’ (1969). Personal reality also becomes permeable as there is ‘a mutual osmosis, a suffusion between the mentalities of half-lifers’ (*Ubik* 21), much as individual realities bleed into each other in *Martian Time-Slip* (*MTS* 1964). Finally, personal realities become taken over by another who brings his victims into a world of his own creation, as happens by accident in *Eye in the Sky* and by malicious design in *The Three Stigmata* (*TSPE* 1965). With the addition of balance and the corrective force of *Ubik*, *Ubik* advances Dick’s metaphysical dialogue. Dick’s attempts at balance make the world less hostile; but there is still a great deal of danger and threat present for the characters.

The threatened loss of reality is signified by a number of motifs that recur in Dick’s writing but are more strongly exemplified in *Ubik* than anywhere else in his oeuvre. These motifs help to illustrate how the loss of reality is portrayed and what attitude

\(^{59}\) *Anamnesis* literally means ‘unforgetting’, and is a term used in Gnosticism to describe the moment of revelation where concealed knowledge is recovered or the layer of deception removed. Since Joe’s situation is concealed from him by Jory Miller, his discovery of reality is more akin to a Gnostic *anamnesis* than a new discovery.
toward that loss the writer is trying to cultivate in his readers. Each motif is a building block in what is, essentially, both a philosophical and aesthetic creation. They combine to give the illusory realities in Dick’s works a certain ‘feel’ or ‘texture’, unique to his work, while at the same time tapping into ideas that are more wide-ranging than may be immediately apparent.

**Half-Life: Weightlessness, Entropy and Regression**

Gravity is a powerful and easily recognised symbol of attachment to reality. People with a firm grip on reality are ‘well-grounded’, ‘have their feet on the ground’ and are even ‘down to earth’, while people less attached to reality might have ‘their head in the clouds’. Dick – who for a science fiction writer talks surprisingly little about gravity – uses weightlessness to signify the loss of stable reality. He uses the metaphor to convey both the positive and negative aspects of losing contact with reality. In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explore how the orientational metaphors of ‘up’ and ‘down’ are commonly used in society, and how those uses often originate in physical facts about our bodies and the world they exist in (14). Dick’s use of weightlessness to signify the loss of reality has a similar origin in embodied existence, since the everyday objects of our reality are on the ground, while the things above our head like the sky and stars are normally beyond our reach and without apparent relevance to the practically-minded. Flight and the orientation of up tend to suggest fancy and fantasy and thus disconnection from the real world.

In *Ubik*, entering half-life means losing touch with stable reality. For the most part, Dick portrays this event as a negative one. Half-life is filled with ominous signs. Ella sees ‘a smoky red light, a horrible light. And yet I kept moving toward it. I couldn’t stop’ (*Ubik* 17). Dick drew inspiration for his account from the *Bardo Thodol*, which defines a vision after death of the ‘soft smoky light of hell-beings’ as leading a person toward a rebirth into a lower form (Karma-gliṅ-pa, Fremantle, and Trungpa 66). This ominous

---

60 Commonly known in English as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *Bardo* is a religious text from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition popularised in the West by Timothy Leary, who published *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the ‘Tibetan Book of the Dead’* in 1964, five years before the first publication of *Ubik*. Dick was familiar with the first English translation of the *Bardo (Exegesis 919)*
introduction to half-life is supplemented by three powerful metaphors: loss of gravity, the acceleration of entropy, and regression to earlier, less evolved states.

In our first introduction to half-life, Ella describes it as being akin to the loss of gravity:

Gravity, she had told him, once; it begins not to affect you and you float, more and more. When half-life is over, she had said, I think you float out of the System, out into the stars. But she did not know either; she only wondered and conjectured. *(Ubik 16)*

Ella’s description is deeply symbolic. Without objective reality to keep her tied to this world, she becomes groundless and feels, literally, as if she might float away. Milan Kundera makes a similar metaphorical comparison in his *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, using weightlessness to illustrate the experience of living in the absence of a unifying belief-system or without ultimate meaning: a feeling that could positively be described as liberating, and negatively as unbearably detached. Ella’s description indicates a similar detachment from ‘objective’ reality, as well as discomfort with her situation.

Dick also uses the metaphor of mass and gravity in his naming of the ‘inertials’ who act to nullify psionic powers. The name evokes two different impressions. The first is stillness and inactivity: the inertials render the psionics inactive or ‘inert’. Present in this meaning is the suggestion of danger defused, as when a bomb or radioactive substance is rendered inert. The second meaning, related to the first, refers to momentum, and links inertia to gravity. The common if erroneous apprehension is that gravity and inertia are both forces that resist motion – though inertia is not a force at all. The inertials act to maintain stability, preventing the psionics from wreaking havoc amongst the unprotected populace. In this context, the ‘inertia’ they provide is a powerful and essential balancing force.

However, to give a full account of how Dick uses the metaphor’s negative and positive connotations, the loss of stable reality indicated by gravity waning might be disconcerting, but it is also liberating. Ella’s description of floating ‘out of the System, out into the stars’ *(Ubik 16)* could be a type of release. In it she leaves behind her gross, physical body, and transcends it and the solar system. Her ascent could be characterised as a kind of science fiction Rapture, with the stars standing for angel-packed clouds.
In *Time Out of Joint*, Ragle Gumm also finds the loss of gravity liberating. On his first trip into space, he revels in the experience:

Free of gravity. The greatest tie had ceased to hold him. The fundamental force that kept the universe of matter behaving as it did. The Heisenberg Unified Field Theory had connected all energy, all phenomena into a single experience. Now, as his ship left Earth, he passed from that experience to another, the experience of pure freedom. (*TOJ* 203)

The description uses scientific jargon – in this case Dick imagines Werner Heisenberg perfecting the Unified Field Theory Heisenberg had been working on when *Time Out of Joint* was written – to describe an emotional experience in a manner familiar to science fiction readers (Vizgin xv). In the passage, Ragle considers gravity a synecdoche for ‘all energy, all phenomena’ and symbolic of his life on Earth, and thus the loss of gravity represents freedom from the connections that previously bound him. Ragle’s recollection of leaving Earth is entirely positive, and he describes it in a way that makes leaving Earth akin to transcending a previous existence and moving to a different plane of reality. The experience is entirely in Ragle’s head, but this is sufficient. His escape from gravity soon turns into an escape from reality, as it immediately precedes his regression back to his 1950s childhood.

Joe Chip’s entry into a new reality – the reality of half-life – is also preceded by a moment of weightlessness, albeit not his own. When ‘Stanton Mick floated to the ceiling of the room’ (*Ubik* 72) it heralded the explosion that catapults Joe from life to half-life. The moment is deliberately unreal, or, more aptly, surreal, and offers the observant reader a clue that what follows might not conform to his or her expectations of the real world. A similar moment occurs in *The Three Stigmata*, where the Martian colonists’ transition into Palmer Eldritch’s world is immediately preceded by the arrival of Palmer Eldritch, in the flesh, so to speak:

At the same time Palmer Eldritch danced back, lithely, bounding upward in the slight Martian gravity; like a balloon – Barney stared but did not believe – he floated off, grinning with his huge steel teeth, waggling his artificial arm, his lank body slowly rotating. (*TSPE* 165–66)
The two scenes are strikingly similar, even down to both Eldritch ‘slowly rotating’ while Stanton Mick twists ‘in a slow, transversal rotation’ (*Ubik* 72). In both novels, the surreal moment takes place in what is, essentially, the characters’ last contact with reality, both marking the transition out of reality and devaluing the idea that reality has to seem real.

Portraying gravity and the associated loss of reality as first positive and then negative is consistent with how Dick usually represents the loss of reality. Initially, the experience is a positive one and liberating. Consider the freedom people feel when they first take Chew-Z and enter a world more amenable to their conscious control. The Martian colonists, in particular, have a need for the experience of Chew-Z and Can-D: they feel oppressed by the lack of control they have over their environment. Most are forced to emigrate to Mars and, once there, cannot leave. On Mars, they find themselves at the mercy of the arid, barren soil. Their physical environment is beyond their control, so they turn to the psychical control offered by Chew-Z and Can-D. However, the experience does not last. Oppression replaces freedom, and the loss of reality that was initially a boon becomes a torment. Similarly, Ragle’s freedom and escape through regression is not a true escape: the government uses his delusion to maintain their control over him and trap him further.

Joe Chip and the inertials who enter half-life with him do not experience the same loss of gravity Ella describes. Most likely this is because her progress through half-life is more advanced and she is ‘far on the road to being reborn’ (*Ubik* 218) and because Dick does not want to give away that they are in half-life too soon. However, gravity does play an important part in Joe and the inertials’ experience. In contrast with the weightlessness and detachment Ella experiences is the terrible power of Jory Miller. When Jory first tries to consume Joe Chip, Joe experiences an inescapable sense of oppressive gravity and inertia:

> It must be me; I’m slowed down, compressed by gravity. His world had assumed the attribute of pure mass. He perceived himself in one mode only: that of an object subjected to the pressure of weight. One quality, one attribute. And one experience. Inertia. (*Ubik* 181)

Joe’s experience is the opposite of Ella’s weightlessness. Ella’s experience is expansive, widening her horizons to include the stars beyond the solar system. In contrast, Joe’s
reality compresses down into ‘one mode only: that of an object subjected to the pressure of weight.’ The picture created is claustrophobic and grim. His reality shrinks into a single element of gross physicality. He stops being a person and turns into an ‘object’. As an object, he is at the mercy of the forces that act on him. Dick’s passive everyman protagonist becomes even more passive, while at the same time more force must be exerted just to stay still. He acts against the weight bearing down on him, driving himself up the stairs seeking solitude, but his movement is not voluntary or to combat the pressure; instead it is as if ‘a biological necessity is at work’ and he is ‘governed by a tropism’ (*Ubik* 184). Dick uses tropisms to describe the lowliest orders of things: insensate machines and bugs are governed by tropisms, and when humans are ruled by these drives, then Dick questions their very humanity, suggesting they are ‘inanimate’ because they are ‘led, directed by built-in tropisms’ (‘The Android and the Human’ 187).

By moving against the pressure, Joe does not escape his doom; he accelerates it. Dick’s description is powerful, with a sense of oppression. The inertia he describes is akin to the most crushing of depressions, where action and movement become incomprehensible and the world reduces down to misery. Nevertheless, the tropism forces him to move, and overcoming inertia has a cost for him. His clothes begin to fray and tatter, as entropy accelerates for him. He is helpless as he climbs toward ‘death, decay and non-being’ (*Ubik* 184) a climb that is ‘culminating in the grave’ (*Ubik* 184). Once more, Dick returns to the idea of two competing forces acting to create balance, but in this scene the two opposed forces are immense and the junction between the two is not the stillness of calm equilibrium, but the tensed stillness of a ship’s rigging in a high wind.

Joe Chip’s climb bears many similarities to the climb of Wilbur Mercer in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (*DADES?* 1968). Like Mercer, Joe finds himself driven, without reason or motive, to climb. Where Mercer climbs a hill in a desert, Joe climbs steps in a hotel. Joe and Mercer fight against gravity and inertia, and the climb becomes steadily more difficult as with each step ‘the weight on him grew’ (*DADES?* 198; *Ubik* 187). The culmination of the climb has been death for the others who have taken it. For Mercer, however, it is not true death, but a plunge into the ‘tomb world’ (*DADES?* 22) which is, itself, only part of a cycle of death and rebirth.**61** Joe sees the final

**61** See Chapter 4 for a more detail of Dick’s notion of the ‘tomb world’.
consummation of the process occurring in ‘the world of the tomb’ (*Ubik* 186). The similarities are remarkable. This scene is plainly one of deep meaning for Dick.

Just as gravity synechdocally represents a number of different physical forces for Ragle Gumm, in Joe Chip’s climb gravity comes to stand for other life forces. In the following passage, Joe associates metabolism with heat, heat with life and the body, and the body with weight. The entire process is compared to the entropic process.

Metabolism, he reflected, is a burning process, an active furnace. When it ceases to function, life is over. They must be wrong about hell, he said to himself. Hell is cold; everything there is cold. The body means weight and heat; now weight is a force which I am succumbing to, and heat, my heat, is slipping away. And, unless I become reborn, it will never return. This is the destiny of the universe, so at least I won’t be alone. (*Ubik* 186)

When talking about the ‘destiny of the universe’, Dick alludes to the entropic ‘heat-death’ of the universe. As Joe succumbs to the crushing power of gravity, his ‘heat, my heat, is slipping away’, referring to both his immediate circumstances and to the inevitable and unstoppable loss of energy in the form of heat that occurs in every energetic transaction. This energy, once lost, cannot be recovered, and must inexorably result in the eventual winding-down of the universe to a low energy state, where pattern succumbs to chaos, and energy is spread out evenly through the closed system of the universe. Joe Chip’s climb is a microcosmic representation of the eventual destruction of the universe, massively sped up. The overwhelming impression is that of waste, as enormous and competing forces are brought out in a competition that can only ever be a victory for entropy. In this process, Jory feeds off the entropic forces, and thus is allied with the destructive processes. Ella and Ubik, in contrast, are allied with sustaining and – if such a thing is possible – creating energy.

Entropy is a physical property, observed and measured by science, but Dick and other science fiction writers are in the game of relating scientific discoveries to human existence. Translating entropy into human terms is a bleak task. Entropy throws doubt on the purpose and meaning of existence and raises the question: What is the point of anything if the end result is already determined?
In science fiction entropy often represents the end of all things and the futility of action in the face of an uncaring universe. H. G. Wells portrays the end of the world through entropy in *The Time Machine*, describing a low-energy existence under a red and dying sun on an Earth populated only by creatures that themselves seem to feed on death and decay: crab-like scavengers. J. G. Ballard is struck by Wells’ vision of the end of things and especially by his use of a beach and the encroachment of water to symbolise the end of the universe, as can be seen in Ballard’s *The Drowned World*. The beach is the terminal point between land and sea. As a terminus, Wells uses the beach to symbolise the end of time and the end of the world. Ballard uses the same idea in his short story *The Terminal Beach* and returns to the idea many times in his works. Olaf Stapledon’s *Star Maker* describes the universe moving to a low energy state, while intelligent adapt by becoming chary with the remaining energy and transition to more and more frugal forms of existence, until they resemble tiny worm-like creatures living under the surface of cold planets. These bleak visions are expansive and all-encompassing, dealing in mostly literal ways with the demise of the universe.

In contrast, for Dick entropy is as personal and psychological as it is impersonal and physical. Dick often represents the victory of entropy and the associated mechanisms of decay and disintegration as a type of personal hell. Joe makes the same association when he observes that ‘Hell is cold’ (*Ubik* 186) as his heat slips away into the void; one irony of the ‘heat-death’ of the universe is that with all energy diffused evenly through the immense cosmos, it is likely to be a cold place, only slightly above absolute zero. The implication ‘heat-death’ has of ‘death by heat’ is a result of translating Hermann von Helmholz’s term *Wärmetod* – the death of heat – in a very literal way. Dick, either through his interest in entropy or his working knowledge of German, could well have been aware of the issue.

The victory of entropy is also, for Dick, the victory of depression as the individual falls into Ellen West and Dick’s tomb world, filled as it is with all the decayed manifestations of biological entropy. It is the hell of Manfred Steiner in *Martian Time-Slip* as he lies helpless in a rest home, his physical form so completely eroded that he is nothing more than a suffering mind in a hospital bed. Entropy lies waiting in the background of most of Dick’s novels, on Earth in the silence of abandoned apartments, the steady advance of
kipple and the slow decay of mentality and procreative ability in Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?; under the waters of Plowman’s Planet in Galactic Pot Healer (GPH 1969), where there exists ‘a world dominated by the force of unyielding entropy and nothing else’ (GPH 90) that threatens to envelop the world above the surface; in the tendency of machines to break and in the futility of artisans and repairers to hold back the tide of mechanical disintegration; and in the quiet moments of every one of Dick’s protagonists, whose passivity can tip imperceptibly and with minimal provocation from persistence and dogged survival into depression and hopelessness.

In Ubik, entropy features heavily in Jory’s world. Jory exerts constant effort to keep entropy from engulfing his creations, which all tend towards dust, regression into the past and obsolescence. Jory uses and accelerates entropy to assist his own survival, but it is as much a danger to him as it is to everyone else. There is a carefully cultivated sense throughout Ubik that everything exists on the edge of entropic ruin. This sense of being suspended over the brink ties in with the impression Dick wishes to foster: that ‘Dickian’ sense of reality as a fragile and possibly only temporary state.

The slip into entropic ruin is, for Dick, emblematic of lost reality. Dick frequently uses accelerated entropy and the micro-level forces of decay and dissolution he associates with it to represent moments when reality is lost, or as a symbol that reality has already been lost. In Ubik, the acceleration of rot and decay is a clue to the characters and the reader that all is not as it should be, and that they are outside normal reality. In Time Out of Joint and ‘Adjustment Team’ (1954), lost reality is shown by having solid things fall into dust, like ancient ruins crumbling under the weight of time. In Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said (FMT 1974), Alys Buckman causes a false reality to come into existence, but the price she pays is to experience accelerated aging and decay until nothing remains of her except a yellowed skeleton, not unlike the mummified corpses Jory leaves behind as the end-result of his power to conceal and take over reality.

By associating accelerated entropy with lost reality, Dick induces a sense of hopelessness in his characters and readers when ‘real’ reality is lost. The heat-death of the universe is a distant concern, but by accelerating its arrival in Jory’s false reality, Dick brings the futility of existence in the face of its inevitable end into close focus. The associated
symbols of decay populate his false realities, and give them a forbidding presence. The half-life world of lost reality is, for Dick, the tomb world.

Entropy always has terrifying overtones in Dick’s works. As mentioned earlier, in the section in Chapter 6 entitled ‘The Hungry God/Machine/Alien’, Dick considers entropy emblematic of the end of individuality, as it culminates in a homogeneous state. He portrays such homogeneity as fearful, associating it with death and being eaten. This reading is corroborated by Jory’s use of entropy as a way of parasitically feeding on a person’s life energy.

Like the hungry god of ‘Rautavaara’s Case’, Jory feeds off those who enter his reality. Palmer Eldritch’s broad metal jaws might hint at a type of consumption and hunger, but in The Three Stigmata, Eldritch’s absorption of an individual is more figurative than literal. Dick adds to the horror of lost reality by literalising the figurative ‘consumption’ of individual reality. Jory is a hungry being, and all his incarnations possess large, square teeth, from Tippy Jackson’s early dream of twin telepaths with ‘great, pale teeth, as blunt as shovels’ (Ubik 52) to the young boy with ‘gray, shabby teeth’ (Ubik 204) Joe confronts. Jory’s hunger is literal and terrible:

Snarling, Jory bit him. The great shovel teeth fastened deep into Joe’s right hand. They hung on as, meanwhile, Jory raised his head, lifting Joe’s hand with his jaw; Jory stared at him with unwinking eyes, snoring wetly as he tried to close his jaws. The teeth sank deeper and Joe felt the pain of it throughout him. He’s eating me, he realized. (Ubik 206–207)

The ‘shovel teeth’, ‘wet snore’, ‘unwinking eyes’ and even his ‘snout’ (Ubik 207) emphasise Jory’s animalistic nature. His teeth, especially, single him out as not quite human; Tippy notices in an early vision of Jory as the twins Matt and Bill that ‘Even their incisors were blunt. As if they lived on a diet of uncooked seeds’ (Ubik 52).62

---

62 There is a small question as to why Dick gives Jory the broad, flat teeth of a herbivore instead of the sharp incisors of a carnivore – after all, Jory does eat people, and Dick no doubt wants to make Jory a figure of fear. Jory’s teeth are suggestive of Homo sapiens neanderthalensis, who, Dick thought, possessed
Despite alluding to a herbivorous diet, Dick still manages to give Jory a terrible aspect. Jory’s hunger for flesh seems even more unnatural when he is described as ‘working his jaws sideways like a sheep’s’ (*Ubik* 207). Jory’s ‘unwinking eyes’ remind the reader more of the blank and apathetic gaze of a ruminant, while the description of the wet snoring noise he makes as he eats, and the characterisation of his nose as a ‘snout’ give the impression of a powerful pig feeding at a trough. The conventional terror of being consumed by a predator is subverted into a much more unusual, but equally gruesome, prospect, while the prey is reduced to nothing more than passive plant. Dick taps into Western society’s subterranean contempt for herbivores, and degrades Joe by placing him below the food chain under a creature with herbivore attributes.63

Dick consistently portrays what were then thought to be these close historical ancestors of humanity as a threat. In *The Crack in Space* they threaten to invade and overcome humanity. In *The Simulacra* the chuppers are delighted when they see humans engaged in civil war, killing each other and giving the chuppers ‘a space to squeeze into’ (*TS* 208). In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the androids, who represent a threat to humanity, are described as ‘anachronistic’ and physically akin to the ‘Cro-Magnon’ (*DADES*? 160). Like androids, god-like aliens and humans without empathy, Neanderthals lie just on the broader and more undifferentiated teeth compared with *H. sapiens sapiens*. Dick was fascinated with Neanderthals and other close relations to humanity, and frequently used them in his writing. *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike* (*Teeth* w.1960, pub.1982) centres on the discovery of fossil remains resembling *H. neanderthalensis*. *The Crack in Space* reveals a parallel world inhabited by the descendants of *H. erectus pekinensis*. *The Simulacra* (*TS* 1964) has a throwback-race of ‘chuppers’; Dick first coins the word in *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike* to refer to the Neanderthals. *The Three Stigmata* makes a direct comparison between Eldritch’s ‘giant stainless steel molars’ and ‘Neanderthal teeth’ (*TSPE* 187). Anne Dick even recalls an argument she had with her ex-husband regarding the diet of Neanderthals (*Search for Philip K. Dick* 59–60) – Phil insisted they were vegetarians with broad, even teeth for chewing grains, while Anne and the rest of the scientific establishment of the time believed they were meat eaters – and Philip Dick rarely neglects to associate his Neanderthals with a vegetarian diet, as he does in *The Crack in Space, The Simulacra* and *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike*.62

63 Consider the common metaphorical association of predation with being ‘up’ or ‘on top’ as in phrases like ‘top of the food chain’, ‘apex predator’ and ‘king of the jungle’, and the associations the orientation of ‘up’ has with dominance, winning, health, and the good, as explored by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*.
other side of the uncanny valley: like us and subtly, significantly, unlike us. By giving Eldritch and Jory these large Neanderthal teeth Dick taps into the idea that they are, in some way, competition for the human race.

Jory’s Neanderthal teeth remind the reader of the regression associated with him and the false reality he creates. Just as his false reality conveys an impression of precariousness, with entropy and decay an ever-present threat, there is also a sense that anything can slip back into the past. Money, cars, and technology are all prone, when no-one is watching, to regress into an obsolete state. Like entropy and weightlessness, Dick often associates regression into the past with the loss of reality. To illustrate, in Time Out of Joint, Ragle Gumm’s false reality is 1950s America. In The Three Stigmata, the colonists on Mars use the drug Can-D and Perky Pat layouts to trick themselves into believing they live in an earlier, simpler time – the familiar and contemporary setting of Dick’s readers’ real world. In Now Wait for Last Year (NWLY 1966), Virgil Ackerman uses an elaborately faked set of his childhood home in Washington during 1935 to escape from reality. By turning what would have been the recent past to his readers into a faked and very distant past, Dick brings the themes of reality and deception back to our own context, and calls our reality into question.

For the characters in a science fiction novel, the past is as fantastic a prospect as their present is to us. By thrusting his characters into the past, Dick engages in a process of ‘estrangement’ like the one discussed in Chapter 6 in the section ‘The Familiar’. In associating regression with false reality, Dick returns to some of his earliest novels: those where present reality is shown to be contingent on a false history. The presence of elaborately ‘faked’ historical objects in novels like Flow, My Tears, The Policeman Said, The Man in the High Castle, The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike and The Penultimate Truth (PT 1964) highlight how elusive and potentially illusory Dick considers the past, and why he uses it to hint at the fragility of half-life reality in Ubik.64

‘It was the first Joe Chip money he had ever seen’

64 Also consider Dick’s religious hallucination/vision of 2-3-74, which pivots on the revelation/delusion that all of history is false, as further evidence of his distrust of the past.
Chapter 8

*The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Ubik* each treat Dick’s most troubling challenge for a real reality: the existence of a *deus deceptor*. *The Three Stigmata* concludes with hope for a return to reality; hope that is immediately undermined by the presence of Eldritch’s stigmata on the character expressing it. *Ubik* ends on a similarly ambiguous note. Joe has made contact with Ella Runciter, who has, with the help of Ubik, allowed him to escape from Jory’s clutches and solidify the transient reality he finds himself in. Ubik will not return him to life, but it strengthens him, repels Jory, and halts the rampant entropy, regression and decay that symbolise the loss of reality. Joe inherits Ella’s role as Jory’s opposition. In this role, Joe acts as an avatar, of sorts, for the debased divinity of Ubik and the link to reality it represents. Joe’s assumption of his new role restores the novel to balance, with Jory temporarily repulsed. This ending follows a thorough dénouement, with the complicated knots of what is real and what is false finally untied and the many different speculations finally put to rest; Jory is responsible for thrusting them into a false reality, while Ubik is responsible for bringing them back.

However, in a short final chapter, Dick destabilises the balance again. Glen Runciter – Joe Chip’s link to the external ‘real’ world – discovers that the money in his pocket has transformed into ‘Joe Chip’ money, with Joe’s profile on it. In Joe’s half-life, the appearance of ‘Runciter money’ was a hint to Joe that, contrary to his beliefs, he had died in the explosion, while Runciter had survived. Runciter does not understand the significance of what is obvious to the reader: Runciter has fallen down the rabbit hole.

Dick, it seems, just cannot resist pulling the world out from under the reader one more time. However, occurring after the dénouement, the short chapter seems tacked on and an uneasy fit with the rest of the novel. There is no sensible way to reconcile Runciter’s discovery with previous events. The chapter undermines the novel itself, casting a cloud of suspicion over all the previous events.

Fitting takes the opposite view, suggesting that the final chapter deliberately destabilises interpretation, causing the text to no longer be ‘a window opening onto a transcendental meaning’ but ‘a mirror which reflects the reader’s look, forcing him out of his familiar reading habits while drawing his attention to the functioning of the novel as a form of manipulation’ (‘Deconstruction’ 51). The success of this chapter is a judgement call on
On the one hand, it defies clear interpretation and draws attention to the functioning of the novel – a risk for any author, with the potential to elevate or ruin a work. Fitting construes this as a piece of deliberate artistry on the part of the author. However, his argument would apply equally well to some of Dick’s truly terrible novels. *Lies, Inc.* (*LI w.1964, pub.1984*) defies clear interpretation and reveals itself as manipulation *because* it is a poorly written and edited book, hammered together from pieces of text written years apart and tenuously joined together after the fact. In *Lies, Inc.* Rachmael ben Appelbaum travels to Whale’s Mouth by instant telepor (sic), and most of the events of the novel take place there. However, the last pages are written as if Rachmael never entered the telepor. Rather than some cunning twist, the error is the result of inserting new material – the visit to Whale’s Mouth by telepor – and sandwiching it into a story where Rachmael does not use the telepor. These contradictory events certainly destabilise interpretation and prevent *Lies, Inc.* from opening up to a transcendental meaning. That Fitting’s argument could equally well be applied to the obvious mistakes of *Lies, Inc.*, and even to the ending of a short story written by a ten year old where the protagonist wakes up and it was all a dream, suggests his argument lacks force.

On other occasions, Dick successfully subverts expectations and interpretation while still maintaining the integrity of his work, which the ending of *Ubik* does not achieve. Rick Deckard’s discovery of a live toad in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is a powerful moment, symbolic of Deckard’s link to Wilbur Mercer for whom the toad is a holy animal, and of a new-found connection with the natural world. The discovery that the toad is fake is an unexpected twist, and one that advances the theme of simulation and reality that is so central to *Androids*. However, the discovery does not undermine the novel itself; nor does it upset Deckard’s connection with Mercer and the natural world. Instead, the discovery of the fake toad adds another layer of complexity to the novel and to Deckard’s relationship with the world of natural things and simulacra, adding to the possible interpretations rather than taking them away. Runciter’s discovery does not open the novel up in the same way; instead it directly contradicts the main interpretation, closing it off, and opens up a new one that does not accord with the previous events.
Chapter 8

Freedman suggests the contradiction of the ending demonstrates the futility of the paranoid viewpoint. Since the ending of the novel defies systematisation, it presents ‘precisely the kind of epistemological disjunction that paranoia cannot allow’ (Freedman 21). Certainly, the ending does provide frustration for the ‘paranoid’ if the word is defined exclusively by excessive systematisation. However, the aspect of paranoia that perceives malice and trickery could only be satisfied with the ending. The truly paranoid was never fully satisfied with the dénouement because there are always more systematising to be done and more conspiracies to find. In a way, this ending is both criticism and celebration of the paranoid mind-set, demonstrating both its futility and the attraction of unending systematisation.

Hayles gives the ending relevance to real life. It shows, ‘of course’, that ‘normal life has begun to operate by the same rules as half-life’ (66). This in turn shows ‘the obvious conclusion’ that ‘our world is no more secure from the threat – and promise – of data-intensive environments than Dick’s fictional creation’ (66). Hayles’ certainty is misleading. The ending is not so clear cut. There are many possible interpretations of Glen Runciter’s discovery. It could mean, as Hayles suggests, that real life has stopped being real and has become more like half-life. It could also mean that Glen is no longer in reality and has entered a half-life, but that real life still exists. Hayles’ interpretation is interested in the real life philosophical and ontological implications rather than an exacting reading of the text which leads her to a more definite conclusion than the novel really allows.

To these readings, I would add one more – no more definitive than any interpretation of an ambiguous ending can be. Even in the ‘Joe Chip money’ ending there is still hope for a return to reality, corroborating this chapter’s reading of Ubik as, ultimately, a hopeful novel that is positive about the possibility of a real world. The Runciter money was Joe’s first hint that the world he found himself in was not the real one. Runciter gave Joe a connection to the real world. Runciter, Ella, Ubik and even the Runciter money are all part of the same dynamic, offering gnosia, a smooth passage through the otherwise hostile object world, and protection from Jory and his accelerated entropy and regression. When the notes in Joe’s pocket regress and become unusable, the Runciter money is still usable, continuing the metaphor of smooth movement through the world afforded by money.
initiated in the conapt scene. Thus, the Runciter money is connected to the notion of a static and accommodating reality as much as Ubik is. The discovery of Joe Chip money is not purely a victory for deception, Jory, or the idea of reality as purely contingent any more than it is a complete victory for Ubik. Rather it is a reminder that the battle is not won, and that the play of reality and deception is not over.

And We Finish with Ambiguity. Possibly.

Over the course of the last three chapters I explored two books that provide both the greatest opportunities and the greatest dangers for my central thesis. They are two of Dick’s best-known and best-received books, and both focus on his reality theme. The novels are driven forward by an overwhelming desire on the part of the characters to find reality, and by their rejection of the contingent reality offered by, respectively, Palmer Eldritch and Jory Miller. Both novels end with the rediscovery of reality that comes with the temporary defeat of the deceiver, and with their own observations of something real and inviolate the deceiver cannot touch.

In *The Three Stigmata* Bulero has faith a higher power acts through him, and is immune to Eldritch’s corruption:

> It’s nothing more than faith in powers implanted in me from the start which I can – in the end – draw on and beat him with. So in a sense it isn’t me; it’s something *in* me that even that thing Palmer Eldritch can’t reach and consume because since it’s not me it’s not mine to lose. I feel it growing. Withstanding the external, nonessential alterations, the arm, the eyes, the teeth – it’s not touched by any of these three, the evil, negative trinity of alienation, blurred reality, and despair that Eldritch brought back with him from Proxima. (*TSPE* 229)

Bulero’s hope is explicitly theological and Gnostic in kind. His ‘faith’ in powers ‘implanted in me from the start’ is a religious type of belief, that some creator has given him the power to resist deception, and find his own way to the truth. This ending to *The Three Stigmata* is that of a classical metaphysical realist who, like Leibniz and Malebranche, argues that God defines reality and ensures a connection between it and the mind.
Chapter 8

In *Ubik*, Joe expresses gratefulness to his connection with the powers that help him discover and return to reality, Ubik, Ella and Glen Runciter:

‘Thanks,’ Joe said to the spray can. We are served by organic ghosts, he thought, who, speaking and writing, pass through this our new environment. Watching, wise, physical ghosts from the full-life world, elements of which have become for us invading but agreeable splinters of a substance that pulsates like a former heart.

(*Ubik* 222)

Joe Chip describes something quite similar to what Leo Bulero describes in the passage from *The Three Stigmata*. In both there is a sense of an almost physical ontological substance that represents reality. Bulero describes it as a kind of ‘holiness’ (*TSPE* 229) while Joe uses the more physical metaphor of splinters of reality that pulse with life. In these passages, Dick’s protagonists are at their most Gnostic, worshiping shards of reality that pierce their world of delusion.

Immediately after allowing his protagonists their realist revelations, Dick undermines both of them. In the *Three Stigmata* he shows that Eldritch can reach beyond the stigmata and affect Leo Bulero more fundamentally, causing him to forget his name is ‘Leo’. In *Ubik*, Joe’s thankfulness to the ‘organic ghosts’ that reconnect him with the real world is undermined with the realisation that Glen Runciter – prime amongst Joe’s physical ghosts – is himself in a half-life. However, rather than proving, categorically, that the realist revelation is wrong, these twist endings show only that the issue is unresolved.

These endings are ambiguous. They do not completely destroy Joe or Leo’s revelations, but they do emphasise that these are fallible characters, and their realist revelations are also fallible. *Ubik* and *The Three Stigmata* do not reveal an author who is a realist, but nor do they reveal an author who thinks reality is an impossible goal. Instead, they reveal someone still searching, someone who hopes dearly for reality to reveal itself as fundamental, unchanging, and revealing itself in the midst of deception, but who sincerely doubts and cannot help asking, ‘but what if...?’
Chapter 9: Dr. Bloodmoney

IS AN APOCALYPSE THE END OF THE WORLD, OR A REVELATION? OR IS IT BOTH?

‘You will live and sleep for a thousand years,’ the Intercessor said, and guided him away from where he stood, into the stars. (MD 189)

Over the past eight chapters I have explored the many ways Dick upsets the idea that reality is static and stable in some of his best novels. For much of Dick’s metaphysical ‘play’ – and the sometimes light-hearted, sometimes dark and troubling cavalcade of ideas that parade through each work often has the feel of a dangerous sort of game – he uses established ontological categories to help create the metaphysical uncertainty he is so well known for. In particular, he uses interaction between subjective and shared reality, idios and koinos, to generate ontological doubt.

Perhaps the most interesting moments in Dick’s novels are moments of ‘transcendence’ when the categories of idios and koinos become irrelevant and even the question of what is real and what is not becomes pointless. Transcendence, with its roots in the Latin verb scandere, ‘to climb’ and the prefix ‘trans’ meaning ‘through’ or ‘beyond’, implies rising above something to reach something truer or more authentic. However, this is not the ultimate form of transcendence in Dick’s work. Rising above one category to reach another – overcoming illusion to discover ‘the real world’, for example – is a flawed strategy in his work, since the new level reached is immediately questioned. The most satisfactory and unique form of transcendence in Dick’s work is where the categories themselves are transcended.

The reality/illusion divide is not necessarily the only target of these transcendent moments, which Dick also uses to target other important dualities in his works. These moments, and the build-up to them, are the primary subject of this chapter. Fredric Jameson describes these moments as familiar ones in Dick’s œuvre:
Every reader of Dick is familiar with this nightmarish uncertainty, this reality fluctuation, sometimes accounted for by drugs, sometimes by schizophrenia, and sometimes by new SF powers, in which the psychic world as it were goes outside, and reappears in the form of simulacra or of some photographically cunning reproduction of the external. (‘After Armageddon’ 32)

To illustrate Jameson’s point, consider *Time Out of Joint (TOJ 1959)*. The protagonist, Ragle Gumm, experiences a psychic regression into the 1950s. The government then externalises Ragle’s psychic world, building a literal and concrete representation of his delusion and populating it with actors. Delusion and reality merge to help efface the boundary between psychic and physical. When the illusion is broken, what was Ragle’s external reality – 1950s suburban America – moves back into the realm of memory and mind. Complexity is added with the knowledge that what is a hallucinatory reality in the novel, namely 1950s America, was real reality when the novel was first published in 1959.

A similar dynamic occurs in *Now Wait for Last Year (NWLY 1966)* in which Virgil L. Ackerman, the wealthy and powerful business owner, employs people to build an exact replica of his childhood town of Washington in 1935, dubbed Wash-35. This setting only exists in the one hundred and eighty year old Virgil’s head – no-one else alive is old enough to remember this time and place. The external representation of Virgil’s internal reality is on Mars, emphasising the artificiality of the construct, and how divorced it is from the reality of the novel. Further blurring between external and internal reality is achieved with the irony that the world of the novel is a fictional construct, while 1935 would be a real memory for many of the people reading *Now Wait for Last Year* when it was first published in 1966. Dick himself was a child living in Washington in 1935 at the same address as Ackerman (Sutin 28) and, were he alive in 2055, he would be only three years younger than Virgil Ackerman himself.

These examples show the internal, subjective world moving into the external world and sometimes back again. The whole process is further complicated by the knowledge that it occurs inside a work of fiction. Jameson describes the effect these moments have on the reader:
The effect [...] is to efface the boundary between real and hallucinatory altogether, and to discredit the reader’s otherwise inevitable question as to which of the events witnessed is to be considered ‘true.’ (‘After Armageddon’ 32)

Jameson’s insight is excellent. However, for most of the transitions between real and hallucinatory, reality does exist to be found, and the boundary still exists. Ragle Gumm is living in 1998, not 1950s America – that setting is purely in his mind. Ackerman’s Wash-35 is a stage filled with robots, actors, simulacra and antiques, and is not the real thing. Rather than the question about what is real being completely discredited and the boundary effaced, we as readers follow the transitions with interest and actively speculate about what is ‘true’ in the novels. Were the boundary between reality and hallucination effaced, the novel would become uninteresting and the events within completely irrelevant, and if readers did not care about what was true, the main narrative force of most of the novels would be lost.

Rather than effacing the boundary between real and hallucination, each movement across makes the next a little easier. The reader becomes used to the quick shift between different theoretical explanations of what’s going wrong with reality, and accepting of more and more extreme explanations. Consider Ubik (Ubik 1969) and the progression and escalation of speculation about what is going wrong for Joe and his friends, leading up to the realisation that they died in the explosion and everything they have taken to be external reality is, in fact, the internal reality of people in cold-pac. Dick acclimatises the reader to his unique ontological play, saving the most extreme shifts until the end of the novel when the reader will be more open to them.

The culmination of this process is an event or events inexplicable according to the assumed reality of the novel at that point, where the boundary between what is real and what is not is effaced and the question of what is real is ultimately revealed to be immaterial; the question itself is transcended. Sometimes the issue is not reality, and one of the many other twin-poled dilemmas Dick finds so fascinating is transcended; a rather dark example is of Fred/Robert Arctor’s identity in A Scanner Darkly (SD 1977). Robert Arctor is a federal drug-abuse agent. Fred is his undercover persona and a drug-addict. As the novel progresses he moves between these two worlds, but finds it harder and harder to separate them until, at the end of the novel, he becomes detached from both. Burnt out by drugs and the strange circumstances of his life, he transcends both identities to become
‘Bruce’ who is neither Fred nor Robert, but, like Fred, is a genuine addict, ruined by drugs and, like Robert, instinctively calls people ‘sir’ and collects evidence to destroy the drug manufacturers.

Jameson’s insight is excellent, but there is more to the story than just the ‘effacement’ of boundaries. Sometimes Dick’s novels contain an affirmation of whatever twin-poled system is under discussion, even while in the process of overcoming it. The prime virtue of Dick’s protagonists is their persistence, and their main vice is surrender, but both the virtue and the vice can be passive qualities. Consider Wilbur Mercer’s message in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (*DADES?* 1968) that ‘There is no salvation’ (*DADES?* 153), and that the appropriate action is to persist. Mercer affirms everything – even the contradictions that cause the protagonists problems. The dilemmas and dualities of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* are inescapable, even as boundaries are effaced through an unending dialectical process represented by Mercer’s climb and descent.

Similarly, in *Ubik* Joe expresses his satisfaction with the model of balance provided by a dualistic system, represented for him by the Psionics and Anti-Psionics: ‘Balance, the full circle, predator and prey. It appears to be an eternal system; and, frankly, I can’t see how it could be improved’ (*Ubik* 31). When he experiences the difficulties of being part of the organic balance – as Jory’s prey – the tensions and injustices inherent in such a competitive system come to life for him. Nevertheless, the final conclusion is still that the opposition is eternal and inescapable, or, as Ella puts it, ‘a verity, a rule, of our kind of existence’ (*Ubik* 215).

Thus, ‘effacement’ is not the whole story, but it is part of it. For this reason, ‘transcendence’ has more descriptive advantages as a term. Dick’s protagonists do not completely efface the boundaries. Nor do they escape the systems they find themselves in. However, they do achieve a new attitude to these systems, an involved detachment that affirms the balance in order to overcome it – or transcend it.

This chapter will explore the process of effacement and transcendence, using *Dr. Bloodmoney* (*DB* 1965) as a case study. It provides an excellent example of the process that leads up to the effacement of boundaries – a process of erosion – and culminates in an event that is inexplicable in terms of subjective and objective, real and false, which I characterise as transcendent.

**How We Got Along After the Bomb**
Dr. Bloodmoney is an unusual book, even in a genre which embraces the unusual and strives for difference. The long title, with its not-so-subtle allusion to Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, suggests Dr. Bloodmoney is a post-apocalyptic novel focussed purely on what happens after the bomb is dropped, but this would be a misapprehension created by editor Don Wollheim’s desire to tap into a lucrative market (Sutin 300). Dr. Bloodmoney contains events before, during (in chapter five) and after the nuclear weapons are used. The apocalypse is anticipated in the form of a vision, a ‘time-slip’ in chapter four, and an earlier, narrowly averted disaster. It is echoed later in another near-disaster caused by the titular Dr. Bloodmoney, Bruno Bluthgeld. The echoes before and after the central event give the novel a balanced structure focussed on that uniquely powerful moment of the apocalypse.

Because Dr. Bloodmoney spans a period before, during and after the apocalypse, it is a rare sort of novel, as most writers portray the apocalypse as a terminal event, in the many senses the word ‘terminal’ implies. It implies endings, death and the termination or extermination of life. Thus, the apocalyptic moment usually occurs at the end of a novel, or as a potential ending that was deferred by the heroic actions of a brave few; Kurt Vonnegut’s Cat’s Cradle (1963) and Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove (1964) are examples. In these novels, the apocalypse signifies the terminal moment for the characters, plot and the novel itself. The apocalypse can also be the beginning of a new world, in which case the terminal moment becomes more like a train terminal, which signifies both the end of a journey and the beginning of another. We might think of John Wyndham’s The Chrysalids (1955), Walter Miller’s A Canticle for Leibowitz (1960), Russell Hoben’s Riddley Walker (1980), or even Dick’s own Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? as presenting worlds after the bombs have fallen. In the case of A Canticle for Leibowitz the post-apocalyptic world of the novel is also an interlude between nuclear wars, and is thus bounded on both sides by these terminal events. It is not surprising that the terminal moment generally occurs before or after the events of a novel; after all, it is the end of the world we’re talking about.

Dick’s choice to include the terminal moment is ambitious, unusual – but not inconceivable – and carves an exceptional place in apocalyptic fiction for Dr.

---

65 I will primarily use ‘Bluthgeld’ to refer to the character Bruno Bluthgeld in preference to ‘Dr. Bloodmoney’ or ‘Mr. Tree’ so as to avoid confusion with the title and to make the referent clear.
Bloodmoney as a novel that grapples directly with the inassimilable. The risk he faces as a writer in including the moment of nuclear apocalypse is to destroy the power of the terminal moment, and reduce it to an event like any other, albeit one of special horror. Dick avoids this risk by making the nuclear apocalypse an event of utter uncertainty, a symbol without a static referent, and yet one with unambiguously universal power. As such it creates, for Dick, an opportunity to return to his favourite theme: the uncertainty he perceives existing between the categories of reality and appearance, subjective and objective. What could be more objective than the explosion of a bomb? What could be more subjective than the end of the world?

(Where/When/How) Did the Bomb Drop?

Dick creates a terminal moment whose fundamental uncertainty is prefigured by being unseated in time. Initially the event occurs in an alcohol-induced vision – a small piece of prophetic foreshadowing that demonstrates the force of the event, which wreaks such a dramatic change that its effects are felt both before and after it occurs. Chapter four describes events from much later in the novel, and breaks its straightforward chronology, before returning to a moment before the bombs fall in chapter five, again unseating the event from a static timeline. The event is even anticipated in an earlier mishap, the ‘Bluthgeld Catastrophe of 1972’ (20) and echoed later in Bluthgeld’s aborted attempt to destroy the world, giving the powerful event the symmetry of ripples radiating from a stone dropped in a pond.

The monumental reality of the bomb seems unavoidable, as if it had already occurred. Dick taps into the fearful mentality of the era, when the terrible power of nuclear weapons and its potential for mutually assured destruction fell into the sphere of human capability, while the popular view of human nature had reached an all-time low following the horrors of two world wars and the realisation that a third could be possible, making a nuclear war seem a dreaded likelihood. Dr. Bloodmoney was written only a couple of years after the Cuban missile crisis, when the America and the world stood on the brink of nuclear war (‘Afterword’ 299). While we know there was a date and time for the nuclear war in Dr. Bloodmoney – the objective reality – the moment itself has subjective echoes in people’s lives.
The ‘who’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the nuclear destruction remain uncertain throughout the novel. There is no declaration of war preceding the bombs, and afterward there is no-one from government to claim or deny responsibility. When Walt Dangerfield, from orbit, sees the bombs begin to explode, he hears a voice from mission control plead, ‘God save us,’ to which Dangerfield replies, ‘From whom?’ (DB 71). Stuart McConchie hears the bombs exploding and speculates that they may not even be part of an attack: ‘Perhaps it was defense’ (DB 70). The reader never finds out who, if anyone, fired the first salvo, or even whether the destruction was caused by hostile attackers or friendly defenders. There is even a suggestion, from Doctor Stockstill, that the disaster is not the result of any human agency:

He had a weird, vivid notion. The war had begun and they were being bombed and would probably die, but it was Washington that was dropping the bombs on them, not the Chinese or the Russians; something had gone wrong with an automatic defense system out in space, and it was acting out its cycle this way—and no one could halt it, either. It was war and death, yes, but it was error; it lacked intent. He did not feel any hostility from the forces overhead. They were not vengeful or motivated; they were empty, hollow, completely cold. It was as if his car had run over him: it was real but meaningless. It was not policy, it was breakdown and failure, chance. (DB 73–4)

Eventually Stockstill concludes that, instead of being under assault by human agency, they are being attacked by the nebulous concept of ‘the impersonal’ (DB 74).

In contrast, Hoppy is filled with joy. In direct contrast with Stockstill’s suggestions, Hoppy believes ‘there is no chance about this’. He views events as part of his glorious destiny; the bombs are, to him, ‘God’s will’ (DB 77).

Dick uses multiple viewpoints on the moments of nuclear destruction to demonstrate how the only universal quality it has in the novel is to divide interpretation. This is another method by which Dick creates uncertainty about the event. He concentrates on the individual experiences of different people, and their personal speculation about what is happening, and avoids any decisive third person assessment.

Within the personal accounts, there is confusion about who initiated the events, how the attack (if it was an attack) came about, and even whether it is a nuclear event – Bonny
Keller maintains a state of denial as she watches the destruction, clinging mostly to the idea that it is an earthquake. Dick turns this grossly public event into one that seems more private. The bomb went off in the real world but it also went off in each person’s idios kosmos, where the effects were hugely different. To help illustrate this point and to suggest that Dick is intentionally playing with the competing interpretation of the event as subjective or objective, take the first two accounts of the terminal moment, the first from the point of view of Dr. Bluthgeld and the second from Stuart McConchie’s.

Bluthgeld’s account hammers home how fundamental personal interpretation is in forming our perceptions, and how much we can live in our own little worlds. The account is reminiscent of a cartoon from *Punch* about how to find a hypochondriac: The lights go out in a crowded room. Most of the people immediately cry out, ‘The lights! What happened to the lights?’ However, one person shouts, ‘My eyes! What happened to my eyes?’ Like the hypochondriac of the cartoon, Bluthgeld tends to assume external things are purely the product of his fallible senses. He has a deep distrust of the external, and includes his physical senses as part of the fallible external world that must be analysed and rejected or accepted by the inner workings of the mind before being taken seriously.

Bluthgeld walks through Berkeley – a city Dick knew very well, having lived and worked there most of his life at that point66 – but is barely aware of the outside world as he is obsessed with his own thoughts. He ‘did not care to see the students’ and ‘was not interested in the passing cars, or in the buildings’; ultimately he ‘did not see the city of Berkeley because he was not interested in it’ (*DB* 65). Dick’s choice of words is telling. Bluthgeld only sees what is of interest to him, and since the outside world does not seem to interest him at all, he ‘sees’ only his own thoughts. Bluthgeld’s perception of the world is shaped by his interests and mind, more so than most people’s. From these first moments it is apparent that Bluthgeld is an intently withdrawn and introverted – almost autistic – person. Bluthgeld is most likely schizophrenic (*DB* 12, 63), and Dick associates schizophrenia very closely with autism and the creation of an independent personal universe, as discussed above in Chapter 2. Bluthgeld’s ability to ignore and literally not see what is uninteresting to him shows how powerfully his mind affects what he actually perceives.

66 Dick lived in Berkeley from 1931 to 1935 and then again from 1938 until his move to Point Reyes in 1958 (Sutin 21, 26, 30, 96).
As he walks, Bluthgeld considers his own troubled mental state. Perhapsironically given his tendency, which will soon be illustrated, to ascribe external phenomena to internal causes, Bluthgeld thinks he is sick and the contamination originates from something outside. He ascribes an internal problem – a mental illness – to something outside his mind. Bluthgeld’s tendency to privilege his own mentation over the outside world naturally leads him to seek external causation, and to trust his thinking more than he should. His body and senses provide an inescapable connection to the external world, but even here he does his best to distance himself by deliberately trying to ‘purify’ his sense data using rational thinking.

Suddenly the sidewalk tilts. Bluthgeld does not believe the evidence of his senses because it does not coincide with his thinking; he thinks the sidewalk cannot possibly be tilting. He immediately blames his fallible senses: his astigmatism has skewed his view which, in turn, has thrown off his balance. He knows the power of the mind to influence perception, and notes that his astigmatism became more ‘acute when he was under stress’ (DB 65). Knowing that balance is regulated by the inner ear, and wondering why he is straying to the left so much, Bluthgeld speculates his balance might also be affected by a middle ear infection. His account shows the suspicion he holds towards his senses, and the faith he has in his mind’s power to influence perception. It demonstrates his belief that he can use reason to find the cause of his fallible senses, and his narcissism in assuming his mind will find the truth of the matter better than his senses will.

Bluthgeld hears a low rumble, and assumes it is a result of tension in his spine affecting his hearing. Everything takes on a ‘dull, smoky cast’ and he notices a rain of ‘fine, sooty particles’ (DB 67). Still he clings to the idea that his senses are leading him astray. He thinks the dull, smoky atmosphere is a result of his worry, but when he sees cracks appear in the buildings around him, he ‘could not explain [them] in terms of some specific physiological impairment of function’ (DB 67). Finally the penny drops, and as the city shakes itself apart he realises, ‘it isn’t me’ but that ‘some great terrible catastrophe has happened’ (DB 68).

Bluthgeld turns this spectacularly external event into an internal one. He finds it difficult to discern objective from subjective, and the terminal moment is no exception. The idea that the subjective and objective can become entangled and confused will become a recurring theme in *Dr. Bloodmoney*, as the dividing line between internal and external
reality becomes more and more blurred. Consider the earlier near-disaster of the Bluthgeld Catastrophe. Stockstill, Bluthgeld’s analyst, suggests that the catastrophe was a result of Bluthgeld’s deep hatred for other people, resulting in a miscalculation that was not intentional, but expressed an unconscious drive (DB 14). The internal – Bluthgeld’s hatred and suspicion – is projected outward onto other people and into the external world by the man, who sees suspicion and conspiracy directed against him everywhere. Then, speculates Stockstill, Bluthgeld’s fear and hatred again goes from the inside to the outside through a subconscious slip, resulting in the detonation of a nuclear device, causing a nuclear explosion – the ultimate in externality. Stockstill’s evaluation of the catastrophe shows the internal and external interacting closely, but there are still boundaries, even if some are weaker than others – after all, people really do hate Bluthgeld, so his paranoia has some real-world justification. The Catastrophe was caused by his actions in the physical world as a result of his mentation, and does not violate any causal laws.

Stuart McConchie, in contrast, has none of the complicated mental problems that plague Bluthgeld. Stuart is one of Dick’s everyman protagonists, a salesman working in a TV shop, just as Dick did when he was young. Stuart’s point of view is much more straightforward and direct. Consider his description of Bluthgeld as ‘the furtive first nut of the day’ (DB 8) when he sees him walk into the psychiatrist’s office, a perception Dick describes as an ‘instant insight’ from a character he describes as ‘astute’ (‘Afterword’ 303). For Stuart, there is no moment of uncertainty about what happens when the bombs start dropping: he ‘knew without the words or the thoughts ever occurring in his mind’ (DB 68). Stuart’s realisation is in direct opposition with Bluthgeld’s, who is all words and thoughts with no insight.

Interestingly, what causes Stuart to intuit that the bombs have begun to fall is when he sees a fellow-salesman’s face, which appears to become ‘old and unhealthy-looking’ (DB 68). Stuart’s perception is focussed outward and on other people, while Bluthgeld does not see others because he has no interest in them. For Stuart, the nuclear event is a shared one with his reality being shaped by observing how others react. His world is a genuine koinos kosmos made robust by a process of checking his own sense of things with how he sees others behaving – ‘reality testing’, to use the appropriate jargon. What Stuart observes is also telling. He sees people running in different directions, ‘as if each of them saw something different, as if it were not the same thing happening to any two of them’ (DB 69). This observation coincides with the effect Dick achieves by showing the event
of the bombs dropping through so many different eyes; the bomb is a shared experience, but it is also an intently internal one too, and experienced differently by everyone.

However, Stuart’s experience of the bombs exploding is also deeply internal. His realisation that the bombs are dropping, which is complete, certain and total, seems almost independent of any sense data. Perhaps this is more indicative of the general state of mind in the early sixties, where nuclear destruction was felt to be so imminent that Stuart’s leap of logic might seem natural, and even inevitable. When the bombs actually begin exploding, Stuart describes it almost as an internal event:

‘How long, oh Lord?’ a man was saying.

Stuart said, ‘Now.’ He knew it was now; he knew that the bombs were going off – he felt them. It seemed to occur inside him. (DB 70)

The description offers the reader some uncertainty about the nature of Stuart’s perception. His early realisation, which springs into being fully-formed like Athena from Zeus’s brow, suggests we interpret this particular passage in a similar way: Stuart’s knowledge seems to either precede his physical perception of the event or coincide with it to such a degree that the event and sense data could be hopelessly entangled.

Dick aids this latter reading by inverting the normal chain of causality with the sentence structure he uses. Normally we sense, think, know and then might verbalise our knowledge. Stuart verbalises, and his utterance is followed by revealing he ‘knows’ the bombs are going off, before finally, at the end of the sentence, we find out he ‘feels’ they are going off. Even the sense by which he perceives is subtly ambiguous. It could refer to his kinaesthetic perception of his environment: he might ‘feel’ the deep vibrations of the bomb. It could also refer to a more intuitive and internal sense of things which, it seems, comes from within and is often described kinaesthetically – since our perception of our own physical selves is primarily through the sense of ‘touch’ and ‘feel’, the kinaesthetic sense is fundamental and one we associate more closely than other senses with our sense of self. We often conflate feeling with thinking, dubbing what we consider to be purely internal creations as ‘feelings’ that may or may not coincide with the senses we treat as more external (‘Sure, he looks, talks and acts like a perfect gentleman, but I have a feeling about him....’).
The actual chain of causality is probably different from the one the sentence structure implies, but the structure gives the impression that Stuart knows the bombs are going off without even needing to use his senses. The event, it seems, is so profound and real that he just *knows* it is happening. His observation that the explosions ‘seemed to occur inside him’ (*DB* 70) also plays with the ambiguity Dick cultivates in Stuart’s account. We might imagine the deep vibrations of the bombs penetrating him and creating a sense that the bomb is exploding within. On the other hand, there is a sense that the bomb has exploded ‘inside’ him because it is such a personal event for each of the characters, one that occurs inside as much as out. Stuart’s earlier thought that people were reacting as if ‘it was not the same thing happening to any two of them’ (*DB* 69) supports reading the section in this way.

Stuart’s account is almost diametrically opposite to Bluthgeld’s, but he conveys the same sense that the terminal moment is as much an internal one as it is external. His intuitive perception of the bombs, and his observation of other people all corroborate the idea that Dick is trying to show the reader that the nuclear bomb did not just explode in the external world. It also had an impact on the *idos kosmos* of the characters, separating them from the shared reality of the *koinos kosmos*. Dick’s description of what happened after the bombs suggests this is a deliberate effect.

**The Aftermath: Inversion and Balance**

Unsurprisingly, there is a marked change in the characters after the bombs have fallen. Bluthgeld and Stuart again provide two central viewpoints to illustrate the change.

Bluthgeld, who, before the bombs dropped, narcissistically valued the power of his mind to apprehend reality over his senses and was thus turned heavily inward, becomes more extreme in his thinking. He sees the destruction and realises that it is not merely happening in his head:

> It’s not me, Doctor Bluthgeld said to himself as he stood on the sidewalk, unable to cross the street to get to his own car. And yet, he realized, even though it is real, even though it is the end of everything, the destruction of the cities and the people on every side, I am responsible.

He thought, In some way I made it happen. (*DB* 87)
He accepts personal responsibility for the bombs, even though he does now know how he made them happen. In assuming responsibility, Bluthgeld undertakes a fundamental shift in his thinking. He goes from instinctively assuming that things in the koinos kosmos are part of his flawed idios kosmos – as he does when he feels the sidewalk tilt and assumes his balance is at fault – to viewing things in the koinos kosmos as being, in some sense, under the control of his idios kosmos. For Bluthgeld, the boundary between the two is non-existent, and his beliefs and desires have physical consequences, to the point that he cannot distinguish between thinking something and saying it (DB 89). As in Jameson’s description of Dick’s reality fluctuations, Bluthgeld believes his psychic world has gone outside. At this point, the reader is led to the conclusion that Bluthgeld has become insane, if he was not already. Bluthgeld’s inner dialogue turns megalomaniacal, and seems to break from the world as we know it in a way that can only be described as schizophrenic, as he considers the ‘almost limitless potency’ of his ‘reactive psychic energy’ (DB 88). He considers himself ‘the omphalos, the center, of all this cataclysmic disruption’ (DB 88).

His megalomania has religious overtones, as he leads stalled people through ‘a solid stream of cars’ (DB 89) in a moment akin to Moses parting the Red Sea. He begins to view the bombs as a punishment to others occasioned by their ill-will towards him. His inner monologue becomes more and more religious in tone, as he resolves to start a ‘voluntary pilgrimage’ and, with mystical passes of his hands, tries to give forgiveness and healing to the passers-by (DB 90–91).

The last, and most compelling, illustration of Bluthgeld’s new mental state occurs when he reaches the outskirts of Berkeley and sees San Francisco in ruins. With the power of his will, and invented hand gestures, he tries to heal the city. He wills the smoke to stop, and eventually it does. He wills the people to leave, and eventually they do. He wills medical treatment to arrive, which it does. He takes these natural events to be proof of the power of his will, and does not notice how many days, weeks and months he stands, trying to effect change with the power of his mind. Just as when he walked through the crumbling city, and ascribed the tilting pavement to the power of his mind to affect perception, he now goes a step further and ascribes mental causation to physical events. The real world loses its power to convince him of its independence.
When the narrative returns to Stuart’s point of view, his thinking has changed as much as Bluthgeld’s. He is in a basement, which he has become too scared to leave. He has become obsessively fixated on things that have no meaning to anyone except him: cash money. His physical isolation has become linked with his mental isolation. He feels cut off from the rest of humanity, and keeps away from other human beings, despite signs that others have emerged. The basement, with its dark associations with the tomb, is appropriate, but it is open to the sky, suggesting his isolation is not necessarily complete or permanent. Until he emerges, he exists between the world of the living and the world of the dead. In this, he is akin to those living in half-life in *Ubik*, and with Bill, later in the story. Bill’s description of death as like being ‘down in a hole looking up’ (*DB* 209) could be of Stuart, huddling in the open concavity of the basement, looking up at the living world he is too afraid to return to.

Stuart is psychologically isolated, but is not completely alone in the cellar, and has a dying man as a companion, who, like Stuart, is in a transitional space. Stuart does not admit the similarity, and feels himself cut off from the dying man, whom he alternates between thinking of as ‘Ken’ and objectifying as ‘the dying man’. Stuart shows a marked lack of empathy for Ken, and reflects that he ‘could not understand him’ and ‘felt cut off from him’ (*DB* 97). Stuart opines that he and Ken are emotionally disconnected because Ken is dying and Stuart will survive, and thus ‘there was no possibility of communication between them because their worlds were too different’ (*DB* 98).

Stuart’s disconnection from Ken is only the tip of the iceberg. He feels that the bomb has brought to the surface something that was already present in him: a profound emotional separation from social reality:

> And yet that was not it only, between himself and Ken; there was still more, the same old problem that the bomb attack had not created but merely brought to the surface. Now the gulf was wider; it was obvious that he did not actually comprehend the meaning of most activities conducted around him. (*DB* 98)

Despite their differences, Stuart shares Bluthgeld’s disconnection from others. Stuart does not feel joined to the *koinos kosmos* and has had his own splitting from shared reality. However, where Bluthgeld has expanded the horizon of his *idios kosmos* by assuming that everything in the shared universe is under the control of his mind and thus malleable
to his will, Stuart has contracted his to include just himself, and has no interest in re-
joining the shared world.

An example of Stuart’s new isolation is his desire for paper money. He has become
obsessed with collecting money, even though it has no worth in a post-apocalyptic
society. Since money is a commodity with little or no intrinsic value, it is a excellent
example of something of value only in the shared world. Still, he collects it fanatically
and at personal cost, since he is more interested in money than real goods like food and
proper shelter. The money has value to him, even if it no longer has value in the real
world, and one of the reasons he is afraid to re-join society is because he suspects that
‘when he showed up at the relief station carrying a pillowcase full of it, everyone would
jeer at him and rightly so’ (DB 97). Stuart has a degree of personal insight that Bluthgeld
lacks.

Dick’s mordant sense of humour comes through strongly in the image of Stuart busily
hoarding worthless cash in a pillowcase; Dick holds a satirical mirror up to the capitalist
mentality. Even the gloomy recounting of Stuart killing a rat and then eating it raw
becomes ridiculous when he observes ‘no one else seemed to be eating rats. Perhaps there
was a superior food available of which he knew nothing’ (DB 97). Stuart fears the cruel
humour of society that picks out the person not in lock-step with everyone else as an
opportunity for mockery – consider the quintessential example of the April Fool
celebrating the New Year in April when everyone else knows the calendar has changed.
Stuart’s worries indicate he is not completely detached from shared reality. He can still
see himself through the lens of society, and worries that he might seem ridiculous. Thus,
he anticipates returning to the rest of the human community. Even his desire for money is
predicated more on a shared reality – albeit one now gone – than on a completely isolated
personal one.

The tomb of the cellar is also a symbolic womb.67 It represents safety and security for
Stuart, but it also prevents him from being born into the new world that exists outside.
Instead, he clings to the old world, hoarding cash money and unwilling to look outside for

67 Dick’s love of Joyce (‘In symbolic terms, Philip would have liked to be James Joyce – and not blind’
(Sutin 79) and the association of a tomb with the womb might recall the reader to the word play of ‘mouth
to her moomb. Oomb, allwombing tomb’ in Ulysses (Joyce 40).
a better food source than rats. This is Stuart’s half-life, where he straddles the nuclear event with one foot in the past and one foot in the present. Like Bill inside his sister Edie, Stuart hovers between the world of the living – the world outside his womb-like cellar – and the world of the dead, represented by his tomb-like cellar. He is unwilling, at this point, to commit himself to being reborn into the new society. He is crucially changed from what he was before the blast, and he will become a new person in the new world.

The examples of Stuart McConchie and Bruno Bluthgeld show that the atomic bombs caused psychological changes as extreme as the physical destruction they effected. There is a sense of inversion in these and other changes that have occurred as a result of the bombs, and a sense that the boundary between internal world and external world has become damaged. Bluthgeld’s inward focus has turned outward, although on closer inspection it is apparent his outward focus is a result of him projecting his psyche onto the external world and not a genuine outward orientation. Stuart – gregarious, well-adjusted and outgoing – has turned inward, and is unwilling to re-join society. Hoppy Harrington goes from outcast to a pivotal member of society. The centres of society have moved from the city to the country, and places like West Marin have become the new hubs of humanity.

Walt Dangerfield, whose trip to Mars places him, literally, at the farthest edge of human existence, becomes the omphalos of the new society, binding together all the disparate people on the planet and reminding them of their shared heritage by reading them classics of Western literature. His own isolation and physical distance contrast ironically with his central position in peoples’ lives. Dick adds a psychological dimension to the Dangerfield plot that engages him even closer with the theme of external and internal reality, and the inversion of the two. Dangerfield is certain he is dying. Most assume the isolation has caused Dangerfield to experience psychosomatic symptoms that are ‘just in his mind’ (*DB* 258), and that he is a hypochondriac – one plot thread concerns finding Dangerfield psychological help and convincing him to take it. However, in a final twist, Dangerfield reveals that the pain is worse when he flies over Northern California. Given Hoppy’s attempts to supplant Dangerfield using his unusual abilities, the reasonable assumption is that Dangerfield’s illness has an external cause: Hoppy Harrington. This latter example shows something external, Dangerfield’s sickness, revealed as internal and psychosomatic, but then finally shown to have a genuine external cause. Finally, the external cause itself is an example of the internal – Hoppy’s will and desires – moving
outside himself through the device of a psionic power. Like a chalk-mark boundary, every time the reader is made to pass between internal and external causation, the boundary itself becomes worn and suspicious.

The motif of inversion and the idea that the internal can become external are also instantiated in Edie and Bill on both a metaphorical and literal level. Edie’s ‘imaginary’ brother, who seemed purely a character in Edie’s personal world, is revealed to be a real part of the external world. The metaphor is then made literal when Bill, who actually existed inside Edie, is pulled out of her and made to fly through the air.

Despite the inversions that have happened between personal and shared, internal and external, outside and inside, these categories still exist after the bombs have fallen, and provide the novel with its well-balanced structure. Nevertheless, the inversions acclimatise the reader to the shifting parameters of Dick’s universe. The reader becomes accustomed to the inside world moving outside, from the minor examples of psychological projection to the extreme of Hoppy’s vision of the future, and the outside moving in, as when Bluthgeld begins to believe the outside world is amenable to his thoughts and emotions. These inversions prepare the reader for more and greater violations of the categories of idios and koinos.

**When Bluthgeld (Almost) Destroys the World... Again**

As the novel progresses, Dick intensifies his ‘play’ with reality to cast more and more uncertainty on what reality actually is, and whether it can be known. One of the ways he achieves the desired uncertainty is to blur the line between what is real and what is false through misperception, and then to blur the line further by showing the misperception to be true and thus inverting true and false. An excellent example, and one that furthers the goal of this chapter, is Bluthgeld’s attempt to destroy Dangerfield.

Bluthgeld, the reader knows, is insane. He is paranoid, and maintains the megalomaniac belief that the bombs dropping were the result of his subconscious desire to protect himself from the perceived malevolence of others. From this he derives the belief that he has the power to impose his will on reality. The days and, perhaps, weeks he spends overlooking San Francisco, unaware of his physical decay, indicate he has had a profound break from reality, as does his belief that when he dies the world will end (DB 219) and his belief that he can will the bombs to fall again because he possesses ‘all the power in
the world rolled together’ (DB 221). Bluthgeld has a clear misperception of his place in reality.

When Bluthgeld wills Dangerfield’s destruction, he is shocked to hear Dangerfield’s voice continue through the radio. He assumes he has failed because Dangerfield is still talking. However, Bluthgeld is mistaken. The broadcast is of a recording, and not a live voice. Bluthgeld’s misperception – that he is omnipotent and can destroy Dangerfield with his mind – is contradicted by the misperception that Dangerfield is conducting a live show. The waters are thoroughly muddled. Bluthgeld’s misperception pushes him closer to what the reader assumes to be true: that he is a paranoid man with megalomaniac delusions and no power beyond the ordinary. His mistake opens up the question of whether a coincidentally correct misperception of reality has any validity, and whether a correct view of reality based on incorrect beliefs can still be said to be correct. Like Leibniz’s windowless monad, Bluthgeld holds a true belief of reality, that Dangerfield is alive despite Bluthgeld’s efforts, but there is nothing truly connecting the belief to reality.

When Dangerfield resumes his live broadcast, but does not immediately begin talking, Bluthgeld assumes he has been successful in causing high-altitude nuclear explosions to manifest and destroy Dangerfield. Soon after, Bluthgeld discovers he is mistaken, but refuses to believe the evidence of his senses: ‘This must be a fake of some kind. A deception. I know it is not real’ (DB 227). Again, Bluthgeld relies on his inner sense of reality over what he perceives. However, he is in some ways correct. He believes he has caused high-altitude detonations to kill Dangerfield. These detonations did occur, and caused Dangerfield’s initial silence. In this situation, it is the reader who holds a true belief, but with a mistaken cause. The reader assumes Bluthgeld is an insane man who lacks the power he thinks he has. Dangerfield’s survival is proof of this. However, as the reader discovers soon after, this is, prima facie, a false belief. Dangerfield sees an

---

68 Gottfried Leibniz uses monads to refer to simple substances in his Monadology (1714). In section 11, he describes monads as not being affected by external causes, and thus being akin to a house that does not open to the outside world with windows or doors and the appearance of causation is created by a pre-existing harmony. Dick was familiar with the concept, and uses it in Deus Irae (DI w.1964, pub.1976 40) and The Three Stigmata (TSPE 1965 16). Bluthgeld’s correct view of reality is not based on any causal connection with the real world, and hence is similar to Liebniz’s view that monads only appear to interact because of a pre-existing harmony.
explosion appear, at first ‘somehow unreal, as if it was only imagined’ ($DB$ 230). Then, soon after, Dangerfield’s vehicle shudders ‘almost as if someone were attacking him’ ($DB$ 231). He sees the explosions move away from him, ‘as if his location were a mystery to them’ ($DB$ 231). Dangerfield’s observations corroborate that strangest of conclusions: Bluthgeld has willed explosions into existence to destroy Dangerfield. Bluthgeld was, in some ways, right all along. Reality is flipped on its head, with Bluthgeld revealed as having a special power over reality, and the reader’s natural assumption that Bluthgeld is entirely deluded is revealed to be mistaken.

Bluthgeld’s power is revealed to everyone as the detonations continue, and confirmed when his death halts the onslaught. The explosions, which so obviously seem to be a result of his will, cast into question what caused the earlier bombs. Could they also have been a result of Bluthgeld’s will, as he surmised? The event of Bluthgeld willing new explosions into being creates a situation where idios kosmos and koinos kosmos can no longer be thought of as separate. The earlier confusion about which things belonged in which category gives way to the realisation that some events in the novel cannot be segregated into one or the other. Bluthgeld’s personal universe has, literally, moved outside itself and begun affecting the shared universe. The confusion Dick encouraged earlier helped to bring about the reader’s openness to this situation, and willingness to see the personal and shared universe as more closely entwined and personal universes as anything but independent.

This discussion highlights that Dick does not immediately violate the categories of idios and koinos. He does so only after setting the stage. He shows the reader that mistakes are possible, and that it is not always apparent what is only in the personal universe and what is shared. He plays with the categories, using them to create confusion about what is true and what is not. It is only at the end of the novel, after a long buildup, that he flips things upside down, and allows something that was considered throughout the novel to be purely internal and part of a deranged idios kosmos – Bluthgeld’s power to create nuclear destruction – to become manifest in the physical world. The reader is left with no time to assess this violation and recognise it as a different type from those before. Like Runciter’s discovery of Joe Chip money in Ubik, this final revelation demands the whole novel be reinterpreted, and the earlier explosions reconsidered. The climactic reality violation, which punches a hole in the barrier between idios and koinos, is also the climax of the novel.
Chapter 9

Dick’s strategy in *Dr. Bloodmoney* reflects his artistic maturity. It is not present in his early novels which play with confusion about what reality is, but do not, as a rule, break reality down as completely as *Dr. Bloodmoney*. *Eye in the Sky* (*ES* 1957) comes the closest by letting individuals inhabit another’s personal universe, but this is not a breakdown of reality as a whole, which is unaffected by the individuals’ experience. In contrast, Bluthgeld’s personal universe has a direct and obvious impact on reality.

The three novels discussed in this chapter each display the same pattern, but come to it by very different means. *Dr. Bloodmoney* is primarily focused on the interaction between *idios kosmos* and *koinos kosmos* and the final violations, when they occur, are based on transcending these categories. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is a very different creature, sublimating its reality theme into the question of the ethical status of its android characters – a profound subject in its own right – and adding a mystical/theological dimension to the discussion. Nevertheless, it shows the same pattern of erosion and transcendence.
Chapter 10: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

**THE RISE AND FALL OF WILBUR MERCER**

This reading of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (DADES? 1968) concentrates on an aspect of the novel that has often been neglected by commentators: Wilbur Mercer and Mercerism. A number of reasons for this neglect suggest themselves. Mercerism contaminates – to use an emotive term – the novel with a theological quality that Dick’s early, and predominantly Marxist, critics would have found distasteful. Mercerism is an opiate for the people who remain on earth, but far from being portrayed negatively, Dick treats it as the means for salvation in his novel.

Darko Suvin described *Androids* as ‘an outright failure’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 20), an opinion he conspicuously fails to revisit, while acknowledging the need to, in his follow-up article 27 years later: ‘I cannot, as one should, reconsider *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?’* (‘Goodbye and Hello’ 370). Suvin explicitly rejects the novel’s portrayal of androids as both ‘wronged lower class and as inhuman menace’ as an ‘underlying confusion’ (‘P.K. Dick’s Opus’ 20). However, giving a mixed portrayal of someone or something is not necessarily confusion – the same criticism could be levelled against H. G. Wells’ wronged lower class, the monstrous and carnivorous Morlocks, or against Robert Louis Stevenson’s Long John Silver, who is as charming a villain as one is likely to meet, or even Shakespeare’s Feste, who mixes wisdom and folly in equal measures. Suvin’s single-mindedness in pursuing Marxist themes causes him to reject the novel out of hand, and level a single criticism that seems to emanate from a desire for ‘lower classes’ to be portrayed in a univocally positive way – a political and *a priori* criticism rather than an aesthetic one that is responsive to the text.

Another reason for Mercer’s omission from the critical literature could be the implicit judgement made by makers of the popular and critically well-received 1982 film adaptation, *Blade Runner*, which makes no mention of Mercer or his religion. *Blade Runner* is responsible for bringing attention both to the novel and to Dick’s other works. However, neither the man responsible for writing the final script, David Peoples, nor the director, Ridley Scott, had read *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Peoples worked
When we turn to the source text, Mercerism and its founder are revealed as central to the plot, forming a nexus that helps to connect the three main story arcs that follow Rick Deckard, John Isidore and the androids, respectively. The main characters are all, in part, defined by their attitudes to Mercer, from Isidore’s passionate acceptance of the religion and all its tenets, through Rick’s ambivalence – matched by his moral ambivalence – through to the androids’ outright attacks on a religion that excludes them. Of particular interest to the literary critic, Mercerism also provides one of the main puzzles in the novel and one of those moments of transcendence this chapter focuses on. Androids does not target metaphysical themes as directly as most of Dick’s other works. In the place of outright metaphysics is the ethical and ontological question of whether the androids – physically indistinguishable from humans in almost every way – should be considered human, and the related question of what ‘human’ really is.

Androids still stands in close relation to the metaphysical thread of Dick’s writing. The issue of whether humans, or animals, possess some ontological quality that privileges them over simulacra leads very easily – as it often does in Dick’s other novels – into metaphysical questions about what separates the ‘real’ and ‘reality’ from ‘simulation’. Of most interest in terms of this chapter, however, is the pattern of dialectical questioning that emerges over the course of the novel, which culminates in moments where the distinctions between real and false, reality and simulation are transcended. These moments are heralded by the arrival of Wilbur Mercer.

There are three moments of transcendence in the novel, where the novel’s ‘normal’ reality is transcended. In each, Mercer or his story impacts one of the two main characters, John R. Isidore or Rick Deckard. In the first, Mercer appears in person to Isidore during a

---

69 ‘Peoples thought Fancher’s initial script excellent and never read Androids, before or after the rewrite’ (Sutin 275); and Scott when asked about the rumour he hadn’t read Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?: ‘I honestly couldn’t get into it. It’s so dense, by page 32 there’s about 17 story lines’ (Scott ‘n. pag.’)

70 Both Rick Deckard and John Isidore are, to an extent, author surrogates, as their names suggest. ‘Rick’ is often short for ‘Richard’ which can also be shortened to ‘Dick’, and his surname ‘Deckard’ resembles ‘Dick” and incorporates “Richard.” Isidore is a character carried over with changes from Confessions of a Crap Artist (CCA w.1959, pub.1975), where he is a stand-in for Dick.
moment of spiritual and ethical crisis. In the second, Mercer appears to Rick and offers him advice to help him kill the android Rick has formed an emotional bond with. In the third, Rick finds himself living out the story Mercerism is based on. There is ambiguity in all three events. They might be hallucinations or idiosyncratic perceptions of reality caused by stress. They might be examples of a higher power reaching into the lives of the two main characters. Whatever the case, they share certain qualities. Mercer and his story feature heavily in all three. The events occur in moments of doubt or personal crisis. Mercer’s advice when he appears in person is to carry on in the face of ethical or religious crisis, to transcend the problem and just persist, even when faced with the prospect of doing something that might seem impossible or evil. They are times when Dick expresses one of his central beliefs: that the highest virtue is persistence and carrying on.

**Dialectic**

As in *Dr. Bloodmoney* (*DB* 1965), the moment of transcendence is not a sudden or random imposition on the text. Rather, it is anticipated through a long process of juxtaposing binary oppositions in a way that questions their relationship. Mercer’s story contains a number of such dialectics. The story is one personally experienced by everyone who uses an empathy box – the device employed by Mercer’s followers to attain a state of ‘fusion’ where they join with Mercer and with every other person participating in the experience. Parallels might be drawn between fusion and religious communion, which has similar implications of union with the godhead. However, while Dick seems to dread the implication of homogenisation, absorption and loss of individuality that he associates with communion, fusion with Mercer is not an experience of this type. Individuality is not lost, as the fusion is more a democratic joining than a pure blending, and each voice is heard within the experience.

Jill Galvan offers an opposing point of view, suggesting that Mercerism and the ‘ideology of empathy’ associated with it ‘function merely as the means by which the government controls an otherwise unwieldy populace’ and the followers of Mercer are ‘gullible citizen-consumers’ (416). Galvan goes so far as to suggest that fusion and the empathy box, far from drawing people together in a shared experience, causes isolation and social disintegration (417). However, Galvan’s arguments are insufficiently justified using the primary text, and are based on applying an argument, made by Scott Bukatman about
motion pictures, to the empathy box without acknowledging the differences between the technologies, a point I will return to.

Galvan uses two brief excerpts from *Androids* to suggest the empathy box is ‘merely’ a tool of government control. The first is a statement by John Isidore that the U.N. ‘approved’ of Mercerism, and the ‘American and Soviet police had publically stated that Mercerism reduced crime by making citizens more concerned by the plight of their neighbors’ (*DADES*? 65). Only a very cynical reading would equate a government approving of something that reduced crime with ‘government control’ with nothing further to recommend that reading. One might take the same position with education or high standards of living, which similarly reduce crime. The second piece of textual support Galvan uses are statements made by Buster Friendly, in which Buster tries to discredit Mercerism. Buster, as an android, hates and fears Mercerism because he is unable to take part in it and tries to destroy it because, as Irmgard Baty puts it, ‘without the Mercer experience we just have your word that you feel this empathy business’ (*DADES*? 179–180). Thus, discrediting Mercerism might go some way to elevating the status of androids. Buster speculates that the telepathic union of Mercerism could be co-opted by a ‘would-be Hitler’ (*DADES*? 179). Buster’s highly subjective speculation is clearly motivated by his desire to destroy the religion, but Galvan unquestioningly accepts Buster’s point of view as the correct one, while ignoring dissenting views.

Galvan’s argument that Mercerism causes isolation and social disintegration is based on an intellectual sleight-of-hand, using arguments Scott Bukatman makes about modern screen image technology, like film and television, and applying them to the empathy box without acknowledging the differences. For instance, Bukatman’s assertion, quoted by Galvan, that modern screen image technology is a ‘unilateral communication’ where viewers are ‘detached from the mass of fellow citizen-viewers’ (36) clearly refers to television and film in the 1990s; the same argument might not apply so clearly to some of today’s internet-integrated media productions, or even to the early days of television when the few broadcasts were widely discussed and often drew people together, and certainly not to something like the fictional empathy box, where a form of telepathic union occurs that is in no way unilateral, but highly participatory. Galvan’s resulting claim that the ‘Mercerist stands beyond the pale of the social collective’ (417) can only be a result of conflating the different technologies, and is a reading completely disconnected from the novel. Far from being detached, the Mercerist, almost by definition, is more
intimately connected with the social collective than is normally possible. Fusion creates an intimate, telepathic awareness of the Other that unifies, rather than isolates. It might be argued that the union people experience is illusory, and that empathy is not promoted by the use of the box, but Galvan eschews that line of questioning in favour of ignoring most of the source text and its portrayal of Mercerism.

A more illuminating comparison might be made between fusion and the group experience of taking Can-D in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (*TSPE* 1965). Can-D causes the user to experience a democratic group experience, a ‘valid interpersonal experience’ (*TSPE* 94), very similar to fusion with Mercer. Some have even made a religion out of the shared experience and see it as salvific: ‘when we chew Can-D and leave our bodies we die, and by dying lose the weight of...sin’ (*TSPE* 42). The flip side is the experience of taking Chew-Z, which destroys individual identity and does put the taker ‘beyond the pale of the social collective’ (Galvan 417) by giving them a ‘solipsistic’ (*TSPE* 94) experience of a world controlled by Palmer Eldritch – ‘when we take Chew-Z we plunge into damnation’ (Fondanèche 146). Hayles points out that Can-D, ‘despite its hallucinogenic properties, preserves intact fundamental aspects of the liberal subject, including agency and a sense of individual identity’ (*My Mother Was a Computer* 72). The same things are preserved in fusion with Mercer, where every voice can still be heard from within the experience. Thus, there are examples of Dick portraying shared experiences like fusion in both positive and negative ways, but, because fusion with Mercer is not fusion into Mercer, but a democratic experience in which individuality is preserved, Mercerism is, on the whole, portrayed positively.

The first dialectical opposition present in Mercerism is in the act of fusion itself. Fusion brings individuals together into an experience that is, in essence, both singular and collective. This aspect is highlighted in the way Mercer is presented to the reader, never directly, but as the aggregation of a number of subjective viewpoints. Isidore sees Mercerism as salvific. Iran finds consolation in Mercerism. Rick finds only questions. The androids see an enemy who unites the human populace in an experience that excludes them, and which acts as a barrier to their being recognised as human. Mercer’s ‘reality’, which so many seem to rely on and which seems to be proven by the miracle of physical wounds manifested on those injured in fusion – a widespread experience of stigmata – is understood in a way that is contingent on whether you are a human or an android. The description of Mercerism we are given is itself a type of fusion, incorporating all the
novel’s different accounts of the religion. Thus, fusion is already an act of reconciling and transcending opposites. Other forms of reconciliation are also present in Mercerism. Science and religion, historically at odds, are brought together with the device of a religion relying on a gadget for its most precious ritual, a juxtaposition Dick returns to in *A Maze of Death* (*MD* 1970).

While the impression the reader is given of Mercer and his story is a composite of many different viewpoints, the longest and most complete account of the *experience* of fusion comes near the start of the novel and is told from the point of view of John R. Isidore. The following re-telling is based primarily on Isidore’s point of view presented on pages 19-23.

Wilbur Mercer climbs a hill under an alien sky. He is a great man and loves all living things. Despite his benevolence he is impeded in his progress and beset by mysterious ‘killers’ who throw stones at him to prevent his ascension, a torment that intensifies as he climbs further. Nevertheless, he carries on despite the gruelling slope and the thrown stones and reaches the top of the hill. The moment of ‘Mercer’s triumph’ when he attains his goal is also the moment ‘where he appears to die’ (*DADES?* 202). Mercer is struck down and descends into the tomb world below. The tomb world is a pit of death and stagnation, filled only with the rotting remnants of animals and humans. It is a static place where nothing happens and time seems measureless. Surrounded by the carcasses and bones of the animals he loves so much, Mercer slowly heals. This part of Mercer’s story will not end until he brings life back to the animals, and when he does so he begins his ascent again. His task is cyclical, and its ending is also its start.

Mercer’s story has an obvious connection to life on Earth in *Androids*. Earth exists in the aftermath of World War Terminus, and the atmosphere is soaked with radiation. Most animals are either extinct or endangered because of this, and the atmosphere wears on the remaining people on Earth, who risk both impotence and erosion of their intelligence. Mercer’s descent into the tomb world is preceded by having his brain bombarded with radiation. In the tomb world the animals he loves have ‘become extinct’ (*DADES?* 22). Dick’s choice of the word ‘extinct’ and the presence of dead animals clearly links Mercer’s tomb world to the situation on Earth. In addition, both Mercer’s descent into the tomb world and the Earth’s own fall are caused by radiation; the Earth has suffered following nuclear war, and one account of Mercer’s life describes his brain being
bombarded with radiation, which ‘plunged him into a different world’ a ‘pit of corpses and dead bones’ – the tomb world. Isidore even explicitly connects his and the other specials’ mental degradation with Mercer’s story by describing it as sinking ‘into the tomb world slough of being a special’ (DADES? 63, my emphasis). Thus, Mercer’s rise from the tomb world is also a story about the Earth under cloud of fallout, and, perhaps, offers hope to the people on Earth.

Already, a number of apparently paradoxical elements are present within Mercer’s story. Perhaps the most striking opposition is between the seeming meaninglessness of Mercer’s experience and the immense import it has for his followers. Mercer’s climb is reminiscent of the classical story of Sisyphus’s punishment in Hades. Sisyphus pushes a rock up a hill, only to have it roll back to the bottom again, whereupon he must push it up again. A Sisyphean task, then, is one that is both difficult and pointless – Camus uses Sisyphus as a metaphor for human existence. Mercer’s story seems Sisyphean in the sense of being apparently pointless and unarguably difficult, yet people are drawn to the gruelling experience of being Wilbur Mercer, and find meaning in it. J.R. Isidore uses it to combat the physical and emotional isolation he experiences (DADES? 19). Iran Deckard uses it to help overcome the crushing depression she feels (DADES? 148).

The irony of finding consolation in Mercer’s hopeless task is emphasised by Rick Deckard’s first fusion in the novel. During it, Mercer addresses Rick directly, telling him, ‘There is no salvation’ (DADES? 153). Mercer’s message is not one of hope, despite the hope people seem to find, and even though he is a religious figure Mercer’s story seems neither uplifting nor in any way spiritual. Rick points out, ‘He’s just an old man climbing a hill to his death’ to which his wife replies, ‘Isn’t that the revelation?’ (DADES? 153). Whatever revelation is present in Mercerism, it is fundamentally different from Judeo-Christian religions, which tend to claim there is meaning and hope to be found in another world, justifying the apparent futility of this existence. The revelation of Mercerism is grounded in suffering and futility, first that of the tomb world, and then that of the climb; there is no nirvana at the top of the hill. Patricia Warrick describes the revelation in this way: ‘The view expressed by Mercer is essential Philip Dick philosophy, and we find it in novel after novel. Nothing is easy; nothing is comprehensible. Still, we must go on’ (127). The people on Earth who persist in their tomb world existence of kipple, fallout, impotence and degradation are heroic to Dick, refusing to leave despite the significant incentives offered by the government.
Mercer’s story is, when stripped down to its structural elements, a story of movement between two polarities, represented symbolically by height and depth. The lowest point in the story takes place in the ‘tomb world’, an idea discussed in Chapter 4, and typically representative of a depressive state – Hayles describes it as part of Dick’s ‘private iconography’ and ‘a fictional/literary representation of the clinical depression that plagued him throughout his life’ (62). Its opposite is represented by height and the plateau at the top of the hill. The top of the climb is not an Elysium to match and balance the torments of the tomb world – Ellen West’s own description of the ethereal world that contrasts with her experience of the tomb world finds no direct representation in Mercer’s story. However, the top of the climb where Mercer appears to die and is cast into the tomb world to renew the cycle is described as ‘Mercer’s triumph’ (DADES? 202), and thus represents the oppositional partner in the dialectic of his climb.

Using one type of symbolism revealed by the use of the phrase ‘tomb world’ – a battle with depression – Mercer’s story suggests that at least one of the oppositional pairs in the novel will be between depression and elation. The revealed symbolism combined with the main thrust of this chapter – that the juxtaposition of opposites will likely end, not in victory for either side, but in some form of transcendence – makes the challenge for this chapter’s argument apparent. Does Dick perform his sleight-of-hand, creating a dialectic that moves between depression and elation to try to achieve a type of synthesis?

**From the Heights of Euphemia to the Depth of the Tomb World**

The beginning of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* deals directly with depression and elation. Dick sets up an immediate contrast between Rick Deckard’s and his wife Iran’s moods using their emotions on waking. Rick is awakened by ‘a merry little surge of electricity’ (DADES? 3), a phrase mirrored and reversed at the end of the same paragraph with a look into Iran’s ‘gray, unmerry eyes’. The parallelism gives this first paragraph a pleasingly complete structure, setting up an early opposition between elation and depression, and tying it in to the opposition between reality, represented by Iran’s authentic emotions, and simulation, in the form of Rick’s electrically-stimulated euphoria from his Penfield mood organ, the latter opposition being part of the novel’s primary theme.
His joy is counterbalanced by his wife Iran’s emotions, which soon bring him down from
his electric high. Her feelings are so low that she sinks into passivity and depression ‘as
her soul congealed and she ceased to move, as the instinctive, omnipresent film of great
weight, of an almost absolute inertia, settled over her’ (DADES? 6). As mentioned in
Chapter 8 in the section ‘Half-life: Weightlessness, Entropy and Regression’, Dick
associates weight and inertia with the tomb world, and the description immediately
evokes these associations. Iran becomes so despondent that she allows Rick to choose her
mood for her, upon which he dials ‘pleased acknowledgement of her husband’s supreme
wisdom in all matters’ (DADES? 7). He dials himself a ‘creative and fresh attitude to his
job’. After he leaves she programs a six hour self-accusatory depression for herself.
Rick’s ‘creative and fresh attitude’ is deflated soon after when he reveals to his neighbour
that his sheep died of tetanus and ‘something of the despair that Iran had been talking
about tapped him on the shoulder’ (DADES? 11–12).

The emotions displayed in this short space of time and short section of text mirror the
pattern of rise and fall that Mercer experiences and the pattern of elation and depression
Mercer’s story hints at with its use of the phrase ‘tomb world’. For such a short period of
time, both the characters present in the scene experience a rollercoaster ride of emotion:
elation to depression to elation for Rick, and the opposite for Iran. As Iran notes, the
mood organ they use detaches the characters from their environment, allowing them to
choose their own responses. This, she says, ‘used to be considered a sign of mental
illness’ (DADES? 5). Much of Dick’s knowledge of mental illness comes from reading
the work of those existential psychologists collected in Existence: A New Dimension in
Psychiatry and Psychology. His use of Ellen West’s phrase ‘tomb world’ – a metaphor
West coined in her poetry to describe the low points of her own cycle of depression and
happiness – corroborates the connection between this passage and its rollercoaster ride of
emotions and Mercer’s story.

The opening scene between Rick and Iran is typical of Dick’s sense of humour. It is
funny and slightly surreal, but there is an edge to it too. Iran’s stubborn desire to be
depressed is incongruous with the early tone of the narrative point of view, which echoes
Rick’s upbeat and positive viewpoint as he jumps joyfully into a new day. Iran’s over-
the-top reactions to his friendly acts seem out of place; for example, she snaps at him to
‘Get your crude cop’s hand away,’ (DADES? 3) when he touches her shoulder. The comic
juxtaposition of eager husband and sleepy spouse has an edge. Iran disapproves of the job
of ‘cop’ that requires him to commit what is, in Iran’s eyes, murder. Her desire to be depressed despite not needing to, which initially seems strange and comic, quickly becomes a more reasonable desire once we realise the cause of her sadness: the silence of the empty apartments all around them that speaks eloquently of their situation on Earth where animals are extinct or endangered and people are eroding and dying in its radiation-soaked atmosphere.

Having set up the two poles of the opposition between elation and depression, Dick proceeds to demonstrate that neither is a satisfactory position. Rick’s initial and artificially stimulated happiness is, as Iran argues, divorced from authentic environmental stimuli, and thus he displays an ‘absence of appropriate affect’ (DADES? 5), one of the characteristics of clinical schizophrenia. Rick’s cheery attitude quickly becomes wearing, and his desire to solve every problem Iran presents him with using the mood organ smacks of an unhealthy dependence. His inability to see past the surface causes him to believe he has won their argument by dialling ‘594’ for Iran: ‘pleased acknowledgement of her husband’s superior wisdom in all matters’ (DADES? 7). His victory, as the reader no doubt knows, is a hollow one and only illuminates the weakness of his own position. Happiness, we see, is not everything, nor the only important thing.

Iran’s view, in contrast, is superior in that she is capable of seeing beyond the narrow goal of happiness and realising the importance of authenticity. Her awareness of the emptiness of the apartments and desire to be affected by the isolation has a certain nobility – she is willing to suffer in order to be connected with reality, which is especially brave given the mood organ’s quick fix. However, her desire for depression seems too extreme. Deliberately inflicting a ‘six-hour self-accusatory depression’ (DADES? 4) on herself twice a month seems masochistic, and well beyond what is needed to stay connected with reality. In addition, she is as reliant on the mood organ as Rick is. Her depression is as artificial as Rick’s happiness. Both of the poles Dick presents are flawed in their own ways. Rick’s happiness comes at a cost, and Iran’s desire for depression – extreme depression – seems self-destructive. In addition, Rick’s use of the mood organ to deny reality and Iran’s use of it to try and simulate real and appropriate affective responses demonstrates that both are equally detached from real emotion, despite experiencing the extremes of both.
As we move forward through the novel, Rick moves between the poles of depression and elation, experiencing dramatic highs and lows that seem almost pathological in their extremity, and the choice to begin the novel with an explicit discussion of depression and artificial elation makes Dick’s focus clear. Rick is ‘floored’ by a ‘new and horribly unique depression’ (DADES? 143), caused by his new-found empathy for the androids. He counters it by going out and buying a goat, an act that cures both his depression and Iran’s when he shows it to her. Even the goat’s name, Euphemia, hints at the positive emotions around it and at Ellen West’s story. The name Euphemia, with its etymological roots in the ancient Greek εὐφημία ‘good speech’ recalls Ellen’s story and hints at a connection between the Ricks’ elation and Ellen’s moments of euphoria, as does the near homophone of ‘euphoria’ in ‘Euphemia’.

Rick is brought low again by ethical doubts that he begins to feel regarding his job. His new-found empathy for the androids makes his actions in pursuing and terminating them intensely painful. His crisis of conscience causes him to seek isolation in the ‘uninhabited desolation’ of the desert ‘where no living thing would go’ (DADES? 195). Rick is at his lowest, having been forced to commit acts he now finds anathema to himself. His desire to seek a place with ‘no living thing’ is reminiscent of the absence and death in Mercer’s tomb world, and his trip to the desert becomes a literal re-experiencing of Mercer’s climb, as he climbs out of the tomb world of his depression and up a real hill. A rock strikes him from nowhere, showing the reader that this experience is not simply an illusion, but something more significant – a moment that transcends Rick’s normal experience of reality. Without holding the handles of the empathy box, and without sharing the experience, Rick experiences the darkest moment of his soul, and finds his own story fused with Wilbur Mercer’s; something akin to a miracle in the context of the novel.

The revelation provided by Mercer is humble, but is at the core of much of Dick’s thinking. Mercer ‘accepts everything’ (DADES? 198), does not judge (DADES? 184), and admits no escape from the way things are (DADES? 153). All Mercer, and anyone, can do is ‘move along with life, going where it goes, to death’ (DADES? 208–209). Thus, the good Mercerist is one who, in the face of suffering and the sometimes painful oscillations between two oppositional poles – joy and depression in this example – is accepting. They do not try to reject the opposition, or the necessity of moving between the two, they simply persist and, in doing so, rise above the process. Mercer might move along with life
to death, but he is also immortal and eternal (*DADES?* 66, 202). In some way, Mercer’s acceptance of his fate allows him to transcend it.

Mercer’s revelation and its impact on Rick and Iran are shown in the last section, where we find an exhausted Rick returning to his wife. He comes home with a joyful discovery: he found a toad – an animal thought to be extinct and one sacred to Mercer – living in the desert. Its existence is a symbol of profound hope, especially in the context of this lifeless place. His discovery is similar to Mercer’s story, where the rise from the tomb world is heralded and caused by discovering life in what is lifeless. This is the highest point for Rick in the novel.

When Iran discovers the panel on the bottom of the toad indicating it is a fake, and the miracle a sham, it would seem to be the cause for another crushing depression. However, Rick and Iran both defy this expectation. Rick is disappointed – ‘crestfallen’ (*DADES?* 207) – but there is a significant difference in his attitude at this point. In the course of the novel, he has systematically sought to evade the painful emotions in his life. He does so using the mood organ and by striving for material goods – in the form of cash and the ownership of animals which are living status symbols in his society – which he thinks will make him happy. His purchase of Euphemia to combat his depression illustrates his tendency to medicate his emotions with material goods. Despite the realisation that the toad is false, Rick is accepting of it and of his emotions: when Iran offers the mood organ to help him overcome his sadness at the false toad, he turns her down. Nor does Rick express desire to own a real animal, or even particular regret at the false toad: ‘The electric things have their lives, too’ he says (*DADES?* 208). This is true growth, especially considering the dissatisfaction that drove Rick to retire as many androids as possible was dissatisfaction with his electric sheep and the desire to purchase a real animal. It appears Rick has, like Mercer, become accepting of both his emotions, and even of the simulated life that has previously caused him such pain. He falls asleep, and Iran offers to dial him the emotion of ‘long deserved peace’ (*DADES?* 209), but there is no need, because he experiences it naturally.

The ending stands in stark contrast to the beginning of the novel. Both Rick and Iran have attained a more authentic state. Iran has reconnected with her husband, and, with her isolation ameliorated, she has also lost her depression, and finds comfort in looking after him. She has become empathetic and sympathetic. Rick has regained contact with his
natural emotions, and no longer needs the mood organ to simulate them for him. The novel closes on Iran ordering artificial flies for the artificial toad, and it is clear that Mercer’s philosophy of acceptance has found fertile ground. In embracing the artificial – Rick by acknowledging the life of artificial things, and Iran by demonstrating care and empathy for both Rick and the artificial toad – both Rick and Iran have become more authentically integrated into their environment. They have not escaped the cycle of highs and lows that have plagued them, but it seems they have reached a more peaceful and genuine state in their relationship with it.

The contrast between start and finish reveals that Iran and Rick at the start of the novel were both, to some degree, android personalities, in the sense that they were artificial. Iran’s lack of affect and cruelty in response to Rick’s cheerful positivity was just as detached from authenticity as Rick’s artificially stimulated happiness. By the end, neither needs to use the mood organ: Iran, who was considering dialling a mood of ‘ebullient joy’ (DADES? 205) before Rick arrived has no more need for it and is naturally ‘feeling better’ (DADES? 210) in the final moments. The final moment is peaceful; a temporary moment of equilibrium in the unending cycle of rise and fall. The cycle will continue, but both have achieved a new and more accepting relationship to it that allows them to affirm and transcend it.

It might seem that affirming the cycle of rise and fall and transcending it are incompatible, but this solution is not unique. To draw an analogy, consider Arjuna in the Bhagavadgītā. Dick had a good familiarity with Hindu scripture, and used its terminology fluently in his exegesis, including the concept of dharma which is explored in the Bhagavadgītā (see Exegesis 18, 336). The similarities between Rick Deckard and Arjuna are striking. Both are faced with a dilemma. They have roles that demand they kill – Rick retires andys and Arjuna is an archer in a battle. Both are struck with a moral dilemma, recognising their kinship with the people they are called upon to kill – Rick begins to empathise with the androids and to consider them as human and akin to him, while Arjuna recognises a literal kinship as he surveys members of his family arrayed against him on the battlefield. Arjuna’s desire to avoid killing his kin rejects the narrow delineation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ forced on him by the battlefield in order to recognise a higher unity. However, to truly connect with the highest unity, Arjuna is counselled by Krishna to affirm the lie of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and fulfil the duty – dharma – allotted to him by his role. Arjuna’s objections to killing his family come from denying his underlying
unity with them, which, if truly recognised, means he ‘should not sorrow for any creatures’ (Bolle 27). Rick, similarly, finds himself counselled by Mercer to kill the androids, as ‘What you are doing must be done’ (DADES? 189). Mercer ‘accepts everything’ (DADES? 198), and his acceptance allows him to transcend the cycle of rise and fall he exists in, meaning that ‘for Mercer, everything is easy’ (DADES? 198). When Rick is finally able to accept the difficult advice that he must fulfil his duty – his dharma as a bounty hunter – things become easier for him and he finds peace that both affirms and overcomes the cycle of emotional rise and fall he exists in.

The Curse of Empathy

Elation and depression are clearly connected to Mercer’s story, and are easily tracked over the course of the novel. Their interplay illustrates Dick’s dissatisfaction with either and with the oscillation between the two, and culminates in acceptance that, ideally, transcends mundane frustration with the process. Just as Mercer’s climb and descent are eternal, so too is the movement between happiness and sadness, and transcendence or overcoming the eternal process comes, ironically, in attaining a deeper and more engaged relationship with it.

More interesting, but at the same time more difficult, are the dialectics that relate to Dick’s deeper themes. Like the emotions in the novel, they too are closely linked to Mercer’s story. This discussion will focus on the themes related to reality and simulation, namely the questions of ‘what is human?’ and ‘what is real?’

Consider the following excerpt from Dick’s 1972 speech at the University of British Columbia, ‘The Android and the Human’:

> It is the tendency of the so-called primitive mind to animate its environment. Modern depth psychology has requested us for years to withdraw these anthropomorphic projections from what is actually inanimate reality, to introject – that is, bring back into our own heads – the living quality that we, in ignorance, cast out onto the inert things surrounding us. Such introjection is said to be the mark of true maturity in the individual, and the authentic mark of civilization in contrast to mere social culture, such as one finds in a tribe. A native of Africa is said to view his surroundings as pulsing with a purpose, a life, that is actually within himself; once these childish projections are withdrawn, he sees that the world is dead and
that life resides solely within himself. When he reaches this sophisticated point he is said to be either mature or sane. Or scientific. But one wonders: Has he not also, in this process, reified – that is, made into a thing – other people? Stones and rocks and trees may now be inanimate for him, but what about his friends? Has he now made them into stones, too?\(^71\) (‘The Android and the Human’ 183)

Dick goes on to suggest that modern technology has imbued our environment with animation, or perhaps revealed it, and that it ‘is becoming alive, or at least quasi-alive’ (‘The Android and the Human’ 183). In the course of his argument, Dick references Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics, who examined the ways information is structured and communicated. By focussing only on information, cybernetics treats machines and living organisms as fundamentally similar. A chain of 1s and 0s in a computer program possesses no essential difference in cybernetics to a chain of deoxyribonucleic acids in a chromosome – to use Richard Dawkin’s terminology from *The Selfish Gene*, genes and memes are not that dissimilar. In revealing this unity, it becomes possible to compare machine behaviour with human behaviour to generate new insights into both. The animism of the ‘primitive’ mind, as Dick points out, is not so primitive after all.

Here we see the fundamental issue of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* at play. How far can we understand robotic animals and androids in terms of real animals and human beings and *vice versa*? If the answer is that we can, then what, if anything, separates artificial life from the life it imitates? Dick’s description of the primitive mind projecting *anima* from within onto the environment and, in order to reject the primitive anthropomorphism, withdrawing it in a process of introjection, creates a striking image, and one that resonates with Mercer’s story, which could easily be a retelling of this process in fable form.

\(^71\) Dick elides the views of Freud, Jung and the other ‘modern depth psychologists’ with popular criticisms of anthropomorphism and with Edward Tylor’s work on animism in *Primitive Culture* in an intuitive fashion, but without acknowledgement. To illustrate briefly, projection and introjection as understood by the depth psychologists is not limited to anthropomorphism, but also to projecting one’s own drives onto another, as when a cheating spouse becomes suspicious and jealous of their partner, or when a hostile person believes others are hostile to them – a more straightforwardly pathological type of projection. Dick presents introjection as the goal of the depth psychologists, without mentioning that they acknowledge introjection can have pathological qualities too.
Mercer at his lowest point is akin to the purely rational mind, in Dick’s rather critical
depiction of it. While Mercer is in the tomb world, he is withdrawn, and can perceive
only death around him and no life but that which is within him. He cannot rise from the
tomb world until ‘the bones strewn around him grew back into living creatures’ (DADES? 22),
because ‘he had been joined to the metabolism of other lives and until they rose he
could not rise either’ (DADES? 22). When they do return to life, he finds himself
ascending, but without the animals and other lives that returned to life with him in the
tomb world. Nevertheless, he finds the other lives ‘still accompanied him; he felt them,
strangely, inside him’ (DADES? 22).

Mercer’s story plays with the ideas of externality and internality, projection and
introjection. The animals in the tomb world are outside him and dead – he is the isolated
and rational mind who ‘sees that the world is dead and that life resides solely within
himself’ (‘The Android and the Human’ 183). When the animals return to life, it is not
clear whether they return through some natural process or whether Mercer, literally,
projects life back into them, because both possibilities are mentioned. Perhaps the
psychological projection of animism has been replaced in this story with a literal
projection; perhaps there is no replacement, and the animals were always alive but Mercer
is only now able to perceive the life in them by extending his own awareness of life
outward from narrow self-awareness to a wider experience as he begins to ‘view his
surroundings as pulsing with a purpose, a life, that is actually within himself’ (‘The
Android and the Human’ 183). Then, as Mercer climbs the hill, he finds the other lives
have completely disappeared from around him, but he perceives them still inside him, as
the external becomes internal. When he falls into the tomb world to begin the cycle again,
the other lives are once more outside him and appear dead.

To this already complicated interplay of externality and internality, one further stage is
added. Mercer’s story is experienced only second hand, through the use of an empathy
box. Users of the box project their consciousness outward, into Wilbur Mercer, who
himself ‘encompasses every living thing’ (DADES? 22). Releasing the handles returns the
Mercerists into themselves. Thus, experiencing Mercer’s story is also a process akin to
projection and introjection. The entire process is closely related to empathy, which, like
anthropomorphism, allows the solipsistic subject to perceive life in the Other. Empathy,
with its literal derivation from the Greek words for ‘suffering’ (or experience, emotion)
and ‘with’ or ‘within’, is a good way to describe the experience of fusion with Mercer, which causes the devout to suffer with their prophet.

Empathy is at the centre of Mercer’s religion, and the use of the empathy box is limited only to those who possess empathy, and thus excludes the androids. Mercer’s plunge into the tomb world is caused by the destruction of the unique nodule in his brain. The nodule is connected with Mercer’s ability to bring the dead to life, but it seems strange that its destruction would cause him to enter another world. There are some connections between Mercer’s ability and the effect its loss has on him. The nodule brings life to the dead, and without it Mercer finds himself surrounded only by dead things. The nodule might represent Mercer’s ability to experience empathy, and his special power might only be that of empathy. Empathy, metaphorically, allows people to bring life to the dead things around them, and without it they would be plunged into a tomb world of inert things.

Dick connects lack of empathy with a descent into the tomb world in Martian Time-Slip (MTS 1964), where Manfred, who is autistic – a condition defined in part by a deficiency of empathy – finds himself trapped in his own tomb world existence, isolated from the world and from ‘the warmhearted people there’ (MTS 181). Perhaps without his special nodule Mercer is like Manfred, and no longer able to see past the surface and empathise with the objects of his perception causing him to perceive them as dead. If this were the case, then the ‘different world’ Mercer ‘had never suspected’ (DADES? 22) existed is simply the world of the isolated idios kosmos, the world of the person without empathy. Without empathy, Mercer can see only corpses and dead bones. Without empathy, Mercer loses the quality that makes him special.

In this reading, Mercer’s rise and fall is also the rise and fall of empathy, mirrored in the plot of Androids. The special nodule that allows him to bring life to the dead is Mercer’s facility to extend his self-awareness out into the world and perceive the life all around him, the facility of empathy. This also explains why Mercer ‘could not get out until the bones strewn around him grew back into living creatures’ (DADES? 22). If the tomb world is the world without empathy, then Mercer cannot leave it until he recovers his empathy and is able to see past the bones and into the living beings to, metaphorically, bring them back to life.

*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* creates a situation where empathy, as in the symbolic reading of Mercer’s story, climbs and falls. It also ends in a moment that could
be described as transcendent. In the novel, empathy separates human beings from androids, and is used to distinguish them. The androids look and seem human, but their lack of empathy sets what initially appears to be a clear dividing line between them and the empathic humans of the novel, one guarded by application of the Voigt-Kampff empathy test. Yet the line between what is human and what is not is not as static as it might seem. The apparent humanity of the androids rises and falls in the novel, as does the humanity of the human characters, causing the readers and the characters of the novel to extend and retract their empathy at different times.

Despite its categorical acceptance in the novel as a definitional human characteristic, empathy is not a quality exclusive to human beings and not all human beings possess it. Rick’s police superior even admits that some ‘think that a small class of human beings could not pass the Voigt-Kampff scale’ (DADES? 33). Aside from their lack of empathy, the androids are almost identical to their creators. By making them so similar, Dick pushes at the boundaries between human and non-human. It is as if he has gone through a proposed list of uniquely human traits with the thoroughness of a logician and systematically attributed them to his android characters.

At some points it is easier to view the androids as human than some of the human characters. When Rick Deckard administers a Voigt-Kampff empathy test to the android Rachael Rosen, some of the answers she gives seem more authentically human than the answers Rick expects:

‘In a magazine you come across a full-page color picture of a nude girl.’ He paused.

‘Is this testing whether I’m an android,’ Rachael asked tartly, ‘or whether I’m homosexual?’ The gauges did not register.

He continued, ‘Your husband likes the picture.’ Still the gauges failed to indicate a reaction. ‘The girl,’ he added, ‘is lying face down on a large and beautiful bearskin rug.’ The gauges remained inert, and he said to himself, An android response. Failing to detect the major element, the dead animal pelt. Her – its – mind is concentrating on other factors. ‘Your husband hangs the picture up on the wall of his study,’ he finished, and this time the needles moved.

‘I certainly wouldn’t let him,’ Rachael said. (DADES? 43)
Chapter 10

Rick considers the ‘major element’ of the hypothetical to be the dead animal pelt and the other factors involved to be distractions from that element. Rachael reacts to how personal the questions are and to her hypothetical husband hanging up pornography. Rachael’s emotional responses seem to be perfectly in line with regular intuition; it is Rick’s that appear skewed. Implicit in the questioning is Rachael and Rick’s shared setting: unlike the reader, these two appear in a background where most animals are almost extinct and care for live animals is socially and morally mandatory and an indicator of social status. In this setting Rachael’s responses are anomalous, but it is interesting that Dick chooses a hypothetical that will almost certainly evoke the same response in the reader as it apparently does in the android. The reader would fail the empathy test in exactly the same way Rachel does. At this early point Dick generates sympathy for and empathy with the androids by showing how human they are. The level of humanity and sympathy the reader has for them is, with the exception of a few bumps along the way, on the rise. Their ‘humanity’ is at the start of its climb.

Aside from empathy, the androids possess many qualities usually considered uniquely human. Rick finds one of the escaped androids, Luba Luft, performing in an opera and playing a role that calls for considerable emotional depth. He finds himself ‘surprised at the quality of her voice’ (DADES? 84). Music is considered an idiosyncratically human realm, intimately and complexly tied to the emotions. Its creation and appreciation go beyond what we might think of as the coldly rational and thus seem to be almost completely opposed to the world a machine inhabits: a world of logic and mechanical response. The fact that Luba Luft can succeed in this field is a testament to her apparent humanity. She pushes the androids’ perceived humanity even higher.

Like Rick, Isidore feels empathy for the humanoid androids that live near him. He worries about poor Pris Stratton who seems to him so vulnerable. He worries for her friends and feels their fear of the bounty hunter ‘that moved machine-like through the flat, bureaucratic job of killing. A thing without emotions, or even a face. A thing that if killed got replaced immediately by another resembling it’ (DADES? 136). The bounty hunter the androids fear and whom Isidore so vividly imagines is none other than Rick Deckard. The inversion is a delightful piece of irony, but it also helps us empathise with the androids themselves. Who, in this situation, is the monster? Rick, who will kill them all for money, or the androids, who wish to live free lives and will do anything to protect themselves? Empathy allows the borders between people to crumble – and it also causes the borders
between human and android to crumble to the point where it becomes impossible to decide which is the machine and which the human. This is highest point for the androids: their humanity reaches a peak and the reader is justified in feeling empathy for them, just as Rick begins to. With his brutal and mercenary attitude to retiring the androids, Rick’s humanity compares unfavourably to theirs. With the androids at their most human, Rick’s humanity slumps; just as when Mercer is at his lowest point, the Killers are triumphant.

Rick’s level of empathy and, by implication, his level of human feeling are put to question. Going one step further, Dick places Rick in a position where he must question his own reality and even whether he is human or android. In his initial interview with Luba Luft, Rick asks her questions that are designed to determine whether or not she is an android. She evades them skilfully, even turning some of them back on Rick. In the following example, Rick describes one of the traits that androids possess and that Luft has recently displayed:

‘An android,’ he said, ‘doesn’t care what happens to another android. That’s one of the indications we look for.’

‘Then,’ Miss Luft said, ‘you must be an android.’

That stopped him; he stared at her.

‘Because,’ she continued, ‘your job is to kill them, isn’t it?’ (DADES? 86–87)

Luba’s glib argument is enough to give Rick pause and perhaps even to make the reader consider Rick’s level of humanity. While her argument is obviously fallacious, the fallacy of affirming the consequent, it would explain some of Rick’s actions. Luft goes on to note that Rick may have false memories implanted that make him think he is a human when he is not. The picture she paints for him is a possible one and would explain, as she puts it, why he ‘seem[s] so peculiar and hard and strange.’ Luft seems eminently human in comparison to Rick. Throughout the interchange Rick’s body language, reactions and general internal reality are minimised. Dick limits himself to describing Rick’s words and actions. Luft, in contrast, is allowed rich adjectives and frequent descriptions of her reactions to events. Her internal states are described vividly. When ‘her immense eyes’ widen it is with ‘childlike acceptance’. When she ‘glares’ at him, it is ‘indignantly’ (DADES? 87–89). This is not an uncommon way to describe someone while they talk, but
when combined with Dick’s perfunctory and basic descriptions of Rick’s words and actions in this scene, the effect is to make Luft seem intensely, passionately human and Rick mechanical and business-like.

Dick, by this point, has made a thorough case for the humanity of the organic robots. They do not seem at all like machines as we know them and because of the similarities between the humans and these androids it is very natural to react to the androids by extending outwards our definition of what is human, like the tide extending to cover more sand, and like Mercer at the top of his climb when he can see that the living things that surrounded him have disappeared, but senses they are now inside him. In addition, Rick’s humanity is thrown into doubt, further helping erode the barriers between human and android. At this point it seems natural for our definition of human to cover the androids: after all, if humanity is defined by empathy and cold-hearted Rick is a human, these talented and intelligent androids must be too. Just as one naturally infers the existence of others from one’s own personal perceptions, so too do we infer the internal lives of the androids based on our own internal existence. With the border between human and android gone, the two become intimately connected. The androids have become tied to Rick, even though he knows that beneath their surface of humanity lies only, as Rachael provocatively reminds him, a simple ‘reflex machine’ that is ultimately ‘not alive!’ (165).

The androids’ fall from humanity is as inevitable as Mercer’s plunge into the tomb world. After letting empathy for the androids rise, and simultaneously letting Rick and the reader’s projection of humanity flow outward to include the androids, Dick creates a perceptual shift where the water drains and we are left stranded on dry land as the tide retreats.

The androids’ lack of empathy causes their veneer of humanity to crack and chip. Without empathy the androids are threatening creatures with the appearance of humanity but with very little of what usually accompanies it. They are unlike the humans and more like spiders or other solitary predators for whom a quality like empathy would be contrary to survival: empathy is something ‘a solitary organism, such as a spider, would have no use for’ (27). Apparently a ‘humanoid robot constituted a solitary predator’ (28). Like the man who hunts them, they have an affinity with predators that is dehumanising.

There are moments when the androids lose the spark of life that seems to animate them. Rick notices that when they are threatened with death they simply give up and lose
whatever will to live previously seemed to possess them. When Luft encounters Rick in a museum building she immediately realises that the subterfuge which previously saved her from Rick’s attention has failed and that he has returned to retire her. Her response is to retreat completely into herself: ‘her eyes faded and the color dimmed from her face, leaving it cadaverous, as if already starting to decay. As if life had in an instant retreated to some point far inside her, leaving the body to its automatic ruin’ (DADES? 113). Her response seems antithetical to that of any other living being, which will fight for every breath, and Dick portrays it as deeply, intently unnatural. Luft, when confronted by Rick, appears to be already dead. She seems resigned to her fate, and that resignation has stripped her of the appearance of humanity. She is ‘cadaverous’ and appears so far gone into death that she is already starting to ‘decay’. She has become inanimate, and her decay is described as ‘automatic’. Dick uses imagery of mechanisms and decay, an apparently mixed metaphor he often makes in order to emphasise the shared qualities he perceives between death and machines. Neither is alive in the sense the word is usually used. The threat of death has stripped away Luft’s veneer of humanity and revealed her to be something cold, inert and ultimately not alive.

As if in response to Luba’s dehumanization, Rick’s own humanity seems to rise. He acts compassionately towards her, buying her a book of art even though he knows she will not be able to enjoy it before she is killed. He faces a personal crisis immediately after she is killed, saying that he ‘I can’t [retire] any more; I’ve had enough. She was a wonderful singer. The planet could have used her’ (117). Rick’s introspection reveals a side to him that was not as visible before: his empathetic side. He has begun to empathise with the androids and with this empathy his humanity becomes clearer.

Even Luft recognises that the androids lack something important. She tells Rick that ‘there is something very strange and touching about humans’ and that as far as she is concerned, humans are ‘a superior life form’ (115). Luba’s perspective is very relevant here because she can speak of the androids’ experience honestly, and her testimony is especially authentic because she is essentially damning herself and the other androids.

Through the novel there is a progression. At the start, Rick is the solitary killer with no remorse for his targets. As the novel develops, so too does Rick, gaining empathy and humanity. With the rise of his humanity, the androids begin to lose some of their apparent
humanity, culminating in a scene near the finish of the novel viewed through the eyes of J.R. Isidore.

Isidore finds a rare and precious spider and, in accordance with his generous nature, shares his find with the androids he is living with. Viewing it with detached intellectual curiosity, and with none of the wonder Isidore brings to it, the androids decide to chop off its legs, one by one in order to see how many it needs to walk. Each of the androids becomes involved in this act: Pris snips off the spider’s legs; Irmgard suggests the experiment and supplies the scissors; Roy burns the spider with a match to get it to move. None of the three is terribly interested in the spider and they harm it only in order to satisfy an idle curiosity while they watch a much-anticipated television broadcast. They feel no sympathy for it. They do not notice Isidore’s horror until he acts to end the spider’s suffering. They are cold, emotionless and utterly psychopathic, and at no other point in the novel do they seem so utterly inhuman.

At this point in the story the androids’ humanity, along with their empathy, is non-existent. Isidore had extended his empathy into the androids, and they have proven to him in an unequivocal way that they do not deserve it. To return to Dick’s discussion of projection and introjection, Isidore extended the life which was in himself into the androids using his empathy, and now sees, when ‘these childish projections are withdrawn’ that ‘the world is dead and life resides wholly within himself’ (‘The Android and the Human’ 183). This is the darkest moment for both empathy and for seeing humanity in the Other. It is akin to Mercer’s lowest moment when he is plunged into the tomb world and is surrounded by only dead and decaying things. Appropriately, the metaphorical link turns into a literal one, as Isidore becomes joined with Mercer’s story.

Transcendence

Before discussing Isidore’s supposed visitation by Mercer, it is necessary to clarify the terminology and mention again the main argument of this thesis, that there are threads of metaphysical realism in Dick’s work, and he is not purely the celebratory prophet of the hyper-real he has been made out to be. Mercer’s visitations are ‘transcendent’ in the sense of being inexplicable in terms of the dominant paradigms of the novel. The culmination of a long period of questioning, these visitations erode the boundaries between a dualistic
opposition like that between reality and simulation. But the word ‘transcendence’ is a heavily loaded one.

The root meaning of ‘transcendence’ is symbolically connected to Mercer’s story. As mentioned earlier, ‘transcendence’ derives from the Latin verb *scandere*, ‘to climb’ and the prefix ‘trans’ meaning ‘through’ or ‘beyond’. To transcend something, then, is to go beyond it or, more literally, overcome it. Mercer’s story is a literal climb, ascension and symbolic transcension. He overcomes his fall into the tomb world of depression, just as he overcomes the thrown rocks of his adversaries and the slope of the hill itself. However, his story is more than just defeating adversity. Because the pattern is cyclic – he will inevitably return to the tomb world – Mercer’s victory is not in ascending and reaching the top. Instead, his victory is in transcending the process by accepting it as inevitable, and thus overcoming it, if not escaping it.

‘Transcendence’ is a pivotal piece of terminology here and it is important to parse its connotations. The traditional, spiritual interpretation of the word is that transcendence is the movement beyond this world into one that is more real. The transcendent moments of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* certainly imply movement from illusion and deception into something more real. This is a convenient interpretation for my major argument; if Dick is favourable towards metaphysical realism, then these transcendent moments show him exploring the idea of a more real reality existing beyond this one. This interpretation works very well, especially for his later and more theologically-directed novels, like *A Maze of Death*, VALIS (VALIS 1981) and *The Divine Invasion* (TDI 1981), where transcending mundane reality allows the subject to perceive a more real reality behind it.

Interpreting transcendence as movement past deception into a more foundational reality has excellent explanatory power, even in those of Dick’s novels that are not explicitly theological and which occur long before his metaphysical turn. The slips of paper that matter dissolves into in *Time Out of Joint* (TOJ 1959) are part of a deeper and more real reality: when thinking about them, Ragle observes that the ‘word is more real than the object it represents’ (TOJ 45). In *A Maze of Death*, Dick sets much of the novel in a virtual reality; an unusually blunt device for a normally more devious author. However, he offsets this simple dualism at the end of the novel by allowing the fictional deity from within the virtual reality to make an appearance in the ‘real’ world. The sense given is
that they have touched on something even more foundational and real than their lives outside the virtual reality.

However, the major target of transcendence in Dick’s novels is the dichotomy of reality and simulation. It would be simple to claim that Dick presents transcendence purely as a way of portraying a more real existence, of touching Reality with a capital R, and in some senses this is true, but he also uses transcendence as a way of overcoming the simple dualism of reality and deception. To return to the example of *A Maze of Death*, it is no coincidence that the deity who rescues Seth Morley at the end of the novel, the Intercessor, is the fictional creation of Seth, his fellow crewmates, and the powerful computer that facilitates their journeys in virtual reality. By having what is, essentially, a fictional creation come into the real world as a literal *deus ex machina*, Dick suggests the separation of reality and simulation is not as profound as it could be. The Intercessor has power over normal reality, which becomes mutable in its hands. To the Intercessor, the real world is as plastic as the simulation it originated from is to the characters and their computer.

There are two main interpretations of this event for Dick’s metaphysical theme. The first is that there is a reality more real than this one, represented by the Intercessor. The characters’ experience in their virtual reality caused them to stumble, almost accidentally, on something transcendent in the theological sense of the word. The second interpretation is that the simple dualism of reality and simulation must itself be transcended. The Intercessor straddles reality and simulation, and thus symbolises the overcoming of these categories. Mercer also straddles reality and simulation. Like the Intercessor, he intervenes in reality, but originates in simulation.

Mercer’s intervention in the events of the novel is inexplicable according to the novel’s dominant paradigms because, as everyone in the novel, even Wilbur Mercer, acknowledges, Mercer is not real: “‘I am a fraud,’” Mercer said (*DADES*? 183). He is an actor on a stage; an alcoholic named ‘Al Jarry’. Even the hill he climbed, described earlier as ‘some place alien, distant, and yet, by means of the empathy box, instantly available’ (*DADES*? 20) is revealed to be ‘a cheap, Hollywood, commonplace sound stage’ (*DADES*? 179). So, when Mercer appears and speaks to Isidore and then Rick, his appearance is, in itself, an example of transcendence and inexplicable in terms of the
Chapter 10

assumed reality of the novel. His appearance is a metaphysical miracle, as he originates from simulation but seems to have power in the real world.

On both occasions, Mercer appears to advocate transcendence in the sense of moving beyond something. Returning to the example that concluded the last section, Isidore experiences a profound depression, caused by witnessing the androids into whom he had projected humanity and empathy as the cold, cruel beings they are, and also by seeing the religion he holds dear being discredited:

Maybe it had been the last spider on Earth, as Roy Baty said. And the spider is gone; Mercer is gone; he saw the dust and the ruin of the apartment as it lay spreading out everywhere - he heard the kipple coming, the final disorder of all forms, the absence which would win out. It grew around him as he stood holding the empty ceramic cup; the cupboards of the kitchen creaked and split and he felt the floor beneath his feet give.

Reaching out, he touched the wall. His hand broke the surface; gray particles trickled and hurried down, fragments of plaster resembling the radioactive dust outside. He seated himself at the table and, like rotten, hollow tubes the legs of the chair bent; standing quickly, he set down the cup and tried to reform the chair, tried to press it back into its right shape. The chair came apart in his hands, the screws which had previously connected its several sections ripping out and hanging loose. He saw, on the table, the ceramic cup crack; webs of fine lines grew like the shadows of a vine, and then a chip dropped from the edge of the cup, exposing the rough, unglazed interior. (DADES? 181–182)

Isidore perceives entropy accelerating as the apartment around him falls into entropic ruin and he connects the vision with Mercer’s story, ironically affirming the religion he has just heard discredited: ‘This is the tomb world and I am in it again’ (183). Dick makes the metaphorical link to Mercer clear by causing Isidore to experience Mercer’s fall into the tomb world without using the empathy box. However, Dick creates some ambiguity in the experience showing Isidore, who did not initiate the experience using the empathy box, holding its handles when his vision ends.

The victory of kipple is the terrible tomb world vision returning once again, and carrying with it Dick’s dense personal lexicon of meaning. Perhaps the most interesting part of
Isidore’s experience is the sense that reality has become fragile. When he reaches out to touch something solid, he finds it turn to dust in his hands, just as things do in ‘Adjustment Team’ (1954) and Time Out of Joint to show they are not real. Just by watching the ceramic cup, he sees its veneer crack and fall, exposing the rough surface underneath, just as he has seen the veneer of humanity chip from the androids he considered friends, and in the same way he is seeing his reality crack and crumble in front of him. As discussed in chapters 6 and 8, lost reality is a terrible vision in Dick’s work, associated with isolation and the loss of personal meaning.

As with Rick, Isidore became connected to the androids by extending his empathy out to them. Having included the androids in his personal definition of humanity, his realisation of their inhumanity comes as a tremendous shock. He became tied to them, and with his epiphany discovers he is surrounded not by human-like creatures but by cold things that have more in common with corpses. Because he has linked himself with them so intimately – a ‘special’ on the decaying Earth is cut off from the rest of humanity in much the same way the androids are – his decent into the tomb world is profound. He perceives everything as dead and decaying. Like Mercer, he is unable to leave the tomb world until he can bring life back into his world: ‘he could not get out until the bones strewn around him grew back into living creatures’ (22). For Isidore, whose fall is caused both by the androids’ lack of empathy and their undermining of his religion, he must regain his faith and his ability to send his empathy out into the world again and perceive the life around him.

With Mercer’s arrival, Isidore senses the retreat of the tomb world. He discovers the dead spider has come to life again, and with it life has returned to the dead things in his personal tomb world, ‘The bones, he realized, have reversed themselves; the spider is again alive. Mercer must be near’ (DADES? 183). The miracle of returning the spider to life shows that Mercer’s appearance is more than just a delusion experienced by Isidore. Dick casts doubt on the event by showing, in the following chapter, that Isidore was holding the handles of an empathy box. However, like the children returning from Narnia with snow on their shoes, the spider is healed, a tiny, miraculous reminder of Mercer’s appearance. In a similar way, Rick is shown the authenticity of his ‘visitation’ by being left with information of the near future he could not have known without Mercer’s intervention.
Chapter 10

Mercer’s message to Isidore is again a revelation of transcendence. Mercer acknowledges the androids are right: he is a bit player and his religion is based on a hoax. However, his miraculous presence belies his agreement. But rather than try to deny the contradiction, Mercer accepts it fully, and by doing so transcends, in the sense of overcoming, the poles of the dilemma of his existence.
Conclusion

The central question in this thesis is, in essence, a simple one. What attitude toward the existence of an objective or absolute reality does Philip K. Dick express in his works? This question strikes to the heart of the writer’s most important and characteristic theme. In response to this question I have developed two main arguments. I suggest that Dick is more open to the idea of an objective reality than many of his commentators have proposed. I also develop the idea that Dick plays with oppositional pairs in order to achieve a kind of transcendence. To relate it to his metaphysical thread, Dick will play with the subjective and objective accounts of reality before coming to a place that partakes of both, but could not be considered one or the other.

In the first two chapters, I surveyed some of Dick’s most well-known critics as they addressed – sometimes tangentially, sometimes directly – the issue of how Dick portrays reality in his fiction. I identified two rough and interrelated phases in how critics have approached Dick’s work.

In the first phase, and the first chapter, Dick’s early critics and interpreters operated in an environment where science fiction was still shaking off its poor reputation. Dick’s work stood out as clearly a part of the genre, but also as exceptional and unusual. His protagonists were not muscle-bound, ray-gun-toting spaceship jockeys, but normal, working class people with jobs, bills and spouses. In his quintessential plot, a working class man with a job like tire-regroover, repairman or record store owner is the victim of an elaborate government conspiracy which creates a false reality and uses it to maintain stability and the status quo. In this plot, commentators like Darko Suvin and Fredric Jameson saw links with the way modern society operates. They were particularly interested in the idea that phenomenal reality might be co-opted by an oppressive ideology to maintain the current mode of production.

These critics established Dick as a part of the academic canon, applying contemporary literary theory to create exciting readings of his work. They drew much-needed attention to his writing. They also tended to offer readings that focussed on the way Dick critiques phenomenal reality, because this had the most relevance to their underlying political and theoretical motivations. To this end, his early work was of particular relevance.
Conclusion

Following this period, commentators connected Dick’s writing to the postmodern movement, which is the subject of chapter 2. Readings of his work during this time emphasised the way Dick effaces the boundary between a simulation and the supposedly authentic thing it is modelled on; what, practically speaking, is the difference between an antique civil war gun and a perfect fake made from authentic materials and with a genuine method? What if that perfect fake is then sent back in time to the period it purports to be from? The question of whether a real thing has a different ontological status from a fake can be generalised and asked about reality. If a supposedly ‘objective’ reality and a perfect fake can be indistinguishable, how can one be said to be superior or more real than the other? And, alternatively, how can one be said to be less real than the other? This thread in Dick’s work interweaves perfectly with the postmodern project, part of which involves juxtaposing categories like ‘reality’ and ‘simulation’ to create a new unity between the opposites. I examined articles by Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, George Slusser, David Golumbia and Umberto Rossi for this section, with Rossi’s article providing a counterpoint to the others.

Both phases established Dick’s relevance to the modern world, but, for the most part, Dick’s critics have had a vested interest in portraying Dick as someone who rejects the idea of an absolute reality, whether to cast him in a revolutionary role with regard to any dominant or totalising ideology, or to suggest he rejects both objectivity and subjectivity in favour of a new mode of understanding.

Having surveyed Dick’s most well-known commentators writing about his reality theme, I turned to some of Dick’s own texts to build a picture, based on his writing, of how he treats reality in his work. To build this picture, I started from the first short story he ever sold, in October 1951: ‘Roog’. The story explores the structure and fallibility of subjectivity, but ends by implying that its apparently laughable subjective point of view might, in fact, be the correct one. Dick claimed the story sets a pattern for most of his later work, which is based on ‘trying to get into another person’s head, or another creature’s head, and see out from his or its eyes’ (BLTW 402). I suggested there is another pattern present which is also repeated in Dick’s work: showing how fallible personal perception is, but then suggesting that it partakes of something objective.

Following my reading of ‘Roog’ I moved to Dick’s first novel-length exploration of subjectivity: Eye in the Sky (ES 1957). Eye is far more critical of subjectivity than even
‘Roog’, and shows how personal belief and the peculiarities of personality and mental state can come to dominate a person’s perception of reality. I suggest that in the process of criticising some types of subjective understanding, Dick explores and rejects some of the common metaphysical positions: theism, reductivism and totalising systemisation. However, Eye concludes in a fairly unadventurous place, with the return of normal reality. The metaphysics of the novel is a basic dualism between perception and reality, with perception entirely contingent on the underlying reality it is based on. The events of the novel are the result of perception temporarily becoming unstuck from reality.

Following my readings of ‘Roog’ and Eye in the Sky, I turned to Martian Time-Slip (MTS 1964). I suggested that Martian Time-Slip is a much more mature novel and that it shows the influence of Ludwig Binswanger and the other existential psychologists. In it, the personal universe becomes unstuck from the shared universe, but the idios kosmos revealed is a dark place: a tomb world where entropy, decay and death have triumphed. The concept of a tomb world caused by isolation and depression is a recurring one in Dick’s writing, originating from Binswanger’s ‘The Case of Ellen West’. One of the characters in Martian Time-Slip describes the vision of the tomb world as ‘under the aspect of absolute reality’ (MTS 116) and ‘under the aspect of eternity’ (MTS 119), suggesting that this particular point of view might be eternal and absolute and, thereby, more real than the more comforting world of the koinos kosmos.

These readings show a writer concerned with and interested by the fallibility of personal perception, but also someone who sees something important and real in it. All three texts reveal how crucial Dick considers personal perception to the make-up of reality, and how he violates the categories of idios kosmos and koinos kosmos in order to try to find something fundamental to reality.

In Chapter 5 I focused on The Simulacra (TS 1964), showing how it explores the idea of transgressing boundaries. Boundaries are transgressed between television and audience, advertisement and psyche, and even the worlds of Umwelt (an individual’s physical, biological context), Mitwelt (the shared universe) and Eigenwelt (the personal universe). In the climax of The Simulacra, the psychokineticist pianist, Richard Kongrosian, absorbs and is absorbed by the physical world when his body flies apart and is replaced by his environment.
Conclusion

My reading of *The Simulacra* paves the way for Chapter 6. Richard Kongrosian’s disintegration is a physical nightmare but also a psychological one. Kongrosian is not so much troubled by having his organs spill out into the world as he is by the fact that he cannot tell the difference between what is part of him and what is not. His personal identity is destroyed. In Chapter 6 I examine the nightmare of lost reality caused by Palmer Eldritch in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. Part of that nightmare is the loss of personal identity, as the characters find themselves first inside Eldritch’s personal universe, and then inside Eldritch himself and unable to distinguish their identities from his. What became clear in this reading is that the loss of reality is the greatest terror in Dick’s works and that many of the darkest tropes in his works are related to it. While Dick’s attitude toward deception and lost reality is negative, *The Three Stigmata* showed how Dick uses his characters’ desire to return to reality as a powerful plot driver, but that a return to reality is by no means guaranteed.

Chapters 7 and 8 carry on from the reading of *The Three Stigmata* by examining *Ubik* (*Ubik* 1969), a novel containing very similar ideas to *Stigmata* and one fascinating difference. *Ubik* presents the same nightmare of lost reality and a deceiving god, but offers hope in the form of the ‘reality support’ (*Ubik* 134), *Ubik*. *Ubik* shows the author’s interest in absolute reality and his hope that a return to reality might be possible.

By closely reading the ‘conapt scene’ where Joe Chip is trapped inside his apartment due to his insolvency, I explored the idea that the loss of reality in *Ubik* is prefigured by the dominance of physical objects that limit the individual’s freedom. I then looked at *Ubik* itself, and tried to account for the many different elements that make up *Ubik*, which instances itself in everything from basic household good to God. I then addressed the dilemma of why Dick chooses to put his one great hope for a true reality into a spray can.

In Chapter 8 I moved on to the notion of competition and balance so important in *Ubik*, which in turn paves the way for the notion of transcendence that I develop in Chapters 9 and 10. Far from being a pure subjectivist or sceptic, Dick tries to balance reality and contingency, striving to allow the co-existence of the two. He is far from the prophet of postmodernism described in Chapter 2.

In Chapters 9 and 10 I developed the idea that Dick aims for a kind of transcendence in his metaphysics, where he puts aside oppositional categories like ‘true’ and ‘false’ in order to come to a new understanding of ontology. I illustrated this idea using first *Dr.*
Conclusion

*Bloodmoney* (DB 1965) and then *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (DADES? 1968), describing the dialectical process he engages in to pave the way for the moments of transcendence in his novels.

I hope I have shown that part of understanding Dick’s writing involves appreciating the attraction and fascination the idea of an absolute reality had for him. Once this element in his writing comes clear, otherwise obscure features gain a new clarity. In addition, by restoring the balance to interpreting Dick’s works, I have tried to make new investigations of his metaphysics possible. By finding a new balance between his search for reality and his doubts about finding it, I have been able to explore the special type of transcendence he creates in his novels, one that is as much an aesthetic construction as a philosophical one. In his works, a pair of binary opposites will fuse and separate until the distinction between the two no longer exists, and a new category that partakes of both but is neither is formed. I believe the special type of transcendence he explores is a unique contribution to metaphysical thinking, and if it lacks the rigour of the pure theoretician, it at least contributes to the pleasure of reading his novels.
Bibliography


Bibliography


Butler, Andrew M. ‘Science Fiction as Postmodernism: The Case of Philip K. Dick’.


Casimir, Viviane. ‘Data and Dick’s Deckard: Cyborg as Problematic Signifier’.


Bibliography


Bibliography


---. ‘Reality as Ideological Construct: A Reading of Five Novels by Philip K. Dick’.


Bibliography


Gillis, Ryan. ‘Dick on the Human: From Wubs to Bounty Hunters to Bishops’.


---. ‘RFID: Human Agency and Meaning in Information-Intensive Environments’.

Bibliography


---. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP. Print.


Jung, Yaz. ““The Martians Are Always Coming”’: Philip K Dick, Twenty Years On’.


Lovelock, J.E. ‘Atmospheric Fluorine Compounds as Indicators of Air Movements’.


Malmgren, Carl D. ‘Meta-SF: The Examples of Dick, LeGuin [sic], and Russ’.


Bibliography


Opie, Brian. ‘Android Textuality: Or, Finding a Toad in the Desert of America’.


Palmer, Christopher. ‘Critique and Fantasy in Two Novels by Philip K. Dick’.


Potin, Yves. ‘Four Levels of Reality in Philip K. Dick’s *Time Out of Joint*’.


Bibliography


Bibliography


Suvin, Darko. ‘Goodbye and Hello: Differentiating Within the Later P. K. Dick’.


Bibliography


Bibliography


