

Paranoid Knowledge - Psychoanalysis and the Interpretation of Mad Writing

Review by Emma Brijs

Alan Bristow's recent publication, which is based on his dissertation, is entitled *Paranoid Knowledge. Psychoanalysis and the Interpretation of Mad Writing* and offers a refined dance through a delicate minefield. With care and finesse, he describes some of the crucial challenges of the Mad Studies paradigm, without detracting from its great value. For those unfamiliar with Mad Studies, it is an approach that focuses on the experiential knowledge of 'mad' people while ensuring that two extremes are avoided. On the one hand, there is a threat of epistemic violence when professionals or theory speak over and overwrite someone's experience; on the other hand, there is the risk of the opposite extreme: placing experience on a pedestal and declaring it so sacrosanct that all interpretation is considered violent in advance (unless in strict co-production). Bristow positions his project precisely between these two poles: he wants to read, but from a psychosocial perspective and with experiential knowledge on an equal footing. The author's substantial work also resonates strongly with my own ongoing doctoral research, so the subject matter is very close to my heart. However, Bristow has pleasantly surprised me with a number of crucial questions. His advancement of a methodology around the subjective experience of madness, shrouded in an atmosphere in which 'psychosociality' prevails, is therefore extremely pertinent. The psychological and the social are inextricably intertwined and cannot be considered separately. And this is precisely where Bristow places his project: an attempt to make the interpretation of 'mad writing' possible again, without interpretation itself becoming a new form of 'epistemic violence'. In his introductory preview, this is sharply posed as the central question: can written madness be analyzed without encapsulating it once again in regimes of knowledge? And is such an analysis necessary in order to provide an epistemological basis from which ethical and political action can follow?

To approach these questions systematically, Bristow divides his dissertation into two main parts. In the first part, he examines how 'mad writings' have been read historically and theoretically and how those readings have produced knowledge claims about 'psychosis' (explicitly placed in quotation marks!) and about the social bond. Daniel Paul Schreber's memoirs, entitled *Denkwürdigkeiten*, form the centerpiece of the first part: Bristow reconstructs (in a non-caricatural way!) Freud and Lacan's psychoanalytic interpretations of Schreber, then moves on to modernist and media-theoretical readings (Santner, Kittler), and ends with schizoanalysis and anti-psychiatry (Deleuze & Guattari). In the second part, he applies the results of that overview to one extensive, non-clinically canonized corpus: *The Exegesis* by science fiction writer Philip K. Dick (PKD). The intention is twofold: to demonstrate how Dick's writing can be read at the level of 'psychosis' and how it simultaneously touches on sociocultural registers; this is precisely what he calls a psychosocial reading. The thesis concludes by formulating reading practices that allow for the interpretation of 'mad text' without reduction, with explicit ambition towards mental health practice. Let us consider:

The introduction and the first chapter situate the field and lay the methodological groundwork. Bristow opens with a literature review of Mad Studies and the interpretation of 'psychotic text'. He then discusses critical psychiatry and the question of who counts as a 'knower' and what knowledge is valid, and discusses dialogical/narrative approaches and the need to define a separate corpus of 'mad writing'. He then reconstructs the famous Foucault-Derrida controversy on madness, cogito, and exclusion, before opening up the possibility, via Felman, that literature, through its pathos and metaphorical power, can be a medium that allows madness to speak without locking it into a conceptual grid. Methodologically, this results in a two-pronged

approach: Althusser's 'symptomatic reading' (reading along fault lines, gaps, and "symptoms" that point to absent, structuring forces outside the text) supplemented by Sedgwick's surface/reparative reading (consciously returning to what the text visibly organizes, such as patterns, keywords, genre, and form, as a counterweight to the hermeneutics of mistrust and overdetermination). This makes interpretation possible without hermeneutic annexation: an approach that Bristow later explicitly positions as a response to the Mad Studies debate on epistemic violence.

In the first substantive block, Bristow revisits the classical psychoanalytic reading. For Freud, the central idea is that delusions and paranoid systems not only express pathology but are also an attempt to restore a broken social bond; delusion as a reconstruction of order. Lacan radicalizes this thinking with the notions of the Name-of-the-Father and "foreclosure," as well as with the distinction between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (ISR). Crucially, he points to linguistic fault lines in Schreber's text: autonyms, metonymic stalls, neologisms that fall outside a shared symbolic network, and shows how a delusional metaphor appears as a kind of emergency construction where a stabilizing signifier is lacking. Bristow meticulously summarizes this clinical approach and uses it functionally: not to reduce Schreber, but to show how writing itself can function as a binding force. In line with this, the later Lacan is discussed with Joyce and the sinthome: writing as the fourth, stabilizing ring that holds RSI together. The result is a shift away from the binary normal/deviant: 'psychosis' becomes one possible mode of subjective stabilization, in which writing itself can have a stabilizing/subjectivizing effect.

He then broadens the perspective to include modernist and media-theoretical readings of Schreber. Santner's 'crisis of symbolic investiture' and Kittler's discourse networks shift the emphasis from a strictly clinical analysis to broader cultural diagnostics: Schreber's text is read as a seismogram of a symbolic rupture and as a product of, and commentary on, regimes of power, technology, and writing. In line with this, schizoanalysis and anti-psychiatry are introduced as counterpoints: not to dismiss psychoanalysis, but to rethink the concept of the 'subject' through desire machines, bodies without organs, and deviant social logics. The arc of this first part is programmatic: let multiple theories speak, and prevent a single lens from monopolizing the text.

With these tools in hand, part two shifts to Philip K. Dick (PKD). Chapter 5 does more than 'sketch context'; it shows the forces at play in the creation of *The Exegesis* and how it can be read. *The Exegesis* is Philip Dick's memoir, which he worked on for the last eight years of his life. Bristow first shows how PKD is often used in the postmodernism debate as an example of hyperreality and loss of time, leading cultural analyses to quickly employ clinical terms ('schizophrenia', 'paranoia') as metaphors. He warns that this colours the view of PKD's own texts prior to the reading. He then sorts out the biographical knots: changing and sometimes contradictory (self) diagnoses, short hospitalizations, periods of suspicion. Central to the *Exegesis* is what PKD himself calls "2-3-74": a series of profound experiences in February and March 1974: the experience of a "pink ray," visions in which his hometown of Fullerton coincided with the Rome of the early Christians, and the feeling of being "activated" by an underlying intelligence. From that shock grew the long, daily writing movement of *The Exegesis*. At the same time, Bristow emphasizes the materiality of our source: the posthumous edition of 2011 is curated and therefore inevitably selective; every contemporary reading works with a filtered PKD. Finally, he outlines the state of research: traces that read the *Exegesis* primarily as religious/gnostic; approaches that focus on paranoid dynamics; and perspectives that understand PKD's notes as an early sensitivity to networks and information ecology. Thus,

Chapter 5 sets up three axes of tension for the rest of Part Two: clinical language versus cultural metaphor, biography versus text form, and spirituality/gnosis versus paranoia/network thinking.

Chapter 6 then carries out its own psychoanalytic reading and shows how you can read within that field of forces without annexing it. Bristow organizes his analysis along Lacan's tripartite division (RSI) and deliberately starts from form: repetitions, shifts, the stacking and adjustment of concepts. In the Symbolic layer, he examines PKD's own information language sphere: experience is thought of as signal traffic ("We advance from signal to signal"), glossolalia appears as noise that interferes with transmission, and gradually a personal language emerges that nevertheless allows the sluggish chain of meaning to move. Language functions here as an interface: PKD constructs a temporary grammar that makes the faltering of meaning bearable. PKD also notes a continuous metamorphosis, in which the writing 'I' changes roles: sometimes observer, sometimes conduit, sometimes part of a larger writing mechanism. In this way, the body becomes a place where the boundary between inside and outside becomes porous. When Bristow talks about the Real, he does not mean (in the Lacanian sense) 'reality', but that which eludes symbolisation: the indigestible surplus that keeps returning as disturbance, emptiness or (paradoxically) 'too much'. From these three points of observation, Bristow motivates his core thesis: *The Exegesis* functions for PKD as a sinthome, a radically new connection that holds together the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real through writing itself. Not a diagnosis, but a working junction: rhythm and repetition forge a social bond and stabilize the subject by shifting the path of jouissance. Writing here is not therapy after the fact, but bonding in actu: a rhythmic, repetitive act that simultaneously forges a social bond (the writer hooks himself into a network of meanings, voices, readers) and channels the drive tension. In this sense, Bristow argues that *The Exegesis* can be understood as a 'psychotic' text without reducing the author to a case: the structure is readable at the level of signifier and body, while the writing itself lays the stabilising knot that Lacan conceived with the sinthome.

I also attempt to explore this field of tension in my own work on writing, creation, and psychosis. In line with Lacan's sinthome, the consideration of the writing function seems to require a certain synthesis. Of course, something is happening at the symbolic level: where there was a radically overwhelming gap in meaning (initially filled by the psychotic delusion and/or hallucination system), something else is indeed woven into the creation *nachträglich*. In this way, some of the jouissance can possibly be limited. However, writing itself cannot be read purely as a linguistic, symbolic act, but is also always a real act *tout court* (Lacan's 'La Lettre'): one moves the body to create something of substance, through which the subject seems to be (temporarily) materialized in a certain sense. Finally, a piece of writing rarely has no addressee or reader. When the step is taken to publish or attempt to share, even minimally, a hitherto solitary product with the outside world, not only does the imaginary dimension of authorship come into play, but the thread to the social and societal world (the Other) is spun. For some, this amalgam seems to embody a sinthomatic power.

Bristow's chapter 7 zooms in on one theme: time, more specifically PKD's concept of 'orthogonal time'. Bristow first shows what that means for Dick: an additional time dimension, perpendicular to ordinary linear time, that brings together past, present, and future in a single state. Dick describes this as a kind of diagonal through time in which 'nows' do not follow each other but overlap; a subjectively experienced 'petrified present' that he also tries to anchor theoretically with references to Einstein and Gödel (closed timelike curves, 'Gödel's metric'), although the concept remains deliberately unstable and at times speculative in the *Exegesis*. Importantly, Bristow situates this orthogonal time in two ways: clinically, as resonant with

phenomenological descriptions of 'psychotic' time experience, and culturally, as an echo of postmodern temporality. The cultural trail builds on Jameson's thesis that late-capitalist conditions make time 'spatial' and cause every historical process to implode into an endless series of 'nows'. With quotations from the *Exegesis*, Bristow shows how PKD literally thinks of time as information signals that follow one another and how that 'signal thinking' fits in with an ontological break in the experience of time associated with digitization and network technology, which were already in their infancy in the social domain at the time of writing the *Exegesis* (the 1970s). Thus, orthogonal time becomes the bridge between subjective disruption and a broader postmodern time regime: what sounds like 'psychotic time' turns out to be a keen sensory antenna for a culture in which synchrony is disintegrating and a static 'now' dominates. In my opinion, this is an extremely powerful and well-founded argument that obliges the clinician/academic to look beyond the singularity of the case study: an actual demonstration of what Bristow will later put forward in his proposed methodology. He concludes this chapter with Deleuze: in this changed temporality, a possibility of 'becoming' emerges, a process in which identity differentiates internally; Bristow reads PKD's own writing development as such a time-driven movement of becoming.

In the final chapter, Bristow shifts the focus from time to body and information. The aim is twofold. On the one hand, he shows that when the experience of time 'becomes spatialized' and comes to a standstill (Jameson), the body becomes the last anchorage of self-experience; on the other hand, he shows that PKD's body language in the *Exegesis* is constantly linked to information flows and networks. Bristow opens with Jameson's thesis that reduction to the eternal present implies reduction to the body, and links this to PKD's own reflections on embodiedness. From there, he unfolds the core of the chapter: the correlation between 'information and embodiment'. PKD describes individuals as nodes in a larger 'living' system ("transistors, diodes, circuits... the network voice – she talks to me. I am patched in to the network, so I am not alone"), whereby his writing both creates a social bond (connection to the network) and translates that bond into the language of information exchange. Bristow shows that this coincides with the emergence of network theory and cybernetics in the twentieth century: first the Shannon-Wiener line, which disconnects information from meaning and carrier (a 'weightless' quantity), as opposed to MacKay, who focuses on context and impact on the recipient; then the shift to reflexivity and autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela), in which systems reproduce themselves and information is no longer understood as a 'thing' but as a relational process. Against this background, he reads PKD's *Exegesis* as a network text, without beginning or end, with repeated interweaving of motifs, and as a text that presupposes a network body: human bodies as links in an information circuit, shifting subjectivity towards 'becoming-information'. Specifically: PKD's notes repeatedly link (1) changes in the experience of time to (2) changes in embodied being and (3) to an information model of reality; Bristow uses precisely these three to show how 'mad writing' allows clinical and cultural registers to speak simultaneously. It reminds me of the need for a (temporary) break, demarcation, and limitation, and I wonder how Bristow would place the function of publishing—including his own work—in this context.

What does all this contribute to the author's own explicit ambitions? Bristow states this clearly in his positioning in the introduction: he wants to investigate how 'mad writing' can generate knowledge about psychosis and social bonds, and what that process does to 'madness'. His hypothesis is that the multitude of readings, between clinical and cultural, shows us something essential about the nature of madness, and that a psychosocial analysis forms the hinge here for connecting individual experience with broader sociocultural issues. Following on from this,

he proposes abandoning the rigid Mad Studies stance on 'epistemic violence' by reading not less but differently: plurality of frameworks, explicitation and situating of the reader's position, and avoiding interpretative closure as the norm. In the concluding chapter, he translates this into concrete 'reading practices' which, he hopes, can also be applied outside the practice of text, in mental health care and decision-making. The thesis therefore does not end with a grand explanatory scheme, but with a procedural promise: read pluralistically, read situatedly, and make interpretation a temporary contract rather than a seizure.

The key question that remains for me is whether we can avoid the notion of epistemic violence at all as long as there is no dialogue, no conversation (as opposed to a solitary reading) with the writer himself: if the writer is not given a voice in absentia in the interpretation of the written text, does this not inevitably remain a radical disregard, a writing about or over instead of a writing with? 'Psychosociality' bears witness to this: a human being never exists in isolation, only in the light of the Other. Should we not therefore reflect this in (academic) methodology? In the case of a post-mortem interpretation, this remains a gap that we cannot fill: the dead do not speak (or perhaps they do in psychosis). On the other hand, practices of 'co-creation', 'co-construction' and 'collaboration' do not necessarily guarantee this elimination either. If not implemented with great care and reflection, they can also create a kumbaya-like false balance, where the researcher can appease their conscience for the sake of convenience. Issues such as imbalance in position often remain present: this must be acknowledged. There is much to be said about this. Is there no ideal middle ground?

In any case, Bristow offers some relevant tools for this with his psychosocial methodology. In addition, Bristow's writing style, in my opinion, testifies to, reflects, and radiates a great affinity for poetry, language, inspiration, and storytelling. In that sense, the whole is already, in a way, a formal challenge to what Bristow refers to as 'epistemic violence': the dry, dogmatic, scientific, and academic positing of Truths about people and phenomena. Perhaps this offers the greatest value and counterbalance of his work in an inevitably academic world full of challenges.

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