



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Culture is Not Your Friend

*Psychedelic literature of the 20th century and its subversive effect in
an industrial world*

Ritgerð til BA-prófs

Gunnar Jónsson

Janúar 2015

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Enska

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What civilization is, is six billion people trying to make themselves happy by standing on each other's shoulders and kicking each other's teeth in. It is not a pleasant situation.

And yet, you can stand back and look at this planet and see that we have the money, the power, the medical understanding, the scientific know-how, the love and the community to produce a kind of human paradise. But we are led by the least among us—the least intelligent, the least noble, the least visionary. We are led by the least among us and we do not fight back against the dehumanizing values that are handed down as control icons ...

Culture is not your friend. Culture is for other people's convenience and the convenience of various institutions, churches, companies, tax collection schemes, what have you. It is not your friend. It insults you. It disempowers you. It uses and abuses you. None of us are well treated by culture.

Yet we glorify the creative potential of the individual, the rights of the individual. We understand the felt presence of experience is what is most important. But the culture is a perversion. It fetishizes objects, creates consumer mania, it preaches endless forms of false happiness, endless forms of false understanding in the form of squirrely religions and silly cults. It invites people to diminish themselves and dehumanize themselves by behaving like machines—meme processors of memes passed down from Madison Avenue and Hollywood.

Terence McKenna, speaking before a live audience.

Into the Valley of Novelty lecture, 1998.

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Introduction

In the middle of the twentieth century, Western writers, chemists, anthropologists and ethnobotanists introduced a hitherto oblivious Western culture to the peculiar effects of what is now called “psychedelic drugs.”¹ Although many of these substances had been well known outside the Western world, often for thousands of years, they were completely novel to their new-found societies.

The term “psychedelic,” originally coined by British psychiatrist Humphry Osmond in 1957, derives from the Greek; “psykhe-” meaning “mind” and “deloun” meaning “make visible, reveal.” For Osmond, the term described the “mind manifesting” effects of these drugs and denoted how they put the user in a more direct contact with his conscious and subconscious mind (Martin 1).

Tales of the effects of psychedelics on the minds of those who ingested them excited many and inspired new research, often having to do with the possibility of these substances shedding new light on mental illness, naturally occurring mystical states and other such curious mental phenomena, as well as having them help treat diseases such as alcoholism and reduce recidivism rates of prisoners (Doblin 419). Others had more sinister motives for studying these drugs. The CIA, for example, conducted their own research, trying to find ways to turn psychedelics into a “weapon” against its enemies (Lee 13).

However, as the psychedelics got out of the laboratory and psychiatry rooms and onto the streets, things got political. Their role in the counter-cultural movement

¹ The word “psychedelics” is normally used to describe the psychoactive drugs mescaline, which is derived from the peyote cacti of Mexico and Southern United States, LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) first synthesized from the ergot fungus by Swiss chemist Albert Hoffman in 1938, LSA (D-lysergic acid amide) which is a close relative to LSD and is found in nature, most notably in the seeds of the morning glory flowers and DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine), a compound found in various plants around the world and even in the human body in trace amounts. Also included are the compounds psilocybin and psilocin, which are the active ingredients in “magic mushrooms.” Other terms, such as “entheogen” (“that which generates the God within us”) have also been applied to the same drugs, but for the sake of clarity I shall stick to using “psychedelics” in this thesis.

of the sixties in the United States was substantial, as has been oft-cited.² This new social and cultural function of psychedelics as the drugs of choice for political dissenters and free-thinkers, in addition to reports of people having bad psychological reactions to psychedelics after taking them in uncontrolled settings, led politicians and other prominent figures to publicly denounce them as dangerous.³ And so in 1968, a federal ban was put in place in the United States, just over ten years after psychedelics had been introduced to the Western world, effectively ending all medical research into psychedelics. The world followed suit, and the drugs went underground (Lee 79).

After 1968, information on psychedelics came through what can only be described as government propaganda; in an attempt to curb its illicit use, administrative money was spent on pamphlets and other such literature in an attempt to convince the public that psychedelics caused mental health problems—a claim that modern neuroscience now questions.^{4, 5} But perhaps more curiously, those who were now allowed to openly ponder the possibilities and limitations of the psychedelic experience were not just researchers in the strict scholarly sense, but rather writers,

² In an article for *The New York Times*, Edward Rothstein notes how the aura of LSD “was a component of the air we breathed [in the 1960s and 70s]. This hallucinogen infused the exhalations of musicians, philosophers, advertisers and activists.” He further quotes Dr. Albert Hoffman to describe the prevalent attitude of there being a “spiritual crisis” in Western industrial society that demanded a “shift from the materialistic” (Rothstein).

³ To further explore the social and political history of psychedelics, read Martin A. Lee’s *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, The Sixties, and Beyond*.

⁴ In 2013 a study conducted by Teri S. Krebs and Pål-Ørjan Johansen at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, titled *Psychedelics and Mental Health: A Population Study*, found that “there were no significant associations between lifetime use of any psychedelics, lifetime use of specific psychedelics (LSD, psilocybin, mescaline, peyote), or past year use of LSD and increased rate of any of the mental health outcomes. Rather, in several cases psychedelic use was associated with lower rate of mental health problems.”

⁵ Writing in the September issue of *The Psychologist* in 2014, British psychiatrist and neuropsychopharmacologist David Nutt, a leading voice on the science of drugs in the world today, remarks in his essay on psychedelics called *A brave new world for psychology?* that to him, speaking “as a former Chair of the UK government’s Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs – the justification for the banning [of psychedelics] was a concoction of lies about their health impacts coupled with a denial of their potential as research tools and treatments” (Nutt 659).

visionaries and artists. To use Plato's allegory of the cave, insights into psychedelics were no longer rooted in empirical research and were now like shadows dancing on the cave wall, shrouded in myth, colorful prose and, often, hyperbole. Novels were published whose writers had been inspired by these substances to explore new possibilities in art and philosophy or simply to shed some light on the counter-cultural movements themselves. Other books which can be deemed as some sort of "turned-on" new age literature used the psychedelic experience as a backdrop for ruminations on where the earth and its population were heading as a whole and how the mystical states brought on by the ingestion of psychedelics might "decondition" its users from cultural values damaging to the earth and the individual.⁶

What can be seen when looking at the literature is how it uniformly possesses a certain attitude subversive to conservative Western values. But what is striking is how it's often far removed from the historical view of the hippie as a sort of comical, clueless figure, hypocrite or angry protester, begging the question whether the modern view of "the hippie" is more a product of government propaganda and Western cultural panic rather than any sort of thoughtful or objective observation. For example the psychedelic literature routinely emphasizes personal growth and satyagraha-style nonviolent resistance to the prevailing cultural models over direct confrontation as well as containing the seeds of the now prevalent environmental culture, that similarly

⁶ Ethnobotanist, psychonaut and cultural critic Terence McKenna remarks on the subversive quality of psychedelics in his book, *The Archaic Revival*. Noting that he is "surprised at any discussion suggesting that psychedelics can make you a good citizen" (52), he goes on to say: "My assumption about psychedelics has always been that the reason they are not legal is not because it troubles anyone that you have visions, but that there is something about them that casts doubts on the validity of reality. They are inevitably deconditioning agents simply by demonstrating the existence of a nearby reality running on a different dynamic. I think they are inherently catalysts of intellectual dissent. This makes it very hard for societies, even a democratic society, to come to terms with them" (52).

to psychedelic culture, has often had to fight to dispel the caricature of its adherents as senseless “tree huggers.”⁷

Psychedelic literature defined

Psychedelic literature, as the name suggests, concerns itself with psychedelics and the psychedelic experience. At the heart of all psychedelic literature lies the human ingestion of psychedelic drugs and the religious, transcendental and mystical experiences that people tend to have as a result. In the classical view, psychedelics became a way for “ordinary” people to attain similar states of consciousness as the celebrated mystics of former times, with people like William Blake and German theologian and philosopher Meister Eckhart serving as important cultural antecedents for Westerners in the middle of the 20th century to simply make sense of these experiences and grant people some sort of cultural authority to talk and write about them. Also invoked were the religious traditions of the world, with Eastern philosophy perhaps providing the most relevant framework to explain and discuss the effects of psychedelics on human consciousness.

The effects of psychedelics are often described as ego-shattering or boundary-dissolving. One’s natural sense of self is disrupted—or transcended—under the influence and impressions of the outside world radically transformed. Modern research suggests that psychedelics achieve this effect by reducing activity in parts of the brain that deal with identity and self (the science of which is more thoroughly explained later in this thesis). Research subjects regularly describe having feelings of oneness with the universe under the influence, of having their identity dissolve and

⁷ Satyagraha is a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi. As John P. McKay remarks in *A History of World Societies, Volume C: From 1775 to Present*, the term is “loosely translated as ‘Soul Force,’ as a means of striving for truth and social justice through love, suffering, and conversion of the oppressor. Its tactic is active nonviolent resistance” (859).

their outlook on life becoming less egocentric and more all-inclusive. Visions are regularly seen and revelations of a seemingly religious nature are reported. Needless to say, such experiences can have a profound and lasting impression on users, challenging pre-existing models of thought and sometimes replacing them with new and lasting ones.

Psychedelic literature can be roughly divided into three subcategories in accordance with the point of view from which the psychedelic experience is examined: Literature concerning the science of psychedelics—that is how psychedelics work on the human mind and how they can be implemented in psychotherapy and various fields of research. The second category contains literature dealing with the anthropology and cultural heritage of psychedelics and, lastly, the third contains works regarding the subjective effects of psychedelic drugs and their political and spiritual implications. Obviously many books blur the definitions between these subcategories.

Psychiatrist Stanislav Grof was arguably a leading force in literature concerning the science of psychedelics in the 20th century, releasing countless works on the subject. Also worth noting is physician, neuroscientist and psychoanalyst John C. Lilly's work with psychedelics, sensory deprivation and dolphins. However, books dealing with the hard science of psychedelics were scant in the 20th century, since the illegality of these compounds greatly limited research possibilities for scientists who wanted to stay overground in their pursuits. In this regard the 21st century will undoubtedly have much to add to this particular niche of psychedelic literature, with Rick Strassman, doctor of psychiatry, ushering in a new age with the release of *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* in 2001, a book detailing his research into DMT (or N,N-

dimethyltryptamine) that marked the first time in America since the 1960s that the government allowed research on the effects of psychedelics on the human mind.

Psychedelic literature concerning the anthropology and cultural heritage of psychedelics, as opposed to the scientific literature, is more abundant given as how researchers and anthropologists had more freedom in their studies, often travelling to countries where psychedelics were legal, giving them an opportunity to intimately understand the interplay between these substances and the cultures in which they are enshrined. Worthy of noting is anthropologist Jeremy Narby's book *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge*, referenced later in this thesis in an attempt to explain the influence of DMT on the aboriginal tribes of Peru and their firm connection to nature. Another remarkable voice in terms of the anthropology of psychedelics is ethnobotanist and philosopher Terence McKenna, whose work is heavily featured in this thesis. McKenna's eloquent talks have found new life in the 21st century on websites such as YouTube and his books are still widely read, giving an extremely thought-provoking—if sometimes unconventional—insight into psychedelics and their influence on thought and culture. Arguably he is one of psychedelics' most endearing spokespeople despite many of his more outlandish theories having failed to find mainstream validation.

Another important voice in the pantheon of psychedelic literature is novelist, researcher and polymath Aldous Huxley and although Terence McKenna lacks the impeccable credentials of Huxley—whose piercing intellect and authority has done much to validate interest in psychedelics over the years—McKenna is certainly planted thoroughly in Huxley's school of science-meets-mysticism and did much to popularize Huxley's seminal works on psychedelics, *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*.

The last subcategory of psychedelic literature of the 20th century is the largest one: Books dealing with subjective effects of psychedelic drugs and their political and spiritual implications. This category includes the aforementioned *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell* by Aldous Huxley as well as his last novel, *Island*. Other writings worth including are Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* by Tom Wolfe, *The Lazy Man's Guide to Enlightenment* by Thaddeus Golas, *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass (or Dr. Richard Alpert), *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness* by philosopher Alan Watts, Terence McKenna's *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge* and *The Archaic Revival*, Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner and Richard Alpert's *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as well as Timothy Leary's books *High Priest*, *Your Brain Is God* and *Change Your Brain*.

Almost all of the books mentioned here will be more thoroughly explored later, with Terence McKenna and Aldous Huxley working as reappearing voices supporting my thesis regarding the effects of psychedelics on the human mind, language, thought, ideology and culture.

Huxley and the American psychonauts

It was arguably the writings of Aldous Huxley that, more than anyone else's, brought the awareness of psychedelic substances to the Western world. Huxley, being interested in nature, religion and mystical states, had written a book in 1945 called *The Perennial Philosophy*, where he explored the common themes of all religions, from early times to his day, trying to distill a unifying metaphysical theme that spoke to man's desire for transcendence or contact with a "divine reality." It was during this

research that Huxley became interested in attaining the mystical states he wrote about, leading the aforementioned psychiatrist Humphry Osmond to introduce him to mescaline, the psychoactive compound of the Peyote cacti of South-America (Woodcock 274).

In his book *The Doors of Perception* first published in 1954, Huxley wrote of his own experience with mescaline, describing how his state of consciousness was completely transformed under the influence of the drug, giving him a philosophical perspective not enjoyed previously.⁸ He came up with a theory of how these psychedelic substances worked on the mind, a theory of the “Mind at Large” that was in part based on the writings of D.C. Broad, the English epistemologist and analytic philosopher (22). Huxley proposed that the mind had the ability to absorb larger quantities of information than people were normally aware of, but seeing as how most of this information was irrelevant to the hominid struggling for survival in nature, the brain filtered out much of the incoming information, much like a reducing valve, letting only the bare essentials inform our consciousness. In his view, psychedelics loosened up this reducing valve, flooding the sensory organs with information, giving one a more intimate and direct contact with “other worlds” (24).

In a memorable passage in *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley thus describes how he, under the influence of mescaline, saw in a flower arrangement in his study:

What Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence...

⁸ The title of *The Doors of Perception* came from William Blake’s book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that declared that “if the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern” (14).

“Is it agreeable?” somebody asked...

”Neither agreeable nor disagreeable,” [Huxley] answered. “It just *is*.”

Istigkeit—wasn’t that the word Meister Eckhart liked to use? “Is-ness.”.... [W]hat rose and iris and carnation so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were—a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence. (17-18)

Huxley further explored the implications of psychedelic drug use in his follow-up book *Heaven and Hell*, where he decried the state of alcohol abuse in the West at the same time that drugs such as mescaline were almost completely unheard of, drugs that in Huxley’s opinion had far deeper spiritual implications than any of the prevailing Western intoxicants of that time, consequently highlighting a link between cultural models and drug use and their influence on each other.⁹

Huxley’s publications coincided, or more accurately, had much to do with an increased interest in the psychedelics used by non-Western cultures in the Western

⁹ In an address to the Jung society in Claremont, California in 1991, Terence McKenna echoing the statements of Huxley regarding the influence of drugs on culture said: “Various societies wear drugs like clothing, with no awareness of their existence at all, somewhat in the way that a fish relates to water. So that, for instance, if you’re in Dublin, you are swimming in the ambiance of an alcohol culture. You don’t have to be drunk to be in Dublin—although it helps—but the entire society is premised on the possibility...In India the entire society is premised on the possibility of hashish intoxication, and social mores, building design, everything takes account of this. Cultures don’t see this. We [Western cultures] do not think of ourselves as a meat, sugar, alcohol culture. People do not walk around saying ‘Oh wow, I’m so high on meat, alcohol and sugar I can hardly stand it,’ but they *are*. And certain consequences flow from that...A culture takes its tone—its clothing—from the drugs that it admits. And you can know a great deal about a culture from the drugs that it excludes, the drugs that it excoriates and fears. Because various drugs accentuate and suppress different parts of the psyche” (19:21-20:59).

world. In the 1950s, in the Canadian prairie province of Saskatchewan, Humphry Osmond, the same man that gave Huxley his first taste of psychedelics—and indeed coined the term to describe them—was conducting a team of psychologists at Weyburn mental hospital who were intrigued by these drugs and the likeness between the psychedelic experience brought on by the then newly synthesized lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD, and early stages of schizophrenia. Eventually news of these research and writings reached the United States, piquing the interest of a young psychiatrist named Timothy Leary, who was then a fledging professor at Harvard University. Leary traveled to Mexico in the early fifties and there tasted for the first time the psychedelic mushrooms that would completely change his professional trajectory.¹⁰

Inspired by his experience, Leary brought Mexican mushrooms to the United States and with help from Aldous Huxley conceived of a plan to use the mushrooms in psychotherapy at Harvard.¹¹ While at Harvard, Leary gave psilocybin to many people, both as part of research as well as unofficially to his friends and acquaintances. Among them were many of the luminaries of the sixties' counterculture and its psychedelic literature. Most notable were poet Allen Ginsberg—who himself had grown interested in psychedelics and how they allowed for a “panoramic awareness” after he naturally hallucinated a voice reciting William Blake’s poem *Oh, Sunflower* as he sat in his Harlem apartment one morning.¹² Others who tasted Leary’s forbidden fruit included writer William S. Burroughs and Leary’s

¹⁰ In his book from 1968, *High Priest*, Timothy Leary discusses at length his introduction to psychedelics and subsequent study thereof at Harvard, leading to his dismissal from the university and eventual work with psychedelics outside the law.

¹¹ Further detailed in *High Priest*, p. 65-67.

¹² In the BBC program “Face to Face,” hosted by Jeremy Isaacs in 1994, Allen recounted his hallucination of the mysterious Blake poem recital and his subsequent use of psychedelics.

Harvard colleagues Ralph Metzner and one Richard Alpert, who would eventually elope to India and return to the United States reborn as Baba Ram Dass.¹³

But as Leary's experiments with psychedelics became more unconventional and rumors of him and Alpert giving psychedelics to undergraduates circulated, Harvard dismissed the two. Leary eventually became one of the primary figureheads of the sixties counter-culture, famously coining the axiom "turn on, tune in, drop out" to neatly summarize his philosophy.¹⁴

It was perhaps this idea of "dropping out" that became the biggest bone of contention between supporters of psychedelics and those opposed. Dissenters saw it as a threat to Western society, leading to "troubles in keeping the ploughs and machines going" (CBC 17:24-17:28) as one concerned Richard Blum notes in a 1966 CBC documentary on LSD when describing the decidedly anti-corporate views of the counterculture as it turned its attention from "the real world outside [to] the real world inside" (17:10) and how this could have destructive effects on Western industry and societal form.

A few years prior to Leary's Harvard dismissal, at the Veterans Hospital in Menlo Park in Oregon, a young writer named Ken Kesey enrolled in an experiment with psychedelics, sponsored by the CIA's now infamous Project MKULTRA, taking numerous psychedelics in a controlled setting over a period of a few months. Kesey

¹³ In his book from 1971, *Be Here Now*, Alpert recounts his transformation from a spiritually unfulfilled Harvard PhD to Baba Ram Dass. The book has sold over two million copies worldwide and influenced people such as Apple CEO Steve Jobs and novelist Michael Crichton. It could be considered a good example of psychedelic literature in addition to providing an introduction to Eastern philosophy for Western readers.

¹⁴ The famous phrase is further explained in his autobiography thusly: "'Turn on,' meant go within to activate your neural and genetic equipment. Become sensitive to the many and various levels of consciousness and the specific triggers that engage them. Drugs were one way to accomplish this end. 'Tune in' meant interact harmoniously with the world around you - externalize, materialize, express your new internal perspectives. 'Drop out' suggested an active, selective, graceful process of detachment from involuntary or unconscious commitments. 'Drop out' meant self-reliance, a discovery of one's singularity, a commitment to mobility, choice, and change" (Leary 253).

was enthralled by these drugs and proceeded to take them regularly, often going to work at the veteran's hospital, at the psychiatric ward, under the influence of psychedelics. Kesey used these experiences as inspiration for his first novel, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, published in 1962. The novel became a best-seller and was praised for its sensitive portrayal of schizophrenia. In an ironic twist Kesey, inspired by his drug-use largely funded by the CIA, eventually became the leader of a counter-cultural gang called the Merry Pranksters, that rode around America in a Day-Glo colored school bus dubbed "Furthur" and turned its citizens on to a new way of life, denouncing the bleak paranoia of the McCarthyism of the fifties and instead reveling in drug-taking, free love, rock and roll music and other artistic expressions that characterized the zeitgeist of the sixties.¹⁵

Novelist Tom Wolfe, intrigued by Kesey, stayed sober, pen in hand, and followed the Merry Pranksters around America, eventually writing *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, a prime example of psychedelic literature, now considered a counter-cultural classic and a seminal work of the "New Journalism" movement. At the same time Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, Ralph Metzner and friends continued with their experiments outside the academic environment of Harvard, often finding correlations between Eastern philosophy, their work in psychology and their drug induced insights, chronicled in *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, both homosexuals and no strangers to what was essentially a taboo lifestyle in the sixties, seemed to revel in the zeitgeist and were breaking new ground in poetry and prose as part of the celebrated American beat poets, eventually co-authoring *The Yage Letters* in 1963, a

¹⁵ Kesey's introduction to psychedelics in Oregon and his subsequent Day-Glo freak-out as a member of the Merry Pranksters is thoroughly recounted in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, released in 1968.

chronicle of Burroughs' visit to the Amazon rainforest in search of the psychedelic brew yagé (or ayahuasca). Furthermore gonzo journalist and self-described “madman” Hunter S. Thompson was living out what would later become *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, an unorthodox investigation of the hypocrisy of “the American Dream.”

All these elements—the interest in Eastern mysticism and shamanism, the condemnation of post-war American consumer society or even Western culture as a whole, the free spirited experiments in art often concerning the breakdown or reimagining of the English language—are found again and again when looking at psychedelic literature. And although the sixties ended and the hippie movement lost its momentum the literature still kept inspiring readers to turn on, tune in and drop out.¹⁶ Many of the key writers kept reciting the same mantras well beyond the sixties, retaining their wide-eyed optimism regarding psychedelics and their possibilities.

And so it was with the then fledging New Age movement that psychedelics and its subversive message found a home. Coincidentally the term “New Age” had been used as early as 1809 by William Blake when describing what he believed was a coming era of spiritual and artistic advancement of humanity (Sampson 369).

Furthermore, the writings of Aldous Huxley kept inspiring new writers such as ethnobotanist, philosopher and “psychonaut” Terence McKenna who read *The Doors of Perception* at a young age and was lead on a path to the indigenous cultures of South-America and Africa where he connected with the archaic value systems that were largely based on a symbiosis with nature through psychoactive plants.

¹⁶ Commenting on the failure of the psychedelic generation of the sixties, specifically the politics of Timothy Leary, Terence McKenna remarks in *The Archaic Revival*: “[T]o try to launch a “children’s crusade,” to try to co-opt the destiny of the children of the middle class using the media as your advance man, was very risky business. And it rebounded, I think, badly...I think Huxley’s approach was much more intelligent—not to try to reach the largest number of people, but to try to reach the most important and influential people: the poets, the architects, the politicians, the research scientists, and especially the psychotherapists” (9).

McKenna, like the writers that came before him, shared a deep unease about the seemingly destructive values held in such high regards in Western capitalist societies and the non-sustainability of modern consumerism. He blamed conservative scare tactics for imposing a warped historical view of the psychedelic experience as psychologically dangerous or culturally unhelpful and was himself highly critical of the dominant capitalist ideals of the late 20th century.

In his essay, *Modernity – An Incomplete Project*, Jürgen Habermas strongly criticizes attempts made to defuse opposition of the intellectuals of the 1970s to neo-conservatism, the rising ideology of that time in America, and one that was in strong opposition to psychedelic culture. Habermas quotes American journalist Peter Steinfels, who describes how neo-conservatism tends to link any intellectual dissent to itself to:

[V]arious forms of extremism: drawing the connection between modernism and nihilism...between government regulation and totalitarianism, between government arms expenditure and subservience to communism, between Women's liberation or homosexual rights and the destruction of the family...between the left generally and terrorism, anti-Semitism, and fascism. (7)

Habermas declares that such wrongful imposition upon political and societal dissenters is “rooted in the analytical weaknesses of neoconservative doctrine itself” (7), further accusing it of blurring the relationship “between the welcomed process of modernization on the one hand, and the lamented cultural development on the other” (7).

Arguably we are now, better than ever, seeing the unsustainability of industrial capitalism and its negative impact on the earth.^{17, 18, 19} Therefore our times are a welcomed opportunity to re-evaluate dissenting ideologies, such as those presented in the psychedelic literature. Within that field of literature there is arguably much to play with from a 21st century point of view; with common topics ranging from the destructive force of the competitive ego, the importance of recognizing one's firm connection to nature and the interdependence of all things, to a deep-seated fascination with language and its role in how the human mind perceives the world and the power of the psychedelic experience to help deconstruct vapid political language and harmful ideologies.

At the same time, there is emerging a new understanding of how the psychedelics of the sixties inspired important breakthroughs of the coming computer

¹⁷ Such sentiments are no longer considered to be on the fringe. An editorial of *The Observer* declared on the 3rd of February 2013 that “an awareness is growing across the political spectrum, and on both sides of the Atlantic, that a radical recalibration of capitalism is essential, not least because the wealthiest and least productive are in danger of allowing their own avarice to sabotage the very system on which they have become so hideously bloated” (par. 3).

¹⁸ In an article on the *Guardian* website in March of 2014, Dr. Nafeez Ahmed, author, investigative journalist and international security scholar, points to a then recent study sponsored by NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center that warns that “global industrial civilization could collapse in coming decades due to unsustainable resource exploitation and increasingly unequal wealth distribution” (par. 1).

¹⁹ In late 2013, Canadian author and social activist Naomi Klein wrote an article called *How Science is Telling us All to Revolt* detailing some shocking discussions at the 2012 Fall Meeting of the American Geophysical Union, held annually in San Francisco. There Klein detailed how many modern geophysicists and mathematicians are turning political as “global capitalism has made the depletion of resources so rapid, convenient and barrier-free that ‘earth-human systems’ are becoming dangerously unstable in response” (Klein par. 3). With systems researcher Brad Werner declaring in his address at the conference that “our entire economic paradigm is a threat to ecological stability” (Klein par. 9), adding that the only hope of disrupting the destructive momentum of modern industrialism was “people or groups of people” who “adopt a certain set of dynamics that does not fit within the capitalist culture” (Klein par. 4). Werner all but advocated “protests, blockades and sabotage by indigenous peoples, workers, anarchists and other activist groups” (Klein par. 4). This remarkable shift in tone, from the scientifically detached to the blatantly political, is seemingly becoming more common within the scientific community, with people like celebrated climatologist James Hansen recently giving up his job at NASA in part to dedicate more time to political activism (Klein par. 7).

age,²⁰ as well as in psychology,²¹ quantum theory²² and even molecular biology.²³

And since the mid-nineties, psychedelic research has been on the rise again, with non-profit organizations like the *Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies*, or *MAPS*, channeling funds into legitimate research, conducted all over the world.²⁴

Much of this research deals with the possibility of reducing end-of-life anxiety in terminal cancer patients by giving them psilocybin, as well as using psychedelics to treat post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.²⁵

²⁰ In his biography, penned by Walter Isaacson, Steve Jobs, the co-founder, chairman and CEO of Apple Inc. said: “Taking LSD was a profound experience, one of the most important things in my life. LSD shows you that there’s another side to the coin, and you can’t remember it when it wears off, but you know it. It reinforced my sense of what was important—creating great things instead of making money, putting things back into the stream of history and of human consciousness as much as I could” (Isaacson 41).

²¹ Speaking at the Psychedelic Science 2013 conference, pharmacologist and medicinal chemist David E. Nichols stated that the “revolution in neuroscience was...catalyzed by the discovery of LSD and then a few years later the finding that serotonin was in the brain” (1:27-1:34), saying that prior to this “psychiatric disorders were thought to be due to poor parenting” (1:43-1:46). As soon as scientists realized that there were structural similarities to serotonin and LSD “a number of people put together the idea [that] maybe behavior and mental function is somehow related to neurochemistry. And that seems sort of silly today because that’s an obvious thing...but that’s the way it was” (Nichols 2:08-2:29).

²² In his book *How the Hippies Saved Physics*, David Keiser, physicist and historian of science and Germeshausen Professor of the History of Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), reveals how modern breakthroughs in quantum information science “ultimately owe their origins to the hazy, bong-filled excesses of the 1970s New Age movement,” further stating that “many of the ideas that now occupy the core of quantum information science once found their home amid an anything-goes counterculture frenzy, a mishmash of spoon-bending psychics, Eastern mysticism, LSD trips, CIA spooks chasing mind-reading dreams, and comparable ‘Age of Aquarius’ enthusiasms” (xiii).

²³ In 2004, a few days after the death of English molecular biologist, biophysicist, and neuroscientist Francis Crick, best known as the co-discoverer of the structure of the DNA molecule, the London paper *Mail on Sunday* printed a story indicating that Crick and other Cambridge academics of the seventies had used “LSD in tiny amounts as a thinking tool, to liberate them from preconceptions and let their genius wander freely to new ideas,” and that Crick had admitted to biochemist Richard Kemp that “he had perceived the double-helix shape while on LSD” (Rees par. 11).

²⁴ Founded in 1986, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies is a non-profit research and educational organization that develops medical, legal, and cultural contexts for people to benefit from the careful uses of psychedelics and marijuana. Detailed reports of their studies can be found on their website, www.maps.org.

²⁵ A *New York Times* article titled *How Psychedelic Drugs Can Help Patients Face Death*, published in early 2012, offers fascinating insight into some of the modern research on psychedelics. Revealing how one John Hopkins University study found “sustained positive changes in attitude, mood and

Furthermore, modern technology such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (or fMRI) is finally being utilized to shed light on how these substances affect brain activity and consciousness, lending credence to some of the psychedelic literature of yore and ushering in an era of rediscovery, research and cultural dialogue concerning psychedelics.^{26, 27}

Language games

A common thread that binds psychedelic literature of the 20th century together is their insistence on examining language and its role in how we perceive—and interact with—the world. In *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley, when discussing his “Mind at Large” theory, writes about how man, in order to ensure his biological survival on this planet, perceives the world through the “reducing valve” of his brain and nervous system, resulting, in Huxley’s words, in a “reduced awareness” (23). The contents of

behavior” (Slater par. 16) in healthy research subjects administered psilocybin. With another researcher who gave terminally ill subjects psilocybin at Harbor–UCLA Medical Center declaring that “it appears the drug can relieve the angst and fear of the dying” (Slater par. 13). The article also reveals how much of these new researchers are keenly aware of the social stigma associated with these drugs, with one claiming: “We are trying to stay under the radar. We want to be anti-Leary” (Slater par. 5). Another adding: “We are serious sober scientists” (Slater par. 5).

²⁶ A study conducted by Robin L. Carhart-Harris, a postdoctoral student at Imperial College London showed that the ingestion of psilocybin, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, caused a temporary dampening in brain activity as the effects of the drugs were felt. Echoing Huxley’s theory of the “Mind at Large,” Carhart-Harris notes that the “results seem to imply that a lot of brain activity is actually dedicated to keeping the world very stable and ordinary and familiar and unsurprising” (Szalavitz par. 6). Two regions that showed the greatest decline in activity under the influence of psilocybin were the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) and the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC), regions that belong to a network in the brain known as the default network. “There’s a lot of evidence that it’s associated with our sense of self — our ego or personality, who we are,” (Szalavitz par. 17) says Carhart-Harris, adding that “Probably the most reliable finding in depression is that the mPFC is overactive” (Szalavitz par. 15).

²⁷ A common thread that binds psychedelic literature together is their insistence on psychedelics’ capacity for deconstructing narrow-minded cultural and political ideology. Indeed there is medical research that seems to support this claim, with a Johns Hopkins study revealing that psilocybin tended to bring about lasting changes in subjects in a part of the personality known as “openness,” related to traits such as “imagination, aesthetics, feelings, abstract ideas and general broad-mindedness” (*Single Dose of Hallucinogen May Create Lasting Personality Change* par. 2).

this reduced awareness have since been expressed by language that, while being a supremely helpful tool of communication, has its disadvantages in how it structures our reality. In Huxley's opinion we become victims:

[I]nsofar as [language] confirms [man] in the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness and as it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things. That which, in the language of religion, is called "this world" is the universe of reduced awareness, expressed, and, as it were, petrified by language. (23-24)

In this sense, language becomes a kind of a trap for people, locking them in a fixed and fragmented view of the world. This sentiment was shared by many of the writers of psychedelic literature and can, to some extent, be traced back to Polish-American philosopher and scientist Alfred Korzybski, perhaps most famous for his development of the theory of general semantics as well as his axiom "the map is not the territory," that denotes how the models—linguistic or otherwise—that we use to make sense of reality should not be confused with reality itself.²⁸

William S. Burroughs studied under Korzybski and his ideas were arguably some of Burroughs greatest influences. From Korzybski, Burroughs adopted the notion that "words were false signposts that had a life of their own" (Grauerholz 8).²⁹

²⁸ An anecdote tells of how Korzybski once gave his students biscuits to eat during a break in one of his lectures, only to reveal after a while—as his students were chewing vigorously—that he had in fact given them dog biscuits. As the disgusted students ran for the toilets, Korzybski remarked "I have just demonstrated that people don't just eat food, but also words, and that the taste of the former is often outdone by the taste of the latter" (Derks, Hollander 58).

²⁹ William S. Burroughs, inspired by Korzybski and friend and artist Brion Gysin, popularized the now infamous "cut-up technique," where text was cut-up, mixed and rearranged with total disregard for

He regularly quoted Korzybski in interviews and propagated his idea that “either/or” thinking was essentially a word-game and could only lead to “intellectual stalemate and self-deceit” (Grauerholz 9). Robert Anton Wilson, another writer of psychedelic literature, was profoundly influenced by Korzybski’s ideas as well as many science fiction writers of the 20th century, such as Robert Heinlein, Frank Herbert and Isaac Asimov, who incorporated some of Korzybski’s non-Aristotelian logic into their work that subsequently influenced the psychedelic generation of the sixties.³⁰

The idea of the tenuous relationship between words and reality was of course the fundamental basis of post-structuralism and deconstruction in the 1960s and 70s, but it was within the psychedelic literature that these topics had an optimistic, political charge. It was there that ideas of deconstruction were linked with the possibility of re-programming the mind, supposedly polluted by political language, and of reclaiming language from the hands of governmental authority. In *The Archaic Revival*, Terence McKenna spoke of the “cultural need” for people to evolve language in a more conscious manner than they had previously done, to generate new words in fields where new levels of nimble intelligence were called for and eliminating words that empower “political wrong thinking,” explaining how “the propagandists for the fascists already understand that if you make something unsayable, you’ve made it

conventional narrative and syntax. These experiments aggressively questioned, and indeed derailed, the relationship between signifier and signified. His 1959 novel *Naked Lunch* used this technique to some extent, while his “Nova trilogy” *The Soft Machine*, published in 1961 and revised in 1966, *The Ticket That Exploded*, published in 1962 and revised in 1967, and *Nova Express*, published in 1964, featured almost completely cut-up text. Parts of *The Soft Machine* are inspired by Burroughs’ travels in South-America, where he searched for the drug yagé, more famously known as ayahuasca; a psychedelic brew made by the shamans of Peru containing DMT.

³⁰ Science fiction spoke to the counterculture of the sixties, not least for its yearning for a transcendence of culture, mind and even the human form. Robert E. Heinlein’s 1961 novel *A Stranger in a Strange Land* introduced the word “grok” (meaning to “understand something intuitively or by empathy”) into the English language, a word that was adopted by the hippies and featured in psychedelic literature such as *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and Robert Anton Wilson’s and Robert Shea’s *The Illuminatus Trilogy*.

unthinkable. So it doesn't plague you anymore," adding that "planned evolution of language is the way to speed it toward expressing the frontier of consciousness" (214).

Terence McKenna was, like many others, enthralled by the idea that language had to catch up with the psychedelic vision, that the evolution of language should try and express impressions that were beyond our everyday "reducing valve" consciousness—to try and articulate the unspeakable.³¹ This would prove beneficial to man facing natural catastrophe in the wake of industrial revolution. Regularly invoked was Philo Judaeus' *Logos*, the divine voice of reason and knowledge in the universe, with McKenna declaring in *The Archaic Revival* that "as long as one maps with something other than the Logos, there will be problems of code quality," saying that "the dualisms built into our language makes the death of our species and the death of the individual appear to be opposed things" (94).

In this view, man's lack of connection to the forces that created him or any sort of objective truth is not simply due to our everyday "reducing valve" ego structure, but also due to the imposing nature of language upon thought patterns. Therefore, a conscious effort to evolve language beyond the current form, with its crippling ambiguity and impositions of false binary thinking, could help mankind break out of its environmental cul-de-sac.

³¹ Others shied away from gratuitous language use, in order to preserve the unspeakable. In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Tom Wolfe discusses the Merry Pranksters' unwillingness to explain their special bond using the crude tool of language, writing: "To put it into so many words, to define it, was to limit it. If it's *this*, then it can't be *that*... Yet there it was!" (126).

The politics of ecstasy

As has been mentioned earlier, most of the psychedelic literature of the twentieth century dealt, to a large degree, with the effects and implications of what has been called “ego death” or “ego loss.” A sensation routinely reported by users of psychedelics where one’s sense of self is felt to disintegrate, sometimes causing panic in the user and sometimes euphoria.³² The ego has historically been considered to be the idea of the fixed self, an identification with the mental forms that make up the all-important “I” that has driven man to create, fight and procreate for the sake of one’s “self” since his beginnings. However, much like Eastern philosophy had done before, psychedelic literature dealt with the deconstruction of the ego, dissolution of self and the political and spiritual questions that arose in its wake.

Both Aldous Huxley and Terence McKenna made a point of discussing the humbling effect psychedelics have on the user as his ego is crushed in the face of a radical encounter with the “other.” McKenna often quoted British geneticist and evolutionary biologist J. B. S. Haldane who wrote in his book *Possible Worlds and Other Papers* in 1927: “Now my own suspicion is that the Universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose” (286). In interviews, Huxley echoed this statement, recommending that:

³² In *The Lazy Man’s Guide to Enlightenment*, a book by Thaddeus Golas first handed out as a pamphlet by the author in the streets of San Francisco in 1971 and later becoming an underground bestseller, Golas—despite being fascinated with the prospect of ego death as something “we go through in expanding to higher levels of awareness” (3)—warns against frivolous attempts at tampering with one’s own ego or the ego of others, saying: “When you offer people spiritual solutions—or solutions of any kind for anything, for that matter—you are asking them to give up what makes them feel active, alive, defined—their ego structure. Be careful—*it’s dangerous!*” (15).

[P]rofessors and almost anybody with fixed ideas and with a great certainty about what's what [should take psychedelics and] realize that the world he's constructed is by no means the only world, that there are these extraordinary other types of universe which we may inhabit and which we should be very grateful for inhabiting, I think. (1:22)

Timothy Leary similarly saw psychedelics as an opportunity to see one's own "games"—a term he often used to describe human interaction—in a wider context, saying in his book *Change Your Brain* that under the influence of psychedelics and “under the right circumstances, local games that frustrate and torment can be seen in the broader, evolutionary dimension” (23), adding that “anger and anxiety are irrelevant, because you see your small game in the context of the great evolutionary game which no one can lose” (23).³³

The idea that the psychedelic experience had an inherent subversive quality and possessed an ability to deconstruct ideology, short-term thinking and self-serving narrow-mindedness by simply *being what it is* was not only felt by high-minded scholars and thinkers. Even the Merry Pranksters, often considered to be decidedly

³³ The whole passage, from Leary's *Change Your Brain* is worth including, as it gives a valuable insight into Leary's thoughts on the relationship between psychedelics, ego and society: “Consciousness-expanding drugs unplug [our] narrow programs, the social ego; the game machinery... Why is this brain-activating experience so strange and horrid to Western culture? Perhaps because our Western world is overcommitted to objective, external behaviour games. “The game” versus the “meta-game.” Behaviour versus consciousness. The universal brain-body versus the local cultural mind. But this old paradox should be made explicit if it is to be fun. What should provoke intense and cheerful competition too often evokes suspicion, anger, impatience... In three hours, under the right circumstances, local games that frustrate and torment can be seen in the broader, evolutionary dimension. But in the absence of relevant scientific rituals to handle the drug experience, physicians seek to impose their game of control and prescription. Bohemians naturally impose their games of back-alley secrecy. Police naturally move in to control and prosecute. Those who talk about the games of life are invariably seen as frivolous anarchists tearing down the social structure. Actually, only those who see culture as a game can appreciate the exquisitely complex magnificence of what human beings have done. Those of us who play the game of “applied mysticism” respect and support good gamesmanship. You pick out your game, learn the rules, rituals, concepts; play fairly and cleanly. Anger and anxiety are irrelevant, because you see your small game in the context of the great evolutionary game which no one can lose” (Leary 22-23).

anti-intellectual in their use of psychedelics, struggled with the ego and the ability of psychedelics to subvert different ideologies and unveil the arrogance they tended to inspire in its adherents, finding themselves in distinctly Eastern philosophical territory as a result. At one point in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* Tom Wolfe describes how Ken Kesey once deflated a Vietnam War protest by pointing out its inherent egomania, illustrating the many different guises of the ego in action. Kesey gets up on stage and after likening activist Paul Jacobs, who spoke before him, to Mussolini, declares:

[Y]ou're not gonna stop this war with this rally, by marching ... that's what *they* do ... They hold rallies and they march [...] I went to see the Beatles last month ... And I heard 20,000 girls screaming together at the Beatles ... and I couldn't hear what they were screaming, either ... But you don't have to ... They're screaming Me! Me! Me! Me! ... I'm Me! ... That's the cry of the ego, and that's the cry of this rally! ... Me! Me! Me! Me! ... And that's why wars get fought ... ego ... because enough people want to scream Pay attention to Me ... Yep, you're playing their game [...] there's only one thing's gonna do any good at all ... And that's everybody just look at it, look at the war, and turn your backs and say ... Fuck it ... (Wolfe 222-224)

This passage not only illustrates the false binary thinking of “anti-war protest” as being the appropriate response to the atrocities of war, but also the many ways in which the ego can in fact fool people into seemingly self-destructive behavior as a result of being stuck with its limited view of the world and its relationship to it.

In his final novel, the utopian *Island*, Aldous Huxley created a sort of antithesis to his famed novel *A Brave New World*. Unlike its counterpart, *Island* dealt with ideas of how human kind could benefit from the best of Western and Eastern thought to further its progression, highlighting the necessity for man to move beyond the ego for the sake of self-realization. In the book he has his characters take the “moksha-medicine,” a drug representing psychedelics and Huxley's impressions of their potential.³⁴

What Huxley highlights thoroughly in *Island* is the matter of the psychedelic experience as a sort of political and spiritual challenge, having enormous transformative potential if taken seriously. He asks the question: Now that you, the psychedelic user, have witnessed your ego structure come loose, if only for a moment, and as you've seen the relativity of your self-importance, will you still go through the motions as an egocentric being? Will you face up to the challenge presented by psychedelics or will you simply treat it as a party drug?³⁵

Of course many did in fact treat psychedelics as nothing more than a party drug, Hunter S. Thompson, for example, was a good example of someone who never

³⁴ “Moksha” is a concept from Hinduism and Jainism meaning “liberation” or “release” from the cycle of death and rebirth.

³⁵ In one passage, Huxley describes the psychedelic challenge thusly: ““Liberation,” Dr. Robert began again, “the ending of sorrow, ceasing to be what you ignorantly think you are and becoming what you are in fact. For a little while, thanks to the moksha-medicine, you will know what it's like to be what in fact you are, what in fact you always have been. What a timeless bliss! But, like everything else, this timelessness is transient. Like everything else, it will pass. And when it has passed, what will you do with this experience? What will you do with all the other similar experiences that the moksha-medicine will bring you in the years to come? Will you merely enjoy them as you would enjoy an evening at the puppet show, and then go back to business as usual, back to behaving like the silly delinquents you imagine yourselves to be? Or, having glimpsed, will you devote your lives to the business, not at all as usual, of being what you are in fact? All that we older people can do with our teachings, all that Pala can do for you with its social arrangements, is to provide you with techniques and opportunities. And all that the moksha-medicine can do is give you a succession of beautiful glimpses, an hour or two, every now and then, of enlightening and liberating grace. It remains for you to decide whether you'll co-operate with the grace and take those opportunities. But that's for the future. Here and now, all you have to do is to follow the mynah bird's advice: Attention! Pay attention and you'll find yourselves, gradually or suddenly, becoming aware of the great primordial facts behind those symbols on the altar”” (*Island* 173).

bought too heavily into the utopian potential of psychedelics, instead reveling in the experience's inherent "madness." But arguably he too felt its deconstructing effects, turning his drugged-out wit on the political structures of America as Nixon's eternal gadfly.

Certainly it's easy to see how the ideas expressed by psychedelic authors such as Aldous Huxley and Terence McKenna are in complete opposition to the main tenets of modern capitalism, as a supremely individualistic ideology, and one that emphasizes the need for new markets and, therefore, increased consumerism, which in turn will ravage natural resources if left unbridled.³⁶ In that sense, the idea of experiencing one's egotistical "needs" as trivial compared to the importance of the ecosystem as a whole is damaging to the markets. And yet there is increasing evidence that the egocentrism of modern capitalism is running the planet off the proverbial precipice and towards natural catastrophe, rendering all life (and its ego structures) extinct.

But what is one to do? Is it ever possible to escape one's ego? Is it possible to see one's wants as trivial in the larger scheme of things and yet be a *person*, capable of functioning in a society built on sating desires and egotistical "needs" no matter what the environmental cost? It is no wonder that conservatives of the sixties felt ill at ease confronted with this new social group of self-described hippies and freaks that had no intention of behaving like cogs in the capitalist machine. And sure enough the energy of the late sixties soon dissipated in the face of external and internal pressures to conform to "reality." Noble ideals of the ego-less utopia were crushed in the face of

³⁶ Commenting on the possibilities psychedelics offer for Western capitalist societies, McKenna writes in *The Archaic Revival*: "Now why should taking a natural psychedelic drug compound like psilocybin give you hope? It's because it connects you up with the real network of values and information inherent in the planet, the values of biology, the values of organism rather than the values of the consumer" (13).

the overwhelming somebody-ness that suited the markets so well and eventually crept in to dismantle the revolution.³⁷

Hunter S. Thompson wrote quite elegantly of the end of the hippie era in *Fear and Loathing*, published as a book in 1972, reminiscing about the days when:

There was madness in any direction, at any hour. If not across the Bay, then up the Golden Gate or down 101 to Los Altos or La Honda...You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning...

And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply *prevail*. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave...

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (67-68)

³⁷ Of course events like the Altamont Speedway Free Festival in 1969 didn't help the hippie cause, where alcohol and drug use was rampant, the Hell's Angels drunkenly handled security and bad vibes were abound. This resulted in a murder by a Hell's Angel of an enraged concert-goer Meredith Hunter, as he drew a gun on the angels. The Altamont festival is often cited as a turning point, a debacle that turned many off flower-power for good. Rolling Stone magazine wrote an article on the festival, with the revealing title: "Rock & Roll's Worst Day" (Burks). The events of Altamont were later detailed in the documentary *Gimme Shelter*, released in 1970.

Nature's God

In 1998, anthropologist Jeremy Narby released *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge*, a non-fiction book detailing his studies of the Asháninka people of the Peruvian rainforest and their use of psychoactive plants, on which their whole culture is founded. What struck Narby was the sophistication of these supposedly “primitive” tribes in terms of their knowledge and application of chemistry. Narby notes, for example, the Asháninka use of ayahuasca, the psychedelic brew containing the psychoactive compound dimethyltryptamine, or DMT for short. Ayahuasca is to many a surprisingly elegant mixture of the leaves of one plant, containing DMT, combined with the bark of another, containing so-called monoamine oxidase inhibitors that prevent the breakdown of DMT in the stomach of its user, therefore allowing the ayahuasca mixture to enter the bloodstream and cause its hallucinatory effects. The brew is considered to have healing and divinatory properties and is becoming quite sought after by Westerners, making ayahuasca-tourism in Peru a growing trend in the 21st century (Narby).

What Narby talks about in great detail in his book is how the Asháninka of the Peruvian rainforest not only take ayahuasca regularly, they maintain that plants are able to communicate with them through the ayahuasca trance, crediting much of their knowledge and sophistication in chemistry to the brew, or more accurately the “spirits” that present themselves to the Asháninka under its influence. “Ayahuasca is the television of the forest. You can see images and learn things” (4) one of them says to Narby. “That is how nature talks, because in nature, there is God, and God talks to us in our visions. When an ayahuasquero drinks his plant brew, the spirits present themselves to him and explain everything” (24). Not only do the Asháninka credit the ayahuasca spirits with much of their knowledge, they have a very distinct and all-

inclusive view of life in the rainforest. Narby explains how the Asháninka are firmly aware of the interconnection of life and “think of themselves as members of the same family as herons, otters, hummingbirds, and so on, who are all *perani ashaninka*, all our fellows long ago” (25).

Although few attempts have been made to scientifically verify the claims of the Asháninka, their subjective point of view remains. Through the ingestion of psychoactive plants they stand closer to nature and have indeed created a whole mythology around the “spirits” or “God” found in nature, entities that guide them and give them knowledge.

It is noteworthy that once psychedelics infiltrated the Western world, similar ideas of man’s indelible connection to nature became highly prevalent within the psychedelic communities. In the view of psychedelic writers of the West, these chemicals pierced through the fabric of culture, revealing a human bond to the natural world that no ideology, linguistic perversion or societal model can ever truly efface. In the words of Timothy Leary, writing in *Your Brain Is God*, “the psychedelic drug experimentation of the 1960s produced one wonderful by-product—a pagan love of nature, a hippy sense of alienation from man-made anthropocentric philosophies,” asking: “Is it not clear that the ecology movement owes its birth to barefoot acid-pagan concern for nature?” (22).

Similarly, Terence McKenna called for what he dubbed “the Archaic revival” in his eponymous book, a step back from capitalist consumer culture towards a more sustainable, nature-friendly way of life, explaining that man’s unique situation as the abstract-thinking monkey-cum-space explorer and possible creator or destroyer of future worlds called for a radical rethink of our modus operandi, further stating in *Food of the Gods*, released in 1992, that “understanding planetary purpose may be the

major contribution that we can make to the evolutionary process. Returning to the planetary partnership style means trading the point of view of the egoistic dominator for the intuitional, feeling-toned understanding of the maternal matrix” (92). McKenna thus advocated a sense of “Gaian Holism—that is, a sense of the unity and balance of nature and of our own position within that dynamic, evolving balance” (93).

In this view, man has become—to use Aldous Huxley’s words—a “victim” to a fixed world view, “petrified” by language and political manifestos and detached from any sort of intuitive relationship with nature. Of course modern capitalist culture has never taken anything resembling McKenna’s ideas of a “Gaian Holism” into consideration, as such matters as a business deal’s impact on nature are by modern economic standards deemed as “externalities.” The free market has chosen to deal with capitalism’s destruction of nature in the form of after-the-fact fines. Such form of justice of course relies on a fair and balanced judiciary system, but it does not take into consideration the question: “What if capitalism ravages the earth and there is no turning back?” Who are we to fine once the biosphere has come undone and human life has been threatened—or worse—been extinguished?

Psychedelic literature of the 20th century highlighted the importance of an intuitive relationship with the natural world, one that trumped any sort of self-serving ideology or cultural model. Its message was often empowering in the sense that its writers shared an optimism in regards to man’s capacity to let ideology and language work for him, and not vice versa. It represented an egalitarian world view, not only in terms of people’s relation to each other, but also to other animals, plants and even things. A world view that harks back to the “primitive” views of aboriginal tribes, such as the Asháninka mentioned earlier.

But who needs psychedelics, anyway?

What emerges when looking at this type of literature is that despite their enthusiasm for psychedelics, many of their adherents certainly did not see their use as an end in itself. Rather, they saw psychedelics as a method for enlightenment, as a political and social galvanizer or a tool that could be used to stop environmentally damaging behavior. Terence McKenna invoked Aldous Huxley in *The Archaic Revival*, saying that modern culture could benefit from attempts to integrate use of psychedelics “with a sense that they point the way toward something. I think [Huxley] called them “gratuitous graces,” explaining that they were neither necessary nor sufficient for salvation, but they were, nevertheless, a miracle” (McKenna 30). Richard Alpert, or Ram Dass, had a similar view of psychedelics, honoring them as one of many methods for enlightenment yet warning against the dangers of getting caught in any one method.

This could be seen as one of the pitfalls of the psychedelic generation, as some people got more interested in the drugs than the ideas they inspired. Eventually many of the chief spokespeople for psychedelics stopped advocating their use, perhaps feeling, rightly, that they had been playing a dangerous game. In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Tom Wolfe recounts how Ken Kesey eventually started advising people to go “beyond acid” (10) declaring it time to “move on to the next step in the psychedelic revolution,” further stating that “we’ve reached a certain point but we’re not moving any more, we’re not creating any more” (379).

It is therefore important to make the distinction of psychedelics as a component of drug addiction or a party lifestyle and psychedelics as a method for attaining goals that go far beyond the psychedelics themselves. When looking at these types of literature there certainly emerges a picture of these writers, almost all

thoroughly falling in the latter camp with the possible exceptions of Hunter S. Thompson and William S. Burroughs.

Final thoughts

In the early 21st century there is an ever growing need for re-evaluation of political systems, ideology and man's relationship to nature. This has coincided with a resurgence of legitimate psychedelic research conducted all over the world that seems to suggest that psychedelics can have positive effects on their users and their quality of life, if taken in a controlled environment. Psychedelic literature of the 20th century often faced ridicule in the face of Nixon and Reagan era anti-drug propaganda at the same time that it provided a healthy counterbalance to the political ideologies of these respective administrations. It often displayed poetic prose that pointed well beyond its time and culture, acting as a natural bridge between Western psychedelia and Eastern philosophy and arguably leaving powerful ideas for the 21st century to play with. The lasting impression when looking at psychedelic literature is of its sympathetic view of human life and its relationship to the earth as well as its subversive effect on ideologies and cultural models that seemingly rely on egocentric thinking, unsustainable consumerism and an unquestioning view of the language that shapes our world.

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