Introduction

In 2010, the magazine *Playboy* published an article on “The New Psychedelic Renaissance,” which examined the state of psychedelic research throughout the world: Israel, Jordan, Canada, Brazil, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and Mexico, were some of the countries researching into the potential of MDMA, ayahuasca, LSD or ibogaine, in various applications such as end-of-life anxiety or opiate addiction. In the United States, psychedelic drugs like psilocybin (one of the main psychoactive agents of “magic mushrooms”), LSD, mescaline (an alkaloid contained in peyote cacti), and MDMA (aka “ecstasy”) were used in research for end-of-life anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorders, cluster headaches and post-traumatic stress disorder of Iraq war veterans (Kotler). CNN also documented contemporary therapeutic research with psychedelics, underscoring its promising early results—notably by interviewing Steven Ross of the New York University psilocybin/cancer research team.

In 2005, Harvard gave its go ahead for research on LSD and psilocybin. From a historical standpoint, this was a highly symbolic move because it was the first time in over forty years that the prestigious university was authorizing psychedelic studies. That ban had its chief origin in the notorious deeds of Timothy Leary, who began his career as the “High Priest” of LSD by introducing psilocybin and LSD to the psychology department—and to some of its students. The university took issue with their “unscientific methods” for studying psychedelics and with the liberties he and fellow psychologist Richard Alpert (now known as Baba Ram Dass) were taking. Leary decided that it was a good time to start promoting LSD as something even better than therapeutic well-being:

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LSD and the psychedelic experience, he reasoned, could change the world for the better.

Half a century later, such claims might still sound surprising. Yet, back then, several influential figures saw psychedelics and their power to radically question ontological certainties as having an inherently revolutionary potential. During his time at Harvard, Leary ran psilocybin sessions with the novelist Aldous Huxley, as well as some the foremost Beat figures. Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Neil Cassady and Peter Orlovsky underwent the psychedelic experience, but it was Allen Ginsberg, who immediately realized that it was time to start a “peace and love” movement.

Prior to this joining of forces, Aldous Huxley had experimented with mescaline and published his psychedelic meditations in his classic essays “The Doors of Perception” and “Heaven and Hell.” Like Leary and Ginsberg would find out in the early 1960s, Huxley also felt that psychedelics had the power of revamping Western society and, upon meeting Leary, suggested that he start a psychedelic crusade in which he would enlighten the “best and the brightest” to ultimately transform the dominant structures of American society—a decision he would regret when it became apparent that Leary was fond of causing controversy. Huxley, then, believed that the psychedelic experience could be used in a pragmatic way to reform the elites.

The fact that a brilliant mind like Huxley or that a charismatic Harvard professor turned LSD guru saw the psychedelic experience as a valid tool for self-improvement and, so went the dialectics, for the greater benefit of mankind, is not the only reason why these ideas deserve attention. Indeed, the Psychedelic Renaissance should not be limited to the therapeutic realm of psychedelics: LSD and psychedelics did not disappear in the ’60s; they have, of course, been used recreationally throughout the decades, but more importantly these drugs, along with others like MDMA, ayahuasca or ibogaine, continue to inspire writers with insights that display a remarkable historical continuity.

The past and contemporary intellectual insights related to the psychedelic experience, then, have many similarities: a monistic and post-modern conception of reality and the Divine, a suspicion of dogma and dualism, and a belief that psychedelics are the key to the next stage of human evolution. Yet, given the present cultural feeling of environmental uncertainty, authors are now taking the philosophico-spiritual value of psychedelics one step further. Psychedelics, they argue, can play a positive role in altering mankind’s consciousness and fostering a much-needed reunion with nature to ultimately prevent a global environmental catastrophe.

While Wouter Hanegraaff has pointed to the “importance […] of psychoactive substances as catalysts of new spiritual revelations” (293) in the development of the 2012 millenarian popular literature sparked by Terence and Dennis McKenna and that have shaped the New Age culture, it also appears that the apocalyptic fears that are so present in post-’60s psychedelic literature and that are behind a tangible 2012 culture are the logical consequences of a specific form of monistic environmental awareness fostered by the insights of the psychedelic experience. In a larger cultural context of growing environmentalism and with the current ban on most psychedelic substances in the Western world, then, tying an apocalyptic message to the prohibition of those substances is also an attempt to argue against the existing legislation and promote psychedelics as valid antidotes to environmental destruction. Thus, where Nicholas Langlitz has recently argued that “attempts to relegitimize [the use of psychedelics] in the West […] have taken the route of science, not religion” (17), evidence in the contemporary psychedelic literature also suggests that the revival is not confined to science, insofar as it is also undertaken from a philosophico-spiritual perspective.

The psychedelic movement which surfaced sometime in the early ’60s, with Huxley’s injunction to enlighten the “best and the brightest” using LSD, and arguably ended with the sordid publicity brought by Charles Manson and his followers, had an agenda for social and cultural change that is echoed today. Although it would be wrong to claim that all LSD users in the ’60s saw themselves as cultural revolutionaries, some did follow Leary’s precepts and believed that if a sufficient number of people changed their ways of
life, they would reform American society. Half a century later, the legacy of the American LSD movement is still unclear. But, as noted above, psychedelic practices did not die in the ‘60s. As Hanegraaff argues, “neoshamanism in its original psychedelic form did not vanish after 1970, but continued as a vital underground culture, which has become much more easily accessible again since the spread of the Internet” (293). Beyond this subculture, however, there are obvious philosophical similarities and differences that exist between the ‘60s psychedelic movement and what might be referred today as the “entheogenic movement.” More broadly the past and present psychedelic movements can be understood as preaching a form of spiritual utilitarianism and traced right back to the longer-lasting tradition of American pragmatists like William James.

**Psychedelic Philosophy in the ‘50s and ‘60s**

There are many intellectuals who, from their early encounters with psychedelics, had life-changing experiences that deeply called into question their ontological certainties. Aldous Huxley was arguably the most influential in this respect, but there are of course other important characters such as Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey, who would share their psychedelic insights with their audience. While Kimberly Hewitt has already attempted to “synthesize the extant psychedelic literature with cultural analysis to present an original interpretation of the ways in which psychedelic drugs changed modern paradigms” (12), identifying these insights to ultimately compare them with the contemporary ideas put forth by psychedelic writers can ultimately present a much broader overview of the psychedelic philosophy over the past sixty years.

**What was Wrong with Humankind?**

Aldous Huxley’s early literary career established him as one of the foremost critics and satirists of his society. In some respects, he concentrated all his deepest fears in what has been widely acknowledged as his essential work, namely his dystopian novel *Brave New World*, which he partly intended as a warning of what Western society could potentially become. Central to his concerns was what he saw as the dangerous alliance of politics, technology and consumerism. In *Brave New World*, the ruling body uses mind-manipulating techniques to condition the masses to love their ruler, but also to find comfort in consumerism. Individuals are born in test-tubes and their technical and intellectual capacities are pre-established by eugenic patterns. Huxley believed that people would not accept biological and mental conditioning if they did not get something in return: a highly promiscuous social life, where everyone is allowed and socially encouraged to have sex with everyone, but more importantly, the escape hedonism of the imaginary drug *soma*, which was, depending on the dosage, alternatively a stimulant, a sedative or a psychedelic (an impossible combination). These key aspects of the society depicted by Huxley allowed any potentially subversive energies to be channeled and diffused. The old order would thus always stay in place.

The suspicion of technology became one of the central elements of Huxley’s critique of Western society. Whilst *Brave New World* was a work of fiction that saw technology as potentially dangerous if put into the wrong hands, Huxley also questioned the legitimacy of the modernist consensus in the real world. He criticized the over-reliance on technology and bureaucratic apparatus to run states with ideals of maximum efficiency. He was particularly concerned about the development of mass communication that ran the risk of descending into brainwashing like in dictatorships (Huxley “Final Revolution”).

Huxley’s concerns accompanied him throughout the first half of the century, looking for an antidote to *Brave New World*. As early as October 1931—even before publishing his novel—Huxley had openly stated what he thought might be the answer. In an article for the *Herald Examiner*, he wrote,
Men and women feel such an urgent need to take occasional holidays from reality, that they will do almost anything to procure the means of escape. [...] The way to prevent people from drinking too much alcohol, or becoming addicts to morphine and cocaine, is to give them an efficient but wholesome substitute for these delicious and (in the present imperfect world) necessary poisons. The man who invents such a substance will be counted among the greatest benefactors of suffering humanity. ("Treatise" 4–5)

This stand clearly indicates that Huxley was ready to acknowledge the liberating potential of psychedelics twenty-two years before his ingestion of mescaline. Huxley thought that Western society had a deep urge for chemically induced escapism—he would later reverse the famous Marxist aphorism “religion is the opium of the people” into “opium is the religion of the people” (“Chemical Persuasion” 135) He was looking for a substance that would be harmless, pleasurable and fulfilling. As if by coincidence, Huxley, who in the meantime had been looking East for his answers, discovered his antidote (mescaline, later, LSD), just as his deepest fears had been re-actualized in the ‘50s: he noticed the consumerist frenzy post-war America was engaged in, but more to the point, he was troubled by the vast array of barbiturates—one of which was ironically named “soma”—that were being offered to American society, not in the name of public well-being, he felt, but in the name of public order and conformity.

In his final novel Island (1962), which, in some respect, he intended as his testament and as a counterpoint to Brave New World (1932), Huxley’s suspicion of the modern Western world became even sharper. In his utopian fable, he depicted an imaginary society (the inhabitants of Pala) that combined the best of Eastern philosophy with the best of Western science, shunning consumerism, violence or greed, and embracing love, care and unity. In order to attain these ideals, the Palanese society partly relied on psychedelics - the enlightening mushroom moksha (in Sanskrit, “freedom for evermore”) used in rituals is the antidote to the escapist soma of Brave New World. Through the voice of the Palanese, Huxley offered a blunt ecological maxim: “treat Nature well, and Nature will treat you well. Hurt of destroy Nature, and Nature will soon destroy you” (Island 248).

The Post-Modern Shift

Before moving on, and examining how psychedelics could perfect humanity, it is worth briefly dwelling on the way some of the key figures of the psychedelic movement sought to make sense of their experience and what philosophical insights they came up with. With the right set and setting, the psychedelic experience could lead to mystical states of awareness, in which the subject would experience feelings of unity with the universe. As a result, psychonauts would adopt a post-modern outlook on the world and reject any form of dogma imposed on them. Reality had to be understood as a personal experience that could not be related through religious scriptures.

In 1962, Leary underwent his first LSD experience and from then on, he embraced a post-modern conception of reality, which would shape his thought until his death. To him, the psychedelic experience was the proof that other levels of reality existed beyond the “ordinary” state of consciousness and that what was thought to be reality was nothing but a social consensus. This was something Ken Kesey also noticed. As a writer, he realized the potential of psychedelics to offer multiple angles of perception of the world and the people surrounding him to distance himself from the “normal” world.

As a natural consequence of the power of psychedelics to call into question the nature of reality, dogma became one of the central elements of modern thought that the post-modern psychedelic culture rejected. In Island, Huxley wrote that “anybody who gets eloquent about Buddha, or God, or Christ, ought to have his mouth washed out with carbolic soap” (43). Like many psychonauts trying to make sense of their experience with the Other World, Leary had looked East for concepts and guidelines, and made the pilgrimage to India in 1965, coming back more resentful of established religions and convinced that God was within you and not somewhere in the heavens. As the counter-cultural movement
gathered momentum, and Leary gained notoriety, he began to offer a kind of post-modern form of spirituality that revolved around taking LSD. Through his realization that reality was but a social construct, it followed that authentic spirituality could only come from within the individual and not from established religion. “The only way out is in,” he told the 1967 San Francisco Be-In (qtd. in Higgs 86), trying to direct the counter-culture towards a more personal form of religion and away from religious dogma. Thus, not only did the psychedelic experience offer a way of attaining an original mystical revelation, as did Huxley during his first experience with mescaline, when he saw “[what] Adam had seen on the morning of his creation” (“Doors” 17), but its strong experiential dimension also enabled users to shun the second-hand experiences of religious scriptures and reject their dogmatic teachings.

Before moving on, it is important to note the limits of the psychedelic post-modern spirituality and point to the multiple references to established religions to make sense of the psychedelic experience. Huxley’s above quote is a good example, but Higgs also notes that Leary, for all his talk about rejecting dogma, felt that all religions were attempts to make sense of an original religious experience, and thus did not mind calling himself a Catholic (as he was brought up) or a Hindu (67). Incidentally, Huxley’s main point of reference was less Judeo-Christian than Hinduist, which he had studied prior to his chemical experimentation, and relied on concepts like “Nirvana,” “Dharma” or “Bodhisattva.” Likewise, some of the Beats who had studied Zen referred to drug-induced mystical states of consciousness as “Satori.”

Leary’s “psychedelic humanism” was centered on the individual and a stand against organized modernist monotheism that worshiped an omnipotent monolithic Divinity. In this respect, he suggested that everybody should start one’s own religion (Start). Although he saw religion as a product of the mind, he would continue to speak of the Divine, but only to refer to the inner power inherent to every human being—he claimed that “your brain is God” and would later publish a book with that title. For Leary, God was not an external and patriarchal force; God was a form of monistic “sentient chaos” that could be found not just in every human, but in all “organic and inorganic life” (qtd. in Higgs 66). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, humans were originally created by God as separate from the rest of the world and logically have a special place in the cosmos. Leary, on the other hand, thought that humans were part of the whole universe and no different to any other organic and inorganic life.

In general, LSD tended to foster a monistic rather than a dualistic conception of the Divine. Leary aside, several other important figures rejected dualism. One of Huxley’s most immediate realizations was that dualisms, dichotomies or polar opposites could be reconciled through the chemically induced mystic experience. When asked during his mescaline experience if it was agreeable, Huxley answered: “neither agreeable nor disagreeable. It just is” (“Doors” 17). This was an intuition he would further develop in his last essay titled “Culture and the Individual,” in which he argued that our perception was conditioned by a dualistic approach to life (i.e., black and white, good and bad, subject and object), which could be challenged and tempered by the mystic experience:

In the mystical consciousness of being at one with infinite Oneness, there is a reconciliation of opposites, a perception of the Not-Particular in particulars, a transcending of our ingrained subject-object relationships with things and persons; there is an immediate experience of our solidarity with all beings and a kind of organic conviction that […] in spite of all that is so manifestly wrong with the world, it is yet, in some profound, paradoxical and entirely inexpressible way, All Right. (Huxley, “Culture” 235)

Huxley concluded in Island that “without [dualism] there can hardly be any good literature. With it, there most certainly can be no good life” (205). His friend, the philosopher Allan Watts, in his Joyous Cosmology lamented that “one of the greatest of all superstitions is the separation of the mind from the body” (3), responsible for the denial of bodily urges. All these teachings were not new: they had long existed in the Hindu or Zen Buddhist traditions. But in the West, they
were a radical new way of re-interpreting reality. Dualism, of course, was part of the legacy of modernism and rationality, which emphasized the importance of the subject/object dichotomy and the universality of truth. By contrast, the psychedelic movement called into question the modernist world view and embraced post-modernism and its emphasis on holism and the relativity of reality.

The Solution is Evolution

Influential figures of the psychedelic movement, trying to make sense of their life-changing experiences came to posit that psychedelics could be the key to unlocking the full potential of the human brain: LSD and psychedelics would lead human beings to the next stage of evolution. Hewitt has argued that Huxley’s psychedelic experiences led him to formulate “a utopian vision of psychedelic drugs used to enhance human senses and further the evolution of society and human consciousness” (8). Examining this interpretation in other people’s writings, however, suggests that this brand of psychedelic evolutionism was not confined to Huxley’s insights and constitutes a major tenet of the psychedelic paradigm.17

One of the consequences of Huxley’s mescaline experience was for him to agree with the British philosopher C. D. Broad, who - inspired by Henri Bergson’s theory on memory and sense perception - posited that the human brain operates as a vast reducing-valve: the primary function of the brain, the nervous system and the sense organs is to regulate the overwhelming flow of information and perception we are constantly subjected to, and keep only what is necessary on a “practical” level. Thus, a great deal of information never reaches us: “what comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet” (“Doors” 23). Huxley, as seen above, also believed that this state of consciousness was too often taken for the only valid one. His mystical experience caused by mescaline was the proof that other states of consciousness could be attained. The mind could be freed from these hindrances to attain what he referred to as “Mind at Large”—the mind expanded beyond its purely “survivalist” function.

In the late 1920s, Huxley was drawn to Bergson’s “vitalist” (élan vital) interpretation of evolution—unlike the more mainstream interpretation that evolution is directionless.18 Bergson argued that this creative life force directed evolution towards higher manifestations of complexity and competence. This type of evolution, as Nietzsche would then speculate, could lead to the race of the Superman (Übermensch): mankind would ultimately reach some form of perfection - for better or worse. The vitalist hypothesis appealed to certain intellectuals, who thought that the next phase of human evolution would come from the untapped potential of the mind. In the late 1920s, Huxley, who was looking for an antidote to the dystopian nightmare of Brave New World, thought the solution might lie deep within our minds, which is why he turned to Eastern philosophy and mysticism, trying to bypass the reducing-valve of the mind. But psychedelics offered an altogether easier shortcut to these states of consciousness. To him, they were the next step on the evolutionary ladder.

The man who introduced Huxley to psychedelics, the psychedelic psychiatrist Humphry Osmond, had come up with comparable evolutionary insights around the same period. He also felt that the psychedelic experience could be a valuable asset to shift humankind’s consciousness and lead it to the next stage of evolution: “I believe that the psychedelics provide a chance, perhaps only a slender one, for homo faber, the cunning, ruthless, foolhardy, pleasure-greedy toolmaker to merge into that other creature whose presence we have so rashly presumed, homo sapiens, the wise, the understanding, the compassionate [...]” (431).

In the early ‘60s, the less well-known psychedelic writer Adelle Davis (using “Jane Dunlap” as a pen-name) came to express similar ideas in an even more explicit way.19 Following one of her experiences with LSD, she felt that she had experienced the evolution of life—although she
claimed never to have been interested in Darwin: “[...] I felt in awe that, out of the struggles and catastrophes of prehistoric life, anything wonderful as primitive man had managed to survive and evolve” (36). She became aware that she, as well as every other human being, was tightly connected to the evolutionary process and “had a momentary glimpse of what man would eventually evolve into, of the heights he would sometime reach, and of the development as yet unimagined” (45). Optimistically, Davis felt that the next stage of human beings would naturally bring about peace and understanding: “I was [...] overwhelmed by feelings of forgiveness, compassion, love and other such emotions; and I knew that evolved man would experience the feeling to a far greater degree than we are capable of” (47).

Leary also embraced a form of psychedelic evolutionism. When LSD became officially illegal on 6 October 1966 in California, he intensified his campaign to appeal to America’s rebellious youth. He personally theorized that they were the key to mankind’s evolution, but also that their young age and their need for directions would make them easier to convert, and began liberally advocating the use of LSD to expand one’s consciousness. In May 1968, Leary co-wrote “The Declaration of Cultural Evolution” with Allen Ginsberg, Paul Krasner and Abbie Hoffman among others. In it, they argued that the old political and cultural models were the cause of all the ills of mankind: “The history of the white, menopausal, mendacious men now ruling the planet Earth is a history of repeated violation of the harmonious laws of nature, all having the direct object of establishing a tyranny of the materialistic aging over the gentle, the peace-loving, the young, the colored” (Leary, “Declaration” n.p.). The solution, then, was to evolve and create new models:

> When a long train of abuses and usurpations, all pursuing invariably the same destructive goals, threaten the very fabric of organic life and the serene harmony of the planet, it is the right, it is the organic duty to drop out of such morbid covenants and to evolve into new loving social structures. [...] We must therefore acquiesce to genetic necessity, detach ourselves from their uncaring madness and hold them henceforth as we hold the rest of God’s creatures. (Leary, “Declaration”)

Although this statement hints at vague environmental concerns, they are not clear-cut and do not really represent the consensual views of the 1960s psychedelic movement. Indeed, apart from Huxley’s utopian fable, few authors put forth a clear critique of environmental destruction and promoted a monistic and eco-centric conception of nature. Yet, it is important to note that even then, there were at least some seeds of environmental awareness that would subsequently grow into a full-blown environmental movement.

Other figures of the psychedelic movement understood the psychedelic experience in evolutionary terms. Michael Hollingshead, who initiated Leary to LSD and took part in various psychedelic projects, saw psychedelics as important agents for a radical shift in human consciousness: “Man could take a ‘third eye’ view of himself. He could escape from the prison of his conditioning, his robot-self, and move towards wholeness, completeness, place-in-the-world. We could all be conscious agents in the evolutionary process.” He also recalled a letter received from the Siddha Guru Alfred Schmielewski, which stated that there “seems to exist after a billion years of unconscious evolution an instrument that man can use to establish control of racial unconsciousness. Man can now say that the race can control itself, its unconscious processes” (n.p.).

Finally, and although this can seem a little far-fetched, the evolutionary appeal could also be found in some of Ken Kesey’s relation to the psychedelic experience. Early in 1963, the money from Kesey’s best-selling novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest enabled him to buy a large secluded house in La Honda, fifty miles south of San Francisco, where he and his closest friends established base-camp and became a closely knit community that had made the LSD experience the best part of their lives. But theirs was not intellectual like Huxley’s, nor was it scientific, and later spiritual, like Leary’s. Instead, it was a curious and complex mixture of hedonism, exoticism, and non-attached “immediatism,” which encouraged spontaneous, authentic and care-free adventure. If Leary’s maxim in relation to LSD was “set and
setting,” i.e., taking care of personal and geographical variables, Kesey’s was “just do it.”

Kesey shared Leary’s view that the psychedelic experience was a way of erasing established patterns of behavior by letting the ego melt under its influence (death and rebirth, but without any Buddhist connotations), and thus, one could confront oneself through the most honest and accurate mirror. But unlike Leary, Alpert and Ralph Metzner, who, in 1964, published *The Psychedelic Experience*, based on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and intended as a practical and even, to some extent, rational guideline to such experiences, Kesey and his entourage shunned any attempt to intellectualize their trips. As Tom Wolfe put it, “the whole other world that LSD opened your mind to existed only in the moment itself—Now—and any attempt to plan, compose, orchestrate, write a script, only locked you out of the moment, back in the world of conditioning and training where the brain was a reducing valve” (59).

In the early 1960s, Kesey and his eccentric friends embarked on a national acid tour where they wore costumes, some with fluorescent Day-Glo paint, and changed their names to nicknames such as Sensuous X, Intrepid Traveler, Speed Limit, Mal Function, or Swashbuckler, in the case of Kesey, and soon came to see themselves as the first psychedelic superheroes. Although his approach to psychedelics greatly differed from Leary and Huxley, all three, to some extent, nurtured the idea that consciousness-expanders had the potential to take the human species to the next stage of evolution. Like most American children, Kesey had grown up reading comic books that featured adventures of superheroes such as Batman or Captain Marvel, and still identified with them when he entered college at the University of Oregon. He contended to his better-read peers that these stories deserved to be considered a valid part of the American mythos, but as Jay Stevens contends, “what most considered cheap proletarian entertainment, Kesey interpreted as Nietzschean parable. [...] In a sense this was the same teleological yearning for a transformed man that Huxley indulged in” (178).

**Entheogens: The Psychedelic Movement Goes Green**

Recently, the word “entheogen,” roughly meaning “God generated within,” coined by Carl Ruck, Jeremy Bigwood, Danny Staples, Richard Evans Schultes, Jonathan Ott and Gordon Wasson in 1979, has become increasingly popular and is now used as an alternative to the word “psychedelic.” The changing terminology is something that deserves closer attention, because it says much about the post-1960s contemporary intellectual trends. This could be referred to as “the new psychedelic movement” or “neo-psychedelia.” But instead, this movement can quite rightly be called the “entheogenic movement,” one that shares comparable goals and rhetoric with the psychedelic movement of the ’60s, yet has notable differences.

To begin, can it really be considered a movement? Shouldn’t these entheogenic practices to be filed under “New Age”? Indeed, the New Age heritage is obviously strong: astrology, UFOs, neo-shamanism and neo-paganism, millennial tendencies or the suspicion of authority are important aspects of the New Age culture that can sometimes be found in entheogenic literature. Yet, the entheogenic movement also has its roots in the psychedelic movement of the ’60s, as well as in the scientific research of the ’50s that offers a vast amount of cross-field literature. Some of the contemporary psychonauts, like Michael Ball or Daniel Pinchbeck, were too young to experience the ’60s. The influential New Age psychedelic writer Terence McKenna did live through the decade in his late teens, but he published his first book in the ’70s, the decade in which the New Age took off. But then there are the interesting cases of the founder of transpersonal psychology Stan Grof, Albert Hofmann, who shaped the ’60s with his invention of LSD, and of Ralph Metzner, Leary’s close companion in the Millbrook days, and co-author of *The Psychedelic Experience.*

Grof, Hofmann and Metzner, as well as all the aforementioned writers, see altered states of
consciousness, whether induced by chemicals or “natural ways,” as an important asset for the future of mankind.

All in all, the strongest case for labeling this as a movement is that regardless of their backgrounds and ages, contemporary psychonauts, to various extents, have a political and spiritual agenda: making the use of entheogens legal in religious settings and raising public awareness to the ills of modern times through entheogenic practices. What’s more, there are still important gatherings for entheogenists to share ideas and offer new directions. For instance, the 2008 World Psychedelic Forum invited Stanislav Grof, Ralph Metzner, Jeremy Narby, Daniel Pinchbeck, Thomas Roberts, Christian Rätsch, Alexander and Ann Shulgin, all of whom are (again, to various extents) drawn to the revolutionary appeal of the psychedelic experience.21

Though the change of nomenclature is not general amongst contemporary writers, it does indicate a general trend. Firstly, it is a clear-cut attempt to break away from the 1960s. That is not to say that contemporary advocates of entheogens are denying their scientific heritage – 1960s authors are still frequently referred to in books on the subject. This breakaway is purely ideological. Entheogenists have realized that the psychedelic movement of the ‘60s has attracted so much bad publicity to mind-altering drugs that a change of nomenclature is necessary.22 While there is a definite continuity with the ‘60s movement, many do not wish to have their names associated with the likes of Timothy Leary. Robert Forte, for example, partly blames Leary for the prohibition of psychedelics and is one of the many authors to point to the paradox of Native American peyotism in a country where the use of entheogens is not permitted for non-Indians and calls for a clear-cut distinction between recreational and ritual use for non-Indian Americans, and to grant exception for rituals (11). This is, of course, nothing new. Leaders like Leary and the founder of the psychedelic Neo-American Church Arthur Kleps used similar strategies in the ‘60s, hoping to see their sacrament legalized one day.

More broadly, historical continuity is salient when both movements are compared. A feature of the ‘60s psychedelic movement that has resurfaced with the entheogenic movement is the rejection of modernist thought. Hofmann could not have put it better when he said that “every human being is the creator of their own world […]. That sounds very mystical, is mystical, but in the same way it is natural scientific truth” (“Natural Science” 54).23 Like in the 1960s, post-modern entheogenists such as Michael Ball think that contemporary religion cruelly lacks religious experience and should be discarded in favor of personal explorations. Recalling Leary’s view that “your brain is God,” Ball writes that “you are God.” (6) Hofmann believed that psychedelics could offer a feeling of cosmic unity (“Il Dio” 66) and rejected dogma, claiming they were second-hand experiences (“Il Dio” 86).24 Terence McKenna, whom Leary dubbed his successor, also argued that “direct experience has been discounted, and in its place all kinds of belief systems have been erected” (“Psychedelic Society” 58). The Roman Catholic theo-
ologist David Steindl-Rast thinks that entheogens can be the solution to make religion truly religious again - but only if their use is directed towards clearly defined spiritual goals (17–21).25

The rejection of dualism also shows further continuity with the ‘60s psychedelic movement. The arguments Huxley put forth half a century ago are still present. McKenna (“Psychedelic Society” 60), and Ball (2) have both re-articulated Huxley’s rejection of dichotomies. Hofmann criticized Christianity’s “duality of creator and creation” (LSD 110), which alienated the Divine from the cosmos, and would later refer to Genesis, in which God gives the Earth to Man—all three elements considered as being radically separate from one another, and not on equal footing (Il Dio 112). But dualism is not just present in religion: it further developed through Descartes and consequently into positivist science which viewed the world as an object of study. It led to industrialization, technification and materialism for a small minority of human beings at the expense of the environment. Moreover it has led humans away from a spiritual life and away from nature (Hofmann, “Natural Science” 1997 36).26 Here, it is important to note that unlike Huxley or Watts’s criticism of this world view, this criticism of a dualistic world view is not purely philosophical. It is directed at the long-term consequences of this world view, most notably environmental destruction. This is why many contemporary writers have urged for a shift of consciousness towards a more monistic conception of nature: “We need to overcome this dualism in the Western world for spiritual renewal,” Hofmann wrote (“Natural Science” 37).

Environmental awareness is an important aspect of entheogenic philosophy. By and large, the entheogenic movement no longer justifies the use of entheogens with purely intellectual arguments. Whilst the psychedelic movement of the 1960s sought to expand consciousness for the betterment of humankind on idealistic grounds, its contemporary manifestation is arguing for entheogenic use on far more utilitarian grounds. Granted, its spiritual and therapeutic dimensions are also important, but one of the main arguments that is regularly put forth to justify entheogens is that they can provide a much-needed shift in human consciousness, and ultimately save mankind from a global environmental or human-caused catastrophe. This is undoubtedly a surprising argument, arguably more so than any put forth in the ‘60s to justify the use of psychedelics, but it is one that has attracted many writers and deserves to be closely examined and made sense of—it also strengthens the idea that the entheogenic movement can be considered as a movement.

The anthropologist and philosopher Roger Walsh understands the contemporary environmental issues as crucial: “we are in a race between catastrophe and consciousness, and we do not know which will win” (183). Grof argues that humanity is facing a psycho-spiritual crisis that is responsible for the broader worldwide crisis. In his opinion, the most apparent symptoms of this crisis are violence and greed. Those symptoms have been present for millennia, but with the contemporary difference that “we have the dubious privilege of being the first species in natural history that has achieved the capacity to eradicate itself and destroy in the process all life on this planet” (2).

Not only is Grof concerned about human violence on humans; he is perhaps even more worried about humankind’s capacity to destroy its environment: pollution of earth, air and water, deforestation, destruction of ecosystems and global warming are amongst some his deepest concerns (“2012 and Humanity” 3). Other writers share his anguish: Hofmann pointed to the dangers of modern science, which treats nature as a mere commodity (Il Dio 98) and was aware of the prospect of nuclear apocalypse (Il Dio 112). Grof (“Consciousness Evolution” 3), McKenna (“Psychedelic Society” 58-9), or Kornfield (134) have expressed similar fears and pointed to a much-needed shift in our consciousness to solve the ills of modern times. All these authors believe that entheogens can trigger this shift in consciousness.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these apocalyptic fears is that some writers have subscribed to what is often referred to as the “2012 phenomenon,” which can be roughly characterized
as comprising a wide range of beliefs that a catastrophic or deeply transformative event was to take place on 21 December 2012, one of the most popular reasons being the supposed end of the Maya calendar. The transformative scenario posits that the human race would undergo a radical physical or spiritual evolutionary change. This phenomenon was originally the product of New Age speculations, particularly those of Terence and Dennis McKenna, who published in 1975 The Invisible Landscape, in which they attempted to make sense of their experiences with psychedelics in the Amazon rainforest. Although, as Hangegraaff points out, Terence McKenna would ultimately acknowledge the scientific bankruptcy of the “Eschaton Timewave” theory the McKenna’s had used to come up with 2012 as the key date (310–1), these theories gathered momentum in the 1990s, and in the 2000s with the notable emergence of the entheogenist Daniel Pinchbeck as one of the foremost spokespersons of the 2012 phenomenon. In 2006, Pinchbeck published 2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl, in which he argued that 2012 would witness a radical shift of consciousness and new feminine-orientated spirituality. And like so many entheogenists, Pinchbeck believes that Western society’s crisis is, first and foremost, a crisis of consciousness.

But, recently, these beliefs have experienced considerable media exposure - scores of websites deal with the subject and Hollywood has even turned it into the “blockbuster” soberly titled 2012. It also worth noting that the contemporary apocalyptic fears are of a special nature. Indeed, they are occurring at a time when the risks of human extinction are not the collective fancies of a group of cultists or New Agers, but represent a fairly consensual scientific fact. Leading scientists all agree that these are pivotal times for humanity, which faces a colossal collective challenge—the widely respected microbiologist Frank Fenner has recently claimed that the situation is now irreversible (Fenner).

Thus, it is no surprise that fears of a large-scale catastrophe and the realization that a solution must be found soon have permeated the contemporary entheogenic literature. As McKenna wrote, “whether you buy into my own particular, apocalyptarian transformative vision involving 2012, or whether you can just tell by looking around you that the shit may soon hit the fan, I think that we can agree that we have come to some kind of an impasse” (“Psychedelic Society” 62). Contemporary entheogenists, then, tend to see their activities as the solution for the environmental crisis. Not all of them subscribed to the 2012 scenario of McKenna or Pinchbeck, yet many share their idea that a shift of consciousness is necessary to save the world.

Correlatively, one criticism entheogenists regularly formulate against Western society, is its emphasis on consumerism, the unquestioned sanctity of economic growth, and science—this is sometimes referred to as “scientism,” i.e., science as a form of dogma. Echoing Huxley’s concerns about technicization, Hofmann pointed to the dangers of unilateral scientific thought serving technocracy (Il Dio 101) and criticized Western society’s worship of materialistic wealth, egoistic individualism and mass consumerism (Il Dio 97). Grof has criticized the capitalist economy’s emphasis on “unlimited growth,” “conspicuous consumerism Evolution” or “planned obsolescence,” (“Consciousness Evolution” 2) and denounced the Western fallacy that a strong GDP was the shortest way to happiness (qtd in Mann). Ralph Metzner, whose name was closely associated with Leary throughout the ‘60s, also believes that the never-ending quest for economic growth will destroy the planet if it is not called into question (Mann). McKenna took issue with capitalist technocracy, believing that the Western “engineering mentality” would seek to “change man into his machines” (“Psychedelic Society” 63).

The realization that something needs to happen to prevent a large-scale global catastrophe has led some writers to hope for a new stage in the evolution of mankind, recalling Kesey, Leary or Huxley’s similar yearnings. This continuity is apparent in the writings of Terence McKenna, who believed that humans would either disappear or evolve—“the history of the silly monkey is over, one way or another” (qtd in Grof “2012 and Human Destiny” 33). The Zen healer Kathleen
O’Shaughnessy thinks that entheogens are necessary for human beings to develop a neocortex and thinks that with the current state of prohibition, “our evolutionary possibilities have been stunted” (187). The Rabi Joel Bakst understands DMT as a godsend to take human evolution to the next stage (Schultz), and the mathematician Ralph Abraham is even blunter: “we’re a dying species. We’re killing the planet. We need to evolve” (qtd. in Schultz). In the 1960s, Metzner thought that “if LSD expands consciousness and if, as is widely believed, further evolution will take the form of an increase in consciousness, then [we can] regard LSD as a possible evolutionary instrument,” and he re-affirms his views some thirty years later (71). Similar ideas are offered by Grof, who strongly echoes Osmond’s insights almost half a century later: “if a sufficient number of people undergoes a process of deep inner transformation […], we might reach a stage and level of consciousness evolution at which we will deserve the proud name we have given to our species: *homo sapiens sapiens*” (“Consciousness Evolution” 33). Incidentally, Grof—like Pinchbeck—was interested in exploring the more optimistic possibility that the Mayan prophecy could be seen as the end of an era “dominated by unbridled violence and insatiable greed, egotistic hierarchy of values, corrupted institutions and corporations, and irreconcilable conflicts between organized religions” (“Consciousness Evolution” 33).

Recently, the philosopher Richard Doyle has produced a book that is in many ways synthesizes the new direction of entheogenic understanding. Realizing that humankind is facing a deep crisis, he thinks that the answer lies in the evolutionary potential of entheogens, because they offer the unique ability for humans to realize that they are part of a much larger imbrication with the environment. This realization will promote a monistic conception of nature and shift away from the instrumental conception of the environment that treats it as a mere commodity. He understands the current “war on drugs” as the interruption of the symbiosis and co-evolution of plants and humans, which creates a dichotomy between humans and nature. He argues that entheogens can be used to build “a future modeled on ecosystemic rather than egoic practices” (26).

**Conclusion: The Utilitarianism of Psychedelics and Entheogens**

The psychedelic movement of the 1960s resurfaced sometime in the late 1980s with the entheogenic movement. The continuity is salient: the rejection of dogma and dualism, a deep suspicion of modern Western society, an emphasis on a post-modern and monistic conception of reality and the Divine, and the notion that psychedelics are the key to the next step of human evolution. But now one major difference stands out: evolution is desperately and urgently needed to re-unite human beings with nature and provide a much needed shift of consciousness to avoid a large-scale environmental catastrophe. Many examples illustrate the entheogenic agenda—the list could no doubt be extended—and reveal the extent to which these ideas are ways of challenging the prohibition of psychedelics/entheogens, as well as the product of genuine concerns for the environment and the future of humankind. Finally, the New Age neo-shamanism of the 1970s and the McKenna brothers, so much the product of the 1960s psychedelic movement, seems to have re-invigorated the contemporary psychedelic/entheogenic movement by introducing stronger environmental concerns with explicitly millenarian overtones.

More broadly, the psychedelic movement of the 1960s, and its contemporary offshoot, owe their ideas to a longer tradition of American thought. Some historians such as Robert Fuller posit that these roots can be traced back to the American aesthetic tradition. He sees continuity between Leary’s idea that “sense and sensuality” are natural sacraments, and Thoreau’s reverence for the sacredness of forests (71). In a similar vein, Albert Hofmann thought that Kesey and his relation to LSD owed much to the American radical tradition of the likes of Thoreau, who had...
“dropped out” of society and embraced a libertarian return to nature (Il Dio 41). As early as 1964, Alan Harrington, a friend of Leary’s who took part in his communal experiences, observed that “socio-religious groups of this kind may be found in virtually every decade of American history. We have had the Brook Farm group from 1841–47, with Emerson and Hawthorne among others, and Thoreau sitting in” (101).

It would also be tempting to posit that the contemporary call for a re-enchantment with nature through altered states of consciousness has its roots in the environmentalist and Deep Ecology movements. For instance, the environmental activist and co-founder of Greenpeace Robert Hunter took issue with Western modernism and argued that drugs carried “the message of change, real change, as opposed to a mere change in flags, label, underwear, or oaths of loyalty” (Hunter n.p.). Moreover, he argued that they enabled the brain to operate more efficiently and made it “more prepared to move in new evolutionary directions” (Hunter n.p.). More recently, MAPS devoted a whole bulletin on the relation between psychedelics and Deep Ecology that perfectly illustrates the contemporary trends of entheogenic thought (see, in particular, Brown 3–7).

While all these interpretations are valid, psychedelic philosophy has continuously shown a greater proximity with the ideas of William James, who had experimented with nitrous oxide to induce mystical states of awareness. As Hewitt rightly notes, “Aldous Huxley revived William James’ radical empiricism as he proposed trusting the body and experiential learning” (37). Indeed, the major actors and researchers of the psychedelic movement were, like James, radical empiricists who refused to discard the psychedelic experience even when it seemed at odds with the existing epistemological models. Like James, and in keeping with his value of experience as radical empiricism, they also believed that the core of authentic religion was religious experience rather than dogma. What’s more, Jodie Nicotra links James’ psychedelic drug use with his attempt to reconcile dualisms, as well as with his desire to block “the habitual self in order to make way for difference or transformation—that is, for a more open, responsive, and ethical relation to the world”(213).

Beyond this aspect of James’ philosophy, it appears that the psychedelic and entheogenic movements have subscribed to his notion that the value of an idea should be measured according to its “cash value,” i.e., its problem-solving potential or its ability to give something meaningful to its user. From this pragmatist perspective, psychedelic philosophy, past and present, has tried to promote a radical shift of consciousness, which can ultimately be understood as a form of psychedelic utilitarianism. But where the 1960s psychedelic movement sought to use the insights of the psychedelic experience to improve American society, the entheogenic movement has further underlined the cash-value of these insights by arguing that they can save the planet.

Notes

1. I thank all the reviewers who helped strengthen this paper. I am particularly indebted to Lindsey Banco and Claire Fanger for their insightful critiques. Finally, the William M. Jones Award committee made this publication possible, for which I am very grateful.

2. For a larger discussion on the psychedelic renaissance, see Langlitz; for a lay overview see Sessa. It is important to note, however, that the ”psychedelic renaissance” is a more problematic concept when applied to international psychedelic drug research. See Passie’s compiled international bibliography for evidence on research in Holland or Germany well into the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when severe restrictions had virtually terminated research in the United States.

3. See Oram for a different interpretation that sees the origins of the ban of psychedelic drug research as the consequence of the Kefauver Harris Drug Amendments of 1962 that required that drug research be conducted under rigorous controlled setting. This created considerable difficulties for psychedelic researchers, who relied on a powerful subjective experience to produce therapeutic renewal.

4. Although a comparison of the two main manifestations of the renaissance is beyond the scope of this essay, it is well worth noting that Langlitz, in a comparable way, argues that the psychedelic revivalists are well aware of the turbulent past of these substances in mainstream culture and science, and need to find new ways of presenting them in a more favourable light.

5. Alternatively, Novak suggests that the psychedelic movement began when intellectuals of the likes of Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard reconceptualised LSD and psychedelics as substances that could cause mystical religious experiences, rather than a model psychosis (as it was in psychiatric research into psychedelics). This interpretation sees the beginning of the movement as occurring in Los Angeles in the late 1950s, rather than at Harvard in the early 1960s.
6. For some elements of discussion on this subject, see Lee and Shlian; Stevens; Higgs. 

7. This precedes James Lovelock’s “Gaia hypothesis” and is probably the starting point of the psychedelic movement’s environmentalist stand. 

8. Here, the concepts of modernism and post-modernism are loosely based on Elwood’s (14–15) contemporary binary classification. Elwood opposes modernism and post-modernism through several dualistic couples; for example: rational science/uncertainty principle; ideal of progress/suspicion of the future; faith in technology/suspicion of technocracy. 

9. The validity of such claims is discussed by Fuller, (164–5, 168) who concludes that ultimately there is no way of rationally deciding whether psychedelics create illusory visions and experiences, or effectively open up the doors of perception. 

10. In large part, many themes in Kesey’s famous novel One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest were a result of his empathy towards the patients of the mental institution in which he was working part-time. This understanding was made possible by the psychadelics he ingested whilst on duty. 

11. Of course, there is the obvious charge that Huxley’s fictional writings should not be equated to his thought. But Island is so didactic (some critics called it pedantic) and represents in many ways the blueprints for a better world that the terminally ill Huxley wanted to leave to his readers, that a close hermeneutics is quite appropriate. This quote, for instance, is taken from Notes on What’s What, and on What might be Reasonable to Do About What’s What, an old manual devised by a former Raja of Pala to formulate the founding principles of Palanese enlightenment, in which Huxley’s presence is even stronger. 

12. Although Leary allegedly converted to Hinduism and also borrowed elements from Buddhism, Lander (73) points to evidence that his religious discourse was merely a ploy to make the psychadelic message more intelligible to Americans. 

13. For a brief, but fitting illustration of this paradox, see Kripal’s (125–30) discussion on the origins of what he calls psychodelic orientalism. Kripal’s argument that Esalen constitutes a religion of no religion could be fittingly used to qualify Leary’s own spiritualism. 

14. For some elements of discussion on Huxley and dualism, see Hewitt, particularly chapter 3, “Aldous Huxley: Visions of Gratiuous Grace” (100–151). 

15. He also pleaded in favour of “non-verbal education” in Island, where children were told about the relativity of things as an elementary form of education. 

16. McDonnald suggests that “the central trend in Huxley’s novels was the movement from a view of reality which was thoroughly dualistic at the start of his career to one in which, at the end, dualism had been resolved.” (103) 

17. By devoting so much space to Huxley, Hewitt seems to suggest that the novelist was the most prominent figure to shape the psychodelic culture. Whether he influenced other authors or whether a full-blown psychodelic experience naturally leads to insights that Huxley identified following his experimentation is beyond the scope of this paper, but would be worth investigating at greater length. 

18. Aldous Huxley was the grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley, the eminent Nineteenth century zoologist, who was dubbed “Darwin’s Bulldog” for his stark defence of evolutionism and for popularising Darwin’s theory. Ironically, Aldous’s brother Julian, attempted to refute Bergson’s vitalist interpretation of evolution. For a discussion on the influence of Bergson on Huxley, see Hewitt (120–137; 145–6). 

19. In 1959, Davis experimented with LSD under the supervision of the psychiatrist Oscar Janiger and shared her experiences in a memoir. Although she was not as widely read as Huxley or Leary, it is worth mentioning, if only because it is one of the rare works documenting a female experience with LSD, but also because it was published long before the drug came to be widely known by the lay public. For another account on LSD use by a female writer see Newland. 

20. While it seems that most veterans of the 1960s psychadelics culture gradually merged their insights into an eco-centric conception of life, Brown notes that Leary, who became fascinated by the possibilities of space migration in the 70s and 80s, dismissed ecology as a “seductive dinosaur science.” (4) 

21. On the other hand, there are many researchers who are not interested in the entheogenic agenda and are quite content to carry out their research without publicly siding with or against the movement. For a discussion of the tensions between lay and scientific use of psychadelics, see Langlitz. 

22. Novak notes that the problem of terminology can be traced back to the early years of psychadelic research in the 1950s, when Humphry Osmond moved away from the negatively-connoted words “hallucinogenic” and “psychomimetic” and coined the word “psychadelic” to suggest an altogether more pleasurable experience (95). See also Boire for a similar discussion. 

23. In this essay, Hofmann argued that science and mysticism are not incompatible. A veteran of psychadelics, he considerably revised his normative views on the use of LSD in society after the ’60s, up to the point where they sometimes resembled Huxley’s, if not Leary’s. 

24. For similar views, see Grof (2009). It is important to note that although Hofmann was critical of established religion, he never discarded his Christian heritage. This echoes the earlier discussion on the need for external frames of spiritual reference to make sense of the insights of the psychadelic experience. 

25. Similar albeit more cautious views are offered by Strassman, who thinks they could be a sound counterpoint to dogma and tradition. 


28. From a much broader perspective, the psychadelic movement would greatly benefit from a comparison with the surprisingly similar “Degrowth” movement that distrusts economic growth, consumerism and technocracy. See for instance Sippel for a discussion on that movement. 

29. This documentary perfectly illustrates the political and ecological agenda of the entheogenic movement, which fears an unprecedented environmental catastrophe caused by reckless capitalism, and emphasises the global need for a new ecological consciousness. This shift can be achieved through altered states of consciousness, whether induced naturally or chemically. 

30. In all fairness, Doyle also points to some past authors like Huxley and Leary, who understood the psychadelic experience in evolutionary terms. This study, however, has a more systematic and historical approach. 

31. See also Fuller, 54–7. Tellingly, Schroll and Rothenberg contend that “eliminating psychadelic experience violates the open scientific enquiry of radical empiricism” (43). 

32. In the ’60s, Mead suggested that the validity of the psychadelic experience should be tested by its potential for social import and its capacity to improve the everyday lives of LSD users, rather than along purely theoretical lines. 

33. Langlitz also points to a similar Jamesian tradition in psychadelic research, where organizations such as MAPS seek to use psy-
Practice and psychedelic use for greater social benefits (e.g., by treating war veterans diagnosed with PTSD).

Works Cited


