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Author(s): William Stephenson

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Timothy Leary and the Trace of the Posthuman

William STEPHENSON

In his conclusion to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault proposed that “man is an invention of recent date [...] [that might soon] be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea¹”. Man is a product of the modern *episteme* that has, since the late eighteenth century, regulated all fields of thought, from economics to linguistics to biology. The posthuman is even more recent and is itself dependent on an emerging *episteme* that is coming to replace the West’s dominant, but increasingly residual, humanism. This posthuman *episteme* is catalysed by the possibilities of technology. N. Katherine Hayles relies revealingly on the cyborg-robotic vocabulary of prosthesis, substrate and artificial intelligence when she defines the four main assumptions that underlie the posthuman:

First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness [...] as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines².

This essay will link Hayles’s criteria to Timothy Leary’s texts, mainly *The Politics of Ecstasy* (1968) and *Chaos & Cyber Culture* (1994). I will refer to Leary’s discussions of drugs, Eastern religion and computers, as well as his commentaries on two writers, Hermann Hesse and William Gibson, in order to argue that Leary

¹ FOUCAULT M., *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London, Routledge, 1974, p. 387.

² HAYLES N. K., *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 2-3.

anticipated twenty-first-century posthumanist thought; in effect, he detected and followed the emerging trace of the posthuman.

Leary began his career as a professional psychologist, with a tenured post at Harvard. After he discovered hallucinogenic drugs in 1960, he incorporated them into his academic research and began giving psilocybin pills to postgraduate students. Following his dismissal from Harvard in 1963, he took on a new role as a countercultural leader who publicly advocated the use of hallucinogenics such as LSD. He became a celebrity, admired as a guru by millions of hippies but dismissed as a charlatan by the mainstream: the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg called Leary "a hero of American consciousness"³, whereas the historian Theodore Roszak commented that "the revolution which Leary purports to be leading is the most lugubrious of illusions"⁴.

Throughout this countercultural career, Leary grafted his extensive reading in mythology, fiction, poetry and Eastern scriptures onto his academic psychological training in order to produce texts in a distinctive synthesis of styles. Leary's works do not belong to a single genre but are hybrids of psychology, sociology, medicine, pharmacology, literature and theology. Likewise, his ideas were not confined to any single discipline. They influenced the work of his contemporaries in diverse fields, from the architecture of Richard Aldcroft and others⁵, to the music of the Beatles, who adapted *The Psychedelic Experience* for their lyrics⁶, to the practises of Christian

³ GINSBERG A., "Preface", LEARY T., *Jail Notes*, New York, Grove Press, 1970, p. 9.

⁴ ROSZAK T., *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society & Its Youthful Opposition*, London, Faber, 1970, p. 169.

⁵ SCOTT F., "Acid Visions", *Grey Room* 23, Spring 2006, p. 22-39, p. 25.

⁶ MACDONALD I., *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties*, London, Pimlico, 1998, p. 164-70.

theologians, such as the Good Friday experiment in 1962, where seminarians in a chapel were given psilocybin and a control group a placebo⁷.

The alteration of consciousness by drugs was, and remains, a highly controversial topic. Richard Nixon called Leary “the most dangerous man in America⁸”. The US establishment was well aware of the challenge to received ideas of subjectivity presented by Leary’s advocacy of hallucinogenics: he was arrested and sentenced to twenty years in prison in 1970, then became a fugitive living in Algeria, Switzerland and other countries after his escape from jail in the same year. After being rearrested in Afghanistan, he stayed in US custody until 1976. He remained a revered but notorious figure until his death in 1996, and had an influential role in popular culture, especially digital media. Typically, he allowed his own death to be filmed. His website, including this footage, was a runner up in the Web category at the Ars Electronica festival in 1996⁹. He arranged for his body to be placed in cryogenic storage, but decided against this shortly before his death¹⁰.

Leary's interest in cryogenics may have arisen because of his shifting position on the role of the body. In his later work, he endorsed the posthumanist assumption that it is an incidental vessel or substrate, which potentially can be substituted for any other medium: “If you think about it, we’re basically brains. Our bodies are here to move our brains around. Our bodies are equipped with all these sensory inputs and outputs to bring information to the neurocomputer¹¹”. In his earlier texts, however, he argues nearly the opposite. *The Politics of Ecstasy* claims that an intimate awareness of the detailed structures and flows of the body can enable transcendence of limited, humanist,

⁷ LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, Berkeley, Ronin, 1998, p. 15-16.

⁸ HIGGS J., *I Have America Surrounded: The Life of Timothy Leary*, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

⁹ O'BRIEN P., "Art & Technology: Leaving Reality Behind?", *Circa* 78, Winter 1996, p. 20-23, p. 21.

¹⁰ GREENFIELD R., *Timothy Leary: A Biography*, Orlando, Harcourt, 2006, p. 594.

¹¹ LEARY T., *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, Berkeley, Ronin, 1994, p. 35.

ego-based models of consciousness: “One of the ecstatic horrors of the LSD experience is the sudden confrontation with your own body, the shattering resurrection of your body. You are capitulated into the matrix of quadrillions of cells and somatic communications systems¹²”. Leary here refuses to make the posthumanist move of constructing the body as a storage medium. Like the brain, it is not a mere hard drive but is program and processor, software and hardware, a site of important operations and a manipulator of data.

Leary’s work straddles a number of digital and analogue media, and is an ever-changing, often mutually contradictory, Protean flow of information; as the above example illustrates, Leary shifted his position on some key issues. However, his work does in many places conform to Hayles’s account of the posthuman view. Leary became fascinated with the fusion of man and machine in his later texts, particularly the articles and interviews compiled as *Chaos & Cyber Culture*. Here, he sees the computer as the key tool for intelligence augmentation, with computer meaning the PC or Mac linked to the internet, rather than the antiquated, institutionally programmed mainframe. Leary also agreed with Hayles’s position on consciousness; he too saw the ego as a usurper that thought mistakenly it was running the whole show. Leary knew from experience that the ego’s comforting belief in its own dominance was an illusion; LSD and other powerful hallucinogenics had shattered the fallacy of the rational, Cartesian subject for him and for thousands of his followers as early as the 1960s.

Leary’s texts sketched out an emerging future in which the humanist subject was to be replaced by a post-subjective being whose processes would operate on a different ontological level. In *The Politics of Ecstasy*, he argued that consciousness would evolve

¹² LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

through dramatically expanded awareness of the automatic somatic workings over which the ego has no control. He believed that LSD catalysed a sudden revelation of these workings, and of the porous boundary between inner and outer space: “Visions of microscopic processes. Strange, undulating tissue patterns. [...] What is without is within. Your body is the mirror of the macrocosm¹³.” By *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, Leary had adopted less heated, quasi-scientific diction to describe the new subjectivities made possible partly by drugs but primarily by computers: “If the brain is viewed as bio-hardware, and psychedelic drugs become ‘neurotransmitters,’ and if you can reprogram your mind, for better or for worse, by ‘turning on,’ then new concepts and techniques of instantaneous psychological change become possible¹⁴.”

Both in his 1960s accounts of the cellular workings of the body and the universe as perceived on LSD, and his 1990s accounts of the computer’s role in culture, Leary’s focus on the microscopic and on cellular process and change (whether in the carbon-based nucleus of the human cell, or the silicon-based nucleus of the RAM chip) strikingly anticipates contemporary thought about the inter-species status of the posthuman subject and its interface with the artificial. Donna J. Haraway has argued, arrestingly, that we have *never been* human; that only ten percent of the cells in the body are occupied by human genomes, the rest by bacteria, fungi and other microorganisms; and that this symbiosis is to be celebrated, not feared:

I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to *become with* many. [...] I love that when ‘I’ die, all these benign and dangerous symbionts will take over and use whatever is left of ‘my’ body, if only for a while¹⁵.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁴ LEARY T., *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁵ HARAWAY D., *When Species Meet*, London, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 3-4.

As early as *The Politics of Ecstasy*, Leary had made the same argument that the human co-exists with the non-human *within the same body*, though he reached his conclusion by very different means. Leary claimed that during an experience with psychedelic drugs, one can become a primate, a fish, an invertebrate. He claims that conventional medicine sees this as a mere hallucination. However, it could equally represent cellular memory: “Is it entirely inconceivable that our cortical cells or the machinery inside the cellular nucleus ‘remember’ back along the unbroken chain of electrical transformations that connects every one of us back to that original thunderbolt in the Precambrian mud¹⁶?” The significance of this is not so much that a pre-human genetic memory may or may not lie in our cells, as that Leary’s thought anticipates Haraway’s posthumanism. Both thinkers argue that we only understand who we are – and move into a territory beyond that occupied by the humanist subject – by acknowledging the non-human Otherness within us.

Likewise, Leary’s struggle for an adequate vocabulary to express his ideas parallels that of contemporary biologists and engineers working at the nano level. Hayles has pointed out the blurriness of current terminology used to describe both nanotech devices *and* microscopic biological phenomena. For instance, scientists describe the bodily operations of bacteria such as *E. coli* in terms of propellers or pumps: “The issue is complicated by the ambiguous boundary between the biological and mechanical at the microscale. [...] [P]art of the ambiguity results from a fuzzy boundary between literal description and metaphoric interpretation¹⁷.” Leary cautioned his reader similarly in 1968, after describing the experience of LSD in terms of awareness of “the breakdown of macroscopic objects into vibratory patterns [...]. I need

¹⁶ LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁷ HAYLES N. K. (ed.), *Nanoculture: Implications of the New Technoscience*, Bristol, Intellect, 2004, p. 12.

not apologize for the flimsy inadequacy of these words. We just don't have a better experiential vocabulary¹⁸”.

Leary aspired to be a nanotechnologist. He directed his thought and applied his technologies (drugs, later computers) to the human subject on the scale of the subatomic particle: “The limits of introspective awareness may well be submicroscopic, cellular, molecular and even nuclear¹⁹”. He saw the nano level as an appropriate space for the study of human interaction: "Interpersonal, emotional, intellectual and social events at the sub-atomic, nuclear level and their transception by the nervous system define neuroatomics²⁰". At this submicroscopic level, states of subjective evolution as yet unanticipated by humanist thought were possible: "Nanomachines could effect transformation of human DNA, enabling eugenic customization. Radical human/machine hybrids could be developed²¹".

Leary's upgrades of his tools, working methods and vocabulary – the most significant of which was the shift from the focus on LSD and Buddhism of *The Psychedelic Experience* and *The Politics of Ecstasy* to that on the PC and neuroscience of *Chaos & Cyber Culture* – indicated not only his sense of the inadequacy of his language to match the endlessly evolving, hugely complex task before him and others, but also the posthuman potential of his goal. He was aware not only that “[s]piritual appeals to transcend the ego are in vain [...] [but also that] ego, with its pitiful shams and strivings, is only a fraction of my identity²²”. He demonstrated clearly his comprehension of the limits of the humanist *episteme* to which his ideas nevertheless remained bound; he was aware of the diminished significance of the ego

¹⁸ LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁰ LEARY T., *Info-Psychology*, Los Angeles, Falcon Press, 1987, p. 5

²¹ LEARY T., and SIRIUS R. U., *Design for Dying*, London, Thorsons, 1997, p. 162.

²² LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *op. cit.*, p. 36-37.

(consciousness) but strove to find a vocabulary to address the decentred, posthumanist existence made possible in part by the technologies he used.

Somadelic Hierarchies, Synaptic Flux: Leary's Shifting Mind-Maps

Leary first ate hallucinogenic mushrooms in 1960 and had an extremely powerful religious experience. In a pattern consistent with the rest of his thought during the decade, the experience was not only psychedelic (mind-revealing) but was also, to coin a term, somadelic, or revealing of the body and its significance. Leary was feeling his way towards a posthuman understanding of the cellular processes beyond the comprehension of the ego: "I ate seven of the Sacred Mushrooms of Mexico and discovered that beauty, revelation, sensuality, the cellular history of the past, God, the Devil – all lie inside my body, outside my mind²³".

Leary found his first metaphorical map of the posthumanist subject in Eastern religion, particularly Buddhism; he appropriated *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* as the key intertext for his seminal LSD manual, *The Psychedelic Experience*, first published in 1964. However, he would come to distance himself from this model. In *Your Brain is God* (originally published in 1982 as *Changing My Mind Among Others*) Leary states that when he made the decision to use *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, he intended to employ the Buddhist scripture as a means of communication rather than a truth in itself. The sacred source worked as trope rather than referent, signifier rather than signified; this approach was, in fact, fundamental to the revision of the human Leary aimed to undertake. In his introduction to the 1995 reissue of his autobiography *High Priest* (first published in 1968), he pointed out that "You will note (and, perhaps, be amused by) our Breathless Spirituality, our lavish use of religious metaphors. Today, of course, we are

²³ LEARY T., *High Priest*, second edition, Berkeley, Ronin, 1995, p. 12.

beginning to use neurological and digital terms to suggest how we can operate our brains²⁴.” Thus religion, like drugs or computers, was a means rather than an end; a tool to serve Leary’s countercultural and post-countercultural revisions of the human. His project aimed to venture outside received psychological and sociological constructions of the subject and towards biological and sensory states which were largely uncharted but towards which his chosen tools, each fashionable for each context in which he was writing, could point the way.

For Leary and the other LSD researchers of the 1960s, the turn to the East was a pragmatic one, based on the need for a new terminology: “When the scope of psychology proved inadequate [...] [for LSD researchers to describe their ecstatic experiences] they found themselves drawn more and more to referencing Eastern religions²⁵.” Leary used both chemical and cellular terminology in his account of Eastern religion, but, to him, drugs *and* religion were both mere vehicles for reaching this somadelic awareness: “the aim of oriental religion is to *get high*, to have an ecstasy, to tune in, to turn on, to contact incredible diversity, beauty, living, pulsating meaning of the sense organs, and the much more complicated and pleasurable and revelatory message of cellular energy²⁶.”

In *The Politics of Ecstasy* consciousness is placed by Leary in a hierarchy of levels, each of which he links to the action of different drugs²⁷. The first and lowest of these levels is narcosis, or sleep, which can be brought on by narcotics or high doses of alcohol. The following, progressively higher, levels of consciousness are: the emotional stupor of the mid-brain (created by medium doses of alcohol); ordinary waking

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.

²⁵ HIGGS J., *I Have America Surrounded: The Life of Timothy Leary*, London, Friday Project, 2006, p. 50.

²⁶ LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44-45.

symbolic consciousness (enhanced by caffeine, cocaine and other stimulants); sensory awareness (focused on more by marijuana, meditation); and finally the precellular, atomic, egoless level of awareness (brought on by high doses of LSD) in which the subject is aware only of the universe, rather than of itself, as a vastly complex system of atoms in an elaborate dance.

Leary revised this model during his working life: it was developed in *Neurologic, Info-Psychology* and other texts, and had more stages added till it became a hugely ambitious model of the whole of human mental evolution²⁸: but the essential structure of levels remained the same. We do not have to be convinced by this model (let alone follow Leary's prescription that drugs can produce states of awareness in a qualitative experiential hierarchy that places LSD above marijuana which comes above alcohol, and so on) to recognize the more important and prophetically posthumanist point that what Leary is seeking to do is to remodel consciousness as a series of processes that can each be modified by different tools and that share a relationship based on hierarchy but also interaction and flux.

This quasi-hierarchy is far from a mere refinement of the Cartesian mind-body dualism. Instead, it offers a fragmentation of consciousness into a complex series of states along which and through which the subject can move by using a number of devices or catalysts, including "neuroactive drugs, electronic instruments, DNA code, sub-atomic nuclear energies, quantum physics, computers, electronic communication²⁹". However, the means, to Leary, are less important than the end: "LSD is simply a key to opening up sensory, cellular and precellular consciousness so that you flow and

²⁸ LEARY T., *Info-Psychology, op. cit.*, p. 8-17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

harmonize with those different levels³⁰.” He claims the problem that prevents people from accessing this and other levels is the virulence of “the symbolic plague³¹” of signs with their rigid, predetermined codes for interpreting the world, that guided ordinary waking consciousness, the realm of the ego and its illusory dominance. Dominant humanist psychological models were completely inadequate in the face of this fragmentation of consciousness:

The unflattering portrait of homo sapiens suggested by the evidence from these ‘new’ sciences – neurology, ethology, neurochemistry, and psychopharmacology – is, of course, quite unacceptable to psychologists and religious leaders who enunciate theories about ‘man’s’ separate, superior and ‘chosen’ status among living forms³².

Posthumanist Technology: Leary and the Computer

Leary’s conceptual hierarchies were in constant flux. Even in the 1960s, he would anticipate his later move away from the body-orientated thought of *The Politics of Ecstasy*, by referring to communications technology as a catalyst for subjective growth and change, in a form of technological determinism reminiscent of the work of his friend Marshall McLuhan. Leary applied to the fusion of the subject with drugs *and* with electronics much the same technological vocabulary McLuhan applied to the hybrid interaction of media:

Electronics and psychedelics have shattered the sequence of orderly linear identification, the automatic imitation that provides racial and social continuity. [...] Technology moves energy focus at the speed of light, and psychochemicals accelerate and switch consciousness in exact proportions to nuclear power and electric circuitry³³.

The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which a new form is born. For the parallel between two media holds us on the frontiers between forms that snap us out of the Narcissus-narcosis. The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses³⁴.

³⁰ LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² LEARY T., *Info-Psychology*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³³ LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

³⁴ MCLUHAN M., *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*, London, Routledge, 1987, p. 55.

Thus not only were drugs a technology and a medium, so was the brain; neurons too processed information and filtered it, though with vastly greater complexity than the then current generation of computers.

By 1989, processing power had speeded up enormously. Leary had come to recognize the potential of the personal computer. He proposed that ownership of an Apple Mac was sufficient to define one as posthuman:

Owning it defines you as a member of a new breed – postindustrial, postbiological, post-human – because your humble VM (Volks-Mac) permits you to think and act in terms of clusters of electrons. It allows you to cruise around in the chaotic post-Newtonian information ocean, to think and communicate in the lingua franca of the universe, the binary dialect of galaxies and atoms. Light³⁵.

Leary's rhetoric leaves the way open for the posthuman *episteme*. A demotion of the physical to secondary status now fuels Leary's idealism. He privileges a self-referential, self-contained virtual world, like Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality: "Electronic reality is more real than the physical world! This is a profound evolutionary leap. It can be compared to the jump from ocean to shoreline, when land and air suddenly became more real to the ex-fish than water³⁶!"

Thus Leary envisages the transition to the posthuman not as a gradual evolution, but as a game-changing revolutionary leap. In this, it resembles the singularity, or transition to superhuman machine intelligence, originated by Vernor Vinge in 1993. Vinge refers to IA as well as the better-known concept AI; to Intelligence Amplification as well as Artificial Intelligence. He proposes the possibility among others that "Computer/human interfaces may become so intimate that users may reasonably be considered superhumanly intelligent³⁷". Thus a new, more capable, posthuman entity

³⁵ LEARY T., *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, *op. cit.* p. 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁷ VINGE V., "The Coming Technological Singularity", [1993], p. 1. URL: [<http://accelerating.org/articles/comingtechsingularity.html>]

could be created, in effect a fusion of man and machine that becomes something Other. The singularity, a fundamental revolution, will make civilization unrecognizable from the humanist viewpoint of the past: “From the human point of view this change will be a throwing away of all the previous rules [...]. It is a point where our old models must be discarded and a new reality rules³⁸.”

Leary anticipated these ideas. Typically, he sloganized his posthuman goals in *Info-Psychology* (1987) as SMPLE, meaning Space Migration plus Intelligence Increase plus Life Extension. He defined info-psychology as “the science which studies the evolution of the nervous system from its terrestrial-mechanical-collective stages to its post-terrestrial-quantum-cyber stages³⁹”. He viewed drugs and cybertechnology not as fetish objects to be venerated in themselves but as tools; as interfaces, initially crude and somewhat unpredictable in their operation, that enabled a fusion (temporary and partial at first) between the humanist subject and a radically revised, more capable posthuman consciousness.

The encounter of the humanist subject with something greater was nothing new; it was a trope not only of religious thought but also of early studies into psychedelic drugs. Aldous Huxley gestured towards revised consciousness when, influenced by D. C. Broad and Henri-Louis Bergson, he used the term Mind at Large in *The Doors of Perception*, yet he posited Mind at Large as something that was always already extant, something that the filter of our mind and sensory apparatus had cut off from our everyday egos, to make day-to-day existence possible: “To make biological survival

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁹ LEARY T., *Info-Psychology, op. cit.*, p. 1.

possible, Mind at Large has to be funnelled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system⁴⁰.”

But what if Mind at Large was a fresh cultural concept, rather than an always already existing, inaccessible medium surrounding the necessarily limited human being? What if it were, in the historical moment of the mid-late twentieth century, something emerging in the minds of experimenters? Leary’s work in fact suggests his awareness of the novelty of the state of the beyond. His Eastern rhetoric largely serves to conceal this, by placing the journey towards the posthuman within a long philosophical tradition of religious access to a state of Otherness or mystical union: “To a Hindu, the spiritual quest is internal⁴¹.” His writing frames cellular and precellular awareness as eternal; “the billion-year-old life process⁴²” is one of his favourite phrases; however, it also constructs such awareness as an emerging target to be aimed at; in a very Western sense it is a goal, *terra incognita* for the visionary explorer, or the as-yet-unknown but eagerly anticipated conclusion of a scientific experiment. In short, to access the posthuman fusion of subject and Other is not simply to regain the territory once explored by religious mystics, as in Huxley; it is to reach somewhere fundamentally new, because outside the limits of the human itself.

Technology, Religion and Transsubjectivity: Leary on Hesse

Leary’s search for the Other was framed in part as a traditional religious quest but it was also a highly contemporary revision of subjectivity, encouraged by emerging technologies of thought. Leary was studying Hermann Hesse, in particular the 1922 novella *The Journey to the East*, and the 1943 novel *The Glass Bead Game*. Leary believed that Hesse had a McLuhan-like insight into the relationship between culture

⁴⁰ HUXLEY A., *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971, p. 21.

⁴¹ LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

and technology, or the spirit and the circuit: “Hesse [...] suggests that human beings tend to center their religions on the thought-processing device their culture uses⁴³.” The mechanical abacus at the centre of *The Glass Bead Game* was Hesse’s prophetic metaphor for the coming dominance of digital calculation; the adepts of Castalia use the abacus as a tool to represent every aspect of culture; likewise, the computer can, given sufficient processing power, simulate anything digitally.

However, for Leary, following McLuhan, such an apparatus must inevitably take a catalytic rather than merely representational role. Leary reads the game of Hesse’s title as a metaphor for the new cultural and religious practices that will follow digitization. Like Hesse, Leary suggests a certain game or piece of technology will have a limited lifespan, because “the emergence of new intelligence machines will create new religions⁴⁴”. Indeed, he copies Hesse’s metaphor of the transient game and repeats it frequently during his writing, such as in his positive references to “turn-on ego-games⁴⁵” which imitate the social rituals of capitalist society in order to transcend them; such games are merely a necessary device before a new technology (drug, computer, interface) leads to new paradigms.

Leary sees the limits not only in drugs or technologies but in the idea of a self seeking to bolster or improve itself using them. His work aims towards a world in which one is not whole, indeed one is no longer a monad, but is a paradigm of complexity; plural and dissolved; a myriad of interconnected selves. “Man’s particular form is a bag of semihairless skin with only a very dim awareness of his internal reality, over ninety-nine percent of which is automated⁴⁶.” Thus even the cell is an internal network, fluid

⁴³ LEARY T., *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, *op. cit.* p. 33.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁵ LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

and in perpetual motion, before it is figured as a part of larger somatic and mental networks, let alone of some nominally stable, singular human subject.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's trope of the rhizome may be invoked to suggest some of the resonances of Leary's idea of the posthuman⁴⁷. The subject under drugs or interfacing with cybertechnology is rhizomatic in the sense of decentred, lacking a privileged origin. Your brain is god, claims Leary, but this is not the same as saying your brain is the Judeo-Christian creator and dominator of the body's universe. Instead, the brain has the sensing, recognizing capacity that makes it conscious of a structure it can perceive in all its complex glory, but never understand properly, let alone dominate. The psyche is constructed as something to be journeyed across and towards; a terrain, rather than a map that can be delineated, made clear, understood at a glance. There is less emphasis on the discourse of revelation and more on journeying, on process.

One reason for this is the blurring of the inside and outside. Once dissociated from Cartesian, Freudian and Romantic models, the subject can be seen both as a rhizomatic internal network and as a node in vastly larger social and universal structures which are equally complex. Such a psyche cannot be delineated; hence Leary's decision to disown his early term, *psychedelic*, originally coined by Humphrey Osmond in 1953, from *psyche*, mind or soul, and *delein*, to reveal or manifest. The rhizomatic psyche can only be travelled through; and indeed, the concept of psyche itself becomes outdated.

The traditional centres of the psyche likewise become devalued and destabilized. One important facet of Leary's challenge to the received idea of the human was his demoting of emotions to a low mammalian, anti-ecstatic, even narcotic, form of

⁴⁷ DELEUZE G. and GUATTARI F., *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. MASSUMI B., London, Athlone Press, 1988, p. 7-9.

consciousness: “Emotions are the lowest form of consciousness. Emotional actions are the most contracted, narrowing, dangerous form of behaviour⁴⁸.” They exist only for evolutionary reasons, to act as triggers of the fight-flight response, for instance as warnings of danger. Ecstasy, he claimed, lay *outside* emotions. To feel *no* emotion but to be in increasingly refined awareness of one’s senses and one’s physiology was the pointer towards ecstatic consciousness: “The way to turn off the emotions is to turn on the senses, turn on to your body, turn on to your cellular reincarnation circus, turn on to the electric glow within and engage only in turn-on ego games⁴⁹.” Thus – in anticipation of coming posthumanism – one of the traditional barometers was abandoned; fear, sorrow, joy become primitive distractions rather than definitive markers of identity.

This had been done long before in the East, most notably in the Buddhist doctrines of detachment, and of meditation as a means of achieving freedom from both emotion and distraction. But Leary did not intend a crude colonization of existing Buddhist tropes when he downgraded emotion. Instead, this is a problematic encounter between a Western culture that idealizes selfhood, an Eastern religion that idealizes the selfless, and the urgent, historically driven pressure on twentieth-century Americans, including Leary, living in the world of consumerism and the Vietnam War, to revise and recreate the self. His notorious slogan, “Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out⁵⁰” was partly a marketing device; it originated after a conversation with McLuhan. Although deliberately simplistic, it carried not only a political charge but also connotations of introspection, of new levels of psychedelic and somadelic awareness:

- To turn on, you go out of your mind and:
1. Come to your senses – focus on sensory energies.
 2. Resurrect your body – focus on somatic energies.

⁴⁸ LEARY T., *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵⁰ GREENFIELD R., *Timothy Leary: A Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

3. Drift down cellular memory tracks beyond the body's space-time – focus on cellular energies.
4. Decode the genetic code. [...] Be careful. This can be shocking. The props of the TV studio stage set [of ordinary American life] are suddenly experienced 1. As sensory [...] 2. As somatic [...] 3. As cellular [...] 4. As molecular⁵¹.

For Leary, the turned-on subject is paradoxically both introspective and politicized. Indeed, turning on to awareness of one's body and its DNA is *inevitably* a political act, as it involves an ego-shattering reappraisal of humanist symbolic consciousness and the ideology which sustains it. Leary was not naïve enough to believe that this state of reappraisal could ever be permanent. Instead, the newly self-aware subject would move continually from advanced to regressive states of consciousness: “After the revelation it is necessary to drop back in, to return to the fake-prop TV studio and initiate small changes which reflect the glory and the meaning of the turn-on⁵².”

Cosmic Dancers: Leary and Posthuman Ecology

Leary was drawn to the cyberpunk author William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (first published in 1984) and his early stories collected in *Burning Chrome* (1986) as prophetic demonstrations of his theory of posthuman evolution through an interface with technology: “In evolving to more physiological complexity, our bodies formed symbioses with armies of digestive bacteria necessary for survival. In similar fashion, our brains are forming neural-electronic symbiotic linkups with solid-state computers⁵³.” “Gibson has produced nothing less than the underlying myth, the core legend, of the next stage of human evolution. He is performing the philosophic function that Dante did for feudalism and that Melville, Tolstoy, Mann and Lawrence did for the industrial age⁵⁴.”

⁵¹ LEARY T., *Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out*, Berkeley, Ronin, n.d., p. 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵³ LEARY T., *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, *op. cit.* p. 42.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

Gibson's matrix is "the electronic consensus-hallucination that facilitates the handling and exchange of massive quantities of data⁵⁵". It represents a clear anticipation of the current state of the internet, and was a working out in narrative terms of the central transition of the posthumanist age, from the physical and real to the electronic and virtual, in which the subject was not simply in a newly disembodied, electronic state but was in transition, in process, jacked into the matrix that would enable his/her mind to access the data held by a worldwide net of PCs.

For Gibson, technology is as dangerous as it is useful; his work reacts against the optimistic golden age science fiction of the 1950s. *Neuromancer* "articulates a distinctively double-edged attitude to the machine⁵⁶". By contrast, Leary's posthumanist vision is utopian, embracing not only science fiction, computers and drugs but also bioscience and ecology. He argues, in a chapter of *Your Brain is God* entitled "Evolution", that we are developing the technology that will enable us to manipulate the genetic code and that this should be celebrated rather than run away from: and yet he simultaneously argues that the coming Golden Age of Biology will enable a deeper understanding of Gaia, the homeostatic planetary life organism first theorized by James Lovelock in the 1970s as "a vast being who in her entirety has the power to maintain our planet as a fit and comfortable habitat for life⁵⁷". Gaia is the delicate, complex biosphere between the rock of Earth and nearly dead space. Leary here appears sympathetic both to ecology and to genetic engineering: "This glorious conception [of Gaia] suggests that a Life Intelligence deftly, confidently, intelligently creates and maintains the biosphere⁵⁸." "Recombinant engineering allows humans to create new life forms, to

⁵⁵ GIBSON W., *Burning Chrome*, London, Harper Collins, 1995, p. 197.

⁵⁶ ROBERTS A., *Science Fiction*, second edition, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 125.

⁵⁷ LOVELOCK J., *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.1.

⁵⁸ LEARY T., *Your Brain is God*, Berkeley, Ronin, 1988, p. 44.

correct malfunctioning genes, to clone, to effect DNA repair, to understand and manage the genetic signals which cause ageing and death⁵⁹. This is a distinctive position that embraces the environmentalist movement and yet at the same time takes a utopian view of GM technology, which that movement has usually signaled as at the very least dangerous, at worst catastrophic.

For Leary, as in Gaia theory, the human species is signified as receding in importance; and its self-concept, the human, is no longer axiomatically precious but is regarded as suspect and potentially dangerous. This posthumanist ecological position is not unique to Leary but has been adapted and made anti-humanist by contemporary fringe groups such as the Gaia Liberation Front, whose website offers the challenging motto, "Save the Planet: Kill Yourself⁶⁰". Leary, however, was no anti-humanist. He believed in the individual's responsibility to design his/her own death, and therefore in the freedom to choose euthanasia⁶¹; but he certainly did not advocate mass suicide or human extermination on ecological grounds. Instead, his work shows his awareness that we, as *Homo sapiens*, are part of a biosphere, a life organism; and at the same time, we are detailed sequences of code, arrangements of infinitesimal building blocks that can be shuffled creatively. Thus the human is decentred on both a macro and microcosmic level; we no longer dominate nature (even if we think we do) and our cellular architecture is no longer immutable. In this posthuman world, the planet and our cells are interconnected and in flux; hence Leary's recourse to the Hindu image of the cosmic dance to describe the cellular *and* universal processes that already exist unperceived but are made apparent to the subject when on LSD or in other heightened states, or through

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁶⁰ ANON., "Church of Euthanasia: Gaia Liberation Front", URL: [<http://www.churchofeuthanasia.org/resources/glf/glf sop.html>]

⁶¹ LEARY T., and SIRIUS R. U., *Design for Dying, op. cit.*, p. 109.

a profound understanding of the new physics: “the awareness that everything is a dance of particles, sensing the smallness and fragility of our system, of world-ending explosions, of the cyclical nature of creation and dissolution⁶²”. Leary’s preferred way of putting this in his later work was to write of software, of the posthuman being as information technology: “The human being of the future may be a bio-computer hybrid of any desired form, or an ‘electronic entity’ in the digital info-universe. Human as program. Or human in programs⁶³.”

Leary’s continual retooling of his language and technologies, for the purpose of a revolution in subjectivity, recalls David Porush’s theory that the most dangerous, subversive tool possessed by the Hebrew slaves in Ancient Egypt was none other than their twenty-two-character alphabet, which had the power of signifying in a new, compressed, ultra-rapid way. It rendered the Egyptian syllabic, pictorial hieroglyphic system obsolete and vulnerable, and hence threatened the Pharaonic Empire whose communications and social formation depended on that system. The alphabet was a new paradigm, analogous to digital media: “highly compressed, a sort of code, a jazzy alternative script and symbology that are just the sort of argot/cipher we might expect to arise among slaves who need to invent their own resistant, subterranean, samizdat-like culture⁶⁴”. Revealingly, Porush points out that his project is not the Ancient Hebrews as such, but “to talk about cyberspace without talking about it⁶⁵”.

Leary was, in a technological sense, one of the Hebrews. He was part of a revolution in communications. He belonged to a countercultural underground that

⁶² LEARY T., *Your Brain is God, op. cit.*, p. 47-48.

⁶³ LEARY T., *Chaos & Cyber Culture, op. cit.* p. 236.

⁶⁴ PORUSH D., “Telepathy: Alphabetic Consciousness and the Age of Cyborg Illiteracy”, *Virtual Futures: Cyberotics, Technology and Post-Human Pragmatism*, ed. DIXON J. B., CASSIDY E. J., London, Routledge, 1998, p. 65.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

sought to wrest the idea of subjectivity – ultimately, the idea of the human – from the grip of dominant interests. By embracing the new alphabets and their codes and symbols (LSD, psychedelics, VR, the matrix, neuroscience), Leary hoped to stake out the territory of the posthuman before the capitalist establishment could get there. Leary has been characterized as a charlatan, largely through his association with hallucinogenic drugs: but Leary's more lasting, and arguably more subversive, contribution to the counterculture was to demonstrate and promote its relationship to the emerging posthuman, in a manner profoundly threatening to capitalism's dominant, but increasingly residual, construction of the subject.

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