
Setting the Stage

For the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions.

—Plato, *The Republic*, Book 4

Louis Armstrong once said, “You have to love to play,” which can be taken in three ways. To perform jazz well, you have to: (1) be able to love, whether it be music or another person; (2) have a sense of play; and (3) take pleasure in performing. One of two key factors driving the Haight-Ashbury counterculture phenomenon—at least with the individuals who contributed most to its rise and fostered the instances of creativity that remain of interest over a half century later—was altered consciousness put into “play.” Haight-Ashbury evolved out of a desire to see anew, to experiment with new perceptual styles, to expand consciousness—and then put it all into communal play. The entire Haight-Ashbury scene could not have developed as it did, however, if consciousness-changing psychedelics weren’t an explosively catalytic factor in the mix.

Early on, Haight-Ashbury culture was an experiment in and celebration of a playful, gentle mode of liberated counterconsciousness. Those exercising it believed that it would lead to a new mode of being and, hence, a new society—if not a new world. Consciousness-altering drugs, marijuana included, were perceived as a tool toward *that* end.

The demise of Haight-Ashbury demonstrates with crystal clarity that mere drug use produces nothing. In fact, the Haight-Ashbury scene deteriorated in almost direct proportion to the extent that drugs became the

point. The meaning of psychedelics is linked directly to the quality of the consciousness: the creativity, keen intelligence, and psychological vitality of the user. The counterculture lost its vitality and direction the more getting high became a substitute for creative input and imaginative endeavor.

Once drugs began to be treated as an end instead of a means, the sense of play giving rise to and animating the counterculture—“play” as in playing baseball, music, or chess—gave way to spacing out and mere hedonistic, self-indulgent, and self-glorifying excess. Meaningful contribution receded into imitative role-playing; exploratory pioneering lapsed into cosmic tourism; and exercise of interesting intelligence dissipated into airheaded non-entity, wowie-zowie deadweight.

While the creators of the Haight-Ashbury scene envisioned psychedelic drugs as a kind of software program by which to enhance one’s own creativity and originality, increasing numbers of adherents used drugs in the manner of playing video games: something done for its own sake, with no point or purpose beyond the game itself. Timothy Leary—himself alternately a heavy hitter and an airhead (and you’re never quite sure which is which)—put it succinctly in *The Politics of Ecstasy*: “Dropping out is the hardest yoga of all.” All too many dropped out in an in an adolescent, dysfunctional avoidance of anything hard.

This difference of mindset constituted the crucial difference between Haight-Ashbury as it existed in the fall of 1965, when it was coalescing and gathering momentum, and Haight-Ashbury as it existed by 1968, when, ironically, its zenith of popularity brought about its rapid decline.

Drugs like LSD, mescaline, and psilocybin were a crucial catalyst of the counterculture, not its cause or its goal. Experimenting with psychedelics was but one factor in the vast array of wheel-within-wheel conjunctions, cross-currents, and generative overlappings that brought Haight-Ashbury into almost accidental being. And what was most joyful and life-giving about it was that it resided in splashing about in those giddy eddies and swirls.

Alternative consciousness, however, is not something one simply puts on like a shirt purchased at the identity boutique. It’s a shirt one makes through exercise of attention, creativity, and craftsmanship in the creation of something pleasing, rewarding, and worthwhile. What the “flower child” never understood is that Haight-Ashbury was not a place you simply moved into. Haight-Ashbury in its full array of interrelated social, cultural, spiritual, political, musical, and artistic permutations was the fruit of a relatively small group of intelligent, creative people—most of them college age or older—striving to fashion “scenes” by which to live their lives in as interesting a

fashion as possible. It was the fruit of their efforts to *create* these scenes that gave rise to Haight-Ashbury and evolved into “the ’60s.”

Haight-Ashbury was the product not of any movement or apocalyptic agenda, but rather of a number of separate scenes—some of them (as with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters) already years in the making—coming into generative interaction in the summer and fall of 1965. It was at its vital best when, to quote Dylan, it was “busy being born”: the period *before* it was discovered and played to the hilt by the media; *before* it was inundated by the wannabe hordes. Haight-Ashbury was at its peak when it was still local and small, a loose array of semi-interrelated convergences and semi-independent propensities that would interweave and reinforce one another to become something far larger than the sum of its parts. It was that early-on, still-in-the-making Haight-Ashbury, not the Summer of Love version that released a torrent of pent-up creativity, which eclipsed the all-dressed-up-with-nowhere-to-go quandary of the previous decade.

It is impossible to understand that time-and-place convergence, however, without an understanding of the general history of LSD in the twenty years leading up to the ’60s.

The Trip Begins: The First Time

In life all finding is not the thing we sought, but something else.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals* (April 11, 1863)

LSD was first synthesized in 1938 as part of a research project totally unrelated to “psychedelics.” Sandoz Pharmaceuticals of Basel, Switzerland, was conducting research on rye fungus (ergot) in hopes of discovering a medicinal circulatory stimulant. Dr. Albert Hofmann was in charge of the project. By April 1943—eight years into the project—Hofmann had synthesized dozens of compounds from ergot without discovering the circulatory stimulant he was after. Acting on a nagging hunch, he went back to the twenty-fifth compound—LSD-25—to take another look. On Friday, April 16, he synthesized a new batch of the compound. In the course of preparing it, he absorbed a tiny amount through his fingertips, an accidental “dosing,” which would snowball monumentally over the next twenty years. Describing the ensuing experience in his book, *LSD: My Problem Child*, Hofmann reported that he was “seized by a peculiar restlessness associated

with a sensation of mild dizziness . . . I lay down and sank into a kind of drunkenness, which was not unpleasant and which was characterized by extreme activity of the imagination. As I lay in a dazed condition with my eyes closed . . . there surged upon me an uninterrupted stream of fantastic images of extraordinary plasticity and vividness, accompanied by an intense kaleidoscope-like play of colors” (Campbell 1971, 66).

Hofmann’s experience—a three-hour, kaleidoscopic, perceptual experience of “striking reality and depth”—is key to understanding the Haight-Ashbury counterculture, from psychedelic music to the posters, light shows, tie-dyed, “freaky” apparel, and the desire to “freak freely” in a festively communal, mutually supportive fashion. It is no coincidence that Hofmann’s account of his LSD experience—the “uninterrupted stream of fantastic images of extraordinary plasticity and vividness, accompanied by an intense kaleidoscopic-like play of colors”—perfectly describes a light show during a psychedelic dance concert at the Avalon Ballroom or the Fillmore Auditorium.

As would be the case with so many after him, Hofmann was sufficiently impressed by this experience that three days later he decided to explore further. He ingested 250 micrograms of LSD-25 and, forty minutes later, began experiencing dizziness, unrest, difficulty in concentrating, and a compulsion to laugh at nothing in particular and everything in general. He rode his bicycle home, soaring on acid. The scientist described this “trip”:

Everything seemed to sway and the proportions were distorted like reflections in the surface of moving water. Moreover, all the objects appeared in unpleasant, constantly changing colors, the predominant shades being sickly green and blue. When I closed my eyes, an unending series of colorful, very realistic and fantastic images surged in on me. A remarkable feature was the manner in which all acoustic perceptions (e.g. the noise of a passing car) were transformed into optical effects, every sound evoking a corresponding colored hallucination constantly changing in shape and color like pictures in a kaleidoscope. (Winter 2019, 125)

Hofmann was impressed, perplexed, and curious. Sandoz persisted (as would be the case with psychedelic acolytes in subsequent decades) in exploring LSD for potential medicinal applications. This research piqued the interest of the scientific community, and LSD began to be explored for possible applications in a number of areas, including psychological disorders, mental illness, and alcoholism.

One of the first people outside Sandoz to enter this research realm was Walter Stoll, a Zurich psychiatrist who was the son of Hofmann's supervisor at Sandoz. Stoll was the first person to experiment with LSD on people, and he published his findings in 1947. His report caused a sensation in the field of psychology, stimulating a flood of new research and scientific papers. Sensing potentially astronomical profits, the worldwide pharmaceutical industry began experimenting with and synthesizing mind drugs for use in psychological research and therapy—research that would produce such drugs as Thorazine, Valium, and Librium. Sandoz, meanwhile, began making LSD available to psychologists, psychiatrists, and lab scientists doing research on mental disorders.

There was a huge surge in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis in the years following World War II. In 1940, less than three thousand psychiatrists practiced in the United States, a number that more than doubled a decade later. By 1956, more than fifteen thousand psychiatrists held membership in the American Psychological Association.

As this field boomed, it split off into a number of different camps, each having its theory as to the nature of the brain and/or consciousness. To cite but a few examples, the Freudians saw the mind in layered fashion as the id (the unconscious), the ego (the waking, workaday mind), and the superego (the policeman enforcing social conditioning and norms), with the id being the wild card in behavior and therapy. The behaviorists, meanwhile, perceived the mind mechanistically and dismissed the unconscious as a myth. Extrapolating from data derived from tests on pigeons and mice, they described the human mind—hence, consciousness and behavior—as the function of a complex of stimulus-response influences. Still other researchers envisioned the brain in chemical terms, viewing mental disorder as a function of disrupted chemical balances that could be adjusted and manipulated through external intervention via drugs.

Within this context during the 1950s, research involving LSD, mescaline, peyote, and the like occurred. Most often, these drugs were used as psychometrics—that is, mimickers of madness. They were administered to patients to simulate schizophrenic-like episodes (and other mental dysfunctions) for study and treatment.

LSD and the Exploration of the Mind

I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I must have changed several times since then.

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (1865)

The 1950s witnessed a growing interdisciplinary interest between psychology, philosophy, linguistics, literature, and art about the nature of reality—or, to put it another way, the question of whether there *is* such a thing as an objective, fixed reality. If so, what is it? Can it be named, described, articulated, or pointed to? Exactly what would one be pointing to? Where do we look to locate and explore it: inside one’s head; in language; the laws of physics; religion; ideology; emotions; pure positivistic fact? To put this question another way, is reality merely a reflection—the assumption that there is a corresponding, nuts-and-bolts referent for certain absolute actions we take for granted—as, for example, with such terminology as soul, God, the id/ego/superego, nature/human nature?

These questions go to the very heart of society and social order and our picture of reality. Is what we call reality nothing more than a learned and enforced social convention that changes with time, place, circumstance, and context? Is it merely an intellectual construct, a function of the linguistic structure into which one is born, what poet Wallace Stevens calls a “necessary fiction”?

Earlier in the century, intellectual figures like Canadian psychologist Richard Bucke, French philosopher Henri Bergson, American philosopher/psychologist William James, and Polish-American semanticist Alfred Korzybski proposed theories that—to facilitate both functional efficiency and physical survival—the physical brain filters out the vast majority of data available to perception at any given moment. There is a vast array of things going on and available to perceive that, in the act of perceptual apprehension, are filtered out, ignored, or reduced into insignificance. This filtered data, however, is every bit as much a part of reality as the edited, constructed, and arranged data the perceiver typically acts upon. Our normal, workaday reality is, in this view, a fiction: a convenient construct we agree to accept and act upon as reality.

These theorists argued, however, that in the “real world”—that is, the world as it exists separate from any act of human intervention and interpretation—there is no such thing as a dollar, a mile, a week, a pound, a quart, a degree of Fahrenheit (or centigrade), or a boundary line between Canada and the U.S. (or North and South Carolina, or the Indian and Pacific Oceans). These constructs are mere conventions, convenient abstractions, and necessary fictions. They exist solely in the mind, but we make them real by behaving *as though* they are real (which sounds like the teachings of a Freudian therapist or Zen master).

But it's even more complicated and problematic. One's apprehension—one's arrangement and interpretation—of reality (the totality of what is transpiring "out there" at any given moment) is a function of a vast array of personal factors: mood (optimistic or depressed, stressed or relaxed, happy or sad); physical state (fatigue, illness, sexuality); age; prior experience; intelligence; attentiveness; and a host of other needs, preferences, and priorities of the moment. The process of perceptual apprehension—the process of making the outside inside—transforms, deforms, reduces, contours, interprets, constructs, and construes reality. Any two people presented with the same poem, symphony, speech, sermon, fiscal forecast, movie, painting, or potential sexual partner will internally register and respond to very different things. In fact, any single person apprehends differently at different times. Which version—which act of apprehension—is real? Can there be said to be an ultimately true, correct, real version, or is everything a version? It goes without saying that the Stalinist, Cold Warrior, Muslim fundamentalist, and born-again Christian holds that there is an ultimate, highest reality.

How would consciousness be transformed if a chemical means were found to circumvent or shut off this filtering, distortive, reductive mechanism? Would that constitute a doorway to madness or to divinity? Would it be the avenue *to* truth/reality or a holiday *from* it?¹ Richard Bucke—a friend of Walt Whitman (who journeyed to Canada to visit him) and an influence on William James—argued in *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901) that culture-altering giants like Buddha, Jesus, Plotinus, William Blake, Honoré Balzac, and Walt Whitman experienced a massive, life-altering illumination because they found a way to step outside received, officially sanctioned consciousness and thereby gained access to a new, more comprehensive way of seeing and responding. By breaking through to a new reality—by seeing in a new way—they were able to tap into and activate a fuller range of the brain's registering capacity. It is precisely *because of* their breakthrough into ab/normal, non-workaday, non-business-as-usual modes of apprehension that we revere, read, discuss, and emulate them.

Literature has a long tradition of groundbreaking, society-changing writers, who used drugs (not the least of which was alcohol) as a tool for triggering a change in perception and thereby widen the range of consciousness available for use. Writers Samuel Coleridge and Thomas de Quincey were opium addicts. From 1844 to 1849, writers Charles Baudelaire, Gerard de Nerval, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and Théophile Gautier gathered regularly at Le Club des Hashischins to smoke hash and marijuana. Edgar

Allan Poe experimented with the opium-based laudanum. Physician and social reformer Henry Havelock Ellis took peyote in 1887 and wrote about the experience in “Mescal: A New Artificial Paradise” (Ellis 1898). Writing in this article about a “silent and sudden illumination of all things around, where a moment before I had seen nothing uncommon,” Ellis argued that “for a healthy person to be once or twice admitted to the rites of mescal is not only an unforgettable delight, but an educational influence of no mean value.” He subsequently provided peyote to William Butler Yeats who, in reporting his experience, noted: “It seems as if a series of dissolving views were carried swiftly before me, all going from right to left, none corresponding with any seen reality. For instance, I saw the most delightful dragons, puffing out their breath straight in front of them like rigid lines of steam, and balancing white balls on the end of their breath” (Stevens 1987, 7).

William James—brother of novelist Henry James and venerated Harvard professor—experimented with nitrous oxide (laughing gas) and peyote (he threw up). Sigmund Freud experimented with cocaine, at one point becoming addicted. In *Uber Coca* (1884), he advocated its medicinal use. In 1924, German doctor Louis Lewin cataloged most of the world’s known mind-altering plants in *Phantastica: A Classic Survey on the Use and Abuse of Mind-Altering Plants* (1924), and novelist Aldous Huxley reviewed it in the Chicago *Herald Examiner*.

Expanded Consciousness and the Layers of Reality

The eye altering, alters all.

—William Blake, “The Mental Traveler” (1863)

A man’s mind is stretched to a new idea or sensation, and never shrinks back to its former dimensions.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., *The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table* (1858)

The use of mind-expanding drugs discovered by Huxley and others showed that psychedelics allowed us to remove at least some of the filters that we impose on our version of reality. In the course of going about our everyday, utilitarian lives, we constantly monitor our environment for information, which

we are evaluating, narrating, arranging, and categorizing in accordance with whatever needs-of-the-moment are at the fore of attention. That processed, filtered reality—what we are really responding to from moment to moment *as* reality—is further contoured, edited, and modified by virtue of our cultural conditioning, value assumptions, experiential histories, ideological, religious, and philosophical beliefs, ingrained habits, and perceptual styles. Linguist Benjamin Whorf contended that *what* we see is largely a product of *how* we see, and *how* we see is largely a product of the language into which we are born, each language being a vehicle that arranges, categorizes, and perceives nature for its user in largely fixed and predetermined ways. Freud argued that the *what* and *how* of perception—and what we respond to *as reality*—is largely a process determined by social conditioning, parental intervention in early life, and past experience as an adult. Whatever our perceptual framework, mode, or style, what we take to be and respond to as reality at any given moment is a highly filtered (reduced, abstracted), arranged, and modified construction—this being essentially what Huxley means by the “screens” and “filters” that produce the consciousness that pervades daily life and culture.

One of the themes that resurfaces in countercultural history is that the experience of using psychedelic drugs forever changes the user’s understanding of, and assumptions about, reality. Whoever passes through that door, Huxley insists, is forever a different person. As recounted by many observers, psychedelic drugs—LSD, peyote, mescaline, psilocybin—undermine our usual experience of reality by suppressing the mind’s tendency to discriminate: to differentiate and categorize, filter and select, arrange and organize. Temporarily liberated from the preconceptions, value assumptions, ingrained criteria, and habits of categorizing that typically contour and shape our understanding, the perceptual faculties are freer to play, and the consequent perceptual experience is freer to unfold wherever the generative impetus leads. As writer and philosopher Alan Watts puts it, psychedelics serve to “suspend certain inhibitory or selective processes in the nervous impressions that is usual” (Watts 1962, 15). Judicious use of psychedelic drugs can help one see—apprehend, perceive, experience, feel—in profoundly different ways than before.

In my days teaching at Rutgers, I took my classes through an exercise meant to demonstrate the intimate connection between prose style and perceptual style. Giving them ten minutes for each step, the students were asked to describe the front of the room as though they were (a) writing the opening paragraph of a horror story; (b) writing an article for *Better Homes and Gardens*; (c) writing an article for *Mechanics Illustrated*; and (d)

writing an article for *Rolling Stone*. Each step of the way, students were asked to articulate the kinds of things they selected for notice, what things were in the foreground and the background, and how they were described and narrated. Typically, the students readily understood that each of their articulations employed different usages—choices—of diction, syntax, and phrasing, and it subsequently dawned on them how each mode of articulation also required, if not dictated, a certain perceptual style. Each mode predisposed the apprehender not only to notice different things about the front of the room, but to evaluate, arrange, and describe those things differently in each case. It was always gratifying to watch the light—and/or confusion—come in their eyes when I asked them to decide, given that each instance ostensibly described the exact same thing (the front of the room), which of the descriptions was *better*, or even most *correct* or *accurate*.

The lesson they took away from the exercise, of course, was that considerations of “fact” and/or “truth” were more complex than they normally thought. What we selected to notice, and how we arranged, composed, attended to, interpreted, and articulated/described/narrated it, was an inextricable function of the perceptual style employed. One mode/style may be more useful, interesting, or appropriate, according to the needs of the moment, and all have their elements of truth and accuracy, but all are provisional with nothing fixed and final. As any marriage counselor, psychoanalyst, lover, or jazz musician will attest, an emotional fact can be as true, important, and relevant as a positivistic fact.

Psychedelic experience fosters this understanding, as evidenced in Blake’s dictum “the eye altering alters all.” Used judiciously and intelligently, LSD, mescaline, psilocybin, and peyote can serve as tools for enlarging the repertoire and widening the range of perceptual response. In lieu of the workaday, survival mode of awareness, one acquires a style of perception wherein objects—and, equally, ideas, values, principles, concepts, and categories—are seen to interrelate less as a network or grid than as a dance. One *feels* the cross-generative, interrelationship between objects, ideas, and emotions to be as important and meaning-making as the objects, ideas and, emotions themselves. Watts evokes the so-called bead game in Hermann Hesse’s *Magister Ludi* (1943) as an example of this mode of perception in his *The Joyous Cosmology: Adventures in the Chemistry of Consciousness* (1962): “The game consists in playing with the relationships between configurations in various fields. The players will elucidate a common theme and develop its application in numerous directions. No two games are the same, for not only do the elements differ, but also there is no thought of attempting

to force a static and uniform order on the world” (21). This description of the world apprehended as play—playing with, performing, interplay, theater, gamesmanship—is an apt account of the perspective fostered by the psychedelic experience.

Psychedelics also tend to shift perceptual orientation from linear to open-ended and from chronological to evolutionary. Alan Watts notes, for example, that “the associative couplings of the brain seem to fit simultaneously instead of one at a time” (1962, 34), resulting in an all-over, multidimensional, panoramic simultaneity of “knowing,” as opposed to sequential, linear associative progressions. One’s sense of time also changes, becoming more experiential, less abstract and more biological, less mechanical. Time is *experienced* more as an ongoing event-in-the-making than *understood* as a utilitarian unit of measurement.

One feels time differently. Under the influence of psychedelics, time is the time of biological rhythm, not of the clock and the time, work, and discipline of the clock. There is no hurry. Our sense of time is notoriously subjective and thus dependent upon the quality of our attention, whether of interest or boredom, and upon the alignment of our behavior in terms of routines, goals, and deadlines. As Watts pointed out, “here the present is self-sufficient, but it is not a static present. It is a dancing present: the unfolding of a pattern which has no specific destination in the future but is simply its own point” (Watts 1962, 27).

When perceptual orientation shifts from the linear, cause-and-effect sequence of the everyday event, consciousness itself becomes an integral participant in the “what happens.” Consequently, the past of one’s private perceptual history is brought into generative play with the in-the-making moment to create a multidimensional, multitemporal dynamic far deeper and more complicated than workaday perception. The categories normally separating past and present, objective fact (the table is wooden) with subjective fact (the table is useful) blur, or even disappear. One sees and makes sense in atypical ways, which brings all heretofore unquestioned, sacrosanct orthodoxies into question. As Aldous Huxley put it as early as 1954 in *The Doors of Perception*, the person who, under the influence of psychedelics, goes through “the door” will come back to the world a different person. One ceases to apprehend the world as a preordained, fixed collection of givens, which become fictitious and provisional. This perceptual style largely accounts for the popularity in Haight-Ashbury of the *I Ching*, wherein reality is apprehended as a momentary, still-in-the-making situation linked to, rising out of, and relevant to a confluence of forces governing *that* moment

only, as opposed to a linear, cause-and-effect reality immune to and above time and circumstance.

It is typical for the person who experiences this profound sense of ontological relativity to conclude that what we take as reality is an arbitrary construct, a sociocultural convention, not an unmediated manifestation of nature. Exalted and amped, the individual apprehends this insight as a door opening out onto the divine and yearns to spread the psychedelic gospel in the manner of a religious missionary, Marxist emissary, or Johnny Appleseed. A sensibility given to “play” embraces this newfound relativity as liberating, redemptive, transforming, and empowering. The sensibility that needs certain “truths” to hold and retain their position (and, hence, ours) in the divine order of things finds this sense of relativity to be subversive, unmooring, and threatening. Indeed, the combination of heightened perceptual intensity, conceptual loosening, and sense of awe produced by psychedelics tends to foster reevaluation of one’s understanding of “self” and place in the big picture. In lieu of a self that is viewed as a static unit that negotiates its way through a world “out there,” the self is experienced as an active participant in and product of a vast, complex, multidimensional dance of interrelations. The givens that have heretofore guided one’s behavior, choices, aspirations, and assumptions dissolve. Like Alice having passed through the looking glass, one sees differently; one exists differently.

The psychedelic experience prompts one to understand (and apprehend) reality as more of an ongoing, still-in-the-making *dynamic* than as a fixed and final construct (James’s “Reality with a Big R”). This relativistic understanding of reality is hardly new in American letters. It informs Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays. It prompted Henry David Thoreau to “drop out” of society in order to “tune in” to his own consciousness and see in a more firsthand, experiential manner. It animates Herman Melville’s exploration of what underlies going to sea in quest of Moby Dick (profit? entrepreneurial zeal? career opportunity? plunder? spiritual quest?). It is the central question of William James’s *Pragmatism* (1907) and a frequent topic in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1929). It is the generative impetus behind the remarkable stylistic experiments of Jack Kerouac’s *Visions of Cody* (written during 1951 and 1952; Kerouac 1972). And, of course, it is the central theme of Leary’s various psychedelic pronouncements and exhortations.

The transformative experience integral to psychedelics tends to be more volcanic than this description implies. The psychedelic experience is not a cerebral reverie with the tinkling of wind chimes, plink of sitars, and thoughts of ancient Tibet serenely wafting about. It is not an innocent stroll

among the daisies in May on the way to feeding baby ducks at the pond. It is not a good idea for everyone. It is not recommended for the individual needing to retain a stable, unchanging frame of reference.

The infamous bad acid trip transpires when the sense of assumed reality which one orients oneself within the cosmos disintegrates, and brings about a panicked loss of reference. For someone experienced in psychedelics, however, that decentering experience produces feelings of liberated expansiveness, of release into new and open-ended possibilities of seeing and being. That transition from stable fixity into open-ended play is central to psychedelic culture, including music, art, and dress.

When people speak of the LSD hallucination—something I rarely experienced, but found interesting and pleasurable when it occurred—I suspect them to be referring to this disintegration of conventional frames of reference. I have read accounts of walls melting, furniture crawling, of seeing bats, and looking in the mirror to see horse heads—exhibit A being Hunter Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*—but I take all this to be personal projections precipitated by the boundaries of everyday perception blending, overlapping, bending, and melding. I suspect those most prone to hallucination are those whose sense of reality is most unquestioned, unexamined, and taken for granted. I have never seen a chair melt, visited an Egyptian temple, or turned into a dragonfly. For me, the LSD hallucination is less a vision of things that are not there than it is a decentered mode of apprehending a world utterly taken for granted, a world arranged and categorized according to preconceived assumptions. Change the *way* one sees—the perceptual style, the new form of awareness—and *what* one sees changes.

Huxley hits the mark in noting that psychedelics “appear to give an enormous impetus to creative intuition” and that one sees things under their influence “the way [these things] appear when certain inhibitory processes of the brain and senses are suspended. . . . Consciousness-changing drugs are popularly associated with the evocation of bizarre and fantastic images, but in my own experience this happens only with closed eyes. Otherwise, it is simply that the natural world is endowed with a richness of grace, color, significance, and, sometimes humor, for which our normal adjectives are insufficient” (1954, 22–24).

To become aware of the vast, powerful, unbounded range of consciousness itself outside the normal perceptual framework can be wondrous, hair-raising, confusing, exalting, harrowing, revelatory, playful, and *fun*—not to mention consciousness-altering and life-transforming—sometimes all within a single psychedelic experience.

Leary quotes a passage from William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) that is amazingly apt in describing postpsychedelic understanding:

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the flimsiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. (388)

The most significant difference between Haight-Ashbury in 1964 to early 1966 and Haight-Ashbury thereafter can be located in how and why psychedelic drugs were generally used. The early residents of Haight-Ashbury viewed psychedelics as a tool by which to enlarge one's perception, to increase the directions one can go in any given response to the in-the-making moment, and then put those new modes of seeing into creative, meaning-making play. As the huge influx of refugees, drop-outs, teeny-boppers, wannabes, and dysfunctionals of various stripe gradually transformed the neighborhood into a media-circus ghetto, drug use—psychedelics very much included—became increasingly recreational, a way to stay stoned and avoid the problems and demands of straight existence.

Those who laid the groundwork and created Haight-Ashbury used psychedelics as an immensely interesting—and ultimately useful—vehicle for exploring the nature of consciousness. The key realization—and it's crucial—is that psychedelics are a tool, not an end. As Watts repeatedly noted, consciousness-expanding drugs are a physical aid in the same manner as are “microscopes, telescopes, cameras, scales, computers, books, works of art, alphabets.” “Mystical insight is no more in the chemical itself,” he noted, “than biological knowledge is in the microscope” (1962, 5). These drugs do not impart wisdom at all, any more than the microscope alone gives knowledge. They provide the raw materials of and tools for wisdom and are useful to the extent that individuals can integrate what they reveal into the whole pattern of their behavior and the entire system of their knowledge. Watts came back to this notion repeatedly. “Drugs of this kind,” he

intoned toward the end of *The Joyous Cosmology*, “are in no sense bottled and predigested wisdom” (83).

Such was not the attitude toward psychedelics (and drugs in general) of latter-day Haight-Ashbury drop-outs and dysfunctionals, and of the counterculture at large, after being a “hippie” degenerated into a shallow cliché, a way of dressing, talking, and behaving that one adopted like an actor trying to become a character fashioned by some playwright or screenwriter. The Haight-Ashbury pioneers tended to be far better educated, more experienced, sophisticated, and older than their Summer of Love successors. The wannabes and fugitives from mom and dad tended to view psychedelics as a ticket to the funhouse offering unlimited rides on the freaky roller coaster: getting laid, nonstop entertainment, and no job. The demise of Haight-Ashbury (and the counterculture at large) demonstrates that there is no more point to getting high per se than there is to getting drunk. Getting high, or *being* high, does not create a higher self, and treating drug use in that manner creates nothing more than a psychedelic skid row—as Haight-Ashbury became after 1968.

As noted as early as 1954 by Huxley, the key dilemma of psychedelics—and especially the attempt to make use of them as a way of life—is that the workaday world awaits you at the conclusion of each stroll through Eden. No matter how revelatory, mind-expanding, and transformative the psychedelic experience, after the first few transformative romps with the ontological platypuses and wallabies, you’re basically repeating the same experience over and over—which was the essential message of Kesey’s “acid-test graduation.” What began as a tool for mind expansion and psychological growth became recreational. Nothing is wrong with recreation. One is taking a temporary holiday from everyday life each time one drinks a beer, has wine with dinner, or ingests an eggnog at Christmas, but what was formerly a breakthrough into new growth can degenerate into mere repetition—and as I told my writing students at Rutgers, to repeat an idea is not to develop it.

Though the first dozen or so experiences with psychedelics can be revelatory and transformative, there comes a point where continued repetition produces neither insight nor change. One gets stuck in a rut—as happened with Leary at Millbrook, Kesey at La Honda, and legions of Haight-Ashbury “heads” circa 1968 and after. One’s wheels may spin at a hundred miles per hour, shooting off sparks and a holy glow, but there’s no progression into new discovery or revelation. What formerly provoked revolutions in consciousness became stylized habit and lapse into cliché. What had been a catalyst for magic and growth become pathetic stasis. What,

then, to do? Anyone who has “seen like Adam” is loathe to relinquish that sense of wonder described by Huxley—that sense of the world unfolding into unguessed-at splendor, possibility, and potential—that opportunity for play, doors to enter, and Eden to wander.

Pass the Acid: LSD Comes to the U.S.

If a stone be cast, there is no foreknowledge of where it may land.

—Flann O’Brien, *The Poor Mouth:
A Bad Story about the Hard Life* (1941)

By mid-century there were a good dozen research projects throughout the U.S. investigating hallucinogens and their effect on consciousness, creativity, and behavior. LSD first came to the U.S. in 1949 by way of research psychiatrist Dr. Max Rinkel, who gave it to his associate, Dr. Robert Hyde—making Hyde the first person to “trip” on these shores. Rinkel and Hyde went on to conduct an LSD study in a Harvard-affiliated mental clinic at the Boston Psychopathic Institute, testing the drug on 100 volunteers in 1949 and 1950.²

One of those whose interest was piqued by the possibilities of mescaline and its pharmacological cousins as a tool for researching schizophrenia was an English psychiatrist named Humphrey Osmond, who had moved to Canada in 1952 to take a position in a mental hospital in Saskatchewan.

Like almost all researchers at the time, Osmond viewed mescaline as a medical tool for inducing psychosis-like states in patients who could then be studied. Testing the drug on himself, Osmond took 400 milligrams and carefully monitored its effect on his awareness and interpretation of his surroundings. The experience convinced him that researchers misunderstood schizophrenia. Given that an ingested chemical could so utterly transform what he assumed to be reality, Osmond concluded that schizophrenics aren’t deluded; they accurately report the reality of what they see and feel. Their dysfunction is not mental but chemical.

Osmond also concluded that, given how profoundly mescaline altered “normal” consciousness, the drug might prove to be a tool for gaining access to a more comprehensive—nonfiltered, nonreductive—reality. The study and exploration of this new reality might reveal volumes about the way consciousness functions in the process of making the outside inside.

Also in 1952, Osmond and his colleague John Smythies published a paper entitled “A New Approach to Schizophrenia” in which they theorized

that the body under stress conditions produces a hallucinogen (in this case, metamorphosed adrenaline) that caused a change in perception that induced the individual to “turn off” reality as a maneuver for self-preservation—this being the schizophrenic state. Osmond and Smythies set out to find this hallucinogen. Osmond held in a subsequent paper, again coauthored with Smythies and published in *Hibbert Journal*, that no one can properly study schizophrenia without experiencing the state firsthand and that this state (or something very close to it) can be experienced by taking mescaline. He also argued that ingestion of mescaline provides access to the unconscious and that it behooves anyone interested in that subject to take it.

Osmond subsequently received a letter in praise of this essay from an unlikely source: novelist Aldous Huxley. Huxley invited Osmond to visit him in Los Angeles, offering himself as a guinea pig for Osmond’s mescaline research. Huxley had the social pedigree, professional résumé, and intellectual credentials to make him a contact to be taken seriously. He was the grandson of T. H. Huxley, the nineteenth-century champion of Darwinism, and his mother was the niece of poet Matthew Arnold and the granddaughter of Dr. Thomas Arnold, legendary nineteenth-century headmaster of Rugby boarding school. Huxley was author of *Chrome Yellow* (1921), *Antic Hay* (1923), *Point Counter Point* (1928), and *Brave New World* (1932), an anti-utopian novel delineating a government that controls society through the dispensation and regulation of the drug “soma.”

Though born and raised in England, Huxley moved to Los Angeles in 1938. He was interested in “the esoteric” as an avenue to higher states of consciousness, toward which end he studied Russian philosopher Pyotr Ouspensky and then Vedantic Hinduism under Beverly Hills guru Swami Prabhavananda. Another member of this circle was a youthful Alan Watts.

Huxley’s move to the U.S. coincided with a more philosophic turn to his writing. He attempted in books like *Ends and Means* (1937) and *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) to distill what he termed “the essence of wisdom,” and it was in this context that he wrote Osmond in 1953 to praise his mescaline research and note his desire to explore its effects on his own consciousness.

In his letter, Huxley sounded remarkably like a “head” circa 1965 Haight-Ashbury, expressing his weariness with what he called “Sears & Roebuck” culture. He complained that growing up in such a culture, “the vast majority of individuals lose . . . all the openness to inspiration, all the capacity to be aware of other things than those enumerated in the Sears-Roebuck catalogue.” It might be, he surmised, “that mescaline or some other chemical substance may . . . make it possible for young people to ‘taste and

see' what they have learned at second hand, or directly but at a lower level of intensity, in the writings of the religious, or the works of poets, painters and musicians" (Stevens 1987, 45).

In early May 1953, Osmond flew to Los Angeles to attend an American Psychological Association convention. Being in the neighborhood, Osmond paid Huxley a visit, bringing some mescaline with him. On May 4, Huxley was initiated into mescaline at age fifty-eight, finally experiencing for himself the state of "cosmic consciousness" he had spent the past twenty years exploring, reading, and writing about. He was absolutely floored by the experience, reporting that he felt himself pass through a screen—apparently that much-hypothesized filter—to enter a wondrous state wherein he was in firsthand touch with "eternity," "infinity," "the Absolute." Concluding that mescaline offers "the most extraordinary and significant experience this side of the beatific vision," Huxley wrote an essay about his experience that evolved into *The Doors of Perception* (1954), which would become a kind of bible of psychedelia. (The band, the Doors, took their name from this text.) Reading this work is central to understanding the subsequent psychedelic culture (Stevens 1987, 45).



Figure 1. Aldous Huxley, author of *The Doors of Perception*. Photo: Henri Manuel, 1925. Source: Wikimedia Commons, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aldous_Huxley_-_photo_Henri_Manuel.jpg

Huxley derived the title from the William Blake passage, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite.” Huxley reiterated the hypothesis of Bucke, Bergson, and William James that the brain filters out the vast majority of reality by “shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment and leaving only a very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful,” and that “most people, most of the time, know only what comes through the reducing valve” (1954, 23–24). In relaxing and/or circumventing this “reducing valve,” mescaline opens the perceptual doors to a splendid panorama of data and sensation—a world of “visionary beauty”—otherwise unavailable to perceptual experience.

Huxley perceived mescaline to be a tool—a technology, if you will—by which to profoundly alter our understanding and apprehension of life. It is by means of this altered consciousness and understanding that we could proceed from (as Huxley put it to Osmond) Sears & Roebuck land into the “antipodes of the mind” inhabited by the “psychological equivalent of kangaroos, wallabies, and duck-billed platypuses—a whole host of extremely improbably animals, which nevertheless exist and can be observed.” (1954, 24)

It suddenly occurred to Huxley an hour and a half into his trip that his perceptual faculties were profoundly and wondrously transformed. With his mind “perceiving in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of existence,” he attained a “sacramental vision of reality” that ushered him into a state of “grace.” He found himself existing in “a perpetual present made up of one continually changing apocalypse” (1954, 20, 22).

A significantly high percentage of authors who have written about their experiences taking LSD, mescaline, psilocybin, or peyote report experiencing this profoundly religious sensibility both while under influence of the drug and in the days, weeks, even months following. As Alan Watts put it in *The Joyous Cosmology*, “in this state of consciousness everything is the doing of the dogs” (1962, 58).

Amping out, Huxley was “seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence.” Describing this mode of seeing, Huxley reports three flowers in a vase were “shining with their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged” (1954, 17). Watts reported an experience nearly identical to Huxley’s, noting: “Going indoors I find that all the household furniture is alive. Everything gestures. Tables are tabling, pots are potting, walls are walling, fixtures are fixturing—a world of events instead of things” (1962, 69). It is this mode of radiant, profoundly ampli-

fied intensity of perception—a truly transformative experience, described by Huxley as “a repeated flow from beauty to heightened beauty, from deeper to ever deeper meaning” (1954, 17–18)—that one sees described over and over in near identical fashion in accounts of the psychedelic experience.

Shifting his gaze from the flowers to the books lining the walls of his study did nothing to abate the glory. “Like the flowers,” Huxley wrote, the books “glowed, when I looked at them, with brighter colors, a profounder significance.” The books appeared “so intense, so intrinsically meaningful,” he said, “that they seemed to be on the point of leaving the shelves to thrust themselves more insistently on my attention” (1954, 19). “This,” he murmured with awe, “is how one ought to see.”

Even while reveling in the glory, though, Huxley touched on an aspect of this experience that would figure profoundly in the evolution—and eventual collapse—of Haight-Ashbury in particular and the counterculture in general. Being privy via participating with mescaline to “the glory and wonder of pure existence,” in “the manifest glory of things,” one’s conceptual map is reconfigured. In the face of all this rapture, the considerations of everyday life recede into irrelevance. Were one always “to see like this,” Huxley noted, “one would never want to do anything else” (1954, 42).

“The contemplative whose perception has been cleansed”—by which Huxley means the person who has had the psychedelic experience (he sounds strikingly similar to the Diggers and the Haight-Ashbury acid mystics ten years down the line):

does not have to stay in his room. He can go about his business, so completely satisfied to see and be part of the divine Order of Things. When we feel ourselves to be sole heirs of the universe, when the sea flows in our veins . . . and the stars are our jewels, when all things are perceived as infinite and holy, what motive can we have for covetousness and self-assertion, for the pursuit of power or the drearier forms of pleasure?”(1954, 43)

“How,” he asked, rhetorically posing the counterculture stumper, “could one reconcile this timeless bliss of seeing as one ought to see with the temporal duties of doing what one ought to do and feelings one ought to feel?” (1954, 345). Mescaline “gives access to contemplation—but to a contemplation that is incompatible with action and even with the will to action, the very thought of action” (41). Bearing witness to the power and the glory, “the mescaline taker sees no reason for doing anything in particular