

Return to the Real, Part I: Tracing a Modernist Set and Setting in Psychoactive Drug Experiences¹

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Abstract: Triggered by Aldous Huxley’s 1954 description of mescaline as “cleansing the doors of perception” and Ido Hartogsohn’s consideration of the cultural set and setting regarding drug use, this article attempts to demonstrate and delineate a particular discourse about drug effects that was prevalent in 20th-century Western culture until at least the 1960s. As shown by the analysis of several drug accounts, the main thrust of this discourse was that (psychedelic) drugs (re)reveal a fundamental “reality” that has become hidden by processes of enculturation. This view is then shown to closely correspond to definitions of (primitivist) Modernism. It is argued that this correspondence demonstrates that drug experiences are more strongly informed by culture than the usual interpretation of set and setting allows. It also implies that other “cultural set and settings” can be identified within Western culture, like that of Romanticism. The second article, “Return to the Real, Part II” discusses some of the repercussions of these observations for drug studies in general and the notion of set and setting in particular.

Keywords: Psychoactive drugs, set and setting, contextualism, culture, modernism, primitivism.

Highlights

- In drug experiments, the individual set and setting is determined by the cultural set and setting to a much greater extent than commonly presumed.

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- One such cultural set and setting, prevalent in Western society from at least the 1910s to the 1960s, may be termed “Modernist” and typically argued that truth or reality have become veiled by processes of enculturation.
- Drug accounts originating in Modernist culture typically claim that (psychedelic) drugs (re)reveal this lost truth or reality, thus confirming a pre-existent worldview.
- A cultural set and setting such as the Modernist worldview profoundly affects a person’s response to experiences as malleable as those provoked by (psychedelic) drugs.

As “what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation – the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence,” is how novelist Aldous Huxley described his experience with mescaline in his 1954 essay *The Doors of Perception* (Huxley, 1954, p. 11). “This is how one ought to see, how things really are,” he mused, positing that his perception had become unfiltered by learned systems of interpretation that had mistakenly come to be regarded as true. He concluded that with mescaline, the human being “recovers some of the perceptual innocence of childhood, when the sensum was not immediately and automatically subordinated to the concept” (ibid., pp. 26, 18). Adopting a phrase by Romantic poet William Blake, he claimed that this drug “cleanses the doors of perception” (ibid., p. 3), clearly implying a most beneficial experience.

Nine years later, Huxley articulated the same message in behaviorist terms, arguing that man “must learn to decondition himself” from “culture-conditioned habits of feeling, thought and action” (Huxley, 1963/1980, p. 253). Huxley – a representative and proponent of “culture” if ever there was one – clearly did not view culture in entirely positive terms. Language, for example, benefits people inasmuch as it gives access to the accumulated records of other people’s experience, but also bedevils our sense of reality, because it makes us apt to take words for actual things and reduced awareness for the only awareness (Huxley, 1954, p. 15). Based on this premise, he presented mescaline as a means of revealing a world *not* of fantasy, delusion, or temporary insanity, as many contemporaries insisted, but as actually *more* real than the flimsy illusions that education imparts on people.

Huxley’s view of what “psychedelic” or mind-revealing drugs like mescaline and LSD “do” set the tone for years to come, but his line of thinking was not all that new. In fact, his vision dovetails nicely with an already existing worldview that will be described below and is of interest not only to art or cultural historians like myself, but also to drug researchers, especially those interested in the role of *set and setting*. It has been am-

ply demonstrated that these two factors are of major importance in determining the nature of a drug experience and can be used to control or steer such experiences to a great extent (Hartogsohn, 2017; Marlatt & Rohsenow, 1980). Zooming out to the cultural dimension, however, necessitates reconsidering this somewhat over-simplified view.

Following Ido Hartogsohn's overview, "set" refers to everything related to a person's mindset, including personality, preparation, expectation, and intention, as well as mood, fears, and wishes. "Setting" refers to everything to do with the environment in which a drug is taken, including the physical and social/emotional, and, as Hartogsohn notes, also "the cultural environment: the ideas and beliefs which are prevalent in the society regarding drug effects and the world in general" (Hartogsohn, 2017, pp. 2–3). As far as I could determine, the mention of "culture" in this context, in other than a gratuitous way, is exceptional. As a rule, set and setting are interpreted in quite concrete, topical, and instrumental terms, as a means of optimizing chances on a harmless, pleasant, and/or beneficial drug experience. Although there is nothing wrong with these goals, this approach betrays a too limited sense of the scope and importance of set and setting, which goes far beyond its immediate utilitarian value.

Referring to studies as old as those of sociologist Howard Becker (1953) and anthropologist Anthony Wallace (1959), Hartogsohn rightly reminds us that "individual set and setting is always nestled within a greater collective set and setting, which is shaped by the society and culture in which a person lives and develops" (Hartogsohn, 2017, p. 10). He speaks of *collective set and setting*, "conceived as the composite sum of factors such as values, beliefs, media coverage, drug laws, social trends, and cultural discourse elements which determine what types of individual set and setting conditions are probable to emerge in a given society and what types are improbable, unachievable, perhaps even unthinkable" (idem). In Hartogsohn's view, "collective set and setting" therefore includes both individual and "cultural" dimensions (Hartogsohn, 2020, p. 208). However, because "collective" usually denotes a group of people and groups of people are seen in turn as constituting or belonging to a culture, I prefer to see the *cultural* set and setting as encompassing both individuals and groups, including subcultures.

Recognition of the importance of culture in these matters, however, seems largely limited to lip service, if at all. Following the arguments made by philosopher Steven Katz regarding mystical experience, I would counter that culture is key "before, during, and after" in matters of psychoactive drugs too (Katz, 1978, p. 27). A Hindu mystic does not have an experience of some universal *x*, which he then describes in the language of Hinduism familiar to him; rather, he has a Hindu experience, "pre-formed" by his

prior beliefs (ibid., p. 26). Such “pre-experiential conditioning” is a “formative” or even “self-fulfilling” element that pre-shapes experience *and* feeds back into post-experiential interpretation and beliefs (ibid. pp. 35, 59). Like *all* experience, Katz concluded, mystical experience is “culturally and ideologically grounded” (ibid., p. 66).

Though much debated, these insights do not seem to have penetrated deeply into drug studies. Perhaps, as Hartogsohn suggests, it is the persistent desire (or demand) that drugs have clearly defined effects on all people in all circumstances, which is so fundamental to (psycho)pharmacology, that explains the aversion against accepting all consequences of the concept of set and setting (Hartogsohn 2020, pp. 171-172, 203, 279, referring to DeGrandpre, 2006). Or else it may have to do with that equally strong and modern tendency to believe in a universal, perennial, or common-core mystical experience, “uncontaminated” by culture (see Janz, 1995, or Wulff, 2014, on this debate). Grace Jantzen has shown that the notion of a religious core experience is a “construct” that originated with the Romantic theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1799 and was subsequently adopted by more modern thinkers such as William James (and Aldous Huxley), who then treated it as an empirical thesis with ecumenical ramifications (Jantzen, 1990, p. 69, referring to Schleiermacher, 1799/1958, and James, 1902/1985; also cf. Jantzen, 1995, p. 278f).

I tend to believe that history shows the validity of the contextualist position (or that of a “moderate constructivism,” as Stoeber, 1992, p. 113, called it), acknowledging the unavoidable impact of culture on set and setting as well as later interpretation. Below I will try to demonstrate the existence of a particular idea about what drugs “do” that seems to have been quite prevalent in modern Western culture and closely correlates with a more encompassing worldview (or paradigm, or discourse) commonly called Modernist. In part II of this article, I will elaborate some implications of this observation and propose a feedback model of set and setting that explicitly includes the cultural dimension.

Metaphors

First, it must be said that the view I mean to identify builds on a millennia-old dichotomy in the appreciation of altered states of consciousness as either deceptive or revealing. As Homer already stated in the *Odyssey* (XIX, 562-569), dreams come to humans either through gates of horn, and then reveal truth, or through gates of ivory, in which case they deceive us with lies and illusion. Wallace (1959) showed the same dichotomy in a cross-cultural comparison, but the balance can also shift within cultures. In the West, for example, the Enlightenment became known for rejecting

anything but the rational, but around 1800 Romanticism seriously reappraised what it called “the dream,” referring to all forms of “ex-stasis” (Béguin, 1939/1991). And within any such period, prevailing views can of course be contested by sub- or countercultural alternatives.

Another point is that, contrary to the usual instrumentalization of set and setting, the distinction between negative and positive drug experiences need not be relevant, as an example shows. When existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre took mescaline in 1935, he suffered various horrific hallucinations (Haynes-Curtis, 1995). One of these, as described in his 1938 novel *Nausea*, involved a streetcar seat that refused to remain a seat, “with its red plush, thousands of little red paws in the air, all stiff, little dead paws. This huge belly turns upwards, bleeding, puffed up – ... is not a seat. It could just as well be a dead donkey, swollen by the water and floating along, belly up on a great grey river” (Sartre, 1938, p. 160).² Unable to push things “back into place,” Sartre’s protagonist feels that “Things have broken loose from their names. They are there, grotesque, stubborn, gigantic, and it seems absurd to call them seats or say anything about them at all: I am in the midst of Things, which cannot be named. Alone, wordless, defenseless, they surround me...” (idem). He feels like suffocating, but then: “revelation... suddenly, all at once, the veil was torn away, I understood, I saw... existence suddenly unveiled itself... the diversity of things, their individuality, was only appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving only soft, monstrous masses, in disorder – naked, with a terrifying, obscene nakedness” (ibid., pp. 161–163).

Sartre’s existential disgust sounds like the negative mirror-image of Huxley’s heavenly bliss, but what matters here is not whether they had good or bad trips. The point is that they *both* talked about their experiences in terms of veils being torn away, revealing the “true” (or “Brute,” as Sartre called it) nature of things that they felt was hidden behind surface appearances. Both, that is, used a particular metaphor that seems key to a particular view of what drugs “do”. Such metaphors do not only reflect existing paradigms (Gentner & Grudin, 1985), but also “frame” experiences and ideas in particular ways (Demjén & Semino, 2016, p. 33). I will now add several other examples of drug accounts that make use of similar formulae, hoping that the reader will accept such proof by enumeration.

² This and all subsequent translations of non-English texts are by the author of this article unless otherwise indicated.

Beyond Dada

During the first World War, drugs were assigned a role in both the destructive and constructive parts of the Dadaist program. In 1915, just before starting up the notorious Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Switzerland, Dada front person Hugo Ball (most probably thinking of morphine) stated that “Such poisons must break down the sterility of modern life... in preparation for attrition, humility, and self-rejuvenation” (Ball, 1927, p. 48). Dada’s intended rejuvenation of art, culture, and society was to be modelled on intoxication, youth, and a salutary form of madness: “The childlikeness I mean... springs from the belief in a primal memory, an unrecognizably repressed and buried world liberated in art by uninhibited enthusiasm, in the madhouse, however, by illness” (ibid., p. 111).

Such references to insanity were not uncommon at the time and were meant quite seriously. In his 1922 *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, art historian and psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn linked the creative expression of psychiatric patients to that of children, uneducated adults, and so-called “primitive” peoples to back up his belief in the fundamental originality and authenticity of (the creative products of) all these groups (Prinzhorn, 1922, p. 312f). When he subsequently took mescaline, he saw this conviction confirmed: “Only in this medium of an inexorable cleansing process, carried out in the spirit of Friedrich Nietzsche, could the pathos be mustered in which the breath of the primal creative drive was recognized in the artistic stammering of the incurably insane and delightfully enjoyed for its authenticity” (Prinzhorn, 1927, p. 279). And so, not unlike Huxley, though more given to pathos, mescaline made him “radically reject all pseudo-cultural superstructure” by re-orienting him towards the *Urzeugung*, or “primordial base of life” (ibid., p. 280).

From 1917 to 1948, physician and expressionist poet Gottfried Benn repeatedly advocated the use of (any type of) drugs to destroy the ego. Such a provoked *Ich-Zerfall* (Benn, 1917/1960, p. 52), he argued, would restore contact with a “primitive,” “primal,” and “pre-morbid” (i.e., pre-civilized) state (1943/1959b, pp. 332, 334, 336), which he also designated “placentuous” (1927/1961, p. 14) and “prehistoric” (1948/1958, p. 404). Only by way of such a “regression” (1927/1961, p. 14), based on a “feverish desire to relapse” (1930/1959a, p. 78), could one’s original, “pure,” and “lyrical I” (1927/1961, p. 11) be liberated from the artificial ego that had been built up around it since birth, according to Benn.

And in 1947, surrealist writer and theater creator Antonin Artaud made a similar case for both opiates and peyote. He started out by arguing that opiates offer reality in “its true weight, without loss or exaggeration, beyond the dead weight of all the imbecilic dress-ups and imbecilic spiritual embodiments that literature, poetry, spirit,

philosophy, reason, rites, intelligence, morality and science have added to it century after century" (Artaud, 1947/1970, pp. 134–135). Thus, by bracketing out culture, opiates induce a hyper-lucid understanding of the "real" that Artaud, like many others at the time, also ascribed to children and some non-western peoples. When turning to his experience with peyote among the Tarahumara of Northern Mexico, Artaud claimed more or less the same thing for this drug, that it "returns us to life as if purged... By taking peyote I did not want to enter a new world, but to leave a false world... I turned to peyote to cleanse myself" (ibid., p. 135). The similarities in both wording and conceptualization are remarkable.

Acid Dreams

Turning from Europe to the US and from the first half of the 20th century to the psychedelic counterculture of the 1960s, the words change but the central thrust remains the same. In 1960, having taken LSD, philosopher Alan Watts rephrased the Homeric dichotomy when wondering whether what he was seeing was "drugged" or not: "In other words, was the effect of the LSD in my nervous system the *addition* [my emphasis] to my senses of some chemical screen which distorted all that I saw to preternatural loveliness? Or was its effect rather to *remove* [my emphasis] certain habitual and normal inhibitions of the mind and senses, enabling us to see things as they would appear to us if we were not so chronically repressed?" (Watts, 1960/1973, pp. 144–145). The main difference from earlier days seems to be that the language has been replaced, or supplemented, by new terminologies.

Beat poet Allen Ginsberg spoke of LSD in clearly behaviorist terms as inhibiting conditioned reflexes, a "useful bath in non-conditioning," and an "anti-brainwashing pill" that leaves the user "staring there with an open brain" (Ginsberg, 1971/1974, pp. 118–119). Psychologist Timothy Leary learned from his first psychedelic experience (with psilocybin) that "we have been programmed all these years, that everything we accept as reality is just social fabrication" (Leary, 1983, p. 33). Psychedelic drugs, he argued, make people "see for the first time," without the filters of education (Leary, 1966/1970a, pp. 104–105). After "unplugging the ego" and suspending all "imprints" (i.e., biochemical conditioning), the "uncensored cortex" perceives directly and catches sight of the unlimited freedom outside Plato's cave (Leary, 1962/1966, p. 111; Leary 1965, pp. 440, 443).

And writer Ken Kesey, Leary's West Coast counterpart, saw similar beliefs confirmed when LSD appeared to break the Hells Angels' conditioned reflex to cause may-

hem and made them see (if only temporarily) that love is indeed all that matters (Thompson, 1966/1983, p. 300; Wolfe, 1968/1969, p. 149f). “The true meaning of psychedelics,” Kesey deduced, “is to know all of the conditioned responses of men and then to prank them. This is the surest way to get them to ask questions, and until they ask questions they’re going to remain conditioned robots” (in Wolfe, 1968, p. 31).

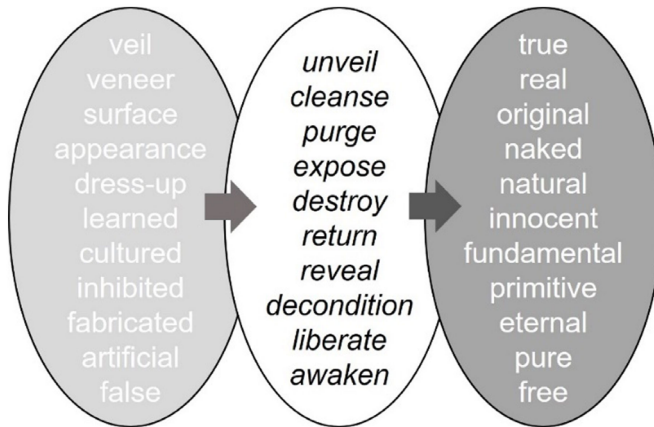
Historians of psychedelia pinpointed other manifestations of the same idea. Jay Stevens noted that “the hippies used LSD as a deconditioning agent” (Stevens, 1987, p. 300) and that its nickname “acid” may have derived from the drug’s chemical name (lysergic-*acid*-diethylamide), but surely also became popular because of the implication that it would burn off, like an acid (or wash away, like a “mind detergent”), the patina of years of social programming and cultural conditioning (ibid., p. xiv). The term “brainwashing,” coined in 1950, could not be used because it already denoted more or less the opposite (Marks, 1979/1991, p. 133). Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain observed that the counterculture’s argot was saturated with talk of “ego death,” “Death of the Mind,” “Grateful Dead,” and other references to the need to die to oneself, or one’s enculturated self, in order to be reborn (Lee & Shlain, 1985/1992, pp. 183, 207). Hartogsohn noted that this “death-rebirth” motif (though already used in the 1910s) came to function as “the signifier of the genuine, bona fide psychedelic experience,” especially since Leary, Metzner, and Alpert insisted on its importance in their 1964 manual *The Psychedelic Experience* (Hartogsohn, 2020, pp. 127–128).

Real and Unreal

In sum, it is fair to say that the above quotes attest to the currency of a recognizable discourse in which drugs are not simply described as triggering a change in consciousness but are valued as a process of revelation. Figure 1 illustrates this narrative using a three-part semantic field. The field on the left contains a selection of terms used to describe (retrospectively) the nature of the pre-drug state, picked from the examples quoted above. They all demonstrate, albeit to varying degrees, a negative attitude vis-à-vis the human condition, expressed in terms that suggest being kept away from the truth and/or reality.

Figure 1

Map of Terms Used by Western Authors and Artists ca. 1915–1970 to Describe (Psychedelic) Drug Experiences



The field on the right contains terms that were used, also retrospectively, to describe the state after taking the drug, – either the drug state itself or the post-drug state following it, the sources are not always clear on this point. Some of these terms may not come across as positive (like “primitive,” which nowadays is only seen as derogatory), but in their original contexts they all implied a desirable improvement over the previous state described on the left. The field in the middle contains some of the verbs used to describe the transition process, some referring negatively to the pre-drug state (such as “expose,” “purge,” and “destroy”), others positively to the post-drug state (like “unveil,” “reveal,” and “awaken”).

This diagram of course does not describe what happens when taking a (psychedelic) drug, but merely how (some) members of a particular culture interpreted their drug experiences. It clearly reflects a worldview and value system in which many of the terms are dialectically dependent on their opposites, since there is no “real” without an “unreal.” It should also be noted that it freezes a discourse that in reality is always fluid and not so easily delineated. Words come and go and, obviously, a term like “deconditioning” is historically dependent on the spread of behaviorist theory. Nonetheless, I hope that it demonstrates that all the above quotes can be subsumed under one and the same “master-narrative,” which, as I will now try to show, closely correlates to Modernism, or at least to a particular strand within it.

Modernism

It is not easy to define a concept like “Modernism.” Apart from a self-conscious break with tradition, there is little consensus on its exact nature (Eysteinnsson, 1990, p. 52), but at least some definitions closely match the worldview expressed in Figure 1. In 1970, for example, literary critic Paul de Man wrote that “Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure” (de Man, 1970, pp. 388–389). Modernism reveals itself, de Man continued, by its “obsession with a *tabula rasa*, with new beginnings,” and “The human figures that epitomize modernity are defined by experiences such as childhood or convalescence, a freshness of perception that results from a slate wiped clear, from the absence of a past that has not yet had time to tarnish the immediacy of perception” (ibid., pp. 392, 396). Philosopher Alain Badiou described Modernist aesthetics in terms of a “passion for the real” and a concomitant obsession with “unmasking” and “purging” all disguises and semblances for the sake of “purification” and finding “the authentic” (Badiou, 1999/2007, pp. 48, 53, 56).

These perspectives on what is real and what is not, and on what past, present, and future have to offer in this regard, closely approximate the narrative of Figure 1, and Huxley’s in particular. One might even presume that de Man would have derived his definition of modernity from a psychedelic experience, or from Huxley’s description thereof, had he not spoken of a “desire.” Then again, the fact that he spoke of a “desire” makes his definition all the more significant in that it suggests that the drug experience actually *delivered* on an already current cultural malaise, diagnosis, and perspective. As with Katz’s Hindu mystical experience, it was pre-programmed and reflected an already existing ontology. The cultural set and setting, in other words, appears to have been conditional for its fulfillment.

Notably, the above definitions of Modernism refer less to a shiny future to be won than to a shiny past to be regained, indicating a primitivist world view. As defined by Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas, primitivism starts from a “discontent of the civilized with civilization” and proclaims “a simpler and less sophisticated life” to be more desirable (Lovejoy & Boas, 1935, p. 7). Although primitivism thus seems to oppose “progress,” it can and often does turn into a program of reform. The difference is that “The primitivist’s way to improve society is not to continue a development already in process or to add to gains which mankind has already won, but to undo the work of history, to scrape off from human life the accretions which have grown upon it” (ibid., p. 17; also see Etherington & Spinner 2024, p. 133). This, too, fits Figure 1. In fact, one

might mistake historian Hayden White's description of the primitivist view of progress for a portrayal of the 1960s counterculture: "[I]n primitivist thought, reform is envisaged rather as a throwing off of a burden that has become too ponderous... [It] simply invites men to be themselves, to give vent to their original, natural, but subsequently repressed desires, to throw off the restraints of civilization and thereby enter into a kingdom that is *naturally* theirs..., is still latently present... and is there for the taking" (White, 1972/1985, p. 171).

Thus defined, Modernism and primitivism clearly show much overlap. One difference may be that Modernism usually refers to a mode of thought that originated in the West and can be delineated in time, while primitivism can be said to be of all times and places. It is only since the 1980s that studies of primitivism restricted their scope to Western dealings with non-Western cultures during (colonial) modernity (Birtwistle, 2000; Etherington & Spinner, 2024; Rhodes, 2008). For our purposes the concept is used in its earlier and broader sense as a cultural critique positing some idealized "Other" (in time or space) as being more natural and capable of regenerating one's own oversophisticated or decadent culture (White, 1976/1985). This is not to deny, of course, that the primitivists' representation of such "Others" was usually quite uninformed and obviously distorted by their own interests (Leighten, 1990).

As to the delineation of Modernism, opinions differ on exactly when it started and ended, but the sources used for Figure 1, all of which date from about 1915 to 1970, seem at least to touch on its core (cf. Boas, 1953; Ferguson, 1991, on the problems of period labels). Depending on one's perspective then, one could speak of a Modernist variety of primitivism or of a primitivist strain within Modernism. As the more specific of the two, "Modernist" may suffice, though not without reiterating that such isms are not homogenous monoliths describing entire cultures. The view expressed in Figure 1 originated with an intellectual and creative vanguard minority that opposed a much more dominant, mainstream, and "progressivist" variety of Modernism that viewed drugs as a remnant of primitive times and/or a gateway to reality loss. It should also be noted that this vanguard consisted primarily of highly cultured white males, reflecting this group's dominance in 20th-century thought (cf. Jay, 2023, pp. 54–55).

Paradise Lost

Minority viewpoint or not, Figure 1 also has roots in earlier ideas and discourses, some of which deserve mention here so as not to oversimplify things and prepare for a more comprehensive view of set and setting. One goes back to Pliny the Elder's "*in vino veritas*," implying that intoxication may cause people to unwittingly reveal truths

(*Historiae naturalis*, XIV, 28). This idea resurfaced when the CIA tested whether LSD could extract information from Soviet spies (Marks, 1979/1991), and, on the other side of another fence, when the radical Weathermen tried to “unmask” possible FBI infiltrators with LSD (Lee & Shlain, 1985/1992, p. 232). In one experiment with artists taking psilocybin, many participants declared feeling “liberated” and recognizing their “true nature” in their drug work (Volmat & Robert, 1961, p. 21). During a similar experiment with LSD, many artists tried to show themselves immune to the drug’s effects, fearing that changes in their work would put their artistic integrity in doubt. As the researcher explained, “General opinion has it that... LSD reveals what really comes from within... and exposes what is only constructed and epigonal” (Hartmann, 1974, pp. 29–30). Despite the differences in set and setting (see ten Berge, 1999, for a discussion), *both* groups apparently believed that they were taking some sort of truth drug.

Truth is also central to Plato’s immensely influential allegory of the cave (*Republic*, 514a–520a), in which it is argued that the everyday world is only a shadow of a “real reality” of pure Ideas, that the “light” of the latter can be known by humans, but that the enlightened are likely to be declared insane by those who stay behind. This view has much in common with that of Figure 1, and it should come as no surprise that Leary referred directly to Plato’s cave to explain what he meant by the “expansion” of consciousness (Leary, 1965, p. 433), nor that some deduced that Plato must have been knowledgeable about hallucinogens (Gordon Wasson, 1961, p. 155).

The Bible provides an equally relevant account of the Fall, which is even easier to read as drug-related. When Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden “fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil,” they lost their innocence and were expelled from the Garden of Eden (*Genesis* 2: 16–17; 3: 4–5). Although some again inferred that this fruit, usually depicted as an apple, must have been some real psychedelic drug (Allegro, 1970/1973, p. 105), the phrase “forbidden fruit” lives on as a metaphor for all illegal and frowned-upon drugs. Mixing the literal with the allegorical, ethnobotanist Terence McKenna has argued for a drug-inspired “archaic revival,” explicitly following the Biblical (and typically primitivist) format of *Paradise*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Paradise Regained* (McKenna, 1992, p. xvi). Indeed, every wish to return to paradise logically implies some “fall from grace,” called lapsarianism by theologians. “Must we then eat again from the tree of knowledge to return to the state of innocence?” Romantic playwright Heinrich von Kleist had one of his protagonists ask, to which he was to be answered: “Most certainly, that is the last chapter of the world’s history” (Kleist, 1810/1883, p. 380). The tricky question, however, was whether undoing the fall would also imply a return to ignorance, and whether that was desirable.

As literary historian Meyer Abrams has pointed out, it was Romanticism that around 1800 ingenuously solved this problem by exchanging the figure of a simple return for that of the spiral, allowing for a “return at a higher level.” This type of return ensures progress all the same, and even gives meaning to all post-lapsarian suffering, because it does not erase but incorporate all the knowledge and experience gained in between (Abrams, 1971, pp. 183–185, 255). Interestingly, the 1960s counterculture demonstrated both the idea of a simple return, say to the land, or some “holy innocence,” and that of a redemptive reunion of innocence *and* experience, naïveté *and* insight, or a “return at a higher level” as it was indeed called by Leary et al. (1964, p. 85).

Recapping Evolution

Another important contribution of Romanticism was its already mentioned reappraisal of “the dream” and the idealization of groups that somehow seemed close to it. In response to the Parisian “hashish club” of the 1840s, for example, painter Eugène Delacroix contrasted ordinary consciousness with the boundless imagination of children, intoxication by opium and hashish, and the artist’s daily inspiration (ten Berge, 1995). Though probably inexperienced with such drugs, Delacroix capitalized on a typically Romantic complex of comparisons that often also included the “madman” and the “primitive.” Today, lumping together such highly diverse groups as all somehow similar in their difference from rational western adults feels both deluded and offensive, even if it was only meant to criticize the nobility or bourgeoisie. In much 19th and 20th century Western thought, however, it was a truism that gained semi-scientific traction through a highly influential variant of evolution theory and, later, through psychoanalysis.

Recapitulation theory held that the development of an individual from conception to adulthood constitutes an accelerated “recapitulation” of its species’ entire evolution from primitive to complex. Declared a “biogenetic law” by biologist Ernst Haeckel (1866, vol. 2, p. 300), this theory was incompatible with Darwinism and refuted by Mendelian genetics, but nevertheless proved very persistent (Bowler, 1988; Gould, 1977, p. 115f; Hopwood, 2015). Part of its appeal lay in the reassuring idea that nothing ever is lost beyond retrieval, another in that it allowed for the equation of prehistoric people, indigenous people, children, the mentally ill, and various other groups as all having underdeveloped, still dream-like “mental lives.” This transfer of a biological theory to psychology was explicitly endorsed by psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud (1913; but compare Gould, 1987) and Carl Jung (1912/1991, p. 23f). It enabled them to see psychiatric disorders in terms of a “regression” down the evolutionary ladder.

Drug experiences fitted this scheme perfectly. In 1927, for example, physicians Frits Fränkel and Ernst Joël argued that with hashish “a dismantling takes place under the eyes of the observer, an exposure, revealing layers of the soul that are directly reminiscent of, and in part even identical with, what we are told about the mental life of primitive peoples” as well as that of children and the insane (Fränkel & Joël, 1927, p. 101). The description of the process (“dismantle,” “expose,” “reveal”) still corresponds well with Figure 1, but the appreciation of the resulting state again varies along the Homeric dichotomy. Of course, describing drug states as regressive and comparable to the mindsets of the insane (as in “model psychosis”) did little to recommend drug use. But those with primitivist leanings reversed the values again and spoke enthusiastically about regaining a childlike innocence or journeying down the evolutionary path.

In 1930, for example, author and artist Jean Cocteau argued that artists resort to opium to compensate for the loss of their childhood imagination (Cocteau, 1930, p. 120), while his colleague René Daumal defended drug use against the surrealists’ official disapproval as “the systematic confrontation... with the mentality called primitive” (Daumal, 1930/1972, p. 155). Leary described his first psychedelic experience in a truly Haeckelian vein as “slipping down the recapitulation tube” to “snake-time, fish-time” and beyond (Leary, 1983, p. 32), positing that psychedelics can even reconnect people to “that original thunderbolt in the Precambrian mud” with which life itself began (Leary, 1963/1964, p. 336). Psychiatrist Richard Hartmann stated that LSD allows users to regress “to an ontogenetically earlier level,” as if “in a time machine” (Hartmann, 1974, pp. 16, 35, 49), and that it may “wind back” millennia of evolution in an “anthropological regression” to a primitive state like that of a Neanderthal (Hartmann, 1992, pp. 33, 37). Next to the progressivist idea of *continuing* evolution on a mental or spiritual plane, the primitivist notion of *regressing* with drugs apparently proved quite attractive as well.

Romanticism

While recognizing the input and interaction of various ideas from various sources, it is also clear that Romanticism provided Modernism with many of its key ingredients. But they would not bear different names if there were no differences, and these include the question of what drugs are thought to “do.” At the risk of oversimplifying things, it could be said that Modernism, as argued above, aimed to remove acquired or imposed layers of artificiality, while Romanticism was more inclined to “bathe” normality in an extraordinary light. Within a three-part diagram like that of Figure 1, it would start out with a discontent with “dreary normality” and *strive* to transform it into

something more exciting, mysterious, and poetic, and therefore “better,” – which is not the same as “more real.”

As Abrams expounded in his celebrated *The Mirror and the Lamp*, the Romantics pictured the (creative) mind not as an inert reflector or mirror of the world (as their predecessors had done), but as a projector or lamp that actively radiates its own light onto the world (Abrams, 1953, pp. 58-59). The Romantic Imagination, with a capital I, had to “modify” vision, in the words of Coleridge, to “strip the veil of familiarity” in Shelley’s, and to “add the charm of novelty to the familiar,” in Hazlitt’s (in *ibid.*, pp. 379, 384, 396). By adding creative vision to ordinary perception, they aimed to re-enchant, poeticize, and “romanticize the world,” to turn drab reality into a magical mysterious fairy-tale. The point was “to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar,” as poet Novalis put it, because “The world must be as I wish it to be” (in Béguin, 1939/1991, pp. 269-270).

Thus described, it seems that the typical Romantic would be quite content with a screen that “distorts everything into loveliness,” as Watts put it. For the typical Modernist, on the other hand, such an attitude would amount to putting on rose-colored spectacles, *adding* filters rather than *removing* them, deceiving oneself with yet another layer of escapist *Ersatz* (cf. Taylor, 1989, p. 458). Outlined like this, however, the distinction is too black-and-white, meant only to emphasize the importance of prior epistemologies. As Abrams noted, Romanticism was also often conceptualized as a project to gain “freshness of sensation,” a “refreshed way of looking” at the world, modelled after the child, still untainted by culture, or the convalescent, also often cited in this context (Abrams, 1971, pp. 377-379; also cf. Bode, 2011, arguing that this issue of “imposition” versus discovery is characteristic of modernity, though negotiated in various ways by various Romantic and Modernist poets). Still, Modernism can be said to differ from Romanticism in that it at least radicalized such aspirations. It lashed out against tradition in ways uncommon to Romanticism and turned a more or less commonplace and rhetorical resort to the child’s innocence of vision into an epistemological argument of existential importance (*ibid.*, pp. 430-431).

The Innocent Eye

The breaking point can be located in Realism and its follow-up Impressionism. Devoted to truth and sincerity, as opposed to creating illusions or moving special effects, these early Modernist art movements pivoted around the notion of the “innocent eye.” The idea was that artists, when aiming for a “truthful” art, should *forget* all they had learned from art classes, tradition, and culture in general. Art critic John Ruskin

coined the phrase in 1857 and defined it as “a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify – as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight” (Ruskin, 1857, p. 6). Impressionist painter Claude Monet famously argued that one should paint not what one thinks one sees, or thinks one ought to see, but what one “really” sees, wishing that “he had been born blind and then had suddenly gained his sight so that he could have begun to paint in this way without knowing what the objects were that he saw before him” (as quoted by Perry, 1927, p. 120).

Again, the thrust of the argument was to leave artificiality behind to retrieve the real, unmediated by the stifling overlays of civilization. In 1934, art critic Roger Fry elaborated that “the conceptual habits, necessary to life, make it very difficult, even for artists, to discover what things look like to an unbiassed eye” (Fry, 1934, pp. 134–135). Surely it is no coincidence that psychologist Havelock Ellis, when describing his experience with peyote in 1898, referred to artists in general and Monet in particular to explain how he now perceived his room (Ellis, 1898, p. 134). And Huxley, in discussing mescaline, not only refers to Ellis, but also appears to paraphrase both him and Fry repeatedly (Huxley, 1954, pp. 5, 15, 18, 25), and even reminisces about a conversation he once had with Fry about precisely this aspect of Monet (Huxley, 1956, p. 44). Next to Blake and Bergson, therefore, his notion of a cleansed perception may be rooted in art history as well.

Building on Abrams’ metaphors, Modernism can be said to seek neither mirror nor lamp, but a lens to cut through the fog and zoom in on an unchanging truth behind fleeting appearances. For some, (psychedelic) drugs seemed to provide just that. While Huxley spoke of removing filters of enculturation, many later proponents of psychedelics drew analogies to optical devices such as the microscope and telescope. Leary even based a drug typology on such analogies, declaring narcotics equivalent to blindfolds, alcohol to dark glasses, marijuana to “the corrective lens which returns [my emphasis] vision to sharp, clear focus,” hashish and moderate doses of mescaline and psilocybin to “microscopes of internal biology,” and LSD to the “electron microscope of psychology” (Leary, 1966/1970b, pp. 281–285; also see Day & Schmetkamp, 2022, on such analogies, including Huxley’s “filter”).

Coda

There are two concluding points I wish to make. The first is that Modernist writers, thinkers, and artists, as a rule, did *not* take drugs to induce new, strange, or exotic experiences, like (some of) their Romantic predecessors, but to inhibit inhibitions. In

simpler terms, they did not expect drugs to *give* them something (useful), but to make them *lose* something (rotten) in order to reveal, or *re-reveal*, something real and true that they felt was lost in the process of civilization. As Leary stated most succinctly, “Men seek chemical liberation to regain what they have lost in the socialization process” (Leary, 1965, p. 440). As a typical Modernist, he blamed nurture for alienating mankind from nature, reality, and truth. Such “modern man in search of a soul,” as Jung (1933) called him, aimed not for pleasure or excitement, but for truth and nothing but the truth. (As I hope to elaborate in the future, Postmodernism can be said to have re-adopted the more pluralist, relativist, and ironic stance of Romanticism, also with respect to drugs.)

My second point is that this is not a matter of mere cultural trappings that drug studies can dismiss or exclude as interference. A “cultural set and setting” such as the Modernist worldview that I have tried to describe, however schematically, is so deeply ingrained that, as a kind of baseline or default position, it cannot but profoundly affect a person’s response to almost anything in life, and especially to experiences as intense and malleable as those provoked by (psychedelic) drugs. Attributing *all* of a drug’s effects to non-drug factors, as the most radical version of the set and setting concept would have it (cf. Hartogsohn, 2020, p. 121, on Leary), would be absurd, but Katz’s idea that pre-experiential conditioning “shapes” all experience undeniably applies to drug experiences as well. Yet this is only one facet of a still larger mechanism that I will try to outline in part II of this article.

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Retour au Réel, Partie I : Retracer un Set et Setting Moderniste dans les Expériences avec Drogues Psychoactives

Jos ten Berge

Résumé: Déclenché par la description de la mescaline par Aldous Huxley en 1954 comme « nettoyant les portes de la perception » et par les réflexions d'Ido Hartogsohn sur le set and setting (cadre et état d'esprit) culturel de l'usage des drogues, cet article vise à démontrer et à délimiter un discours particulier sur les effets des drogues qui ont prévalu dans la culture occidentale du XX^e siècle jusqu'aux années 1960. L'analyse de plusieurs récits de consommation de drogues montre que la thèse centrale de ce discours était que les drogues (psychédéliques) révèlent (ou révèlent à nouveau) une « réalité » fondamentale, voilée par les processus d'enculturation. Cette vision correspond de manière étroite aux définitions du modernisme (primitiviste). L'article soutient que cette correspondance démontre que les expériences avec drogues sont davantage influencées par la culture que ne le suggère l'interprétation habituelle du set and setting. Cela implique aussi que d'autres set and settings culturels peuvent être identifiés dans la culture occidentale,

comme celui du romantisme. Le second article, Retour au réel, Partie II, discute des répercussions de ces observations sur les études sur les drogues et sur la notion de set and setting.

French translation by Antoine Bioy, Ph. D.

Rückkehr zum Realen, Teil I: Auf den Spuren eines modernistischen Sets und Settings bei psychoaktiven Drogenexperimenten

Jos ten Berge

Zusammenfassung: Ausgehend von Aldous Huxleys Beschreibung von Meskalin als „Reinigung der Pforten der Wahrnehmung“ aus dem Jahr 1954 und Ido Hartogsohns Überlegungen zum kulturellen Umfeld und Rahmenbedingungen des Drogenkonsums versucht dieser Artikel, einen bestimmten Diskurs über die Wirkungen von Drogen aufzuzeigen und zu beschreiben, der in der westlichen Kultur des 20. Jahrhunderts mindestens bis in die 1960er Jahre vorherrschte. Wie die Analyse mehrerer Drogenberichte zeigt, bestand der Hauptgedanke dieses Diskurses darin, dass (psychedelische) Drogen eine fundamentale „Realität“ (wieder) offenbaren, die durch Prozesse der Enkulturation verborgen wurde. Diese Sichtweise entspricht dann eng den Definitionen des (primitivistischen) Modernismus. Es wird argumentiert, dass diese Übereinstimmung zeige, dass Drogenerfahrungen stärker von der Kultur geprägt seien, als es die übliche Interpretation von Set und Setting zulässt. Dies impliziert auch, dass andere „kulturelle Sets und Settings“ innerhalb der westlichen Kultur identifiziert werden können, wie beispielsweise die der Romantik. Der zweite Artikel „Rückkehr zum Realen, Teil II“ diskutiert einige der Auswirkungen dieser Beobachtungen auf die Drogenforschung im Allgemeinen und den Begriff von Set und Setting im Besonderen.

German: translation by Eberhard Bauer, Ph. D.

Retorno ao Real, Parte I: Rastreando o Set e Setting Modernista em Experiências com Drogas Psicoativas

Jos ten Berge

Resumo: Estimulado pela descrição de Aldous Huxley em 1954 da mescalina como “desobstruindo as portas da percepção” e pela consideração de Ido Hartoggoohn sobre “o set e setting culturais” em relação ao uso de drogas, este artigo tenta demonstrar e delinear um discurso particular sobre os efeitos das drogas que prevaleceu na cultura ocidental do século 20 até pelo menos a década de 1960. Como demonstrado pela análise de diversos relatos sobre drogas, o principal impulso desse discurso foi que as drogas (psicodélicas) (re)revelam uma “realidade” fundamental que se tornou oculta pelos processos de inculcação. Essa visão é então demonstrada como correspondendo muito proximamente às definições do

Modernismo (primitivista). Argumenta-se que essa correspondência demonstra que as experiências com drogas são mais fortemente informadas pela cultura do que a interpretação usual de set e setting permite. Também implica que outros “sets e settings culturais” podem ser identificados dentro da cultura ocidental, como o do Romantismo. O segundo artigo, “Retorno ao Real, Parte II”, discute algumas das repercussões dessas observações para os estudos sobre drogas em geral e para a noção de set e setting em particular.

Portuguese: translation by Antônio Lima, Ph. D.

Retorno a lo Real, Parte I: Trazando una Actitud (Set) y un Entorno (Setting) Modernistas en Experiencias con Drogas Psicoactivas

Jos ten Berge

Resumen: Desencadenado por la descripción que Aldous Huxley hizo en 1954 de la mescalina como “limpiadora de las puertas de la percepción” y por las ideas de Ido Hartogsohn de la actitud y el entorno culturales en relación con el consumo de drogas, este artículo intenta demostrar y delinear un discurso sobre los efectos de las drogas prevalente en la cultura occidental del siglo XX hasta al menos la década de 1960. Como muestra el análisis de varios recuentos sobre drogas, el enfoque principal de este discurso era que las drogas (psicodélicas) (re)velan una “realidad” fundamental que había sido ocultada por los procesos de enculturación. Se muestra entonces que este punto de vista corresponde cercanamente a las definiciones del Modernismo (primitivista). Se argumenta que esta correspondencia demuestra que las experiencias con las drogas están más fuertemente influenciadas por la cultura que la interpretación habitual de la actitud y entorno. También implica que pueden identificarse otros “actitudes y entornos culturales” dentro de la cultura occidental, como el Romanticismo. El segundo artículo, *Return to the Real: Part II*, analiza algunas de las repercusiones de estas observaciones en los estudios sobre drogas en general y en la noción de actitud y entorno en particular.

Spanish translation by Etzel Cardeña, Ph. D.