

Return to the Real, Part II: Cultural Feedback Loops in Psychoactive Drug Experiences¹

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Abstract. Having identified a typically Modernist view of what (psychedelic) drugs “do” in “Return to the Real, Part I,” this follow-up article discusses some of the implications of this observation for drug studies in general and for the notion of set and setting in particular. A fourfold diagram is proposed in which the cultural set and setting, the individual set and setting, the drug experience, and its articulation back into culture, are seen as interconnected elements of a feedback loop. Different processes within this loop are described and illustrated with historical examples. Since the main effect of (psychedelic) drugs is to amplify, it follows that their use tends to reinforce prior beliefs. And since feedback loops are by definition cyclical and repetitive, their effect on a sociocultural level would have to be conservative too. On this level, transformative effects are rather due to impactful articulations of drug experiences in receptive environments. Finally, this paper suggests that drug studies require a minimal knowledge of cultural history.

Keywords: psychoactive drugs, culture, set and setting, feedback loop, cultural history.

Highlights

- The importance of the cultural set and setting to drug experience necessitates extending the concept of set and setting beyond its immediate and instrumental use.

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- Together, the cultural set and setting, individual set and setting, actual drug experience, and its articulation back into culture constitute a fourfold feedback loop.
- Because of their amplifying effects, (psychedelic) drug experiences tend to reinforce prior (personal and/or cultural) beliefs and world views.
- Being cyclical and repetitive, feedback loops tend to be conservative by nature, at least at the sociocultural level.
- Transformative effects on this level are rare and usually result from high-impact publications that land in fertile cultural soil.

As argued in part I of this article (ten Berge, 2025), Modernism can be seen as a particular “cultural set and setting” that strongly influenced or even “shaped” drug experiences in ways that can be distinguished from other cultural set and settings. Accepting this thesis has implications for the concept of set and setting. It necessitates an explicit inclusion of “culture,” defined as the prevalent ideas and beliefs of a society, or part thereof, about the nature of reality (Hartogsohn, 2017, pp. 2–3). The idea of and search for “naïve,” that is, cultureless users is overly romantic. Drug historian Mike Jay noted numerous reports of people who accidentally ingested psilocybin-containing mushrooms without having a “cultural or religious tradition for their use.” Such people interpreted the resulting “dizziness, gastric disturbance, [and] odd and intrusive thoughts” as the result of accidentally having eaten poisonous fungi (Jay, 2023, pp. 289–290). This does not, however, make them “naïve,” nor their experience “pure” or untouched by culture. It simply means that their culture taught them to beware of poisonous mushrooms and that they responded accordingly.

It follows that antecedent cultural variables, or biases, are not so much an unwanted interference as an important key to studying psychoactive drugs. This inevitable conclusion has been confirmed both cross-culturally, by anthropologists Anthony Wallace (1959) and Marlene Dobkin de Rios (1984), and historically, within one culture. Although Dobkin de Rios argued that visionary content in Western society is “particularly idiosyncratic and nonpatterned” (ibid., p. 218), part I of this article has shown that Western thinking about drugs also includes very particular patterns. But I am not the first historian to underscore the importance of culture in these matters.

Chameleon Drugs

In 1979, Lester Grinspoon and James Bakalar belittled the importance of pharmacology in favor of that of culture by denying the existence of “any such thing as

a psychedelic way of life: a metaphysics, ethics, and social philosophy that emerge irresistibly from the drug experience. Psychedelic drug users can be bellicose like the Yanomamö or peaceable like the Mazatecs; pagans like the Huichols, Christian like the peyote eaters, or vaguely Buddhist like the Beat Generation... When middle-aged, middle-class [Western] people took LSD in the 1950s and early 1960s..., it did not turn them into hippies; often, it even reinforced previous religious and moral convictions" (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979, p. 184). Such variety in response is not exclusive to psychedelics: MacAndrew & Edgerton (1969) painted a similarly diverse picture for alcohol.

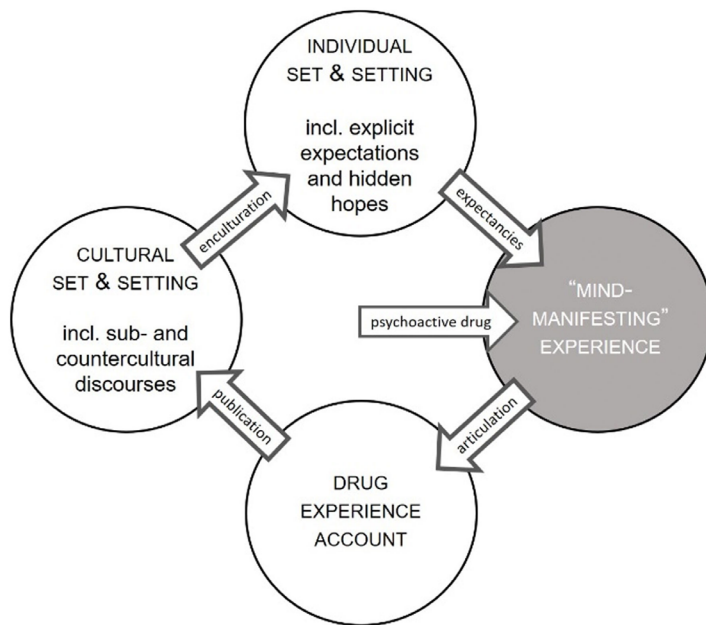
In 1985, Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain concluded that "The love-and-peace vibrations thought to be intrinsic to the psychedelic high were largely an amplified reflection of the unique spirit that animated the mid-1960s, just as the CIA's obsession with LSD-induced anxiety and terror mirrored the Cold War paranoia of the espionage establishment" (Lee & Shlain, 1985/1992, p. 200). They thereupon defined LSD as a "non-specific amplifier of psychic and social processes," catalyzing whatever forces are already active or latent in a given social milieu (*idem*). By 2020, Ido Hartogsohn started out from the idea that LSD is a "psychopharmacological chameleon" that changes "its psychoactive pigmentation in relation to the cultural set and setting into which it is introduced" (Hartogsohn, 2020, p. 7). Three years earlier, he had wittily noted that the designation of such drugs as "psyche-delic" (mind-manifesting), proves doubly apt, as they reflect "not only the mind states of their users, but the mind states of entire societies and cultures" (Hartogsohn, 2017, p. 10).

Feedback Loop

If culture cannot be excluded from the equation, then it should be included with more than a gratuitous mention. Descriptions and graphic depictions of the notion of set and setting often present the drug, the (individual) set, and the (physical, social) setting as the only determinants. With Figure A, I want to emphatically add the cultural dimension (on the left), as well as the articulation of drug experiences into culture (at bottom), for reasons to be explained below. On the downside, I had to conflate "set" and "setting" as factors difficult to distinguish when moving beyond the topical: "Culture" can be ranked both under "set," as something internalized during enculturation, and under "setting," as dependent on one's sociocultural environment. Lacking a suitable alternative, I will often treat "set and setting" as one concept denoted by two words.

Figure A

Proposal for a Four-fold Conceptualization of the Feedback Loop Involved in Psychedelic Use



To start on the right side, (psychedelic) drug experiences, like all intense experiences, can generate an urge to express or “articulate” them, as I prefer to call it in order to mediate between “report,” which is too suggestive of objectivity, and “frame,” which might connote intentional manipulation. Such articulation includes everything from on-the-spot notes to highly crafted accounts intended for public consumption. None of these should be considered completely reliable “recordings.” They can all be subject to all sorts of distortions such as omission, censoring, normalizing, embellishing, elaborating, interpretation, extrapolation, revision, moralizing, and more. This is not the place to disentangle all such “post-production” processes, but it is clear, first, that unusual experiences are inherently susceptible to rationalization and narrative fabrication in order to have them “make sense” (Rosen, 2013, p. 5), second, that this is most often and easily accomplished by connecting to pre-existing and familiar discourses, and third, that all such attempts at translation or transmission result in cultural products.

When such accounts are being “published,” in the widest possible sense of being shared with others, they enter the broader domain of culture, on the left in Figure A. Mere verbal reporting to peers may prove ephemeral, but some accounts impacted the sociocultural realm to such an extent that they have become milestones in cultur-

al history. The relation is clearly reciprocal, with culture (or subculture) providing the frame to accommodate drug accounts, and drug accounts feeding back into culture. And it is to culture that all individuals are “enculturated,” internalizing its ideas, beliefs, paradigms, and discourses (LeVine, 1973, 2001, as cited in Hartogsohn, 2020, p. 189). This is the collective or “cultural” set and setting that, next and inevitably, feeds into the individual set and setting at the top of Figure A, which has long been recognized to be crucial in determining the nature of drug experiences. What it all adds up to, as Hartogsohn (2020, p. 209) noted, is a feedback loop.

Opium’s Iconography

The previous description of this feedback loop is still schematic, but each phase and process can be illustrated by well-documented cases and analyses, also from times long past. Thomas de Quincey, for starters, already pointed out in his 1821 *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* that “If a man ‘whose talk is of oxen’, should become an opium-eater, the probability is, that (if he is not too dull to dream at all) – he will dream about oxen” (de Quincey 1821/1971, p. 33). A true precursor of the concept of “set,” de Quincey insisted on extensive “preliminary confessions” about his background, life history, and deepest inner drives and fears as key to understanding his later opium dreams and nightmares.

Next, de Quincey’s *Confessions*, being the first published articulation of drug experience of its kind, both attracted *and* primed novices. Many later opium users admitted that reading his book had started them off in the expectation of dreams and nightmares as intriguing and sophisticated as his (Hayter, 1968, pp. 40, 105–108). Whether they also received them is hard to say. Some might have, because of the power of suggestion, others might not, being too dull, but after studying the works of several 19th-century opium-using authors, whose talk was certainly not “of oxen,” literary historian Alethea Hayter could not but confirm that opium only “works on what is already there in a man’s mind and memory” (ibid., p. 331). In 1927, John Livingston Lowes provided the still most impressive demonstration of this fact by tracing almost every single word of Coleridge’s (opium-related) poem *Kubla Khan* to sources that the poet had previously read or heard about.

What is in “a man’s mind and memory” is never exclusively personal, and when opium-using authors articulated their experiences, they invariably connected to pre-existing discourses. From the images already available around them, they selected those “which could be made to bear the special emotions of the opium reverie,” Hayter concluded (Hayter, 1968, pp. 84–85). She also observed that, in due time, this

selection process resulted in a recognizable pattern, or “landscape of its own,” identifying an iconography of deserted cities, buried temples, drowned palaces, and petrified landscapes as typical for opium addicts (ibid., pp. 82–83, 336–337). Meyer Abrams certainly had been wrong when positing (in his admittedly somewhat immature undergraduate thesis) that opium provides “access to a new world as different from this as Mars” (Abrams, 1934/1971, p. 4). In fact, it is culture before and after, supplying not only much of the input, but also the repertoire of imagery to choose from post factum.

Similarly, the orientalist connotations of hashish in mid-19th century France derived not from *tetrahydrocannabinol*, but from people’s awareness of its origins coloring, first, their expectations (Mickel, 1969, p. 58f), thereby their experiences, then their articulation of them, and thus subsequent users’ expectations in yet another feedback loop showing only minor changes and variations in detail over time. When, after the turn of the century, smoking opium became popular, it was with a set and setting that emphatically evoked *and* reinforced Asian aesthetics, spirituality, and wisdom (de Liedekerke, 1984, p. 171; ten Berge, 2004). The style of the “psychedelic” rock posters of the 1960s derived not from LSD, but from selecting, out of many possibilities, the formulas of Art Nouveau and adapting them in such a way that they could, to paraphrase Hayter, bear the weight of the special emotions of tripping. Again, it was culture on both the input and the output sides, with the drug itself having at most a modulating influence.

Pygmalion

Within the proposed feedback loop, relating the individual set back to culture may be the hardest gap to bridge for researchers. It involves distinguishing the personal from the cultural, which is no easy task. The case of Hans Prinzhorn, already mentioned in part I (ten Berge, 2025), illustrates some of the possibilities. Prinzhorn’s belief in the higher authenticity of the artistry of the insane clearly stemmed from expressionist circles to which he was eager to belong and whose aesthetics he wanted to anchor in science and expand upon. After writing his book, the “model psychosis” triggered by mescaline seems to have confirmed and reinforced his already established conviction that insanity approximates the primordial. As one Prinzhorn-expert explained it, the wish fathered *and* intensified the thought, with mescaline functioning as a catalyst of self-suggestion (Röske, 1995, p. 194).

Equally interesting, Prinzhorn’s own protocol notes (in Beringer, 1927, pp. 129–144) present a rather disjointed variety of impressions without making any claim to particular insights or the artistry of the insane. His published account of it, however, writ-

ten many years later, presents a compelling drama of revelation (Röske, 1995, p. 189). Possibly he needed some time to decide on what his drug experience meant or how to make it “fit.” On the other hand, claims of revelation and inspiration are rarely exclusively descriptive. “Through the idea of inspiration the communication gains in authority, and the person who communicates it is relieved of the burden of responsibility,” as one psychoanalyst of the arts remarked (Kris, 1952/1964, p. 294, also cf. Jantzen, 1995, p. 168f). Revelations turn theories and opinions into “felt” truths. In retrospect, it seems impossible to say whether mescaline did indeed confirm Prinzhorn in his earlier beliefs, or whether he only framed or reframed it this way later on to make it serve this purpose. In the terms of Figure A, he appears to have intentionally widened one gap, between his experience and his account of it, in order to bridge another one, between himself and the circles that he wanted to impress. The point being that such possibilities become apparent only when taking into account *all* the phases involved in the loop, rather than just one.

Sartre’s case, also described in part I, seems different. In him, mescaline catalyzed a deep-seated fear of “the failure of the power of words to control reality” (Haynes-Curtis, 1995, p. 91), but it seems farfetched to relate this fear to a larger, cultural anxiety about language losing its function (though not impossible, given the contemporary fascination with the absurd). In Huxley’s case, most of the insights that he credited to mescaline in 1954 were clearly anticipated by his long-standing fascination with mysticism. His sizeable anthology on *The Perennial Philosophy* of 1945 was already focused on demonstrating unity behind the variety of religious experience, and the only really “new” idea in his post-drug worldview was that drugs could open up these realms, which he had always denied before (Jay, 2023, p. 293). But Huxley’s search for a common core in mystical experience was far from new. In fact, he was a relative latecomer in a tradition that soared from the 1890s well into the 20th century, playing a major role in the arrival of abstract art, for example (Tuchman, 1986).

Psychedelic drugs indeed present “a fascinating case of the Pygmalion effect,” as it was called by Hartogsohn (2020, p. 203). They can make ideas “come alive” and “come true” in ways that feel overwhelmingly “real.” But the ideas were there already. They spring from direct suggestion (by a guide, or shaman for example), from topical expectations (provided by an experiment leader, or, before that, by one’s peers), or from much deeper down a person’s biography and world view that inevitably developed in constant interaction with culture. The line may not be easy to draw, but each individual “set” undeniably *also* stems in large part from the cultural “setting” in which the person grew up and/or chose to belong.

Boosting Change

But both de Quincey and Huxley clearly set something in motion, while Prinzhorn and Sartre did not, or not to a much noticeable extent. The different impacts of their accounts can be attributed to many factors ranging from language, medium, and circulation to perceived credibility and fertile landing grounds. Prinzhorn published his account in a not widely read German magazine, Sartre effectively hid the drug connection in a novel. De Quincey and Huxley on the other hand can be said to have started a new loop, or at least to have redirected an existing one. The point, however, is that they managed to do so *not* primarily because they had unique and inspiring drug experiences, but because they sent an inspiring account of it into a receptive culture where it began to reverberate.

The process is illustrated most dramatically by ethnomycologist Robert Gordon Wasson's trailblazing article "Seeking the Magic Mushroom" in the May 1957 issue of *Life* magazine. In it he introduced the idea of a prehistoric mushroom cult at the base of the world's religions that had somehow been preserved among indigenous Mexicans. This was not what the shaman who gave him the mushroom had told him or believed herself (Jay, 2023, p. 290), but what he wanted to believe it to be and what many readers were willing to accept. The existing cultural set and setting took a hit, and a new feedback loop splintered from it. Quite suddenly, an age-old and culturally deeply ingrained fear for poisonous fungi gave way to a run for magic mushrooms, at least among those susceptible to the message, and started reproducing itself. As Jay noted, this sudden switch in expectation, experience, and interpretation strongly confirms Becker's theory that drug experiences must be both "taught" and "learned" (ibid, p. 289, referring to Becker, 1953).

An even stronger catalyst was Huxley's 1954 essay *The Doors of Perception*. Its impact was to reorient the expectations of countless readers away from model psychosis towards psychedelic or mystical experience. As drug historian Steven Novak observed, "Once Huxley and [his friend and philosopher Gerald] Heard had popularized their psychedelic interpretation, self-selected volunteers arrived primed to have a *Doors of Perception* experience" (Novak, 1993, pp. 109-110). The psychiatrists, therapists, and researchers to whom they arrived were often also inspired by Huxley (ibid., p. 94), which further stimulated the psychedelic set and setting because, as one of them noted, "under LSD the fondest theories of the therapist are confirmed by his patient" (Cohen, 1964, pp. 182-183). The next stimulus came from Leary and his associates who insisted not only on the indispensability of their own LSD "manual," but also on first

reading Huxley, Watts, and Gordon Wasson for the right set to ensure transcendental success (Leary et al., 1964, p. 105 and *passim*).

A final telling example was catalyzed in a more diffused way, in the late 1960s, by horror stories in the press. “The public’s concern about the young and disapproval of drugs made it eager to hear about drug dangers, so the media featured evidence of such dangers, which fueled the public’s alarm anxiety and further stimulated its interest in such stories,” sociologists Roy Baumeister and Kathleen Placidi observed (1983, p. 39). Not unlike the earlier loop that revolved around model psychosis, scare stories about murder, suicide, genetic damage, and psychosis worked their way into the expectations of (new) users, increasing the number of bad trips, further increasing anxiety and creating even more bad trips. This, in turn, caused users in the early 1970s to avoid risk and take smaller doses to ensure a “good time,” gradually changing the “set” emphasis from existential self-discovery to pragmatic hedonism. And because LSD is not very well suited to this later purpose, it eventually fell out of favor (*ibid.*, pp. 45–47, 53; also cf. Bunce, 1979). This particular loop apparently led to its own demise.

Focusing on the 1960s, Hartogsohn called LSD a strange chameleon indeed, “because its modulation fed back into its environment in a feedback loop, meaning that society also changed its colors in response to it” (Hartogsohn, 2020, p. 209). The 1970s demonstrated the same process in a very different manner. And in still other times, without talented influencers to plant the seeds *and* a ready-made (sub- or counter-) culture to serve as fertile soil, not much happened on sociocultural levels at all. Which goes to say that, without culture on both the sending and receiving ends, the medium remains deafeningly silent. It is only natural that revolutionary changes attract most attention, but the amazing stories of new or redirected loops should not be allowed to obscure the more basic general pattern.

Amplifiers

Feedback loops are by definition cyclic and repetitive. The loop shown in Figure A thus seems to function as an echo chamber for bias confirmation, with the drug in the role of amplifier. Indeed, an inventory of the main verbs by which drug historians have characterized the effect of psychedelic drugs shows remarkable agreement. Such drugs “reinforce” (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979, p. 184), “catalyze” and “amplify” (Lee & Shlain, 1985/1992, p. 200), “reflect” (Hartogsohn, 2017, p. 10), “magnify and amplify” (Hartogsohn, 2020, p. 10), and “confirm” (Jay, 2023, p. 82). As early as 1860, poet Charles Baudelaire spoke of hashish as “a magnifying mirror” (Baudelaire, 1860/1961,

p. 109), and I have also come across “intensify,” “enhance,” “exaggerate,” “accelerate,” “crystallize,” “radicalize,” and similar verbs indicating more or less the same process.

In 2020, Hartogsohn spoke of non-specific “amplification” as “the psychedelic core fundamental,” composed by suggestibility and intensity. All of these words are inherently related, he argues, “because it is through amplification and magnification that things are manifested or revealed (as in the often-repeated simile of psychedelic drugs as microscopes or telescopes); and it is through suggestibility that they are magnified or amplified” (Hartogsohn, 2020, pp. 209–201; also see part I of this article on the analogies with optical devices). What psychedelic drugs have in common, he concluded, is “their ability to induce experiences that people interpret as highly meaningful,” and this, he thought, could explain their effectiveness in therapy, conveying spirituality, and boosting creativity (ibid., pp. 210–211). This last remark may very well be true, but also distracts from the larger picture that I am trying to bring into focus.

Perhaps a proverbial elephant in the room, this larger picture does not look very transformative. In fact, with amplification or reinforcement as the main mechanism, the whole process appears quite conservative and at odds with the often-heard idea that psychedelics can summon new insights, sudden conversion, and radical transformation. Such insights, conversions, and transformations, however, may not be as new, sudden, or radical as they are claimed to be. Many of them could be “pre-programmed,” with the drug acting (only) as a disinhibiting catalyst, amplifying them to an extent that cannot be ignored. Admittedly, this can be difficult to prove if previous sentiments went unarticulated or even remained subliminal, but over and against the pitfalls of wishful thinking and circular reasoning, there are many relatively clear cases (Prinzhorn, Sartre, Huxley) that confirm that drugs deliver not only on direct suggestion, but also on long-standing private hopes, beliefs, convictions, and fears.

As philosopher Steven Katz noted with respect to (non-drug) mysticism, beliefs first shape the experience and then, as a rule, the experience reaffirms and strengthens those beliefs (Katz, 1978, pp. 35, 59). He spoke of “a dialectic that oscillates between the innovative and traditional,” but that ultimately “maintains,” “reinforces, even exaggerates” canonical authority by (only) “stretching” the truth (Katz, 1983, pp. 3–4, 30; also see Janz, 1995, pp. 85, 91). Also, heresy, by definition, does not transcend tradition but *responds* to it. None of this makes the claimed feelings of insights, conversions, or transformations any less “real,” but it does return them to their contexts and make them less surprising in hindsight. At the same time, it seems to reduce the prospects for both therapy and brainwashing.

Truths

Figure A is supposed to represent a mechanism that functions regardless of content. In fact, the radical “interpretative flexibility” typical of psychedelic drugs (Hartogsohn, 2020, p. 204) allows for the confirmation of any point of view, whether progressive or conservative, dogmatic or heretic, romantic or modernist. It would indeed be much more surprising, and much more difficult to explain, when drug use turned such dispositions into their opposite. Thus, they can support therapy, spiritualism, and creativity, but also anchor, entrench, and radicalize every conceivable other agenda, as Hartogsohn also acknowledged (*ibid.*, pp. 251–254; see also Marks, 1979/1991; Pace & Devenot, 2021; Piper, 2015; Toy, 1980). Toy, 1980; Earlier, anthropologist Dobkin de Rios already somewhat reluctantly admitted that “hallucinogens appear to have been used by regional religious and political leaders for control of political, psychological, and social arenas,” to “ensure conformity,” and even to foster an ethos of combat and violence (Dobkin de Rios, 1984, pp. 16, 213).

Psychedelic drugs can confirm just about any belief, but the “truths” thus revealed do not stand *ipso facto*. In fact, using psychedelic experiences as (experiential) evidence for a theory or opinion appears to have been psychedelia’s greatest fallacy (as Katz, 1978, argued in connection with mystical experience). The verb “confirm” does indeed need a disclaimer in this respect. Psychedelic drugs “confirm” in a strongly emotional, or “noetic” way, as William James (1902/1985, p. 380) called it, but not in any other, more ordinary sense of the word. Huxley came to believe that psychedelic experience confirmed the reality of reincarnation and extrasensory perception (Novak, 1997, p. 100), but no matter how strongly felt, affective appeals to strong feelings of truth are not the kind of evidence that convinces scientists.

Another telling example is provided by LSD-researcher Stanislav Grof, who noted many reports on “ancestral memories, elements of the collective unconscious, and evolutionary experiences accompanied by phylogenetic flashbacks”; also, he insisted, from “unsophisticated subjects who know nothing about Ernst Haeckel’s biogenetic law” or Jungian theory (Grof, 1976, pp. 107, 161; see part I of this article on Haeckel). From this, he (hesitantly) deduced such theories to be true after all (*ibid.*, pp. 167, 172, 212, 241), but this conclusion seems unwarranted. Haeckel’s law, for one, was refuted by genetics, which works by variation and selection, not accumulation, making any retrieval or “recapitulation” of phylogenetic evolution a logical impossibility. Rather than shelving Darwin and Mendel, it is more reasonable to return to Grof’s earlier position and assume that such experiences do reflect theories that trickled down the popular imagination in some diluted (and sometimes untraceable) form, and then were pos-

sibly amplified and elaborated again by the mind on drugs. Such experiences prove *not* the theory, but the theory's dissemination into culture.

As LSD-therapist Sidney Cohen noted already in the mid-1960s, "The LSD state is, in essence, one of greatly heightened suggestibility" (Cohen, 1965, p. 85). When judgmental attitudes are relaxed, the observing and doubting ego is suspended, and everything takes on a "realer than real" significance, an overwhelming faith in the truth and reality of experience can turn any conjecture into certainty (ibid., pp. 190, 215; also Carhart-Harris et al., 2015). And so, inevitably, reports of meaningful insight can be met with stories of pathetic absurdity, such as that of the aspiring mystic on hashish who, in 1896, approached poet William Butler Yeats "with a piece of paper on which he had drawn a circle with a dot in it, and pointing at it with his finger he cried out, 'God, God!'" (Yeats, 1961, p. 282). Or the art gallery owner who was offered a drawing with nothing but a wobbly triangle on it. When met with reserve, the artist became angry, arguing that it represented the sum total of all his previous work, that he had frantically searched for it, and that "it" had revealed itself to him when on LSD (Hartmann, 1974, p. 222).

Loop Recognition

Regardless of the quality of some results, the mechanisms as such cannot be dismissed. Much has been gained already from recognizing the role of set and setting. In retrospect, however, Leary's assertion that set and setting account for "ninety-nine percent (Leary, 1962/1966, p. 115) or even "all" (Leary & Alpert, 1962, p. xii) of the specific response to psilocybin was overly optimistic about the malleability of these drugs. It served to drive home his point about the importance of a guide, topical suggestions, and environmental cues, but turned too much of a blind eye to still other non-drug factors that prove much more viscous, such as a person's background and worldview, and the cultural set and setting that both users and researchers inevitably bring along. Cross-cultural comparison had already pointed in this direction, but perhaps Western Modernism's insistence on its own truths blinded many researchers to the particularity of their own worldview.

In their 1966 *Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, for example, psychologists Robert Masters and Jean Houston professed to offer nothing but phenomenology, yet also stated unequivocally that LSD can provide "a novel ability to separate the false from the true, the authentic from the inauthentic, and the essential from the mountainous accumulations of superfluities" (Masters & Houston, 1966, p. 185). Today, such a statement seems typical of the Modernist desire for a "return to the real," a desire that they

probably shared with and/or conveyed to those they prepared for, guided through, and subsequently interviewed about LSD in yet another perfect loop. Similarly, Grof noted that, in a certain phase of the LSD experience, “a simple and uncomplicated way of life in close contact with nature appears to be the most desirable mode of existence” (Grof, 1976, p. 139), as if echoing a definition of primitivism. As Katz vehemently insisted, “There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences” (Katz, 1978, p. 26). And if there were, they would still have to be mediated to become be accessible to others. It makes one wonder how many researchers were – or indeed still are – inspired by Modernist, primitivist, Huxleyan, ecumenical, Platonist, lapsarian, or even Haeckelian dispositions. Or would be able to recognize such dispositions in others as well as themselves.

The identification in part I of what I have called the Modernist disposition, world-view, or paradigm hopefully leads to a stronger awareness of both the role of culture in drug experiences (Figure 1, in ten Berge, 2025) and the feedback and looping mechanisms involved (Figure A). With respect to their “mind-manifesting” qualities, drug experiences show the human mind to be both an individual *and* an enculturated entity. And following up on Leary, Alpert, and Metzner’s distinction between immediate and long-range set (1964, p. 103), drug experiences can be said to manifest (and magnify) both the user’s personal set, ranging from topical expectations to more profound and possibly nonconscious expectancies, *and* the collective set or culture that helped shape such expectations and expectancies. Yet this may still be too binary. A whole range of levels of mediation needs to be defined and articulated.

The import of culture, furthermore, extends beyond both set and experience into the phase of articulation, when drug experiences are cast into forms that must fit existing discourses to be intelligible. Here they can be made to serve many purposes, from pleasing one’s therapist to flouting authority, and from entrenching prior beliefs to boosting new ones with the aura of revelation. Sometimes it seems that the “mind-manifesting” or revelatory moment does indeed occur only in the post-drug phase, in trying to *make* the experience “mean” something. Either way, it is these articulations only that feed back into culture and other people’s expectations, provided they have sufficient impact and a fertile soil to fall on.

Together, all four phases constitute a loop that can be said to have a life of its own. A loop can be born, grow, accelerate, peak, meet obstacles, slow down, take a turn, split up, converge, or die, or go underground to re-surface at some other time. It can have a stable and uneventful, even invisible, life because of widespread consensus or within the care and protection of a subcultural niche. It can coexist, compete, and blend with other loops in various social domains such as politics, spirituality, cre-

ativity, and technology (as summarized by Hartogsohn, 2020, pp. 216–222), as well as with older loops from the past, such as the Romantic drug discourse that may have been dethroned by the Modernist one, but never completely disappeared.

Cultural Conditioning

For a long time, considerations such as the above have received little attention within the field of drug studies. The reasons for this may be obvious but are no excuse. Pharmacology's preference for "pure" effects, without the "contaminating effects of cultural suggestion" (Wallace, 1959, p. 67), for example, appears to be a mirage in this field. Excluding culture, or "nurture," as "noise" presents a near-impossibility. This can be regretted, but not ignored, and when embraced, could yield greater understanding. The amazingly high levels of preconditioning, suggestibility, volunteer bias, and feedback would render experimental data quite worthless in "normal" science (Novak, 1993, pp. 109–110), but when studying psychoactive drugs these factors can or should constitute the primary object of study. It is certainly worth investigating whether drug-induced heightened suggestibility (Carhart-Harris et al., 2015) plus drug-induced meaning-enhancement (Hartogsohn, 2018) equals an active super-placebo, as has been suggested with both hope and concern (Dupuis & Veissière, 2022). And whether this picture of an essentially empty amplifier is indeed the whole picture.

Another obstacle may be that the concept of "set and setting" starts to blur by the inclusion of culture, not only because culture fits both terms, but also because the individual self can hardly be delineated from the enculturated self. Thus, this most promising instrument gets blunted while trying to sharpen it and needs further refining or redefinition. Third, factoring in something as diffuse and unmeasurable as "culture" can cause complications beyond the control of any researcher, but then again, ignoring it can also cause serious distortion. Finally, one might object that it promotes a relativist view of knowledge, but this is decidedly untrue insofar as it offers a more inclusive view of various truth-claiming discourses.

The gain in adopting a mechanism-diagram like Figure A is that it does not invalidate a content-diagram like Figure 1 (in ten Berge, 2025) but incorporates and historicizes it as one particular "cultural set and setting" among many. And as Lovejoy noted long ago, "the utility of a belief and its validity are independent variables; and erroneous hypotheses are often avenues to truth" (Lovejoy, 1936/1974, p. 333). The theory of the innocent eye may have been a myth, because *seeing* does not come before and cannot be disentangled from *interpreting* (Gombrich, 1960/1991, pp. 246–278; Steer, 1989; Lou, 2018), but as a colleague of mine said of the Impressionist artists'

belief in it: “*forgetting* represented a fantastic wish, the very extravagance, the impossibility of which, serves to underline the strength of the goal of renewal... The dream of innocence was both a rhetorical strategy, an index of serious commitment, and a principle of considerable motivating power” (Isaacson, 1994, p. 435). Myth or not, its impact on art history was immense, not only in getting Impressionism accepted, but also in the more important sense of returning to art a sense of purpose and opening doors for subsequent developments.

Much the same can be said about psychedelia. If, in retrospect, some, or most, of its assumptions proved erroneous and some, or most, of its goals unattainable, this does not alter its historical impact or the perspectives that it opened. Its recognition of the importance of set and setting, for one, represents a major contribution to our understanding of the workings of psychoactive drugs. Half a century later we can also recognize how deeply rooted psychedelia was in a particular worldview and how limited its sense of set and setting still was. Although cross-cultural differences are usually acknowledged, albeit somewhat gratuitously, the cultural components of set and setting within Western culture itself seem to have gone largely unnoticed by those participating in it. It is easy enough to inquire after concrete expectations such as a “*Doors of Perception* experience” to trace expectations, but more general and profound sentiments like a primitivist aversion to artificiality or a Modernist longing for purity are less easily recognized. And so, if the 1960s believed that LSD “allowed you an objective look at your own conditioning” (Stevens, 1987, p. 246), then cultural history can maybe help us navigate our collective conditionings.

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Retour au Réel, Partie II : Boucles de Rétroaction Culturelle dans les Expériences avec Drogues Psychoactives

Jos ten Berge

Résumé: Ayant identifié une vision typiquement moderniste de ce que « font » les drogues (psychédéliques) dans Retour au réel, Partie I, cet article de suivi discute certaines implications de cette observation pour les études sur les drogues et pour la notion de set and setting. Un schéma en quatre volets est proposé : set and setting culturel, set and setting individuel, l'expérience de la drogue et son articulation avec la culture sont considérés comme des éléments interconnectés d'une boucle de rétroaction. Différents processus dans cette boucle sont décrits et illustrés par des exemples historiques. Puisque l'effet principal des drogues

(psychédéliques) est d'amplifier, leur usage tend à renforcer les croyances préexistantes. Les boucles de rétroaction étant par définition cycliques et répétitives, leur effet au niveau socioculturel doit être également conservateur. Les transformations surviennent surtout lorsque des expériences de drogues sont articulées de manière marquante dans des environnements réceptifs. Enfin, il est suggéré que les études sur les drogues nécessitent une connaissance minimale de l'histoire culturelle.

French translation by Antoine Bioy, Ph. D.

Rückkehr zum Realen, Teil II: Kulturelle Feedbackschleifen bei psychoaktiven Drogenerfahrungen

Jos ten Berge

Zusammenfassung. Nachdem in „Rückkehr zum Realen, Teil I“ eine typisch modernistische Sichtweise dessen identifiziert wurde, was (psychedelische) Drogen „bewirken“, werden in diesem Folgeartikel einige der Implikationen dieser Beobachtung für die Drogenforschung im Allgemeinen und für den Begriff von Set und Setting im Besonderen diskutiert. Es wird ein viergliedriges Diagramm vorgeschlagen, in dem das kulturelle Set und Setting, das individuelle Set und Setting, die Drogenerfahrung und ihre Rückkopplung in die Kultur als miteinander verbundene Elemente einer Rückkopplungsschleife betrachtet werden. Verschiedene Prozesse innerhalb dieser Schleife werden beschrieben und anhand historischer Beispiele veranschaulicht. Da die Hauptwirkung von (psychedelischen) Drogen in einer Verstärkung besteht, folgt daraus, dass ihr Konsum dazu neigt, bereits bestehende Überzeugungen zu verstärken. Und da Rückkopplungsschleifen per Definition zyklisch und repetitiv sind, müsste ihre Wirkung auf soziokultureller Ebene ebenfalls konservativ sein. Auf dieser Ebene sind transformative Effekte eher auf wirkungsvolle Beschreibungen von Drogenerfahrungen in empfänglichen Umgebungen zurückzuführen. Abschließend kommt dieser Artikel zum Schluss, dass Drogenstudien ein Mindestmaß an Kenntnissen der Kulturgeschichte erfordern.

German translation by Eberhard Bauer, Ph. D.

Retorno ao Real, Parte II: Feedback-Loop Cultural em Experiências com Drogas Psicoativas

Jos ten Berge

Resumo: Tendo identificado em “Return to the Real, Part I” uma visão tipicamente modernista do que as drogas (psicodélicas) “fazem”, este artigo complementar discute algumas das implicações dessa observação para os estudos sobre drogas em geral e para a noção de set e setting em particular. Propõe-se um diagrama quádruplo no qual o set e setting culturais, o set e setting individuais, a experiência da droga

e sua articulação de volta à cultura são vistos como elementos interconectados em feedback-loop. Diferentes processos dentro desse loop são descritos e ilustrados com exemplos históricos. Como o principal efeito das drogas (psicodélicas) é amplificar, segue-se que seu uso tende a reforçar crenças anteriores. Uma vez que feedback-loops são, por definição, cíclicos e repetitivos, seu efeito em um nível sociocultural também teria que ser conservador. Nesse nível, os efeitos transformadores seriam devidos a articulações impactantes de experiências com drogas em ambientes receptivos. Finalmente, este artigo sugere que os estudos sobre drogas requerem um conhecimento mínimo de história cultural.

Portuguese translation by Antônio Lima, Ph. D.

Retorno a lo Real, Parte II: Circuitos Culturales Retroactivos en las Experiencias con Drogas Psicoactivas

Jos ten Berge

Resumen. Tras identificar una visión típicamente modernista de lo que “hacen” las drogas (psicodélicas) en *Retorno a lo Real: Parte I*, este artículo analiza algunas de las implicaciones de esta observación para el estudio de las drogas en general y la noción de actitud y entorno en particular. Se propone un diagrama cuádruple en el que la actitud y el entorno culturales, la actitud y el entorno individuales, la experiencia de la droga, y su articulación con la cultura son elementos interconectados en un circuito de retroalimentación. Se describen diferentes procesos dentro de este lazo ilustrados con ejemplos históricos. Ya que el principal efecto de las drogas (psicodélicas) es amplificar, se deduce que su consumo tiende a reforzar las creencias previas. Y ya que los circuitos de retroalimentación son por definición cíclicos y repetitivos, su efecto a nivel sociocultural también tendría que ser conservador. A este nivel, los efectos transformadores se deben más bien a las articulaciones impactantes de las experiencias con drogas en entornos receptivos. Por último, este trabajo sugiere que los estudios sobre drogas requieren un conocimiento mínimo de la historia cultural.

Spanish translation by Etzel Cardeña, Ph. D.