

**The Techno-Appropriation of LSD:**  
**A Theoretical Approach to Psychedelics as New Media**

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## Introduction: LSD's Significance in Counterculture

In Fred Turner's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Turner narrates the techno-libertarian dream that enacted the uprise of Silicon Valley, grounded in a discourse that espoused "the rise of a new 'digital generation' — playful, self-sufficient, psychologically whole — and it would see that generation gather, like the Net itself, into collaborative networks of independent peers." In conceptualizing the advent of the center of technological engagement that is the Silicon Valley, Turner brings to light the "New Communalists" as the harbingers of this change: In an effort to enact social change at the time of extreme political divide during the Vietnam War, these young people "turned away from political action and toward technology and transformation of consciousness", which politically entailed a vocal necessity, "to deregulate the technology industries that were ostensibly leading the transformation".<sup>1</sup>

While Turner's story primarily follows the transitional work of Stewart Brand, another important actor in this techno-utopian performance is Timothy Leary: "the Pied Piper of [psychedelics] experimentation — the counterculture legend" at the heart of the movement. Through a well-chronicled series of experiments with LSD, Leary sought to "expand the limits of humane experience and thought through consciousness-expanding drugs".<sup>2</sup> By espousing this message of "opening one's mind", using LSD almost as a metaphor of such, he symbolized the totality of the counterculture movement, in an effort to act against the "establishment." Leary, just like Brand, was a part of the movement that spurred the establishment of cyberculture.

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, Fred. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich, Jennifer. *The Timothy Leary Project: Inside the Great Counterculture Experiment* (Abrams, 2018), 2,4.

Now, in a time where the Silicon Valley has successfully become the forefront representation of techno-utopianism and capitalistic gain, micro-dosing LSD has become a hot phenomenon as a method to enhance “productivity and creativity”. In an attempt to “feel a little bit of an energy lift, a little bit of insight, but not so much that you are tripping,” the concept of micro-dosing LSD for the purpose of work seems to twist what was initially conceived of LSD’s use in the eyes of the counterculture movement: Instead of using LSD **against** the establishment, it has become a means of productively working **with** the establishment; a tool for the machine.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, this transition begs the question: What is LSD’s political role in the technological change present in the Silicon Valley, and how has this role changed? In an attempt to answer this question, I ground this paper in an understanding of LSD as a new media form, seeking to thread historical movements with theoretical concepts to narrate: one, the significance of LSD as new media in the development of technology; and two, the appropriation of LSD as tool for techno-capitalism. While Turner’s narrative “does not tell the story of a countercultural movement whose ideals and practices were appropriated by the forces of capital, technology, or state”, I consider whether such is actually the case.<sup>4</sup>

### LSD as New Media: The Message and The Aura

Mcluhan’s “Medium is the Message” provides the grounds for a broad generalization in the definition of “media” beyond communications technologies based on the idea that the content

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard, Andrew, and Andrew Leonard. "How LSD Microdosing Became the Hot New Business Trip." Rolling Stone. June 25, 2018. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/how-ld-microdosing-became-the-hot-new-business-trip-64961/>.

<sup>4</sup> Turner, 7.

of any medium is always another medium — “that the personal and social consequences of any medium — that is, of any extension of ourselves — result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. In this way, the totality of social circumstances that arise as a result of the media we produce is its message. In this way, the medium, in itself, is the message, as opposed to its “content”.<sup>5</sup>

In the same vein, Leary viewed LSD as the medium for which, “to transform our concepts of human nature, of human potentialities, of existence... to make use of that fabulous electrical network he carries around in his skull...” It’s to no surprise, then, that Leary not only looked up to McLuhan, but that the two were also friends. In Leary’s autobiography *Flashbacks*, he accounts the lunch where the duo met, in which McLuhan, “urged Leary to promote LSD the way advertisers promoted a product: ‘The new and improved accelerated brain.’”<sup>6</sup> In this way, one can see how both McLuhan and Leary saw LSD not just as a drug, but as a technological force — as a media.

What Leary and McLuhan must have found significant about the potential of LSD as a medium may be understood in what Walter Benjamin considered “aura”. Benjamin’s notion of medium’s aura grounds itself within that medium’s historical, cultural, spatial, and temporal context, that gives it its “unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.”<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin himself, in fact, considered the drugged experience to have that of an auratic

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<sup>5</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Rein, Lisa, and Michael Horowitz. "Timothy Leary and Marshall McLuhan, Turned on and Tuned in." *Boing Boing*. June 05, 2014. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://boingboing.net/2014/06/03/timothy-leary-and-marshall-mcl.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" from *Illuminations*. New York, Schocken Books, 1968, Pgs. 217-251

experience based on his experiences and writings on hashish, in which he describes a sense of, “functional displacement. ... [S]omeone gave me one of Kafka’s books: “Betrachtung.” I read the title. But then the book at once changed into the book-in-the-writer’s-hand, which it becomes for the (perhaps somewhat academic) sculptor who confronts the task of sculpting that particular writer. It immediately became integrated into the sculptural form of my own body...”<sup>8</sup> This depiction paints the drugged experience as that of one that disrupts time and space back to an original form — one that can take its user and an object itself to an authentic space.

While hashish itself is not a psychedelic, the drug seems to mirror that of what Leary saw in LSD: one that has the ability to extend human consciousness beyond physical boundaries. Most importantly, one that could allow its user to disrupt their usual ways of thinking — and thus, one that could disrupt the establishment. This sort of mentality incurred by the use of LSD, I argue, provided the means for the counterculture to incorporate this in its transition to cyberculture.

### Technological Innovation as the Reproduction of Psychedelic Experience

In his unpublished letter in support of Leary after the latter’s imprisonment, McLuhan pitched, “electric technology, by virtue of its immediate relation to our nervous system, [as] itself a sort of inner trip, with drugs playing the role of sub-plot or alternative mode. It may well appear a few years hence that the panic about psychedelic drugs relates less to the chemistry than to the hidden terrors which people feel in the presence of electric technology.”<sup>9</sup> This quote in

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, Walker. *On Hashish*, ch. II (written 15th January 1928 at 3:30pm).

<sup>9</sup> Marshall McLuhan, June 1974 (From a previously unpublished letter).

particular highlights a parallel to what Bruno Latour espouses in “On Technical Mediation”, in which he emphasizes that, “the adjective *modern* does not describe an increased distance between society and technology or their alienation, but a deepened intimacy, a more intricate mesh between the two.”<sup>10</sup> **In a similar vein, I argue that modern conceptions of technology are impregnated with pieces of the psychedelic experience that characterized the counterculture movement.**

LSD’s abilities to liberate the mind, in essence, mapped out the sort of discourse that Leary would take into his techno-utopian visions of the future. Leary would conceptualize his vision of the next step in human evolution through what he called Space Migration, Intelligence Increase, and Life Extension, or “SMI2LE”. In painting the picture of SM2ILE, Leary provides a basis for which we absolutely need space migration to continue our ability to improve and evolve as a human race, and to do so he considered, “A centralized consumer civilization [as] an inevitable evolutionary development.”<sup>11</sup> This free-market mentality parallels most of what Turner cites in the transition from counterculture to cyberculture: a techno-libertarian dream of sorts that would allow for the liberation of the consumer beyond the power of the establishment.

Leary’s conception of the potential of technological went beyond that, however — he envisioned cyberspace, in many ways, to parallel his psychedelic experiences. As a part of his book *Chaos and Counterculture*, Leary characterizes the “brain as a digital transmitter,”

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<sup>10</sup> Latour, Bruno. *On Technical Mediation: The Messenger Lectures on the Evolution of Civilization*, Cornell University, April 1993. Lund, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Flatley, Joseph L. "Silicon Valley's Technolibertarian Dream Was Invented by Timothy Leary." The Outline. February 06, 2017. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://theoutline.com/post/1030/timothy-leary-silicon-valley-technolibertarian?zd=1&zi=zvukvbou>.

highlighting how the personal computer can take its user into what he calls “ScreenLand.” He describes how, “in ScreenLand our right brains are free to imagineer digital dreams, visions, fictions, concoctions, hallucinatory adventures. All these screen scenes are as real as a kick-in-the-pants as far as our brains are concerned. Our brains have no sense organs and no muscles. Our brains command our bodies and send spaceships to the Moon by sending signals in only one linguistic: the quantum language of zeros and ones.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, Leary characterizes this notion of cyberspace as a hallucinogenic performance — as a warping of time, space, and body into a new world. This, in many ways, underlines our current conceptions of cyberspace today: something that disturbs the notions of reality that were usually associated with the physical realm before the digital came about. It’s no wonder, then, that much of human-computer interaction can be analogized to drug-user relationship: as Sherry Turkle explains in *Life on the Screen*, “The computer's holding power is a phenomenon frequently referred to in terms associated with drug addiction. It is striking that the word 'user' is associated mainly with computers and drugs.”<sup>13</sup>

This, I argue, highlights a reproduction of the auratic experience present in psychedelic experiences into technological innovation produced by what is the result of techno-counterculture movement: the Silicon Valley. **In essence, the counterculture movement attempted to reproduce the “functional displacement” effect of drugs such as LSD in the**

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<sup>12</sup> "Chaos & Cyber Culture by Timothy Leary." Goodreads. December 31, 1994. Accessed May 10, 2019. [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/346006.Chaos\\_Cyber\\_Culture](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/346006.Chaos_Cyber_Culture). 22.

<sup>13</sup> Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York, NY: Touchstone Books, 1997.

**development of cyberspace — which, I believe, led to the the social repercussions we see today.**

### Reproduction as the Loss of Aura: LSD as a Tool for Techno-Capitalism

Benjamin analogized his biggest fear to the reproduction of art, to which he highlights, “what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura”.<sup>14</sup> Reproduction, then shatters the authenticity that is present in the initial work’s context — historical, cultural, temporal, spatial. As described before, what was significant about the LSD experience to Leary was its ability to extend human consciousness by distorting narrow notions of time and space — the experience that I will generally call its “distortion effect”. In this way, a parallel can be drawn to the reproduction of LSD’s auratic experience to Benjamin’s argument: In reproducing LSD’s distortion into a new cyber-spatial medium, the former’s aura is suddenly lost. This is what Benjamin described as the “decay of the aura”, that results from, “a perception whose ‘sense of sameness in the world’ has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique.” The distortion effect, in this way, loses all meaning.<sup>15</sup>

The perception of LSD as a medium, then, changes. As a result of the desensitization of its overall effect, the public interest in such — as a means of “hyper-consciousness” or “as a extension of the mind” as Leary had hoped — fades away. It’s use can only be conceptualized in comparison to contemporary conceptions of “use”; that of a techno-capitalist tool for productivity. In this way, the, LSD is appropriated by the Silicon Valley in the form of

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<sup>14</sup> Walter, 209

<sup>15</sup> Walter, 215.



micro-doses, as described at the beginning of this piece. This reflects the fears underlined by Benjamin: Perception is susceptible to change as time goes by, and thus can be easily disturbed in the face of mass reproduction. The “perceivability”, then, of the original understanding of the distortion effect, is easily manipulated by what capitalist notions of production wants.

The historical and social movement of LSD as a medium follows that of much media that have been appropriated as a result of capitalist gain. Thus, in reflection, while Turner may narrate the transition from “counterculture to cyberculture” as not one of capitalist institutional appropriation, I am tentative to agree whether such can actually be the case, given that LSD was not initially meant to be used in the form of a productivity tool. Thus, overall, while I would agree that the values instilled in the counterculture movement made cyberculture what it is today, it seems that the way LSD as media has been performed historically — from that of a tool for counterculture, to that of a tool for techno-capitalism — it seems as though the machine has been able to do more than what the New Communalists intended.

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