

# Surfing the Fractal Wave at the End of History

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This is called Flaking on the Edge of Fractal Uncertainty, or something like that. Anyway, it's just an excuse to catch up with you. I sort of feel like this is the home congregation — or at least the office of the Holy Roman Rota — the congregation of the faith. This is probably the audience where I feel most at home and have the least slack. I've been traveling madly since I was here last May. Mostly it seemed like a tour of the English-speaking world. I went to South Africa, to Australia, to England, back and forth to Hawaii many times. I think traveling really reinforces the impression that we are in the grip of the transcendental attractor at the end of time. It's one thing to stay home and follow it on the internet, but the sense of the planet just exploding... These Australian and South African cities and populations trying to deal with political redefinition, technological onslaught, media onslaught — it's amazing, amazing, very much like Neal Stephenson's vision in *Snow Crash*. I turned 50 since I've been here last year. It feels weasel-wise, although those of you who are ahead of me in time may find it NBD.

What I'd like to talk about is sort of a riff, a soliloquy, a monologue on the adumbrations of Heaven's Gate, since that has a deep, humorous resonance with most people's value systems these days. Actually, my son, who was with me in Mexico in January, who's 19, pushed me to think about these issues before all that, because he's dealing with the culture in a very different way than I am. I listen to his laments and complaints with great interest. So the thing that I thought would be interesting to unpack a little this evening is what I call the "balkanization of epistemology," or what he calls simply the "curse of relativism." This is the idea that you can't tell what's going on anyway, so no matter how squirrely what you think is, it's no squirrellier and no less squirrely than what anybody else thinks. All ideas are somehow on this even footing, including ideas that have taken hundreds of years and the talent of thousands of people to put together, and something somebody just channeled in from Francis Bacon, who's living under Catalina Island in a state of suspended

animation with a troop of Atlantean engineers who are uploading human fetal tissue to who knows where.

This balkanization of epistemology: it's sort of like, if you believed in economic theory, thinking that it would be a good idea if everybody printed their own money; and then to the degree that you had vigor for the use of your printing press, you could run off more and more copies of whatever meme you had invested in, and I suppose these things would compete. In your imagination they would compete, but anybody who's studied economics for ten minutes can tell you that there's something called Gresham's Law, which is that "bad money drives out good money," and I think it's even more true with ideology. Squirrelly ideas drive out ideas of depth and substance. There's a kind of danger of being gently, without quite noticing what's going on, ushered into a world of increasingly more cartoon-like ontological and epistemological fantasies about what's going on, or what's partially going on.

To my mind, conspiracy theory is a kind of flight from facing the fact that probably nobody is in charge. You want a vertiginous vision that'll stand your hair on end? How about that! It's not the Catholic Church, not the World Bank, not the Jews, not the Communist Party — nobody is in charge! I was in London in October, at a conference that these shaved, pierced and scarified deconstructive contemporary artists were having near Buckingham Palace. They put me in a hotel in Vincent Square, so I had to walk back through Whitehall late at night, which is where the Ministry of Defence and all the backchannel, super-secret British ministries are, and the lights are burning late in those buildings. I assume it's because nobody has a grip, nobody has a clue. They have to pay guys with ponytails and earrings to turn on the machines every day, and then it sort of goes from there.

The balkanization of epistemology — it's not a popular topic, because the simplest and most fun way to discuss it is to launch attack by example. Alice Roosevelt Longworth used to say at White House dinners, "If you have nothing good to say about anyone, sit by me." I've had the good fortune, or "fortune," to be on this circuit long enough to have collected horrifying stories about almost anyone you may ever have considered respecting, and given certain conditions I can trot this stuff out. It was a joke; I used to have this thing I called the "kiting checks and stealing cars" test, which was: examine a given guru or expert. Ask the question, how much time has he done for kiting checks and stealing cars? It turns out a lot of people can't pass this test! My own past digressions were considerably more noble and ideologically motivated, but let's not linger there. So I was reading *Time Magazine* on United coming down, and it turns out, yes, there was a mug shot of Marshall Applewhite, and I thought, "Oh, so what'd he do?" and then I saw: "Oh, car theft, of course!"

The reason I got onto this whole issue of witnessing and media and authenticity of experience and so forth and so on was because I was getting a lot of people asking me for my take on alien abductions. Apparently, some significant portion of our fellow citizens are under the impression that *pro bono* proctologists from a nearby star system are making unscheduled house calls at night. Well, you and I know how difficult it is to get a medical professional to pay any

attention at all to you, so I think the likelihood of that occurring, based on that alone, needs to be carefully examined. Now I think I know what to make of this thing. I think we need to become much more subtle, first of all in our own thinking — in other words, there are rules for sorting out the shit versus Shinola dilemmas that come along through life. I was recalling to one of my audiences Occam’s razor, and of course nobody had heard of Occam; that wasn’t a good sign, and I won’t put you to the test. Just nod “yes” when asked. “William of Occam?” “Yes.” He had a razor. He said that hypotheses should not be multiplied without necessity; seems reasonable. I’ll condense it, or modernify it, for you: it basically means, “Keep it simple, stupid!” In other words, the simplest explanation is to be preferred until it breaks down, and then the next simplest explanation is to be preferred.

I didn’t realize that this kind of thing was such a leap into deep thinking until one night I was on the internet and this site was announcing that an object twice the size of Earth was accompanying Hale-Bopp, the comet, into the inner solar system, and they’d just put up the ponied-up photograph that was supposed to support this idea. So I thought, “Wow, great, what are the world’s great astronomers and observatories saying?” The web designer obviously anticipated my thought. I looked down and it said, “Hear What the Experts Are Saying.” So I clicked on this button, thinking, “What’ll it be, the Hubble Telescope update? The Arecibo facility in Puerto Rico? The Atacama desert facility in Chile? The Keck in Hawaii?” No, it was something called the Farsight Institute, which brought the news that its remote viewers were in agreement that the object sighted was under Gray control and had an Atlantean architectonic and was on a peaceful mission, having already discharged its cargo of umbilical and fetal tissue traded from the U.S. Military for advanced technology.

We can laugh about these things; we do laugh, we should laugh. It’s just too bad that some people off themselves in the process of struggling to figure out what’s going on. After the Heaven’s Gate thing, they were interviewing people on NPR, and people were saying, “Oh, I just can’t understand how these people could have worked themselves into believing such a bizarre group of ideas.” So then they buttoned that up and they said, “Well, now what’s happening with the White House Easter Egg Hunt?” Yes, it turns out a lot of people are carrying a lot of peculiar intellectual baggage. I mean, I don’t have any problem with people having religious ideas, but I think they should be clearly labeled as Irrational, and those people should voluntarily recuse themselves from debates about the nature of reality. The spectrum of philosophical differentiation between the Resurrection, the Easter Bunny and Heaven’s Gate is only a matter of taste and aesthetics. Hey, it’s a hard truth, but something to consider.

So thinking about things like this, I’ve sort of come up with a rap which I’m going to try out on you, which is the slim and meager fruit of my agonizingly slow maturation process. I think there were hints of this last year, but these things come slowly. There’s this phenomenon in nature — nature is always a good thing to go back to when trying to tease apart what’s happening to us, culturally and individually — there’s this phenomenon in nature called neoteny. What it means is “the retention of juvenile characteristics into adulthood by a

species.” This is a strategy; it happens in nature and it happens in evolution. For example, we human beings, of all the primates, are the most hairless. We have hair and it’s all over our bodies, but it’s very fine and allows you to see through to the skin. This is an infantile characteristic of most primates, but we retain it into adulthood. Another similar example: our head-to-torso ratio is a fetal ratio when compared to most primates. In other words, the fetus of other primates looks more like a human being than the adult form.

Neoteny. There are much more spectacular examples of this which involve what appears to be an ability to express sexuality in actually two morphogenetic forms. There are creatures which live in swamps where, as long as the swamp ecosystems are at equilibrium, they basically appear to be like polliwogs, in other words, gilled creatures, fishlike creatures. They actually can have sex with similar creatures of the opposite sex and give birth to polliwog-like creatures, and this all appears to be species reproduction as we know it. The amazing thing is that if the swamp is disrupted and goes dry, these things dig into the dirt and six months later they come out as gilled animals with flippers, able to breath oxygen and move around on the land, and they then can have sex with creatures of the opposite sex and produce a second form. The interpretation of this is that the first form is the neonatal but sexually mature form that is pinned in place by environmental factors, and then the second form is actually the true mature form, which is only called forth under special conditions.

The reason I mention this is that I’m thinking more and more about this issue of media manipulation, the internet, the evolution of culture, who shall control it and what its effects are. Recently I had a physical, and my doctor said, “You know, in the 19th century most people your age were dead,” and, yes, this is sobering to realize. Early death, something which has been with us until virtually the last half of the 20th century, was a factor acting to reinforce a kind of cultural neoteny within the cultural environment. Jung, I think, was on to this in some way, because he felt that the great adventure of individuation began in middle age. Well, riffing off that, I think the idea that I’m coming to is that culture, in all of its offerings and splendor and artifacts, and especially in the form of ideologies, is not the friend of the life-prolonged, postmodern individual. Culture is not your friend. This is the message, vaguely smelling of political incorrectness, that continued drug use and philosophical abuse has brought to me. Generally the way the intellectual life is presented is that there are good ideologies and bad ideologies, and by a mixture of intuition, logic, education and mastery of the tools of the culture, we make choices between good and bad ideologies; but you can’t help but notice at a certain point of alienation, maturation, psychedelic boundary dissolution — it doesn’t matter what vocabulary you use — that culture is some kind of con game. It’s a scam. It’s a manipulation. It’s for the naive. They can only work this limited set of tricks upon you three times, four times, six times, before you get it, you figure it out. How many art openings, how many Next Great Novels by the geniuses among us, how many filmic triumphs, Nobel Prizes, Booker Fiction Awards, and on and on and on, can we tolerate in the illusion that we are moving into the truly new and exciting? It works for a while, is the idea.

So then what does it mean to get beyond cultural values? How does that look? I can only speak for myself, obviously. It seemed to me in my peregrination through American culture that there were traps. It's sort of like the Mahāyāna bardo of the dead: there were allurements to be avoided and obvious pitfalls that no one in their right mind would drive into. The first one of these, I remember, was even before I contacted the larger initiatory machinery of society. It was under my father's tutelage that I learned to kill. Elk hunting was a rite of passage where I grew up, and I dreaded this from the moment I was able to cognize what it was going to be. In time it ground toward me, manifested itself, and in some kind of miraculous epiphany an animal actually sacrificed itself to my trembling hand, and I moved on. Essentially my father never asked anything of me again in that context, but the future was waiting with sharpened knives, "red in tooth and claw." Not nature red in tooth and claw, that's a misnomer, but society. So the first thing to steer around was military involvement; I passed that intelligence test with flying colors. It didn't hurt to be chickenshit and have bad vision, either; sort of the wind beneath my wings at that point.

The next pitfall was corporatism, which never had a hold on me because I managed to choose the wrong schools in the first place. It was wonderful, in Boston last week, to actually go to Harvard for the first time. I totally liberated myself from ever wanting to have anything to do with that whole scene — not because it was so terrible, but because it was so ordinary, of course. This is part of my revelation about undoing the hype that evolves around the uninvestigated portions of reality. You're impressed by Harvard? You're impressed by crop circles? You're impressed by the Black Madonna of Częstochowa? Go there. Go there, have a drink in the pub across the street, buy the T-shirt, listen to what the locals are saying, and it'll all snap into focus very nicely.

Beyond military involvement, corporate involvement, right universities, wrong universities, the one I think where middle-class values rear their heads most fiercely is the issue of marriage. I speak as somebody who has been ground finely on the anvil of this particular issue. It's almost as though we're sort of like cuckoos — in fact we are cuckoos, but we're also like cuckoos — in that we're kicked out of the nest too early, so just as you're about to cross that big golden bridge into adulthood, it says, "Last exit in the neonatal realm. Find somebody as clueless as yourself, get back to back and start a marriage." The process of being raised is essentially then self-generated. We then continue the process of cultururation, acculturation, the acquisition of cultural values, now bound in this romantic myth. One of the things I really had to come to terms with was how many of my relationships in the past had been dominated by sentimentalism, and what a craven thing that is, and how brutally it uses us, because it basically cashes in on that you're a nice person and it screws you.

So then things happen. If you're smart, you succeed at whatever you chose: advertising, filmmaking, fashion, modeling, playwriting. There's this insidious process which goes on in the culture, which is that just as you get your kids sent off to the Sorbonne, get your marriage dissolved, your shrink patting you on the back and all of this, then money comes. You become successful, you get

rich behind all this prostitution and self-mutilation that you did for the previous twenty years. Just at the moment when, if they didn't recognize you, you would turn on them in fury and construct a real identity, they in fact come around; and you are inculcated, and lifted further and anesthetized, and now you become a mentor to people making their way through the same blood-stained labyrinth, the footprints through which you seem to recognize somehow.

The idea here is that we're obviously coming to some kind of cultural crunch. The print-created categories of the post-Renaissance are breaking down. We can explore this or deny it or create a mix of exploration and denial that is uniquely expressive of our own hopes and fears. Culture is some kind of a collective hallucination. It's infantile. It's an epistemological cartoon, and it's breaking down. What brings the news that it's breaking down are the absurdities that nibble at the fractal edge. The great absurd propositions that have been passed on and revered and sentimentalized for millennia, like the Resurrection and monotheism and all this stuff, are now having their false premises illuminated by the cheap goods that are being sold in competition, that cheapen essentially the entire magic show. It's now exposed as a bargain basement of trinket dealing and foolish goods. The wages of civilized existence are now found to be hollow in some way, but I think that people don't want to culturally confront this because they've been told, "Alienation is bad; this is alienation." Well, it's alienation from insanity.

The culture has become self-limiting, toxic. This is why it's generating technological antidotes to itself. That's why it's importing things like psychedelic plants and substances, or Eastern techniques of meditation, in a kind of delirium or a kind of self-review at the end of its existence. It's furiously exporting, into the lens of its own self-inspection, every text, every drug, every ritual, every method, every cuisine, every language group, every folk dance — every anything — in a frantic effort to find some kind of connecting metaphor. Well, there isn't a connecting metaphor of the ordinary and usual sort. What all these ideologies do — what all ideology does — is provide closure of some sort, at the cost of realism. Whatever satisfaction you get from quantum physics or Marxism or Hasidism or any closed system of thought, you need to recognize that that satisfaction is purchased at the cost of realism. In Lit Crit there's this term, "willful suspension of disbelief." That's all very fine in the confrontation with art, but in the confrontation with that which claims to be real it's a precondition for being led down the primrose path.

I think the last time we got together the theme was how there are two kinds of people: artists and marks. The only way to relate to the engines of commodification of ideas and production of consumer ephemera is to produce. The only sane position is to produce, because if you're consuming, you are in the victim part of this equation. As more and more people realize this, the level of artistic content and creativity asymptotically accelerates as it knits itself together across the interface of evolving fields of knowledge. Whether you follow my deeper metaphysical harangues about the presence of an actual mathematical point in the spatiotemporal domain that is sucking us into a kind of black hole of novelty, connectivity and boundary dissolution, or whether you just, as

a rationalist, observe the speed of the acceleration of computer technologies, media technologies, interactivity, data accessibility to the normal person and so forth and so on: it's very clear from either perspective that social business as usual has been taken off the menu, and that we have unleashed, as a collectivity, something inside ourselves. Call it syntax, call it "grammar's appetite for virtual reality," call it the Gaian mind — it doesn't matter whether you have a beansprout vision of it or an Extropian vision of it — whatever it is, what we have called "human consciousness" is moving into a deeper relationship with prosthesis at a faster rate than anything we've known in human history. In a way it isn't new; since Ur we've been operating inside virtual realities of a sort, but when the medium is fired clay or steel and concrete, the speed at which these things unfold relative to a given human lifespan is such that a weird hallucination of equilibrium and business as usual is maintained.

That illusion of business as usual is giving way to a kind of vertiginous sense that the human unconscious morphogenetic field, whatever it is — some kind of protean thing that links us all in an active, not passive, mode — is expressing itself through us. My dis of the alien thing earlier is not from the point of view of scientific rationalism. Not that I don't think the alien is among us, but rather I think that the most foolish among us pushed forward against the velvet rope with their chattering description of it, like sugar-crazed five-year-olds, and that cooler heads have to come in and look at this. The alien is — where? The alien is in our heads, in some way; and then people say, "Well, that's the psychic explanation, that's terribly humdrum." No, I don't mean that, exactly. I mean that, whatever its essence is, I will know it as I know your essence. You will know it as you know my essence, which is entirely as information. So then people say, "Well, that's some kind of flattening of it. You're making it a literary conundrum." No, not that. The new technologies — VRML, enhanced reality, all that stuff — are showing us that the world is information.

You know, in every scenario of alien contact there is a prop. It has different ways of appearing, but basically it's the landing zone. You have to build a landing zone, and every flying saucer cult worth its salt builds a landing zone. In a way, I think that the purpose of the Net is to catch the alien mind. The alien mind is within us. It will be coded by human fingers, but it will be truly alien. Simply because it is downloaded through the human neural network, do not think that the invoking of this thing — which is an artificial intelligence, a protean, non-human intelligence, a globally-distributed, self-learning, self-defining-teaching-integrating intelligence — is not going to be alien. And yet it is going to come through us.

The cheerful scenarios of Hollywood myth-making are going to be thin comfort indeed when we begin to see just how alien we ourselves are and how real we can make that for ourselves. We are dissolving away from the print-created nexus of rationalism and geometry that we call public space. It came into existence 500 years ago; it will dissolve over the next fifteen or twenty years, and what it will leave us all in is a domain of imagination, neither clearly public nor private, but clearly, intensely numinous, and realized in a way that we at this stage can barely even begin to comprehend. We have been living in the

imagination, but our feet touch the earth, because the laws of physics and the laws of materials and architectonic constraints held the imagination in place. But what will we become when we unfold into the dream? The answer is going to depend on how clearly we think about it going in and how demanding we are upon ourselves in terms of the kind of beauty we create.

We can see from how capitalism manipulates the commodification of ideas that what it tends to do is flatten and trivialize, because it appeals to the mass mind. Is this simply a momentum of the print technology that will play itself out in the new media multiverse, or is it a more pernicious tendency that is going to try to actually survive the cultural transition? I certainly fear the latter and feel that the best antidote to the survival of that tendency is for people to consciously celebrate diversity, to consciously insist on an expansion of language, an erasure of categories and a psychedelization of the cultural enterprise in the service of beauty, diversity, astonishment and mystery, the theme that I wanted to return and end with. Ideology flattens reality because it denies the mystery, because it has all the answers. Whatever it is, it doesn't matter; the ideology, by providing a complete explanation, automatically certifies its own falseness. In the interests of cultural maturity and living a postmodern existence, and taking art as our — the image comes to me, T. S. Eliot says in “The Wasteland,” “Come in under the shadow of this red rock.” For him it was the churches. For us, I think it has to be art freed from ideology, a celebration of beauty, culture with a direct relationship to beauty through the felt presence of immediate experience. That's what the growing beyond ideology and certitude gives back to us, the dynamic sense of being alive in uncertainty. Civilization denies that, and in a sense cheats us of our birthright in uncertainty.

Anyway, that's what I wanted to download on you tonight. Thank you very much.

Audience: It's one question, but it's in two parts. The first thing is the idea of neoteny. It struck me that there's a similarity between the idea of there being two forms of the same organism with the Heaven's Gate people's idea that they were in human form and that if they were taken out of one environment — which is the sociocultural environment — and put into that special environment which is the cult — which is sort of “digging underground” — then they would be reborn into the next level.

I advance these things as models. To me, all of this stuff is an intelligence test. Those people failed it. But my point in my main lecture was that they are not as bizarre as they are made out to be, in the sense that lots of people are running around with extremely bizarre ideas that we have simply gotten used to because they are socially sanctioned. When Pliny the Younger first wrote his report to the Roman Emperor on Christianity — I was recently reading a book called *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* — he said, “This is a cult. It's a cult of Christ. Religions deal with the great issues of cosmic origins and final endings. This doesn't deal with that; it's a cult of Christ.” So we have built a culture around that cult, and yet the rantings of a Southern preacher suitably



liquored up on Jim Beam and syphilis was convincing, I think, that these are the rantings of a diseased mind. So what I think people should do is learn to trust their intuition and develop their crap detectors to a little higher state of subtlety, because as we approach the narrow neck of happenstance that is constricting the end of the century phenomena, there are going to be more and more claims upon our attention and our imagination, “wonder workers” moving among the people and on the networks. Do your mental calisthenics early, so that when they come knocking on your door, you will have the strength to tell them to keep on moving.

I couldn't believe the way in which the media portrayed the Heaven's Gate people as very careful thinkers, very reasonable people — I mean, I heard about this thing in 1975. Somebody said, “Hey, there are these two people who are running around who say that they're off a spacecraft. You wanna go see?” “NO!” Yet decent people — and most of us are decent people — just lack the imagination to imagine where you can get if you embrace pathological lying as a professional strategy for advancement. Joseph Goebbels showed that this can really take you places!

Audience: This is a question about culture in general. When you mentioned the Net being a landing pad, it struck me that the reason we're all so addicted to culture is because it is the landing pad, we're trying to trap something in it. What I see as the obstacle to “honing your crap detector” is not wanting to give up your claim on beauty. If you've been trapped in your cultural net, you don't want to give up your neural connection to beauty and live without it. In spiritual traditions there's the idea that you have to pass through this desert, where you have given up your water. . .

I would differ with you. I preach reason, but when into a tight place, I think the appeal to beauty is a deeper and more intuitive dimension in which to make the judgment. In other words, I'm a thoroughgoing Platonist. I say the Good, the True and the Beautiful are three aspects of something we're trying to maximize. Truth: you can formally learn the rules by which one approaches Truth; it's tricky. The Good, it's even trickier. Beauty makes a direct appeal to the senses. Somebody asked me, what did I think about the face on Mars? And I had no problem dismissing that because it was tacky. In other words, that's all you have to know about that, because the mystery will not be tacky! It is not tacky!

It's awfully harsh, but it brought us to the right position rather quickly and with dispatch, which was the point. Why put these people through misery if in fact ultimately we're going to have to say that their commodification of whatever intellectual system they're peddling is found wanting? So I think if we built a society based on Beauty, strange Beauty, the True and the Good aspects of this three-pronged enterprise would fall naturally into place. I have that faith.

Audience: I didn't mean give up Beauty, but give up our claim to Beauty.

You can see more art in twenty minutes on high-dose psilocybin than you see in a long afternoon wandering around Florence.

Audience: That's right, but most of us don't spend our time in the psychedelic state.

Well, no, but we should spend our time reflecting on it, I think.

Audience: This is not a culture question, it's a drug question. What do you think is the evolutionary advantage that led to addiction, and why does it still persist? What's the purpose of addiction? I have my answers, but I'd like to hear from you.

This touches a big subject for me, and some of you are familiar with my position on this. I think that psilocybin in the early human diet interfered with the ordinary primate tendency to form gender-based hierarchies, and that we actually medicated male dominance out of our behavioral repertoire during the period in which we were evolving language and culture and humor and theater and that sort of thing. Then later, when the psilocybin came unstuck from the human enterprise because of climatological change, this kind of abuse syndrome arose because there was a sense of having had a relationship that was interrupted. This is why human beings addict to countless substances and behaviors, and each other, and political ideologies. In a way ideologies are drug fixes, because they fix some certain kind of mental disequilibrium. You just give yourself a shot of Marxism or Hegelian idealism and say, "Oh, that makes the pain go away!" But that's what it is: it's disequilibrium brought on by being torn from the Gaian matrix, by having an early pseudo-symbiotic relationship with mushrooms interrupted. How about that?

Audience: It seems to make it a totally pathological issue instead of an adaptation. I think there might be more to it than that.

Well, there might be more to it than that. It's pathological only when it's exercised in the presence of an inappropriate stimulus. In other words, it's pathological to addict to morphine, Marxism or monotheism; it's not pathological to addict to self-reflection, punctuality and — I don't know, it's just behavior. But thank you, it's not easy to climb up and face the music.

Audience: I was wondering, with the 2012 date, and approaching more and more connectivity, things are coming closer together and people are realizing that things are connected: it seems that there is a technological side to that. But in a way, the whole technology is geared toward military stuff, NASA's involved in this and that; it's going that direction. But hemp, for instance, the earthly, natural type of thing; the same people who are promoting technology and those things are down on psilocybin — laws against it, paranoia against it — because it changes people's minds. It ties them into a connectivity that's

with the earth, with the earth grid, as opposed to something else, something out there that people are going for.

I think you're right about the whole issue about drug suppression in this society. It has to do with the fact that these things have unacceptable social consequences in the area of deconditioning and dissolving boundaries, and that they actually are synergistic to forms of local community and affinity group-building that establishments find very threatening. This all has to do with the idea that culture is some kind of conditioning process that you are not supposed to get behind or get in front of or doubt; and it's complicated, you're given many choices. You can teach at Wellesley, you can go into banking, into brain surgery, and you're still within the game. The reason drugs are inveighed against so furiously, when you can demonstrate in terms of the normal criteria by which social menaces are judged that these don't even make it onto the radar, obviously there is some phobia or taboo or secret agenda about repressing these things. I think it's simply that we are very anxious in this society about other people's states of mind. The idea that people would take control of their states of mind by intoxicating themselves, or in any way altering consciousness, is considered fundamentally disloyal.

You're making this point very well, but I am not a pessimist, I am not into these conspiratorial theories, because from my point of view it all seems to be being negotiated in a fairly sane manner. In other words, the military-industrial complex has quietly taken its place as number two, behind the entertainment and media industries. Governments are being told by corporations, "Keep the roads repaired and care for the sick. We'll take over the manufacture and distribution of commodified goods." Apparently in the same way that the Church was patted on the back and toddled off the stage at the end of the Thirty Years War, nation states are going through this. Their *raison d'être*, which was the whole Cold War paranoia scenario, has pretty much been unplugged. There's a lot of retro-inertia and people moving at different speeds within the system, but I think we're now living in the corporate, post-informational, boundaryless collectivity, and it was built by guys with ponytails with rings in their ears, who were druggies, basically.

I think there are a lot of bad things going on, but mostly just to make money. Very few scenarios of control are going to bring those who generate them much happiness. There's money to be made, for sure, on the good side and the dark side of the cultural transition, but as far as the drug thing is concerned, the very presence of the word "drug" in our culture, in the denumerized form in which it exists, makes it very hard to talk about the issue. Everything is defined as a drug by those who are looking at it from a marketing and commodification position. Society, again, is not going to help you with this. You're actually going to have to someday face the fact that you're going to get as far as your intelligence can carry you. Expecting the society to undergo some fundamental reform, and then for it to take over the function of your transformation, is probably hopelessly naive. What this is is not a free ride; it's some sort of opportunity in the midst of chaos.

Audience: My question is in relation to Jewish mysticism, and specifically the Kabbalah. The Kabbalists believe in *tikkun*, which is the restoration of matter and creation when the divine Seed is reconnected with the Godhead. My question is: do you believe that this is a metaphor for cosmic consciousness, in that we, as Man, as the earth, have a collective soul or collective consciousness that somehow can be connected with the Other and brought forth to a new dimension of time and space?

The persistent myth of the West is this thing about the going forth of the Word and the descent or the declension of the Word into matter. Kabbalistic mysticism has a lot to say about the realization or coming into being of the Word. Reality from that kind of point of view is some kind of literary construct. The difference between science and magic, fundamentally, is that science believes that the universe is made of something, like matter and energy, and magic believes that the universe is made of language.

Audience: What about the fusion of the two? What if language was sort of a lower evolutionary form of communication, and the higher form of communication would be something like telepathy or sensational connection?

If you have a powerful enough language, you can take control of reality. This is what magical languages in the late Renaissance were about. The only thing which comes close to that today is code for computers. Essentially, these are languages which, when executed, something happens. They are languages of efficacy. They carry not meaning but motivation to activity. This Kabbalistic question is very interesting; someone recently showed me a sculptural object, which, when illuminated from various angles by a source of light behind it, would cast, one after another, each of the Hebrew letters on a screen. In other words, this was a higher-dimensional object which had the entire Hebrew alphabet somehow embedded in it. When I mentioned this to Ralph Abraham, he said, "Well, all you have to do is digitize and quantify that object and we'll be able to compute from that three-dimensional object to a 5-, 6-, 7-, 8-, or 9-dimensional object which would cast all letters of all alphabets into matter." So one way of thinking of the transcendental object at the end of time is as this kind of ur-letter or ur-word in hyperspace, from which, as it sheds the radiance of its syntactical numinosity into lower and lower dimensions, realities — as literary functions of being — constellate themselves.

Audience: So would you say it's sort of like the fusion of the unconscious with the conscious, in such a way that we can experience the entire world in one moment, or the entire universe in one moment, or the entire works of creation in one moment?

Yes, I think one way of thinking of the internet is as a hardwiring of the human unconscious. In other words, all these databases, all these buried complexes and

data are becoming accessible to the inspection of the conscious mind in a single moment. So it's almost as though whatever the post-historical experience is, it's something that cannot be achieved or approached in the presence of baggage as antiprogressive as the unconscious mind. We are discovering that we are, in a sense, simply protrusions on this larger protean form called the human collectivity, the community, the unconscious. Our dear identity, so dearly won, is simply a kind of convention of how we present ourselves in Newtonian space, but we are collectivizing even as we discover the depth of our individuality. It's a paradox, but it's not a self-canceling paradox; it's a truth.

Audience: Would you say that the Godhead is what we would consider perfection?

I think of it as connectivity and novelty. Perfection — I've never tended toward these Neoplatonic things where it gets more One-ish, more White-ish, more Light-ish. For me, it gets just weirder and weirder. You know, whether all these scenarios of transcendence and transfiguration come to be in some "real" dimension, whatever that means, you may be sure that, long before 15 years have passed, every major and minor religion on this planet will have a VRML simulacrum of its eschatology up and running for you to comparison shop with!

Audience: I've heard you several times, and I come because you use words so wonderfully. I have something to say about the print culture versus the internet. I'm a librarian at a city college, and I see the internet mostly being used by very ignorant people. I'm afraid I see more of the pernicious effects of the internet, and when I read about people like Negroponte, who speak of bodies as meat, to me that's the opposite of beauty, because beauty, as you said, is connected to the senses. So I don't see a liberation in terms of virtual reality, necessarily. I think it depends on who's doing it. At the moment — you used the word "commodification" a lot — as a post-Marxist I can say that everything is being commodified now, including the internet, although the kids with the rings in their ears didn't make as much money as Bill Gates, who didn't have a ring in his ear. What I'm getting at is that everything is still very much controlled by money, and as long as it's controlled by money, I don't see how it's going to be liberating. Just one more comment: you speak so well; I heard you talk about Aldous Huxley, and you were the only one who talked about Aldous Huxley. What I'm getting at is: you are absolutely grounded in the print culture. Much of what you say about beauty is what William Morris says as well. I guess I'm trying to make something of a defense for the print culture, and something of a warning about seeing the internet as necessarily liberating.

You're right that I'm definitely rooted in the print culture. I consider basically my entire schtick as proving that you can turn a liberal education into a Borscht Belt phenomenon. That shows how short people's memories are: "Oh, he quotes Homer! Amazing!" But I think the fear that the internet was going to plunge us into a world of barbarian illiteracy was a transition phase. Now I'm

meeting people whom, I think, you would consider largely illiterate — in that they've never read a book — but they are very fully in command of the tools of the culture because they do all their reading on the internet. What's happening is simply a celebration of diversity. Capitalism built the internet, but it has not yet made a great deal of money off it. McLuhan said that no technology in history has ever been implemented with even a partial appreciation of what its real effects were going to be. The internet is supposedly a great place to do business, but what I see it doing is empowering previously marginalized minorities and positions. It has certainly pulled the plug on the agenda of the nation state. Corporations do not use war as an instrument of national policy. They do not like starving refugees; they like well-fed, true-believing customer bases, and to this end they have exported a lot of chaos to the ghettos of the world; and even there, there's a shrinking of the commitment to the kind of chaos that typified the age of nationalism.

We make these different metaphors about what's happening; here's a sort of neo-Christian metaphor, which follows McLuhan. We lived through the age of the patriarchal beehive or anthill, we lived through the age of the glorification of the perfect Man, and now what we're seeing is the protean advent of the age of the Holy Ghost. Electricity in McLuhan's pantheon was the descent of the Holy Ghost. It clothes the planet in numinosity, it accelerates information to the speed of light and it creates a kind of collectivity of understanding. Were we not so secular and so embedded within it, we would see its transcendental implications much more clearly, I think. People like Teilhard de Chardin and McLuhan and various others have seen that, but the rest of us are so focused on the commodification issue that it seems banal and mundane. It is, in fact, not banal and mundane, and I think quickly this is going to become more and more apparent to more and more people. We've only been dealing with the internet for about three years, really, as a culture, and already it dominates all discussions of salvation, destruction, chaos, redemption. Wait 'til you see what's coming!

Audience: With this new glut of information and ideology, is it simply a matter of there being so many more, or is the choice between mystery and ideology any more difficult than it has ever been?

Well, I think so, because I really believe that you have to take seriously the hidden agenda of every form of media that you embrace or reject. So it's not simply about "more," it's that print, the electric light, every form of media changes us in ways that we don't suspect or understand until we move beyond it. Now we're understanding things about print that previously we couldn't even language to ourselves, because it was like the surface of our own bodies. Now we see that the assumptions of interchangeability based on modern industrial processes, or the assumptions about the quality of our voting, one person/one vote — these kinds of mechanistic thinking about society, which we were raised not to question, are in fact notions that only make sense in the print-constellated universe. Now that we're moving into a world with different sensory ratios, how

we do science, how we do fashion, how we do art, how we do relationships, how we define things as deeply ingrained and supposedly outside social manipulation as gender identity and things like that, are discovered to be completely fluid.

Audience: But haven't they always been fluid, even though the ideology may have said differently? Wouldn't the fundamental decision between being fluid and remaining solid stay as equally powerful, even in the context of the fluid network, etc.?

I think so. But as you say, our attention has drifted away from that. This whole thing I was trying to put across tonight, without just saying it flat out, was that we have become silly, we have become infantile. We lack dimension. This is not an adult style of civilization, the way we live. Now you're saying, "Well, maybe in the past there have been adult styles." I don't know — maybe, maybe not. I'd probably tend to resist it. But for sure, this society is silly, trivial, juvenile, infantile, self-denying, self-flattening, uses a simplified vocabulary for emotion, for relationships and to chart its way forward. The defining of social values and the expression of social institutions is left to faceless collectivities — these "Theys" we're always talking about — the Corporations, the Media, the Government, the Somebody. Again, this is an infantile myth of how reality works. Imagine if you were actually a free and responsible individual. Play with this idea; it has implications for you, I think, and it may not have been true in the past. As I look back to how I was raised and the people who raised me, everybody was living inside a cartoon, a sitcom of some sort. We've blown the whistle on that. That was what the work of the deconstruction that modernism performed on the bourgeois sensibility was all about, to tell you that you're more complicated than that, deeper than that, more dynamic, more self-surprising than that, more psychedelic than that. More sexy than that, smarter than that!

Audience: All I really want to know is — you know, I had this great philosophical question, a psychedelic question, I was all excited — but all I really want to know is: how does Terence McKenna live? How do these nights affect your life?

I'm trying to "walk the walk and talk the talk." What that means at the moment to me is: three years ago I moved from northern California where I'd been for 35 years in a kind of sandal/beansprout/blurred-gender culture that spoke a rhetoric of rainforest action and so forth and so on. I moved to Hawaii; I moved off the grid. I live within thirty seconds of climaxed rainforest. I have an ISDN-speed 128k connection straight onto the internet, through the air, wireless; I point at my provider. So I'm trying to study the internet in isolation from the rest of the culture. I just want, basically, an archaic world of nature and natural values, and the fastest, most high-tech machine I can get my hands on.

Somebody said, "What, is your message still the same?" My message is still the same, and it has nothing to do with me. The message is, "Don't follow me,

eat a shroom!" Unlock the cultural box and check out what's going on. Your nervous system, your sexuality and your vegetable friends provide an antidote to cultural dystopia, alienation and victimization. Don't be a victim. Don't consume. Produce art. Keep your powder dry, one hand over your wallet, the other hand over your asshole: this is the way to proceed with this society, I think. And then we'll all meet at the end and make extremely high art. I see it coming.