

The Art of Reality: Psychedelic Experience in Cinema and Television

By Evan Martin

Psychedelics temporarily inhibit the mind's filtering mechanisms, allowing the senses access to increased amounts of information. Since prehistory, shamans, artists, and storytellers have used these hyper-receptive states to transmit meaning and insight by implementing attention evoking mechanisms such as rhythm, dance, poetry, narrative, vocal cadence, facial expression, body language, symbolic and patterned costume, and scenic sensorial effects such as fire, decorations, and acoustics. So emerged what we now call theater: a blending of art forms (visual, musical, dance, fashion, linguistic, etc.) onto an animated canvas of human action, painted with the endless palette of human emotion.

The technological unfurling of the past century has awarded us increased capacities, both generative and destructive, from acid to the atom bomb. While psychedelic aesthetics are intimately joined to the natural world (as exemplified by such hippie-driven movements as environmentalism, natural foods and clothing, natural medicine, natural homes, nudism, and the romanticization of indigenous cultures) there has also been a direct historical correlation between psychedelics and the cutting edge of technological innovation. This can be easily illustrated by the most recognizable symbols of psychedelic culture: electric guitars, electronic music, computer graphics, computational or fractal geometry, and the open, collaborative ethical codes brought forth by networked information technologies that spread like mycelia from the silicon spores of Bay Area counterculture philosophy.

These two seemingly diametric attachments, to nature and technology, are in fact aspects of psychedelics' more general tendency to enhance awareness of networks and systems, such as those that comprise biologies, ecologies, and cosmologies (an aspect aptly captured by Richard Doyle's notable neologism: *ecodelic*). When technological methods are aligned with those of nature—such as beauty, harmony, and synergy—technology itself becomes indistinguishable from nature: an emergent property rather than antipode.

Special effects have always been part and parcel of cinema's evolution. As photographic and editing technology improved, so did the



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apparent reality of on-screen illusions. The earliest visionary sequences were mostly found in animated shorts and features such as *Mickey's Garden* (1935), *Fantasia* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), and the Salvador Dali/Walt Disney collaboration *Destiny* (1945). Another Dali collaboration with Alfred Hitchcock in 1945 for the dream sequences in *Spellbound* introduced more sophisticated, non-animated film effects to portray the surreality of altered states.

In 1959, LSD made its first appearance onscreen in *The Tingler*, starring Vincent Price. Film presentations of *The Tingler* took viewer immersion to the next level. Multicolor oil lighting effects were projected over the black and white film during the LSD scene; a real skeleton popped out of a trap door next to the screen and zip-lined out towards the audience; actors paid to be moviegoers screamed and fainted in their seats; and electric vibrating buzzers under the seats startled the audience when the movie's namesake creature, which feeds on fear, supposedly escaped into the theater.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as the influence of LSD and other psychedelics on popular culture grew, so too did the number of films inspired by, depicting, and even celebrating psychedelic experiences—certainly more than are within the scope of this review. A few notable mentions include *The Trip* (1967) written by Jack Nicholson, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), *Fritz The Cat* (1972), the animated and profoundly psychedelic *Fantastic Planet* (1973), and *Hair* (1978), based on the 1967 off-Broadway musical.

During the anti-drug hysteria of the 1980s and early 1990s, most films and television shows either contained ominous warnings and goofy misrepresentations about psychedelics, or directly exaggerated their negative consequences. One such example is the classic, psychedelic camp thriller, *Altered States* (1980), based on the hallucinogenic and sensory deprivation experiments of Dr. John Lilly.

Other films from this period that added a baleful air to drug experimentation were *Midnight Express* (1978), *Liquid Sky* (1982), *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) and *Lawnmower Man* (1991).

Lawnmower Man is a perfect example of how technology-driven special effects evolved hand-in-hand with the portrayal of altered states, as it was the first film to utilize the revolutionary new 3D capabilities of computer-generated imagery (CGI).

Some films from that repressed period, such as *Naked Lunch* (1991) and *The Doors* (1991), portrayed the consequences of combining psychedelics and more harmful intoxicants such as alcohol and heroin. Others, such as *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and *Beavis & Butthead Do America* (1996), while clearly psychedelically informed, additionally demonstrate that visionary states were most frequently portrayed to the general public in menacing contexts.

David Lynch's *Dune* (1984), based on Frank Herbert's 1965 novel, while having a generally positive take on mind-expanding drugs, focused less on the drug itself than on the raging violence over its control. In other films, even when references to drugs were not explicit, psychedelics nevertheless directly informed themes and aesthetics. For instance, the producers of *Brainstorm* (1983) consulted Stanislav Grof for the CGI-driven post-death transpersonal journey of Christopher Walken's character.

With the resurgence of psychedelic use that occurred in the early 1990's along with the rise of rave and cyberculture, it became harder to thwart the oncoming flood of psychedelic aesthetics, reinforced as they were by emerging technologies. *Strange Days* (1995) portrayed a brain-computer interface that offered radically novel subjective experiences and generated its own black market—a digital drug with the potential to “fry” a person's senses into warped rainbow static. In 1996, the most famous work of theatrical drama in history became a blockbuster film which had Romeo rolling on MDMA when he first laid eyes on his Juliet. Terry Gilliam's now-classic rendition of Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998) famously portrayed the results of “seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a saltshaker half-full of cocaine,

and a whole galaxy of uppers, downers, laughers, screamers.”

With the turn of the millennium came yet another influx of psychedelics in major films, starting with *The Matrix* (1999). The entire film (and its sequels) candidly draws from the standard themes of psychedelic philosophy, such as a red pill that forces Neo through a birth-like process into the “real world” of mind over matter, time dilation and cave raves where there are no spoons and “anything is possible.” The exploding electronic dance music scene became the backdrop for altered states in a number of popular films, including *Human Traffic* (1999), *Groove* (2000), *Sorted* (2000), *24 Hour Party People* (2002), *A Midsummer Night's Rave* (2002), *Party Monster* (2003), and *It's All Gone Pete Tong* (2005).

As the use of MDMA spread beyond the rave scene, its portrayal in cinema moved beyond the lights and sounds of electronic music parties and into the bars and bedrooms. The “love drug” had favorable (or at least neutral) cameos in such popular films as *When Do We Eat* (2006), a comedy about a Jewish family that comes together over a Passover dinner and a tablet of MDMA, as well as *25th Hour* (2002), *Bad Boys II* (2003), *Garden State* (2004), *Holy Rollers* (2010) and *Black Swan* (2010).

The complex effects of fictional hallucinogenic flowers were central to the plots of Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2002), Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) and Richard Linklater's adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* (2006). *A Scanner Darkly* explored themes of addiction, drug politics and disapproving inter-dimensional beings, and was made in a similar animation style to Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001), a profound and visually stunning film about lucid dreaming and other transpersonal states.

Some of the most accurate and intricate depictions of the psychedelic mystical experience in cinematic form occurred in *Renegade* (2004). Directed by Jan Kounen, who was deeply inspired by his ayahuasca journeys, this shamanic Western was based on a comic book series by visionary illustrator Jean “Moebius” Giraud, who passed away in March 2012. In addition to helping formulate the stunning visuals in *Renegade*, Moebius also helped create the luminous aquatic aliens in James Cameron's *The Abyss* (1989) and contributed design concepts to such fantastical films as *Alien* (1979), *Tron* (1982), *Willow* (1988), and *The Fifth Element* (1997).

Psychedelic aesthetics without direct drug references are also making a splash in popular cinema as can be seen in the epic visual creativity of such films as Terry Gilliam's *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009), the increasingly popular works of Hayao Miyazaki, and *The Secret of Kells* (2009), an enchantingly trippy film about illuminated manuscripts and Celtic faerie lore which won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.

In the past decade, we have seen many hallucinogenic insights and adventures in hilarious stoner films such as *Knocked Up* (2007), *The Pick of Destiny* (2006), *Walk Hard* (2008), *Men Who Stare at Goats* (2009), *Get Him to the Greek* (2010) and *21 Jump St* (2012); whimsical and profound psychedelic experiences in musical and light-hearted comedies like *Across The Universe* (2007) and *Taking Woodstock* (2009); and even some frightful trip scenarios in thrillers like *The Tripper* (2007).

One of the most sophisticated cinematic explorations to date of altered states, including those induced by LSD, DMT, and near-death experiences, was in the maturely dramatic film *Enter the Void* (2009). Filmed in Tokyo and shot entirely in first-person perspective—blinks, memories, and all—*Enter the Void* begins with the central character smoking DMT while coming down off LSD before being launched into a voyage through the Tibetan bardos.

Avatar (2009) was also particularly striking in its psychedelic saturation. Even a symbolic portrayal of the ayahuasca ritual was almost included but the scene ended up being cut from the script. That such a representation of the way human beings actually are capable of reconnecting with the ecosystemic sentience of Earth was so nearly included in the highest grossing, most popular film in history, says something about the rate at which the mycelial threads of psychedelic cultures are reaching out and linking up with the very roots of popular culture. [Editor's Note: See Erik Davis' article on ayahuasca and *Avatar* in this issue.]

While big-budget feature films have the benefit of ever-advancing special effects to communicate psychedelic themes to popular culture, psychedelics are also making more appearances on television. The main character in *House* is a gifted yet troubled M.D. who echoes the image of shaman in his uncanny ability to diagnose mysterious ailments and his radically unorthodox methods of healing. This petulant medicine man has taken LSD at work to relieve a migraine, given psilocybin to a surly young patient suffering from cluster headaches, and helped manage a fellow doctor's difficult psychedelic experience. In the supernatural thriller *True Blood*, the fictional drug works as an addictive stimulant in small doses—enhancing cognition, sensation and physical strength—while at higher doses it affords visionary states casting rippling rainbows of euphoria and insight over the bleakness of a tribulating world. The hit comedy *Weeds* presented its main character imbibing ayahuasca, albeit not in the most meaningful manner, still further exposing the concept of entheogenic ritual to the masses.

One of the boldest and most ostentatious treatments of psychedelic drugs on TV is in the successful science fiction serial, *Fringe*—the very first episode of which involves the main protagonist being administered a cocktail of LSD and ketamine while floating in a sensory deprivation tank and neuro-computationally interfaced with a recently deceased person in order to extract subjective memories from the still warm corpse. Throughout the show, another lead character—the lovable mad scientist—repeatedly admits to using psychedelics during his normal routines. The screenwriters even grant psychedelics the fundamental role of inspiring the invention of the transdimensional portal that is the basis of the show's entire story arc.

Psychedelics have repeatedly been topics in the longest-running sitcom in American history: *The Simpsons*. In one episode, Homer undergoes an intense and extended vision quest after consuming the merciless "Insanity Peppers of Quetzalacatenango." *South Park* also routinely pokes fun at the criminalization of psychoactive drugs, from psychedelics to medical marijuana dispensaries. *Family Guy* also recently paid homage to psychedelic experiences with an episode in their tenth season in which Brian consumes magic mushrooms on a rainy day and returns from his vividly harrowing experience with a newfound sense of calm and compassionate wisdom.

Phenomenal strides are being taken in the inoculation of pop culture with psychedelic revelations, yet we are still but on the brink of fully realizing the potentials for big-budget applications of rapidly advancing media technologies to the momentous, shamanic emotion of the imminent entheogenic reformation. Amidst the commencing unfurlment of technological extensions into interactive, immersive media, mutable matter, neurotechnology and the awakening ethics of interconnectedness, openness and abundance, the exteriorization of the psychedelic vision from the mind's eye to the world of matter and media will become ever more manifest and resplendent.

Despite mass media's flagrant exploitation for misguided ends, an inter-subjective and egalitarian ethos is emerging upon the rising tide of network and communication technologies, wherein the doctrine of centrality will once again be denigrated to quaint obsolescence, as the telescope did for the geocentric model, or Gutenberg's press for centralized religious authority. Coinciding with the rise of networked society is a rediscovery of ecological reverence which calls for sustainable relationships with nature, plant knowledge, and biomimetic technologies. Amidst the cultural, technological and biological diversity to which all these trends introduce us, shamanic principles will rapidly become increasingly appropriate. With psychonautic navigation at the helm of creative design and media communications, we will beautify the earth, and reclaim art as a core aspect of our conscious, cosmic evolution. •