

Transhumanism & the War on Drugs

Tristan Gulliford & Ken Goffman (a.k.a. R.U. Sirius)



Tristan Gulliford
tristangulliford@gmail.com



Ken Goffman (a.k.a. R.U. Sirius)
rusirius@well.com

John Stewart...
Colbert and Bill Maher
get cheers
from the audience
whenever they
mention pot...
even Tony Soprano
had a
sort-of-meaningful
peyote experience.

KEN GOFFMAN (a.k.a. R.U. Sirius) is a well-known cultural commentator, author, editor, and internet talk show host, probably best known as cofounder and original Editor-In-Chief of *Mondo 2000* magazine. He is the author of *True Mutations*, *Counterculture Through the Ages*, and six other popular books about the cutting-edge of cyberculture. To listen to Goffman's radio show visit: <http://rusiriusradio.com>

This interview was conducted by Tristan Gulliford. To find out more about Tristan's work see: www.myspace.com/djdreamcode

Gulliford: Some people have noted that the "War on Drugs" is actually a war on certain states of human consciousness. If this is true, then how can anyone ever hope to "win"?

Goffman: There are a lot of cracks in the drug war façade. For example, spokespeople for the War on Drugs now like to deny that people actually go to prison for mere drug possession. It's a lie, but it's a lie that speaks of a tremendous change in our social attitude towards drug use. And certainly, casual drug use is sort of winked at as an optional part of adult (and teenage) life in America today.

There was a period during the Reagan Administration's big drug war escalation when the media was intimidated and drug humor was virtually eliminated from TV. Now John Stewart and Colbert and Bill Maher get cheers from the audience whenever they mention pot; you've got shows like "Weeds", the kids on "That 70s Show" have smoked pot, and even Tony Soprano had a sort-of-meaningful peyote experience. Most of the major Democratic candidates say they'll leave medical marijuana alone. And, of course, starting in the '90s, the FDA began allowing some psychedelic research and there have been all kinds of positive news reports. I was particularly amused by the *New York Times* headline a few months back that was based on some John Hopkins studies with psilocybin. It read, "Mushroom Drugs

Produce Mystical Experiences." Wow! Scientists Discover Ass Not Elbow!

So yes, I think there's some hope. On the other hand, there's a huge drug war industry and the prison-industrial complex is one of America's biggest businesses, so those are powerful forces for maintaining the drug war. And hysteria about teens taking drugs is something politicians can still demagogue about. I think those are the reasons why the drug war continues. I don't think the powers that be are that concerned about altered consciousness itself anymore. That cat is already out of the bag and it's a market that they cater to. Realistically, it doesn't threaten the power all that much.

Gulliford: One of the topics covered in your book *True Mutations*, and also in *Mondo 2000*, is transhumanism. This is a field of futuristic study and speculation that can be defined in many ways. How do you describe its basic tenets?

Goffman: I don't know that I would claim to describe its basic tenets, but I'll say what the intrigue is for me. I see it in terms of hacking. One of the basic ideas behind hacking is that you take a technological system or object and you get it to do things beyond what it was apparently intended to do or was capable of doing. So I like to think of the transhumanist movement as an ongoing project to hack the human body and the brain, and the social and material worlds outside our bodies and brains, and get them to do things that they can't do now—including things that humans up to this point would have perceived as being in defiance of "nature."

That has, of course, been the story of technology, technique, science, and human ingenuity since day one. But now we're looking at hacking our biologies for extended lifespans, hacking our brains for increased intelligence, hacking molecules for material abundance, building intelligences that are greater than ours—or different from ours—and so forth. We also might be looking at engineering our level

of happiness or bliss, engineering out painful forms of insanity, hacking our skin pigmentation color or our physical design. As Debbie Harry put it in our *Mondo 2000* interview back in 1990, “A tail might be nice.”

By the way, this is all terribly ambiguous and potentially “Brave New World.” In some ways, I’m less interested in arguing about whether it’s socially responsible to push forward with all this, and am more excited by the sense that it’s an irresistible manifestation of a human impulse that has been expressed in various adventure myths involving grail quests, magick, religious imaginings, science fiction imaginings, and so on. So it pleases me to imagine that human beings could win the prize, even though I’m not quite sure what the prize is. I don’t think long life, in and of itself, is a huge value. I’m interested in how all of this might open out into something extraordinary and profoundly psychedelic.

This interface between the literal expansion of human possibilities in the material realm and the expansion of consciousness through drugs and other

techniques is very complex and it comes with no guarantees. But a number of techno-visionaries have suggested that after the bio-age comes the neuro-age. With nanotechnology and a greater comprehension of neurology, we may be able to target chemicals—in the words of Zack Lynch—“to... deliver and regulate specific neurological pathways in specific regions of the brain without disturbing nearby processes.” In other words, we may learn to play this instrument—the brain—like Yo Yo Ma plays the fiddle. The implement for playing it will be chemical but the choices regarding how to use the instrument will be ours... well, it had better be ours or we’ll be locked into the perfect control system.

I hope people will check out my book *True Mutations* for ideas and debates about this potential trans/psychedelic future. •

One of the basic ideas behind hacking is that you take a technological system or object and you get it to do things beyond what it was apparently intended to do or was capable of doing.

Missed, Mist



Neal M. Goldsmith, Ph.D.
neal@inch.com

I feel in a mist
Sleepwalking through life
Sleeptalking with other sleepwalkers
Triggering out my insides.

On the other hand...

I float down to my ground
And on the way down
I cry my childhood into completion
On the ground
A glowing mound throbs
Emanating peace

I touch the glowing orb
And my sleeping seed awakens
Reigniting the unfolding frozen so long ago
Unfolding unto the sun
Upward to the warmth of love
From the glow to the warmth

– Neal M. Goldsmith, Ph.D.
February 6, 2008