

Letter from the Editor

David Jay Brown

Numerous references to psychedelic drugs—as well as the influence of their effects—can be clearly and pervasively seen throughout modern popular culture and the arts. If you know where to look, these influences and references appear just about everywhere—in film, music, television, comedy, advertising, comic books, fashion, toys, video games, and other multimedia art forms. Sometimes the reference or influence is blatantly obvious, while other times it is subtle, or hidden with a knowing wink.

It's no secret that cannabis and psychedelic drugs hold incredible potential to enhance creativity. This was the subject of a previous special theme *MAPS Bulletin*, and many highly acclaimed artists, scientists, writers, musicians, and creative people of all sorts have claimed this for decades. The bottom line is that you have to already be talented to begin with—psychedelics won't give you that—but among those who already are, it appears that cannabis and psychedelics are creativity-enhancers without par.

Since the 1960s, psychedelics have inspired a lot of music and visual art, and much of it has worked its way into today's mainstream culture. Additionally, psychedelics have influenced just about every aspect of the art world, from painting and sculpture to theater, music, writing, poetry, and dance. How psychedelics have influenced mainstream artistic forms of expression—and their appreciation—is the subject of this special theme *Bulletin*, which I co-edited along with MAPS communications director Brad Burge.

This is a huge, encyclopedic topic that deserves a whole library and an entire museum to contain, so we'll just barely be able to scratch the uppermost surface of this important subject in this issue, although I'm sure that we will be exploring this fascinating cultural and pharmacological interaction again and again in the future.

Psychedelics, Performance Art, and Popular Music

The first artistic medium that usually springs to mind when we think of psychedelics is music, as an endless array of talented musicians have claimed inspiration from cannabis and psychedelics. Music is often an integral part of many people's psychedelic experiences, and it is even used in clinical therapeutic settings with psychedelics. It appears that this tradition of combining music and these compounds stretches back into human prehistory, as members of our species have been using psychedelic plants and dancing to music since the beginning of time.



David Jay Brown
dajabr@well.com

In his marvelous, although now outdated, book *Kaleidoscope Eyes: Psychedelic Rock from the '60s to the '90s*, Jim Derogatis recounts the intertwined history of modern music and psychedelics, which is a good place to start for those interested in this subject. Music and psychedelics alone is a huge and important topic, and it deserves having a whole *Bulletin* dedicated to it, so we'll just be able to touch on it here.

For this special issue, we brought in the voices of two brilliant British music composers to discuss this subject further. I spoke with Simon Posford from the popular electronica music project Shpongle, and music writer Damon Orion interviewed David J of the alternative rock band Love and Rockets, about how psychedelics have influenced their remarkably successful music careers.

Circus artist Rose Grey also contributes to this edition with an article on how modern community-based performance troupes make use of the psychedelic experience.

Painting, Modern Art, and Psychedelics

Although the intimate relationship between painting and psychedelics has been covered in previous *Bulletins*, and will be somewhat de-emphasized in this one due to spatial constraints, this is certainly one of the areas where there has also been a great deal of influence—as the covers of most *MAPS Bulletins* clearly demonstrate.

Psychedelics have not only influenced how paintings are created, as with music, but also how they are viewed. To get a broad overview on this subject, I interviewed *New York Times* art critic Ken Johnson, author of *Are You Experienced?: How Psychedelic Consciousness Transformed Modern Art*, about how psychedelics have affected modern art in mainstream art circles. Visionary artist Martina Hoffmann also joins us to share how her late husband, the celebrated painter Robert Venosa, developed in intimate collaboration with psychedelics and the worldwide visionary art community.

Also joining us is University of Pennsylvania graduate art student Nese Lisa Senol, who discusses how the influx of new psychedelic-inspired visionary art is influencing the “post-postmodern” academic art scene.

Film, Television, and Psychedelics

There is a strong psychedelic influence in many popular television shows, films, commercials, as well as many animated films, and numerous Hollywood actors and directors have claimed inspiration from psychedelics, such as Stanley Kubrick, Jack Nicholson, Peter Fonda, Larry Hagman, Jane Fonda, George Carlin, and Dennis Hopper. Art Clokey, creator of the wonderful *Gumby* animation series that originally ran from 1955 to 1968, has said in interviews that he was inspired by his experiences with psychedelics.

So many popular films come to mind when one thinks about how psychedelics have affected the motion picture industry that it’s hard to keep count. Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Ken Russel’s *Altered States*, the Wachowsky brothers’ *Matrix* trilogy, Jan Kounen’s *Renegade*, and Jodorowsky’s *Holy Mountain* are but a few that instantly spring to mind.

In this edition of the Bulletin, celebrated writer Erik Davis explores how psychedelic themes of ecological interconnectedness shape the highest-grossing film of all time: James Cameron’s *Avatar*. Evan Martin also joins us in this special issue to share with us his encyclopedic knowledge of how psychedelics have influenced film and television.

Pushing the Boundaries of Mainstream Culture

I suspect that every creative person who has ever taken a psychedelic drug or plant yearns to express the experience. Whether one has had a healing experience or a beautiful vision, a mystical insight or a sense of spiritual transcendence, some rapturous sensory enhancement or a revelation that reveals hidden dimensions in the mind and nature, the creative spirit seeks to express these profound and powerful experiences through the medium that it finds most effective. As our species continues to evolve, as we grow smarter and more aware, our artistic ability to express these extraordinary states of consciousness will surely grow and develop into realms that we can now hardly conceive of.

We can barely begin to imagine what the future holds in store for us. However, before we can arrive at such a transcendental point in our evolution, we first need to radically heal ourselves and the biosphere. Psychedelic drugs seem to be valuable keys, that can not only help us to effectively treat many forms of illness and disease, but also to help raise ecological awareness, inspire spirituality, and enhance creativity on a major scale.

This is why I believe so strongly in the research that MAPS is doing, and so faithfully support this leading-edge organization. A more conscious and compassionate world can emerge with the intelligent use of psychedelic drugs, and the kind of scientific research that MAPS and its sister organizations are currently doing can transform how our society views the use of these important medicines. •

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