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Narcotic Dystopia; Psychedelic
Utopia?: Aldous Huxley, Drug-induced
Experiences, and ‘Topianism’ between
Brave New World and *Island*

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Abstract

A widely researched aspect of Aldous Huxley's work is his later years' advocacy for *psychedelic* drugs, in which he came to develop a strong psychological and philosophical interest. While the early novel *Brave New World* (1932) presented the fictional 'perfect drug' *soma* in dark, authoritarian tones, the autobiographical essay *The Doors of Perception* (1954) evaluated the experience of *mescaline* therapy much more approvingly. Considering also his final novel *Island* (1962) as a powerful statement of belief in psychedelics' potential, it is tempting to read the later ideas as essentially disconnected from the earlier, more skeptical ones. However, such a view risks oversimplifying the larger picture of Huxley's intellectual development, in which context his approach to psychedelics and other drugs must be situated. This problem thereby feeds into an issue of *periodization*, which research on Huxley has not often dealt with explicitly. While scholars have examined the crucial points of difference between *Brave New World's* and *Island's* philosophical viewpoints, they have just as often declined to look closer at the period of transition between the two, wherein ideas were shaped and adjusted according to historical circumstances and personal experiences. Hence, this paper adopts a New Historicist framework, aiming toward a historically contextualized comparison between Huxley's 'early', 'middle', and 'late' stages. This analysis of Huxley's treatment of *drug-induced experiences* emphasizes the dynamic interplay between innovation and variation on received themes that constitutes an authorship.

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Introduction

Aldous Huxley's novels *Brave New World* (hereafter *BNW*, 1932) and *Island* (his last, 1962) depict parallel but widely dissimilar experiences of psychoactive substances, or, for simplicity's sake, *drugs* (in the interest of avoiding unduly obstructive dualism, I do not call these depictions 'polar opposites' or any such thing, although they may appear so). The organic, mushroom-based '*moksha*-medicine' of *Island* was modelled on *psychedelics*, a term co-coined by Huxley to refer to those "soul-revealing" substances he deemed capable of inducing "mystical and visionary experiences" (Rasch 262). Meanwhile, its *BNW* equivalent, 'soma', is "euphoric, narcotic, pleasantly hallucinant" (46), and thus generally more reminiscent of a sleep-inducing, pain-relieving *narcotic* (*Britannica* (1) paragraph 1). However, as discussed below, *soma* is a more complicated case, a hypothetical ideal which is not reducible to a simple likeness of any single type of drug.

Furthermore, the differing social customs and attitudes governing the use of these drugs contribute to characters experiencing them in such disparate ways. According to Huxley's own characterization in a later essay, *soma* is administered daily and mainly for recreational purposes, increasing consumption and social contentment in service of totalitarian control (*Moksha* 82). On the other hand, the *moksha-medicine* is consumed more seldom and mainly under specific, celebratory conditions, being integrated into a holistic educational system (Rasch 277). In recognition of the multiple determining factors behind the effects of these drugs, this paper builds on philosopher Aidan Lyon's expansive definition of the term 'psychedelic experience', not as a chemical or legal class of substances but as a multi-conditional *experience* which is often, but not necessarily, induced by a certain type of drug (Lyon 2). Importantly, this qualification also leaves room, even in directly drug-induced experiences, for other aspects beside merely a psycho-chemical agent working upon some presumed 'neutral' subject.

Such experiences were depicted by Huxley in terms of their potential cultural implications; therefore, this paper applies a New Historicist lens to investigate the ways in which changing cultural attitudes informed these depictions. New Historicist scholar Stephen Greenblatt defines *culture* as "a structure of improvisation, a set of patterns that have enough plasticity, enough scope for variation, to accommodate most of the participants in a given culture", wherein "most artists are themselves creators of variations upon received themes" (229). Through this definition, his approach becomes rooted in an inbuilt recognition of the

dynamic relationship between historical circumstances and creative authorship in the origins of literature. Greenblatt's conception of the author, one of both reflecting contemporaneity and reacting individually to it, is one which this paper adopts as eminently conducive to nuanced historicist argumentation. While such 'cultural analysis' is concerned with examining and even reconstructing the historical circumstances implicit in literary texts, it is in no way opposed to complementing this with "internal formal analysis of works of art" (227) - this paper consequently applies close reading of parts of Huxley's novels alongside historical analysis.

Taking a bird's eye-view of his career, one may get the impression that Huxley's trying mescaline produced in him an instant switch to full-fledged fanaticism for psychedelics. For example, scholars such as Gorman Beauchamp and Jerome Meckier deftly analyze the crucial points of difference between *BNW* and *Island*, but they do so without looking any closer at the period of transition between them. Is it really so simple: 'narcotic dystopia; psychedelic utopia'? Upon closer inspection, Huxley was clearly hesitant on many points as to the new psychedelics' large-scale dissemination and normalization and, even in his final years, conditioned his acceptance of them on careful cautioning about the specific circumstances under which psychedelics could be used successfully. This shows that, beside the discovery of psychedelics as chemical compounds in themselves, there must have been other factors at play in his changing conception of what they could offer – other *caveats*, so to speak, which he needed to navigate concerning their safe and beneficial use. In contrast to earlier diachronic comparisons of Huxley's writings on psychedelics, I therefore argue that his acceptance of them was in essence a *gradual* process. By positioning his psychedelics advocacy in historical context, I further argue for its appearance as a new premise in an ongoing socio-political line of argumentation, as opposed to an end unto itself.

In *BNW*, for instance, *soma* use was envisioned as a powerful institution in the World Government's authoritarian control of its subjects, an experience afforded to loyal citizens as a privilege but leaving little room for self-development or even individual ideation: "making people like their unescapable social destiny" (*BNW* 12). Later, Huxley certainly lauded mescaline for its perceived revelatory psychological benefits; but, as in the essay *Brave New World Revisited* (*BNWR*, 1958, cited below from *Moksha*), he persistently warned against the dangers of repression in case of its political implementation. Finally, Huxley was inspired by (and himself took part in inspiring) the optimistic spirit of early counter-culture progressivism in imagining a way for psychedelic experience to serve both individual enlightenment and stable social development. Hence, my view is that Huxley's thought in the interval between

BNW and *Island* in was, in effect, an ideological tug-of-war between the promise of a much-needed, constructive “applied mysticism” in the political world (Ballesteros 732) and the ever-present threat posed by the use of drugs in totalitarian atrocities and social repression – not least informed by the prominent *brainwashing scare* of the 50s and 60s.

During this 30-year intermittent period, Huxley repeatedly set down his thoughts on different types of drugs and drug use, and their differing effects on culture, wherefore we now know something about the underlying convictions which are mirrored in his literary portrayals. Alongside the famous non-fiction prose duo *The Doors of Perception* (*Doors*, 1954) and *Heaven and Hell* (*H&H*, 1956), his changing views on this favorite subject were also covered in many shorter texts such as essays, some of which feature below. His accounts of the potential benefits and pitfalls of different alternate states of consciousness are hereby shown to shift from a socially necessary escapism which risks causing docile suggestibility, into a direction of psychedelic-inspired self-exploratory mysticism, and consequently into positing ways of putting individuals’ revelatory experiences into practical use in cultural context. This trajectory provides a link between the two main fictional works’ underlying assumptions of the societal role of *drug-induced experiences*¹.

What, then, can the 20th century’s development of new drugs, and new perspectives on their use, tell us about the ways in which Huxley portrayed drug-induced experiences in his writing? This thesis proposes that his shifting views in reaction to historical revaluations and related personal events can be shown in three distinct stages: moving from early pre-psychedelic skepticism to late holistic acceptance, through the middle stage of condoning its benefits for individuals while forewarning large-scale implementation. The aim is to show how an alternative periodization of Huxley’s career can be constructed based on this crucial aspect of his thinking. Placing focus on the *pivotal* stage of his negotiation between opposing viewpoints, the tempting over-simplification of an ‘early/late watershed’ can be dissolved in a dynamic, historically conditioned process which is shown to encompass them both. (While I don’t pretend to charge any particular critic with this misconception, I do maintain the utility of ‘safeguarding’ against a possible structural misunderstanding by addressing it explicitly). As is often the case with distinctions in periodization, a comparative look at transition phases can offer insight into *why* events might have unfolded as they did. In

¹This concept is intended as an expansion of the sense of ‘psychedelic experience’: the experienced effects of other, ‘non-psychedelic’, drugs may be discussed according to similar phenomenological dimensions – e.g., neuro-chemical, socio-political, etc. (see subsection ‘Terminology’ below).

this case, I mean that Huxley constructed *Island* as a sort of compromise between the backsides of drug-induced experiences (as shown in *BNW* etc.) and the newly discovered promises which accompanied his mescaline session (and its theoretical treatment in *Doors* etc.).

The three stages are presented and discussed in turn below, after an initial background survey of drug histories before and during Huxley's time. The early stage is represented by the pessimistic 'opium-as-the-religion-of-the-people' ideology of *BNW* (*Moksha* 113). The middle is represented by the tentatively hopeful, personal-psychological mysticism of *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell*, alongside the consistently repression-wary *BNWR* and adjacent essays. Finally, the late stage comes to full expression first in *Island*, wherein long-absent ideas of the social incorporation of psychedelic experience are enacted through a holistic philosophy of world-affirming *applied mysticism*. Furthermore, the three stages in turn represent literary-philosophical critiques of the ideas of 'utopia', 'dystopia', and finally of the whole dualistic framework encompassing the two, in favor of a new ideal which may be termed 'topianism' (after Huxley himself, qtd. in Rasch 269).

Background

Terminology

The central terminology of this paper is largely comprised of related but distinct terms, such as 'drugs', 'psychedelics', and 'narcotics'. As a starting point to establishing these terms clearly, the definition of 'psychedelic experience' presented by philosopher Aidan Lyon has as its key component the decoupling of the term from the necessity of drug use (18). This means that the type of experience commonly associated with psychedelic drugs *can* also be engendered by many other means, among them meditation and other typically 'mystic' practices (9).

Based on this definition, the current study finds fit to adopt a wider umbrella term of 'drug-induced experience', since it is by no means obvious that *all* drugs mentioned by Huxley may be reasonably described as psychedelic. For the same reason, it is not in the interest of this paper to establish with certainty which real-life drugs may have modelled for or inspired those found in the novels, although this may be brought up tangentially as *one of many factors* which can inform us about their associated experiences. The idea is to maintain a crucial distinction between the widely varying psycho-physiological effects of types of substances like psychedelics and narcotics, while acknowledging their shared common trait of engendering a

certain experience which is both culturally contingent and itself constitutive in shaping cultural processes of regulating social *constraint* and *mobility*, to use Greenblatt's terms (225).

As for the question of the actual content of these experiences, Devenot & Irving note that it is notoriously difficult to put into words in an academic form (1). Granting that they refer specifically to psychedelics, the same can be said also of other drug-induced experiences, considering their unavoidable integration in the "complex whole" (Greenblatt 227) of the cultures in which they occur. Devenot & Irving's tentative answer is to give a concise 20th-century retrospective of the historical-philosophical developments of psychedelic phenomenology, thereby establishing the context of its origins. Moreover, in outlining possible critical approaches to depictions of psychedelic experience in literature, they emphasize the potential of poetic expression for capturing ineffable phenomena (1). Following their example, I therefore focus on historical circumstances which are reflected in Huxley's conception of the role played by drug-induced experiences in the larger scheme of social reality, which may be attained by close reading of those parts of his works which portray characters engaging in such experiences.

Historical Overview

Historians of medicine such as Mold, Naguit et al., and Yates have all proposed to outline the developments of American and British drug policies and public attitudes toward the subject, with a combined range from around 1850 to 1950. While the 50s-and-60s (proto-) counterculture era is generally given much more attention in this respect, filling the chronological gap from, at least, the writing of *BNW* up until then is crucial to understanding Huxley's cultural surroundings during the formative years of his creative profile. Mold, for instance, suggests a slow-but-steady movement in Britain from the moralizing tone of Victorian 'drug panics' toward the recognition of narcotics use as a public health issue, although this term came into wide usage only in the 1950s (95-96). Similarly, Naguit et al. explain 20th-century Britain's pioneering role in founding "associations that are aimed at changing local or national drug policies" (2), connected in turn with the construction of the "drug user" as an "autonomous subject" (3) propagating for social reform as the logical cure for what was now increasingly considered a social disease (2-3). Beside the fact that Huxley spent time in California throughout his career, Yates points out that his home country also experienced a prevalent

American influence in the early 20th century, which only serves to underline the importance of considering both contexts as part of Huxley's cultural surroundings.

During the same period, Nazi Germany was experimenting with narcotics in ways perhaps endemic of the era's authoritarian regimes. As Defalque & Wright point out, *methamphetamine* came into wide usage in the form of the internally manufactured "Pervitin" (21). German chemists having synthesized it the year before, the drug was commercialized in 1938 and officially regulated in 1941 due to concerns about its physical and social effects; however, after that time it remained in common use in the army (24). These later revelations about Nazi German drug history must be said to reveal an element of extraordinary prescience in the idea of social control by *soma*, introduced in *BNW* some 10 years earlier. Since Huxley could not have been aware of the events at that time, it is more likely that he was tapping into certain historically-grounded popular apprehensions about state-sponsored drug use.

As for his 50s-and-60s writings, it is likely that Huxley was to some extent familiar with the role played by drug habits and pharmacological institutions in the atrocities of Nazi Germany, as these factors came to light already at the time of the famous Nuremberg Trials beginning in 1945. As López-Muñoz et al. (2) explain, this applies not least to the 1945 so-called "Doctor's Trial" around the abuses of main psychopharmaceutical supplier I.G. Farben, which in no small part consisted of administering large amounts of Pervitin for various socio-political ends (401). Indeed, any awareness of these circumstances could only have reinforced the apprehensions against psycho-chemical government repression which were especially emphasized in *BNWR* (as shown below).

Furthermore, as Snelders & Pieters argue, the situation with German Pervitin is not reducible to a simple case of state enforcement but must be seen as a complex socio-economic process involving all layers of society. In their "drug history from below", they explore the notion that "All societies have unique patterns of psychoactive substance use and consumption, which are essential elements of everyday life" (686). Nevertheless, while acknowledging the aspect of social demand, they maintain that Pervitin was *also* disseminated 'from above' for various political purposes: it was thought to inspire the strong "will and belief" needed to power the state project, to "stimulate a sense of well-being, to suppress fatigue and to accelerate the productivity of workers" (690). In summation, whether in a 1950s American "Amphetamine Democracy", a German "Amphetamine Dictatorship" (686-687), or any other real or imagined society, drugs do inevitably play a part in the multilateral social interactions of *constraint* and *mobility*, the complex "structure of improvisation" in which Greenblatt

locates *culture*. Thus, the *experiences* produced by any and all drugs which are consumed are necessarily involved in the co-construction of the societal structures in which they are integrated; they are *drugs that shape men's minds*, to use Huxley's own phrase (*Moksha* 122).

Beside the Third Reich, López-Muñoz et al. (1; 2) also reference, to a lesser extent, the comparable medical abuses of the Soviet Union and other regimes before, during, and after World War II (11; 402). Furthermore, the Communist states of the 50s and 60s were to become subject to the persistent rumors of the so-called "brainwashing scare" which Williams claims was "widespread in Cold War popular culture" (21), and which was in no small part founded on accusations of indoctrination not unlike the "Neo-Pavlovian Conditioning Rooms" of *BNW* (15, my decapitalization). While this phenomenon can with some utility be dismissed as sensationalist, it did tap into a deeper vein of public discourse about democracy and individual autonomy which was potentially politically valuable (Williams 26), and in which Huxley was very much involved from *BNW* onward.

Furthermore, its effects were not limited to popular culture but were afforded greater authority by their acceptance in the social sciences; for instance, British psychiatrist William Sargant's popular book about "Brain-washing" received public appraisals from several notable figures, not least of which was Huxley himself (25). A product of the "battle for the mind" aspect of a period of psychological warfare (22), American and other Western paranoia focused on the shadowy goings-on supposedly concealed "behind the 'Iron' and 'Bamboo' Curtains" of Russia and China (24). As Carruthers adds, this "chimed with populist notions of communist cunning (and[...] 'Oriental' artfulness)" (81). Of course, there is no reason to assume that Huxley would have intentionally promoted such prejudicial notions; however, considering their apparent pervasiveness in American and British discourse of the time, it is all but inevitable that his politically oriented writing should find them mirrored in some form or other.

Early Stage: *Brave New World* (1932)

***Soma* and Philosophy**

In *BNW*, the World State's social program is all-encompassing: "from the prenatal genetic engineering, through conditioning, indoctrination, and entertainment to *soma*", all of which amount to "the thwarting of awareness in a cloud of constant intoxication" (93). Uwe Rasch's

biography *Aldous Huxley and the Enemies of Freedom* picks up on this interdependence of the different parts of society, identifying *soma* as an integrated part of a holistic conception of the socio-political realm (99). Specifically, “awareness”, and not least the loss of it, is philosophically crucial to Huxley’s thought; it bears associations to concepts like empiricism, experience, perception, the body, and so on, which may be categorized, albeit somewhat simplistically, as *immanent* values in opposition to corresponding *transcendent* ones. Throughout Huxley’s corpus, there are constant attempts at negotiation and reconciliation between these two sets of values, stemming from his conviction that, as Rasch puts it, “the cultural move from away from Hellenistic pantheism to Platonic Judeo-Christian monotheism has produced a truncated anthropology reducing individual existence to the mental (and purportedly transcendental)[...] at the expense of the human animal, the unconscious, and the wisdom of the body” (97).

Consequently, recognizing *BNW* as a *novel of ideas* means understanding its philosophical importance as a premise in the prolonged Huxley argument that “Reality is anti-Platonic”, which “logically extends to a fundamental criticism, and critique, of ideologies” (Rasch 110). On the surface, this is directed at certain particular ideologies, such as socialist planned economy or capitalist free-market consumerism, but I argue that it is also aimed at *the concept of ideology itself*. As Rasch claims, the idea for *BNW* was the product of a time in which both the capitalist and socialist models were perceived by Huxley as “leading only to further concentration and centralization of power” (95). As a result, the World State appears as a sort of political ‘perfect storm’, combination of the two systems in which citizens’ self-identification with both collectivist class unity and rampant consumerist hedonism are enforced through ‘hypnopædic conditioning’ (20-21).

This judgement is reinforced, as Rasch shows, by the consistent naming of characters after historical figures from both political camps (100), as well as by an observation of the shared common denominator of *rationalism* which underlies both systems (101). The take-away is clearly not that either one or the other ideology is more or less repressive than the other, but rather that they both falter in analogous ways *by virtue of being ideologies*. In essence, they are Platonic-idealist chimeras, intellectual creations which, when mapped out forcibly onto the ‘real’ world of human experience, fundamentally violate its epistemic being as a realm of *anti-Platonic*, empirical phenomena. As shown below, *soma* fits into the picture as an allegory for these rationalistic, ‘utopian’ ideologies.

***Soma* and Utopianism**

From the allegorical perspective, there exists a strong literary link between this underlying philosophical-political critique and a subversive, parodical statement about the utopian literary genre or form. The assumption that ideal societies are impossible to realize is inherent in the term *utopia* itself, through its Greek-derived sense of *no-place* (*Britannica* (2) paragraph 2), but *BNW* carries this line of thinking further by positing that the pursuit of such a society may also be *undesirable*. They may, for instance, manifest themselves as a “welfare-tyranny of Utopia”, as Huxley characterized the World State in a 1946 foreword (*BNW* 1). The novel’s narrative form follows the classic utopian model, consisting of outsider John the Savage’s ‘guided tour’ through the various facets of society under the World State. The innovation is in the content: the particulars of this culture in which both the welfare and the tyranny viscerally shine through, for instance in Lenina’s date with Henry (62-67) and Bernard’s simultaneous experience at the *soma*-frenzied orgiastic ritual of the “Community Service” (67-74).

As Elcock points out, *soma* is “depending on the dosage, alternatively a stimulant, a sedative, or a psychedelic” (298), allowing it to blend into any social situation by inducing an appropriate reaction. *BNWR* corroborates this grading of possible effects, connecting a small dose to stimulant “euphoria”, a medium one to “hallucinant” psychedelia, and a large dose to “narcotic” sedation (82). In this way, it is able to penetrate every aspect of society, both being served in small doses with the young couple’s coffee (65) and elsewhere exalting citizens into ecstatic heights of radicalized “Fordism” and self-identification with the collectivist machinery: “Ford, we are twelve; oh, make us one, / Like drops within the Social River; / Oh, make us now together run / As swiftly as thy shining Flivver” (70).

Consequently, just as Snelders & Pieters claim that Pervitin use “never threatened the political or social structures of the Third Reich” because its constant level of endemic use ensured stability as far as its influence went (697), so Elcock observes *soma*’s capacity to “[allow] any potentially subversive energies to be channeled and diffused[...] The old order would thus always stay in place” (298). In this sense, *soma* represents the practical implementation of a typically authoritarian brand of utopian idealism, offering its subjects increasingly complete social order in exchange for the possibility of expanding its reach ever further into each small part of the totalitarian edifice. Although this element of cultural ‘sedation’ goes along with an interpretation of *soma* as *symbolically* narcotic, there are other

textual indications which complicate this view, and which the following paragraphs therefore look closer at.

***Soma* as Psychedelic**

Considering these three rather incongruent *modes* of *soma* experience, it is not possible to reduce it to a simple likeness of any existing drug (or even type of drug). As Huxley relates in the essay “Chemical Persuasion”, it is named after the unknown substance, of the same name, praised in the ancient Indian religious documents of the early Vedic culture of ancient India. However, he also claims that it differs fundamentally from its namesake, not least in that it offered none of the supposedly dangerous physiological drawbacks of the original (*Moksha* 113). Rather than any circumstantial likeness to real drugs, the crucial aspect of *soma* is rather its very *perfection*, its symbolic function as an ideal drug. As Rasch puts it, “*soma* is the perfect supplement for an otherwise near-perfect social design for bland happiness” (262). In this way, it epitomizes the culture in which it is embedded, an observation which at once emphasizes the social malleability of drug-induced experiences and the potential power of their impact in shaping culture.

In this social or *cultural* sense, Bernard’s Community Sing should not be seen as something essentially separated from the psychedelic experience which Huxley would later celebrate. In fact, it shares several facets in common with the Huxley-based concept which Sawyer (1) calls the *unitive mystical experience*, in which psychedelics are thought to *embody* a holistic philosophy through a directly experiential “unitive knowledge” (3). While *soma* represents a very different kind of philosophy from the ones explored in *Doors* and other later works, namely one of totalitarian consumerism and conformism, it is nevertheless seen to inspire an immersive experience which reenacts and promotes this particular philosophy. Every aspect of the “Solidarity Service” ritual intensifies and is intensified by the central rite of *soma*-ingestion: the “President of the Group” ceremoniously making “the sign of the T”; the “synthetic music”; the “loving cup of strawberry ice-cream *soma*”; the repeated formulas of self-annihilation and social unity; and the “Solidarity Hymns” praising the existential unity of individuals working as ideological cogs: “Orgy-porgy, Ford and fun, / Kiss the girls and make them One. / Boys at one with girls at peace; / Orgy-porgy gives release” (69-73).

Consequently, while *BNW* is usually relayed to a ‘pre-psychedelic’ stage

before Huxley's first recorded drug-induced experiences of his own, it does already betray a substantial interest in the possible consequences of drug use in culture. Sawyer (1) further delimits the phenomenology of *unitive mystical experience* according to Paul Marshall's several "subtypes": "*integral*" apprehension of "the world as a whole", feeling an "*immersive*[...] part of that whole", "*communal*[...] sense of loving fellowship", "*interconnective*" intuition of thing-relationships, and discerning of a "*source*[...][a] grounding of things in a common origin" (11). Their exact philosophical nuances can be discussed, but at the very least, the *communal*, *interconnective*, and *source* criteria all appear readily available here in some form or other. Although most or all of them are conspicuously absent for the disillusioned Bernard compared to the other participants, they underline the many similarities between this literary portrayal and those later ones, discussed below, which are nevertheless laid out in much more positive terms and as explicitly *psychedelic*. This may, in turn, prompt the reader to compare and contrast the two in search of what really differentiates them in Huxley's view. Since the pre-mescaline *early stage* already contains such similar accounts of drug-induced experiences, can the 1954 discovery of mescaline alone account fully for the increasing involvement of drug policy in the positive side of Huxley's socio-political thought?

Middle 'Pivotal' Stage: *The Doors of Perception* (1954); *Heaven and Hell* (1956); *Brave New World Revisited* (1958), etc.

Periodization

This stage is crucial to understanding Huxley's development of ideas on drug-induced experiences; I call it a *pivotal* stage because it represents a dividing line between the polar opposites of *BNW* and *Island*. However, its position in between those two 'great novels' might lend it the appearance of a simple pre- and post-mescaline divide, at which the author 'instantly' switched direction and, without reservations, adopted the psychedelic experience as personal and political panacea. Although some of his acquaintances may arguably have fallen prey to this temptation (especially during the later stages of 60s counterculture), a careful survey of the period shows him struggling all along with the pros and cons of the issue in relation to his surroundings, with the promises and threats of the future as he perceived them. This realization,

in turn, offers valuable insights into *why*, in particular, *Island* was designed to accommodate psychedelics in such a way as it finally was.

At this point, despite being positively overwhelmed by his recent mescaline experience, the reader finds Huxley grappling with the question of what this new type of drug can really offer beyond an improved form of *soma*-like escapism. Hall & Farrell (2022) shine a light on what exactly it is that separates Huxley's 'tentative' adoption of psychedelic advocacy in the *Doors*-era from the bolder example that follows in *Island*. While he lauded mescaline as being "less harmful than alcohol and tobacco", this very statement also betrays an assumption that it nonetheless fills the same need for psychological relief as these other drugs (1812). In other words, this argument for psychedelic experience is not based on any proposed positive benefits but rather on a sort of negative *damage prevention* measure of replacing hazardous drugs with more innocuous ones.

This argument is based on Huxley's view that all cultures offer some form of acceptable drug use as a means of "chemical vacations from intolerable self-hood and repulsive surroundings" (qtd. in Hall & Farrell 1812). In *Doors*, he expounds upon this focus on the *negative virtues* of mescaline: "Unlike alcohol, it does not drive the taker into the kind of uninhibited action which results in brawls, crimes of violence and traffic accidents", it "does not have to be paid for (and this is surely important) by a compensatory hangover", and "The Indians who consume peyote buttons do not seem to be physically or morally degraded by the habit" (40-41). However, a relatively innocuous form of chemical escapism is still just that, a *vacation* and nothing more, which does not appear to warrant the whole fictional society of *Island* being built on the virtues of psychedelic experience. Furthermore, Huxley had already considered the consequences of a completely non-harmful drug like *soma* and would continue to warn about its political dangers in *BNWR* and other essays written after *Doors*, as seen below.

Therefore, it stands to reason that Huxley's subsequently expanding psychedelic advocacy must also have been based on some *positive virtues*, which could distinguish mescaline and the like from formerly known chemical experience-inducers and offer an actual change in possible outcomes. These virtues are, in fact, inseparable from the aforementioned philosophical background of 'anti-Platonism' which he had been cultivating up until this point. In *Doors*, mescaline experience is partly taken as the answer to an interest in "*Istigkeit* – wasn't that the word Meister Eckhart like to use? 'Is-ness'. The Being of Platonic philosophy – except that Plato seems to have made the enormous, the grotesque mistake of separating Being from becoming, and identifying it with the mathematical abstraction of the Idea" (7, italics in

original). As has been shown through Rasch's commentary, the question of Plato was for Huxley part of a complex of concerns about certain 'idealistic' aspects of Western modernity, which lead him to inquire further into the real implications of the psychedelic-experiential antidote to these: "But meanwhile my question remained unanswered. How was this cleansed perception to be reconciled with a proper concern for human relations, with the necessary chores and duties, to say nothing of charity and practical compassion?" (23).

Apropos of the above quote, I argue that the question would remain unanswered up until it was given aesthetic form in *Island*. For now, suffice it to say that the possibility of answering it arose, not only in reaction to mescaline, but as a premise in a long line of argumentation about a certain aspect of Western philosophical heritage as manifested in modern culture. When psychedelic experience appeared on the stage laid by Huxley's previous thought, it fit into the larger scheme by offering a new mode of access to *istigkeit*; however, it also bore an alarming similarity to those previously known drugs, the cultural implementation of which had been represented in the *soma*-replete Community Sing service of *BNW*. Simply by virtue of being innocuous, mescaline and other psychedelics could not be cleared of those apprehensions associated with other powerful drug-induced experiences. Consequently, there arose an apparent need for a larger framework into which the new type of experience could be integrated in order to get the most out of its positive potential, while avoiding the pitfalls of large-scale use.

Psychedelic Philosophy

Although *stage two* is here represented by a selection of Huxley's 50s works, this is not to be taken as an isolated or clinically delimited period in the development of his thought and authorship. For example, Mark Taylor traces *Doors*'s positive reevaluation of philosopher Henri Bergson's *vitalism* back through Huxley's work to the 1925 novel *Those Barren Leaves* (364); meanwhile, Dana W. Sawyer (2) notes the continuity of Huxley's interest in his own 'perennialist' brand of mysticism at least from 1945's *The Perennial Philosophy* (541). These are just two examples of the various threads of ideation which can be seen to feed into this pivotal middle stage, into Huxley's formulation of the holistic socio-political statement which was to become *Island*.

Focusing in on the mysticist thread, Sawyer remarks that Huxley did not equate

this with any “essence of religion”, as has sometimes been assumed (540). While he thought of traditional, organized religion in general as “*ignorance and dogma resulting in arrogance and control*”, he seemingly considered mysticism as more or less the *opposite* of dogma: “*unitive experience*” (541). Incidentally, this experiential, ‘anti-dogmatic’ focus shares a great likeness not only with the philosophical inspiration derived from Bergson, but also with the aforementioned *immanent-contra-transcendent* question.

While *immanence* was adopted by Huxley as a counterweight to a prevailing ideal of *transcendence* in Western modernity, Rasch explains that he similarly appreciated the Bergsonian “philosophy of life” because it “opposed an overly reductionist and mechanistic scientific world view” (193). In his own time, Bergson’s opposition had been staged mainly against the rationally minded neo-Kantian movements of German prominence, and Huxley picked up the critique as increasingly urgent in the face of a deepening (post-)modernist crisis of values. Hence, it appears that all signs point in the same direction as to Huxley’s philosophical development: his growing interest in mysticism, vitalism, and *immanence* all emphasize the values of concrete, *unitive* experience over dogma-ridden idealism. In light of this observation, we may reevaluate the role played in these matters by the discovery of mescaline in *Doors*.

Despite his belief in mescaline as an aid to this kind of intensely *direct* experience, there remained the problem which *Doors* termed the “gratuitous grace” (46). That is, that however revelatory, such an ephemeral phenomenon was by no means easily translatable into beneficial use in ‘daily life’, beyond the short span of the immediately drug-induced state of consciousness. Huxley especially stresses the difficult contradiction between unmediated *visionary* experience and the predominantly *verbal* forms which, by necessity, mediate the more prosaic arenas of “language and the other symbol systems” (47). The problem of *gratuitous graces* would continue to follow Huxley throughout his later attempts to reconcile *unitive experience* with education and culture, wherefore it is revisited below in connection with the *late stage*.

Applied Mysticism in Historical Context

One cannot take the perceived positive properties of psychedelic drugs as sufficient in themselves to explain Huxley’s psychedelic turn. For instance, Virginia Ballesteros contextualizes his experience by situating his ecological, technological, and pacifist concerns

as central to the postwar zeitgeist, as problems which he proposed could be alleviated by psychedelic-inspired *applied mysticism* (734). Rasch remarks that Huxley's interest in such typically *counterculture*-associated values began at least as early as his involvement in the 1930s and -40s peace movement, Jiddu Krishnamurti-inspired meditation practices, and so on (186), suggesting a kind of 'proto-counterculture' affiliation beginning long before the 60s.

On the one hand, Huxley recognized the psychedelic potential for a temperamental increase in the personality trait of *openness*, which might predict an interest in many of the socio-political virtues he had been propagating as antidotes to his *BNW* premonitions: moral flexibility and exploration, antiauthoritarianism, liberalism, environmentalism, and so on (749-750). On the other hand, as Ballesteros also cautions, the actual experience was only one part of the whole picture of its moral repercussions, being preceded by the *preparation* stage and followed up by the *integration* of learned insights. The experience, in turn, was not made solely by the drug itself; it was determined not only by the classic psycho-physical parameters of *set and setting*, but also by the long-term perspective of *matrix*, including the totality of the subject's life circumstances going into the experience (742).

In view of all of these unruly preconditions to a successful outcome in the long term, it is no wonder that Huxley saw the need for an *applied mysticism* as "a technique for helping individuals to get the most out of their transcendental experience" (qtd. In Ballesteros 734). Although he was certainly encouraged by the intimation of positive potential in mescaline and other psychedelics, he also realized that its fulfillment was far from guaranteed, as he gave voice to in *BNWR*: "By systematically using the psychological, chemical and electronic instruments already in existence (not to mention those new and better devices which the future holds in store) a tyrannical oligarchy could keep the majority in permanent and willing subjection" (*Moksha* 83). This was not meant to apply exclusively to the *soma*-likeness of German Pervitin and the like but to *any* drug which plays a part in shaping human experience, not least one so powerful as certain psychedelic "mind-transformers": "What man will ultimately do with these extraordinary elixirs, it is impossible to say" (84).

In effect, then, tentative hopefulness about the personal-psychological benefits of reliably inducing mystical states of consciousness was seriously tempered by such apprehensions about their possibilities for repressive implementation in the hands of authority. While this risk had obviously been firmly manifest already in *BNW*, the actualities of the political climate reinforced the notion not only through the reveals of the aforementioned Nuremberg *Doctor's Trial*, but also through the Cold War's *brainwashing scare*. Alleged

Soviet use of drugs to heighten suggestibility and compliance in subjects is somewhat vaguely referenced by Huxley in the essay “Chemical Persuasion” (1958): “It is said that these drugs are sometimes employed by the Communists, when preparing important prisoners for their public appearance in court” (*Moksha* 117). Similarly, “Drugs that Shape Men’s Minds” (1958) tells that “The Russians[...] are now halfway through a Five Year Plan to produce “pharmacological substances that normalize higher nervous activity and heighten human capacity for work”” (128). In *BNWR* he claims (more confidently, but still citing no source), that “One third of all the American prisoners captured in Korea succumbed, at least partially, to Chinese brainwashing” (81).

Regardless of any verdict on the degrees of brainwashing paranoia contra legitimate information behind Huxley’s above claims, the point is that the potential implications of large-scale, government-sponsored drug use evidently raised the stakes of formulating an *applied mysticism*. While the newly discovered (at least by the Western public) psychedelics were “destined to play a part in human life” (84), the outcome depended in large part on the methodological framework surrounding their use – which was plainly a path fraught with peril, not least in the historical context of Huxley and his contemporaries. It would provide a theoretical link between mystical (psychedelic) experience in itself, and its integration into a larger infrastructure.

Late Stage: *Island* (1962)

‘Topianism’

Having recognized the need for an *applied mysticism* to make proper use of psychedelic experiences, Huxley was faced with the consequent issue of how, *in particular*, this method should be designed. It is important to emphasize the inherent difficulty of developing a coherent theoretical framework around this phenomenon, which was in essence meant to critique and supplement the very instruments of rationality and intellect which would now have to be used in its service. It is not as if one could reasonably make a valid statement against philosophical dogmatism by designing a rigid manifesto of one’s own, as this form would seem to undermine the proposed criticism from the offset.

Island was a solution to this difficulty, as instead of prescribing certain rules or

axioms of psychedelic use, it *embodied* those notions of *applied mysticism* in a particular, historically contingent environment. This sets the island of Pala apart in the vast corpus of utopian visions of literary history by denying the typical pretensions of universal validity in favor of a locally adapted model, which has built in a fundamental recognition of its own existence as conditional *response* to the needs and frailties of a specific time in history. While Oana Muresan has acknowledged this in terming the novel a "realistic utopia" (355), I find more utility in Huxley's own description of "a 'topian' rather than a utopian phantasy" (Rasch 269).

This distinction may strike the reader as mere semantics, but my terminological discrimination is founded on the novel's importance in the larger argument of *applied mysticism* which this paper follows. When Muresan, along with many others, calls Pala an "ideal society" (349), it is without recognizing the philosophical background that connects the optimistic idealism of utopian imagination back to the very Platonic, rationalist heritage to which Huxley considered this novel a polemic answer. When, as Rasch points out, "Huxley lets Pala founder on the hard rocks of contemporary reality" (272) in the ending's military annexation (*Island* 285), this is not compatible with calling it a 'utopia' unless it happens to be only a peripheral event of no import to the novel's overall philosophical standpoint. Hence, the following is devoted to explaining how the distinctly *topian* ideal is, in fact, integral to an intelligible account of the novel as part of Huxley's whole world of ideas. In other words, *Island* should not be viewed as an expression of some 'realistic', or any other type of, utopianism, but rather of the essentially different idea of *topianism*.

Beyond East and West

Beauchamp and Meckier both give similar renditions of the general purposes of *Island*. Beauchamp arrives at the novel's philosophical emphasis on the predominance of *eupsychic* (internal, from Gr. 'good mind') over *eutopic* (external, 'good place') values, and Meckier at much the same point, although using the terms *truth* and *beauty*. To sum up the common denominator in both arguments, *Island's* seemingly pessimistic ending in military annexation is contrasted with the protagonist's revelatory psychedelic experience to represent the inexorable triumph of heightened consciousness, even if it means awareness of a grimly *topian* world. How might this philosophical statement relate to Huxley's late experiences, and to the zeitgeist of the time he wrote it?

As Beauchamp proposes, *Island* can be seen as a “Summa Philosophica” over Huxley’s entire oeuvre, or at least as the conclusive endpoint to a mystically inclined search for meaning which was initiated with John the Savage’s argumentation against World Controller Mond in *BNW* (Beauchamp 60). The purpose of the peculiar *topianism* which characterizes Pala is therefore part of a larger scheme of long-developed ideation: to formulate, in fictional form, the blueprint for an *applied mysticism*, which can channel the raw experiential potential of psychedelics into serving the philosophical-political goal of ‘balancing the scales’ between Western and Eastern, *immanent* and *transcendent* influences in a more harmonious societal build.

Beauchamp continues by contrasting Plato’s dream of an autocratic “philosopher king” with *Island’s* long succession of reigning Hindu rajahs and their Scottish scientist chief advisors (62). Although Huxley was undoubtedly making a point with this pairing, I hold it as equally important that both of these men are obviously *concerned with immediate experience*. Doctor MacPhail is by no means sketched as a picture of scientist rigor, first establishing himself at Pala by performing an esoteric procedure of “mesmeric trance” on the Old Raja (123). Likewise, neither is his ‘Eastern mystic’ counterpart made out in unidimensional terms. For instance, the Old Raja is said to have had such a fascination for the phallic-centered Hindu ritual of “Buttering the family lingam”, that his doctor-advisor was unable to dissuade him from this particular expression of abstract symbolism, something which they were both otherwise opposed to by principle (113).

The relationship between these two characters signifies that Pala’s dual, Western-Eastern leadership is not simply a case of the intermingling of two polar-opposite principles. While they each represent a set of complementary philosophical aspects associated with their places of origin, they also share in common the fundamental orientation toward all manner of ritual practices which aim to establish a certain intense sense of existential ‘presence’. In essence, this experience-focused common denominator constitutes an expression of what Sawyer (1), after Huxley himself, calls *empirical mysticism* (10). This term is, of course, similar to *applied mysticism*, with the addition of specifically positioning mysticism within the rationalist-empiricist dichotomy.

***Moksha-medicine* Experience**

Like *BNW*, *Doors*, and the other works mentioned above, *Island* did not come about in a vacuum. Still, besides being located in, and conditioned by, historical circumstance, it is no less contingent upon its author's previous *personal* experiences as well. As David Bradshaw's remarks in his 1993 biographical introduction to the novel, those experiences had shaped his literary ambition "to arrive, technically, at a perfect fusion of the novel and the essay" (qtd. in *Island* viii). This idiosyncratic take on the 'novel of ideas' genre can be traced back at least to *BNW*, wherein he presented John the Savage with the choice between two opposing principles of utopian visions: was it preferable to live in the *welfare-tyranny* of the World State, or in the undiluted primitivism of the Savage Reservation? Bradshaw's introduction here quotes Huxley from 1935, who himself chooses "neither, but I believe some mean between the two is both desirable and possible and must be our objective" (xxiv). Furthermore, the author's 1946 foreword posited that "If I were now to rewrite the book, I would offer the Savage a third alternative" (xliii).

While he did not rewrite *BNW*, the third alternative was offered up in the form of *Island*. As shown above, the 30-year period since posing the aforementioned 'Savage's dilemma' had been spent developing a wholesale socio-political theory to challenge predominant idealist assumptions from manifold angles. Rational religion had been countered with *empirical mysticism*, which hoped to utilize psychedelics as an experiential alternative to the dogmatic platitudes of narcotic *soma* use: "A gramme in time saves nine", "Remember, one cubic centimetre cures ten gloomy sentiments", or "A gramme is always better than a damn" (*BNW* 77). Finally, as Rasch points out, the beginning of *Island* with a quote by *immanence*-champion Aristotle, and not by the *transcendent* idealist Plato (broadly speaking on both accounts), further marks Huxley's ideological positioning on this spectrum of interconnected philosophical dualisms: "In framing an ideal we may assume what we wish, but we should avoid impossibilities" (qtd. in Rasch 269).

Having established that these tropes in Huxley's thinking had been developing for some 30 years at least, can it really be said that *Island* brought anything new to the table philosophically? In my view, the element of *topianism* is the principal new ingredient which carries the novel *beyond* the pre-established, binary framework of diametrically opposing utopian visions – whether these be manifested as capitalism and communism, religion and science, or any other assumed pair of opposing forces relevant to post-war modernism. In a

way, it might appear identical with Huxley's previous favoring of the *immanent* side of the Western history of ideas. However, that is, in fact, a view which was present already in the quasi-paradisical primitivism of *BNW's* Savage Reservation, and what characterizes Pala differs in important ways. Namely, to hold a philosophical standpoint of empiricism, mysticism, and experiential *life philosophy* is one thing; however, it is still, in some sense, an ideal, an abstraction in the form of an intellectually maintained position. Instead, *Island* makes a point of putting its ideas into practice, as clearly visible in the *moksha*-medicine ceremony episode.

Compared to the above treated Community Sing episode of *BNW*, the corresponding one in *Island* has many parallels in common but also differs in ways that highlight the contrasts between the whole novels – and the periods of time to which they belong. The ceremonial event built around taking the *moksha*-medicine is offered to young citizens of Pala as an “initiation out of childhood into adolescence” (159), thus recalling the socializing phenomenology which Bernard reacted so adversely to. However, while he was all throughout being lulled into hedonistic submission by music, sweets, and orgiastic celebration, the Palanese ritual is framed by anything but such pleasure-seeking temptations. It is preceded by a daunting mountain-climbing test, so organized in order to infuse the whole experience with a sense of hard-earned achievement, as opposed to being purely unconditional (160). It is true that the directly drug-induced part of the ceremony still retains an aspect of *gratuitous grace*, as Huxley had called it in *Doors*, since the physically and mentally straining challenge is ‘artificially’ added onto the mystical experience. However, remembering Ballesteros’ point of the importance of a subject’s *matrix* in directing the end result of *applied mysticism*, it follows consequently to read the careful framing of the ceremony as Huxley’s, at least partial, answer to the problem of *gratuitous graces*, akin to *BNWR's* recognition that “The universe is not in the habit of giving us something for nothing” (84).

Topia, by taking the argument of *applied mysticism* to its full conclusion, avoids both clinging to utopian ideals or negatively invoking them through dystopian lamentation of their lack. Instead, the *mere experience of existence* is taken as fully self-sufficient, wherefore even a seemingly pessimistic ending is staged in a paradoxically triumphant light by the intense sense of presence ‘in the moment’ that it sees evoked in the protagonist. While the *empirical mysticism* of the *Doors* era had placed itself firmly on the ‘realistic’ end of the spectrum of utopian types, it had also been associated with the search for a pure, *applied mysticism* which could break away from this spectrum altogether. Drug-induced experience of the particularly psychedelic-mystic kind is put toward achieving this aim, being placed in the socio-political,

‘real-world’ context of a Palanese culture which it can inject with the appropriate measure of direct, holistic experience needed to realize the *topian* project.

Conclusion

This text has argued for a reimagined, specified periodization of Aldous Huxley’s career as a novelist and political thinker. This was a multifaceted career of diverse influences, a number of which could conceivably form the basis for a fruitful approach to periodization. Nevertheless, I have chosen one of the main threads running throughout his writings, referring to it broadly as his interest in *drug-induced experiences*. This line of thinking has led to a categorization in three distinct, gradually transitioning stages of intellectual, and accompanying literary, developments.

The *early stage* of *BNW* focuses on the potentially repressive aspects of the social stability we often aspire to as ideal. This is represented by the chemically unimpeachable *soma* as a tool in the hands of an autocratic state, its *narcotic* effect being associated philosophically with the rationalist, dogmatic religion of *Fordism*. The *pivotal stage* of *Doors* and other essays, in turn, contrasts this bleakly ‘dystopian utopia’ with the *psychedelic* virtues of empiricist, directly experiential mysticism. The idea of a *gratuitous grace* is here introduced as an expression of the linguistic barrier between immediate experience and culture, and thus of the fundamental problem faced in trying to achieve positive social change through the use of psychedelic experiences.

Finally, the *late stage* constitutes an attempted answer to this problem by an imagined *applied mysticism*: an aspiration of implementing *drug-induced experience* as a socio-political resource in service of a culture of holistic education. In *Island*, Huxley’s carefully developed conception of the psychedelic experience’s cultural potential results in a literary expression of *topianism*: a radically realistic, at once tragic and triumphant, alternative beyond the utopian-dystopian divide.

By way of concession, this topic has in no way been treated exhaustively here, and it may well be said to deserve far more critical attention to detail in a medium better able to accommodate its size and complexity. This being said, the current thesis has mainly set out to call the issue into question, thereby encouraging readers to evaluate the often overlooked role played by periodization in the interpretation of literary development over time.

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