

Erik Davis. *High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica and Visionary Experiences in the Seventies*. London: Strange Attractor Press; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019. 550 pp + 23 b/w illus. ISBN: 978-1907222764; ISBN: 9781907222870. Trade: \$34.95; paper: \$24.95.

Christopher Partridge. *High Culture: Drugs, Mysticism, and the Pursuit of Transcendence in the Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 472 pp. ISBN: 9780190459116. \$34.95.

While the world's first psychedelic science research centers were opening in 2019, the psychedelic renaissance was already leaving its mark on religious studies with the publication of two field-defining books in the psychedelic humanities: Erik Davis's *High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies* (2019) and Christopher Partridge's *High Culture: Drugs, Mysticism, and the Pursuit of Transcendence in the Modern World* (2018). Their celebrated arrival speaks to the shifting cultural climate of the academy, which has long embraced cultural prejudices that rendered the subject of psychedelics illegitimate. While both books briefly address the biases that historically suppressed interest in psychedelic experience within religious studies, they chart visions for a future of growing research in the "psychedelic humanities," which is yet in its infancy.

Written with a hip-shooting candor for style, Erik Davis's *High Weirdness* is both a page-turner and an intellectual *tour de force*. On the surface, it is a study of the thematic "family resemblances" connecting three literary psychonauts from the 1970s: Terence McKenna (along with his brother Dennis), Robert Anton Wilson, and Philip K. Dick. But it is also an experimental embrace of those very themes—a commitment to navigating through (and with) the weird, unknowable forces described in his source texts. Chapter one establishes a solid theoretical framework for the project, which serves as a guidepost for navigating the heady chapters to come. Davis describes the "weird" in terms of the anomalous and the queer, as that which refuses rigid categorization and

reductive explanation. As such, the weird takes on many forms: a social position, an aesthetic object, a genre of culture, a mode of enjoyment. Given the inherent slipperiness of a subject that cannot be constrained, Davis is careful to situate his project in conversation with William James's "radical empiricism" alongside Bruno Latour's "experimental metaphysics" as reference points. Building on the thematics of his earlier book, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (1998), Davis extends Latour's insight that a human creation can yet take "autonomous flight, its meanings and function no longer constrained by the human artifice that produced it" (26). By shifting the locus of subjectivity from individual agents to material-semiotic networks, Latour's theoretical perspective casts the book's psychonautic visions as information-rich renderings of the interface between symbolic scripts and material novelties, rather than as mere "hallucinations." From James, Davis similarly adopts a pragmatic orientation towards his texts, which means taking "them seriously without taking them literally" (22). This pragmatism forms the basis of Davis's own experimental orientation towards the texts, which he reads as networks of recursive encounters with—and reactions to—the unknown. In every case, these texts offer experimental engagements with extraordinary possibilities—metaphysical narratives that actively shape their subjects' perceptions even while they elude any absolute confirmation or closure.

Chapter two characterizes the 1970s as a liminal period marked by widespread rebellion and creative experimentation, tempered by a hefty dose of disenchantment and paranoia. Confronted with the "collapse" of 1960s aspirations for massive cultural transformations alongside a crisis of trust in traditional institutions, psychonauts in the 1970s turned to the power of storytelling to develop "centrifugal" forms of subjectivity through practices of occult exploration and creative re-invention. Fueled by a breakdown of conventional narratives, these psychonauts amplified their direct encounters with anomalous phenomena as a means of undermining dominant paradigms. The resultant writings documented

their efforts to strip away “social and familial imprinting” in order to “clear the ground for something different to emerge” (55). In every instance, this difference took the form of an encounter with a relational “other,” a call from beyond that transformed the self and exceeded any expectations.

Part two reads the McKenna brothers’ “Experiment at La Chorrera” as a rationalistic project of “weird naturalism” grounded in biology and alchemy, which pushes back against Wouter Hanegraaff’s characterization of the experiment as essentially delusional. In particular, Davis suggests that the machine diagram rendered by Dennis amounts to a real representation of high-dose tryptamine phenomenology rather than an embarrassing testament to failed science. Within a speculative framework of radical empiricism, that is, Dennis’s diagram represents an intertextual model of the very hermeneutics of resonance that seemed to structure the contents of the tryptamine trance by blurring the boundaries between subject and object.

Part three elaborates on this theme of boundary crossings by pivoting to Robert Anton Wilson’s techniques of “anarchist culture jamming” in *Illuminatus!* and *Cosmic Trigger*. In over-the-top mash-ups of esoteric traditions alongside outlandish conspiracy theories, Wilson draws the reader into “a state of political and ontological uncertainty” by destabilizing their expectations—including expectations about the usual distinction between “truth” and “fiction.” Unmoored from stabilizing frames of reference, Wilson cultivates a form of “maybe logic” that embraces what language can *do* once conceptual scripts are uncoupled from the usual search for final answers. Wilson’s writings explore how stories—including fictions—seem to “take on a life of their own,” shaping our experiences and influencing our subjectivity as a function of the attention we invest in them.

Finally, part four explores the writings of Philip K. Dick as they interface with his lifelong pursuit of extraordinary experiences. As Davis explains, Dick’s life was punctured by anomalous phenomena whose features elude simple categorization according to concepts drawn from either religion or psychosis. In

particular, Davis confronts the “hypergraphic” textual productions surrounding the events of “2-3-74,” which Dick described—in shifting terms—across fictions, essays, correspondence, and private journal entries. Davis argues persuasively that the contradictions and mutations evident across Dick’s various accounts reflect the literary nature of the event itself. Although Dick arguably “authored” 2-3-74 by “seeding his . . . field of consciousness with symbols and notions that authorized mystical attacks from without” (314), the event was fundamentally structured as an act of communication—an encounter with an “other” that transformed Dick’s subjectivity while evading any definitive attempt to explain or understand it. Davis argues that Dick’s fictions recreate the conditions of these weird, literary encounters with the unknown, to the extent that they function as prospective scripts for extraordinary experiences more than merely retrospective testimony. Dick’s complex, textual networks coalesce around the “hermeneut”—whether “psychonaut *or* . . . reader” (295)—with the aim of “successfully” reproducing (372) the anomalous experiences that inspired them in the first place. This explanation provides a theoretical mechanism of action to explain Dick’s reputation as a psychedelic author in the performative sense, “as the author of books that functioned *as* drugs” and not just books *about* drugs (277).

Although Davis sprinkles hints of his personal connection to the book’s topic throughout, the final section attests to the non-rational motivations that inform the author’s study. Davis ultimately reveals that *High Weirdness* is arguably a work of autoethnography, given his active participation in the very cultural currents that he chronicles here: “I have been blessed, and sometimes cursed, with my fair share of ecstatic, peculiar, enchanted, mystical, and sometimes paranoid experiences. I was friends with Terence, and got to hang out some with Bob Wilson” (382). As such, *High Weirdness* can be understood as what the authors of *An Art of Limina*¹ call a “further life of the work”: a type of performative

1. Neşe Lisa Şenol, “A Practitioner’s Commitment to Principle in Art: Review of ‘An Art of Limina,’” *Jacket2*, last modified August 24, 2011, <https://jacket2.org/reviews/practitioners-commitment-principle-art>.

scholarship that differs from traditional “interpretation” by participating in the very principles that underlie its object of study. As Davis attests, “I have tried to invite the reverberations of the weird into this study itself, not only in its objects but also in its method, its style, its esoteric overtones” (382).

High Weirdness is an eminently quotable text, packed with pithy formulas, including the following: “Synchronicity . . . is an event of resonance that resembles a representation” (247). I would have appreciated more discussion of (or even citation for) the claim that psychedelics and their “anti-disciplinary politics” informed postmodernism more “than is conventionally acknowledged,” which has the potential to broaden scholarly interest in psychedelics throughout the humanities (261). There is also the thorny issue of diversity and representation. While I respect Davis’s acknowledgment of his focus on a group of (in his words) “straight white guys,” I take issue with his specific explanation for that decision. While it is true that the “most celebrated . . . druggy visionaries of the era” were male, he is incorrect in attributing this to a “white male privilege” that provided the necessary “confidence to sally forth into extreme experiences that risk psychopathology—as well as the bravura to report on the journey and its supposed significance afterwards” (37). Although women’s contributions have been virtually erased from popular histories of psychedelic literature, both Adelle Davis and Thelma Moss published mass-market paperback books during the 1960s about their own psychedelic experiences.² (Partridge similarly avoids contributions by female psychonauts; he quotes Adelle Davis in a single sentence of his book without providing any description of her.) Even though both women were working mothers, their accounts reveal the extent to which they intentionally risked “madness” while theorizing extravagantly in pursuit of self-knowledge through altered states. The actual reason for their obscurity has much more to do with imposed, patriarchal standards that the field at large has yet to fully acknowledge.

2. Lana Cook, “Empathetic Reform and the Psychedelic Aesthetic: Women’s Accounts of LSD Therapy,” *Configurations* 22, no. 1 (2014): 79-111, 145.

From the standpoint of genre, *High Culture* is a more recognizably a work of traditional academic interpretation, in that it maintains a clear subject-object divide with its subject matter. (That said, it could actually stand to be *more* “interpretive,” in light of Partridge’s tendency to allow quotations to “speak for themselves,” without additional analysis.) The introduction makes the case for scholars of religious studies to take the subject of psychedelics more seriously, largely by mirroring the arguments set forth by Wouter Hanegraaff in “Entheogenic Esotericism” (2012). Both authors cite “unacknowledged prejudices” within the dominant intellectual culture since the Enlightenment, which have perpetuated a proto-Protestant conflation of moral rectitude with hard work. From that vantage, the “effortless” insights attributed to psychedelics are *ipso facto* illegitimate, and all the more dangerous for muddying the distinction between authentic knowledge and its counterfeit facsimile. Within a narrower disciplinary context, both also note that religious studies has long harbored a dualistic separation between “spirit” and “matter” that locates mystical states “outside” of the material world, which immediately renders the notion of chemically-induced mystical experiences as nonsensical.

Partridge describes psychedelics as “technologies of transcendence” that reliably induce experiences “of that which is Other . . . [and] beyond the . . . everyday” (3). He argues that by revealing the constructed nature of ordinary experience, and by exposing “technologies of domination” involved in naturalizing *some* ideas as “common sense,” psychedelic gnosis “challenges those systems of meaning into which we have been socialized” and thereby clears the ground for new systems to take root (14). This is a useful articulation of a common refrain throughout the psychedelic literature, the implications of which exceeds its historical association with the supposed failures of countercultural utopianism. Despite the prevalent theme of nonduality within psychedelic discourse, Partridge repurposes the esoteric concept of “gnosis” in order to emphasize the “dualistic interpretative framework” involved in distinguishing extraordinary experiences from the

quotidian habits underlying the “everyday.” He tracks this phenomenon as it is articulated across different drug contexts, following a roughly chronological arc from Romanticism (opium and nitrous oxide), Victorianism (nitrous oxide and hashish), modernism (mescaline, psilocybin, and LSD), through postmodernism (DMT). His chapter on “Occultism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” is the most successful in its scholarly rigor, and makes a persuasive case for the significance of Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875)—an African American occultist who developed spiritual practices with hashish—within the modern history of psychoactive drugs.

In his eagerness to make a case for psychedelic mysticism, however, Partridge often paints in overly broad strokes. While elaborating on the inadequacy of discursive language to communicate psychedelic gnosis, for instance, he arrives at the indefensibly reductive claim that the “only way others could understand the experience was for them to take the drug themselves” (15). This claim is appended to a misquoted line from Tom Wolfe that articulates a multiplicity of routes to ecstasy beyond drug use *tout court*. Further, many of the figures at the center of Partridge’s study—from Timothy Leary to Carlos Castaneda—explicitly experiment with poetic or “non-discursive” language in order to communicate such states.

In another misleading generalization, Partridge cites Castaneda to characterize a “psychedelic shamanistic perennialism” wherein journeyers transcend their “particular historical circumstances” to experience “not only the same nonordinary reality as others who have taken the same drug, but also the same nonordinary reality that our ancestors visited” (22). In actuality, Castaneda describes a “separate reality” that is still subject to time, and hence changes. As Peter Luce describes in *Getting Castaneda*, “These worlds are as complete and engulfing as ours; beings live and die in them, and we can visit them and live and die in them, too” (38); they also include gender differences (137).

These early missteps attest to an uneven familiarity with the various figures featured in *High Culture*, who range from Humphry Davy circa 1800 through the

twentieth century. Partridge admits to lacking a cogent understanding of Terence McKenna, and his portrayal of Castaneda is frequently misleading. As a literature scholar, I've spent years teaching Castaneda's sophisticated use of literary devices and rhetorical strategies in conveying non-ordinary experiences to his readers. These literary features undermine Partridge's simplistic explanation for Castaneda's historical appeal, which he attributes to Castaneda's academic "legitimation" of widely-held ideas: "little rhetorical skill was needed: like worshippers before a preacher, his readers simply wanted verification of beliefs they already held" (308). To the contrary, it is on the basis of Castaneda's *literary* sophistication that he is able to conjure approximation of non-ordinary experience for his readers—a fact that Partridge himself alludes to in a quote, merely four pages later: "this is no mere recounting of hallucinatory experiences," but rather "events that we [the readers] . . . have the opportunity to *experience*" (312, emphasis added). Partridge does not comment on the apparent contradiction here.

Problematic elisions are peppered throughout *High Culture*, including its opening section on Romanticism, which is my own historical specialization. Although Partridge equates "Romanticism's gnostic quest for transcendental subjectivity" with "detachment from the limits of embodied existence" (47), scholars of Romanticism have published extensively on the distinctly *embodied* sublime pursued by many Romantics, including Davy. Furthermore, Partridge minimizes the impact of nitrous oxide research on Romanticism, going so far as to claim that "unlike opium, the experience of nitrous oxide had little impact on Romantic literature and culture" (68). Although he notes in passing—without analysis—that nitrous oxide was described "in words not entirely dissimilar to contemporary descriptions of opium dreams" (63), my own research has demonstrated the extent to which Romantic descriptions of opium were themselves influenced by the discourse surrounding nitrous oxide.³ In fact, Partridge undermines his own

3. Neşe Devenot, "Medical Ecstasies: Chemical Synthesis and Self-Experimentation in Romantic Science and Poetry," *European Romantic Review* 30, no. 1 (2019): 1-24.

point later on that same page, where he observes that “the popular connection between nitrous oxide and Romantic philosophy was firmly established by 1820” (68). He does not clarify how the strength of this association is possible in light of how nitrous oxide (supposedly) had such “little impact.”

Some of the gaps in both publications might be attributable to the subject’s extraordinarily interdisciplinary demands at a time when the “psychedelic humanities” are still in their infancy. Partridge’s opening salvo should have cited the work of Roan Kaufman on hegemony,⁴ for instance, and of Richard Doyle on the sensitivity of psychedelics to “initial rhetorical conditions.”⁵ Also, since both Partridge and Davis demonstrate the inextricability of psychedelic religiosity with literary practices, this means that the future of psychedelic religious studies must develop in conversation with literary scholarship to a greater extent than either book evidences. The relative paucity of literary interlocutors might help to explain the absence of any references to new materialist scholarship in either text; as Tamsin Jones has pointed out in “New Materialism and the Study of Religion” (2016), religious studies has been slow to embrace new materialism as a practical and theoretical paradigm. Given the extraordinary conceptual overlap between new materialism and the theoretical concerns of both texts—new materialism is virtually interchangeable with what Davis calls “weird naturalism” or “visionary materialism”—I anticipate future cross-collaborations with scholars who are likewise exploring the status of religious experience within a “posthuman” world (a term used by Davis, but not by Partridge). As Jones explains, “new materialism . . . seeks to avoid . . . any dualism

4. Partridge presents his main thesis (on the power of psychedelics to circumvent hegemony) as an original contribution to the literature, but it is not; in particular, see Roan Kaufman’s *Ayagogy: Ayahuasca as a Social Change Agent and Learning Model* (Madison, WI: Inner Dimensional Media, 2016) and the section entitled “Ayahuasca as Antidote to Western Hegemony” of Neşe Devenot, “Psychedelic Drugs,” in *Gender: Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks*, vol. 7, *Nature*, ed. Iris van der Tuin (Farmington Hills: Cengage, 2016), 361-77.

5. Richard Doyle, *Darwin’s Pharmacy: Sex, Plants, and the Evolution of the Noosphere* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 23.

between spirit/mind and matter”; it also “posits . . . the *agency* . . . of the material world, rather than continuing with the fable of a subject who acts upon dormant and inert matter” (4-5). Once brought into conversation with these discourses, Davis and Partridge chart a future for psychedelic theory to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of social constructivism and physicalist reductionism, with implications that will ultimately touch on all of the humanities.

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