

Cyberia Psychedelia: Timothy Leary and the Counterculture in Cyberspace

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1. A Revived Guru in the Computer Age: "The '90s are here, and the doctor is in..." (William Gibson)

Maybe it's a mere coincidence that William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) was published only a year after Timothy Leary's autobiography *Flashbacks* (1983). It seems, however, that this coincidence may suggest interesting synchronicity. *Neuromancer* is a classic, a bible, and a forefather of the 1980s' Cyberpunks, which at once opened up new territory in not only the field of SF but the whole field of contemporary fiction. And in '90s it is still re-presenting itself as a fast-speaking yet trustworthy prophet as the Cyberspace actually keeps expanding towards the closing of the twentieth century. *Flashbacks*, on the other hand, though ordinary in style compared with *Neuromancer*, survives as also a classic, if not a bible any more, of those who believe, or believed, in the potentialities of the '60s' Psychedelic Revolution.

Better known as an anti-Establishment "LSD-guru" and psychedelic "doctor" to the public and less as a farsighted psychologist and scientist, Timothy Leary came to build up a solid reputation as he explored the potential for psychedelic drugs as a new therapeutic psychiatric at the Center for Personality Research in the Harvard University. As the roaring '60s diminished into the rather exhausted '70s, however, Leary went through a political crackdown from the U. S. government, mainly from the Drug Enforcement Administration, and spent most of his time as either an escapee or a prisoner.

Before *Flashbacks*, Leary had published more than a dozen of major books starting in 1956, such as *Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality*('57), *The Psychedelic Experience* ('64), *High Priest*('68), *Neurologic* ('73), *Intelligence*

Agents ('79), and *Changing My Mind, Among Others* ('82). The basic attitudes and assertions that all of his books have in common may be summarized as follows: (1) Free will on individual sovereignty should be held in the highest regard; (2) Human mind is the sum of brain activities, and we are all neuro-genetic robots whose brains/bio-computers are re-programmable; (3) The government, the military, religious sects, mass media and other totalitarian forces are all brain-washers and they condition a person to their advantages; (4) LSD and other psychedelic drugs drastically, though temporarily, expand the brain function, and through this awakening people know better their social and cultural environments in which brainwashers are active.

Though Leary's assertions and suggestions gained large popularity with the generation of counterculture, since the use of LSD and other psychedelic chemicals began to be severely restrained and controlled by the authority, his theories and his own public figure, together with the image of LSD, had been labeled (with positive help from mass media) rather as criminal and immoral.¹⁾

After *Flashbacks*, Leary eventually didn't publish any book through the end of the '80s. During these years, however, his main interests had shifted from drugs to personal computers.²⁾ In 1986, he even released a software called *Mind Mirror*.³⁾ Leary's official site on the World Wide Web explains how his research subject changed :

During the eighties, Tim went on college lecture tours and foretold of the future that computers would bring to the world. He started his own software company called Futique and helped design programs that would digitize thought-images. He believed the internet was going to be like the LSD of the 90's empowering people on a mass level.⁴⁾

Leary's fascination with personal computers subsequently lead to the potentialities of the computer networks: the Internet and the cyberspace. In 1994, he published one of his last two books, *Chaos & Cyber Culture*. It has an interview with William Gibson, creator of the cyberspace, and Leary repeatedly admires *Neuromancer*. Here may arise two controversial questions. First,

why in the '80s, after *Flashbacks*, did Leary convert from the drugs to the computer, to the cyberspace, and to the cyberpunk? Second, why does the '60s psychedelic revolution come to find its voice in the 90s' computer technology? These questions may come from a basic recognition of the difference in cultural and political tendencies. The '60s can be observed as so political and countercultural, while the '80s to '90s so technological and mainstream-oriented, in terms of the general social values. What follows is a rather a first-step attempt to grope for possible answers to the above questions, which may hopefully contribute to knowing a bit of this gigantic, consumer-oriented and information-dominating era.

2. Technological Counterculture:

"The '90s are just the '60s upside down" (Philip Proctor)

Mark Dery, in his *Escape Velocity* (1996) analyzes how the counterculture is reconciled with the cyberculture and forms "cyberdelia," a coined word from cyber and psychedelia.

The return of the sixties, and the culture war raging around the memory of that turbulent decade, is at the heart of the cyberdelic wing of fringe computer culture. Not surprisingly, many of cyberdelia's media icons are familiar faces from the sixties: No magazine cover story on the phenomenon is complete without the septuagenarian Timothy Leary, admonishing readers to "turn on, boot up, jack in" and proclaiming that the "PC is the LSD of the 1990s," . . . ⁵⁾

Obviously it is essential for the counterculture to stay "fringe" of the mainstream. Leary's well-known Pied Piper spiel in the '60s, "Turn on, tune in, drop out," or rather, "Turn on to the scene; tune in to what's happening; and drop out---of high schools, college, grade school...," was originally meant to advertise the importance of consciousness expansion (via LSD), of getting full aware of the

surrounding reality, and of questioning authority.⁶⁾ The 90s' version of this catch phrase, "turn on, boot up, jack in," can be understood entirely in terms of computers: turn on the machine, and boot up both the software (OS: Operating System) and the hardware, and connect to the Internet ("to jack in" was first used in *Neuromancer* and it means to get into the cyberspace by physically connecting one's brains to the computer networks). Thus, Personal Computer can be the best equivalent for LSD (ideal consciousness expander), as people, on and through the former, net-surf out to not only unknown fields of their consciousness/brains but also almost the limitless sea of intelligence and information, which was exactly what the latter aimed for.

The '60s' counterculture movement or "Hippiedom", according to Dery's analysis, "inherited the Blakean vision of a return to Eden and the Emersonian notion of a transcendent union with Nature." (Dery, 25) But, if so, the '90s' cyberculture faces towards a completely opposite or at least different direction: apparently neither Eden nor Nature should have any computers or technologies. How, then, can the reconciliation be possible?

"The counterculture of the 1960s was rural, romanticized anti-science, anti-tech. But there was always a lurking contradiction at its heart, symbolized by the electric guitar," says Bruce Sterling, SF writer who first used the word cyberpunk.⁷⁾ Though the back-to-the-land hippies and flower children in fact lived in communes separate from technology, they had their own music enhanced by electric instruments, Rock-n-Roll, just as the legendary Woodstock concert tells it all. Those ex-hippies and their children-in-culture are, Sterling goes on, now "special effects wizards, mixmasters, tape-effects techs, graphics hackers, emerging through new media to dazzle society with head-trip extravaganzas like FX cinema and the global Live Aid benefit. The contradiction has become an integration."⁸⁾

It may be relevant, accordingly, to observe in the '60s' counterculture some subconscious dependence on and unquestioned assimilation to its own enemy technology. At the moment that the "contradiction has become an integration," the counterculture has, too, become integrated to the mainstream. This is not surprising or contradictory, for the "Power to the People" originally meant to

take over the power of the authority. But what can be contradictory, was that they were not fully conscious of this irony: desire for taking over the authority will, when fulfilled, inevitably lead to banishing the rebellious core, the essential justification for being the "counter-." As a result, when in the late '80s the pro-technological tendencies began pouring from the broken dam of "lurking contradiction" and flooding in, those ex-hippies or ex-beatniks took full advantage of the new high-tech media in still a countercultural way, as Sterling explains above. But, though in the '80s the computer culture and the Internet still stayed rather "fringe," or at the margin of the whole society, they were already foretelling the future hegemony, absorbing day by day a larger and larger territory of the mainstream culture. In the '90s, now, if you know the word "computer illiterate," you should know the rest of the story.

3. The Counterculture Lives!:

"All media are the extensions of our own bodies and senses."

(Marshall McLuhan)

The mainstream culture that is still the counterculture at its heart: this is exactly the practical "upside down" of the '60s. Such self-contradictory attitudes can also be seen throughout Leary's *Chaos & Cyber Culture*. For example, he defines in his own way the word "Cybernetic," as "Mapping and colonizing the digital data-worlds located on the other side of screens." He subsequently goes on to his own definition of the word "Psybernetic," a coinage from psychedelic and cybernetic, as "Mapping and colonizing the next frontier---one's own brain." (p. 84) Comparing the both, the word "frontier" draws immediate attention. Not to mention Horace Greely, this word is connected to and associated with the American frontier, the West, and the Wilderness. Leary, taking advantage of such historical connotations, seems to so differentiate Psybernetic=frontier as Nature from Cybernetic="the digital data" as Civilization. It's needless to say that one of the hippies' assertions was to go back to the Nature away from the Civilization. Already an "amphibian"

(Leary's term that literary means "double life;" i.e. one who inhabits both in flesh-material reality and in cyberspace (p. 3)) in the technologically advanced cybernetic space constructed by the digital-data, Leary tries to put himself even farther away, probably farther out to the frontier, the "fringe," the "counter-" position to the digital civilization. But why does he have to do this?

Dery introduces Leary's advocacy to the psychedelic as the basis for the computer culture:

...Timothy Leary sees [the PC revolution] as a vindication of the counterculture; without the psychedelic revolution, he suggests, the personal computer would have been unthinkable. "It's well known that most of the creative impulse in the software industry, and indeed much of the hardware, particularly the Apple Macintosh, derived directly from the sixties consciousness movement," he asserts. "[The Apple cofounder] Steve Jobs went to India, took a lot of acid, studied Buddhism, and came back and said that Edison did more to influence the human race than the Buddha. And [Microsoft founder Bill] Gates was a big psychedelic person at Harvard. It makes perfect sense to me that if you activate your brain with psychedelic drugs, the only way you can describe it is electronically. (Dery, 27-28)⁹

Presenting Jobs and Gates, the big two PC revolutionists, as psychedelic pupils, Leary is trying to reinforce the connection between the emergence of personal computers in the '80s and the '60s' consciousness movement, so as to reevaluate and renew the achievements of the past psychedelic revolution. By doing so in this patriarchic, remember-who-your-father-is discourse, Leary is also suggesting and evoking not only the image that the computer is in original concept anti-totalitarian and countercultural, but also the one that there lies the psychedelic idealism at the heart of today's computer technology.

Leary's arguments for the revival of the '60s' counterculture seems to be derived from his view mainly on the zeitgeist of the '80s. Looking over the four and a half decades from the '50s, Leary first defines the Woodstock concert in

August 1969, at which "four hundred thousand energetic, educated young people assembled" for the Summer of Love, as the monumental achievement of liberty, and as "the role model of the counterculture of that time." Then he reevaluates the hippies in contrast to the depressing situations during the Reagan administration in the '80s. Leary exemplifies the accomplishment of the counterculture as follows:

Hippies started the ecology movement. They combated racism. They liberated sexual stereotypes, encouraged change, individual pride, and self-confidence. They questioned robot materialism. In four years they managed to stop the Vietnam War. They got marijuana decriminalized in fourteen states during the Carter administration. Etc. (pp. 53-54)

Then he starts with condemning the wars during the '80s, which expelled the virtue of the Woodstock revolution:

During the 1980s the gentle tolerance of Woodstock was replaced by a hard-line Marine Corps attitude. The pacifism of "Give Peace a Chance" gave way to a swaggering militarism. The conquest of Grenada. The glorious bombing of Qaddafi's tent. The covert war against Nicaragua. Star Trek gave way to Star Wars. (p. 54)

As if expostulating on their detachment from social issues, Leary mildly criticizes university students in the '80s, reminding them of the historical fact that the '60s' counterculture was always centered on the campuses: "While brave students in South Korea, China, the Soviet Union were exhibiting the idealism they dutifully learned from Woodstock, back in American students have become conservative, materialistic, career-oriented, like the Japanese universities, and like the Russian colleges under Brezhnev." (p. 55)

Finally, the '80s "have given us a sequel to McCarthyism" (p. 55), summarizes Leary. "The poor, conservative, fearful, conforming college

students of the Reagan years were stuck with Moms and Dads who grew up in the bland Eisenhower 1950s. The ghosts of that decade---Senator (Red-Scare) McCarthy and General Douglas ('nuke the slant-eyes') MacArthur and John Wayne and Father Knows Best came back to haunt the colleges in the 1980s." (p. 54)

It has to be admitted, more or less, that Leary's insights into the '80s' zeitgeist are hitting the mark. The McCarthyistically conforming force, both political and social, the single white male dominance, and the television dictatorships that require uniformity and passivity: these are all negative characteristics of the '80s which can be commonly sensed.

Such recognition of the decade's zeitgeist might have driven Leary to the Cyberpunk. Gibson's *Neuromancer* was published in 1984,¹⁰ and this cyberpunk starter depicts the virtual network space governed by some autocratic artificial intelligence, to which the main character, outlaw cybernaut and "console cowboy," tries to break its ICE, the fatal security system. The "cyberpunk controversy" took place immediately after *Neuromancer*, and, not only the literary innovation it can suggest, but also the ideology and hegemony of the postindustrial capitalism, and also the ways the actual cyberspace project should take, become the main concern.¹¹ The counterculture with a cyber gear on should be best suitable for Leary's anti-'80s circumstances, for he now expects the '90s' kids to in turn take revenge. Though Leary's optimism about the future of Cyberspace often goes too far, his basic and ultimate assertion, "Think for yourself, question authority" will not be misdirecting in an information-oriented, media-dominating, totalitarian-computer age.

Notes

1) See Martin A. Lee & Bruce Shlain, *The Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: the CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985), pp. 89-95.

2) In 1984, the same year as the *Neuromancer*'s publication, the Apple Macintosh,

one of the first personal computers in the world, went on the American market. Just like *Neuromancer*, Macintosh had become Leary's favorite. Its television commercial shows a main-frame computer with a huge screen on which a totalitarian male ruler is brainwashing the audience. A female athlete, running in, throws a hammer and breaks the screen to pieces and liberate the audience. In the closing shot, a man's voice says "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like 1984." The latter 1984 of course refers to George Orwell's novel. This television commercial is still available to watch at "The Museum of Apple Computer <<http://the-mac.home.ml.org/>>."

- 3) "Mind Mirror allow the performer to digitize (scope) any thought, compare it with other thoughts, and compare thoughts with others, and to engage in simulations of various roles." Timothy Leary, *Flashbacks: an Autobiography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1983, 1990), p. 384. On the publisher's imprint page, it also says in small letters, "This book is printed on acid-free paper."
- 4) Timothy Leary has his own web page. The URL is <<http://www.leary.com/>>. This quotation is from <<http://www.leary.com/Biography/Eighties/eighties.html>>.
- 5) Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. 22.
- 6) William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-1972* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 1115.
- 7) Bruce Sterling, ed., *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (New York: Ace Books, 1986), p. xii.
- 8) Sterling, op. cit. "The audible symbol of this change from the 1960s to the 1980s is the music. If you want to find the soul of a culture, listen to the lyrics that direct the sounds, the beats, the rhythms." Timothy Leary, *Chaos & Cyber Culture* (Berkeley: Ronin Publishing, Inc., 1994), p. 55. The further reference to this book will be indicated simply by the page numbers.
- 9) "I know now that our research with psychedelic drugs and, in fact, the drug culture itself was a forecast of, or preparation for, the personal-computer age."

Leary, *Chaos & Cyber Culture*, p. 42.

- 10) It is another interesting and suggestive coincidence that the setting of Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) is in 1984. Also, the main plot/theme is exactly based on the connections between the '60s' and the '80s' political and social changes.
- 11) See, for example, Larry McCaffery, "Introduction: The Desert of the Real," in Larry McCaffery, ed., *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk and Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1991), pp. 1-16.