

Perils of Expansion: Aldous Huxley and the Counterculture

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INTRO

- I'll be talking today about Aldous Huxley
- We heard from Jules this morning about his combination of empiricism and mysticism, of the scientific with the spiritual
- What I want to do now is think about that specifically in connection to Huxley's place within the Counterculture of the 1960s – a movement that adopted him as a sort of guru
- By the Counterculture I mean a literary and wider cultural movement:

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- beginning roughly with anti-establishment, nonconformist literature of the Beat Generation + in the 50s

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- running through to the emergence of The Hippies in the 60s + Social + Cultural Protests Against the Vietnam War, + Racial, Gender + Sexual Discrimination.
- A period in English and American cultural history that's associated with Anti-Rationalism, with the Romantic celebration of the Inner Child + with the Rejection of Skeptical Irony + of the kind of Modernist Remove that Huxley is famous for.
- It's this anomaly that I find most interesting about him.
- His balanced, controlled voice spoken from within a zeitgeist that celebrated the loss of both – a zeitgeist that was all about the unchaining of the mind, of the word and of the flesh.
- I come to him as one subject in a book I'm writing that reassesses the politics of the American Counterculture and that tries to use those politics to think about the legacy of that movement today.
- In my reading, he's one of a few figures who had a major impact in that time but whose skepticism ran against its grain

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- People like the Beat Generation writer William Burroughs, who I was going to talk about today but have time unfortunately.
- Burroughs' own experiments with psychedelics were part of his deep dive into the ugliness+ brutality of the human psyche. The horror not the beauty.
- I'll look to H's famous 1953 essay *The Doors of Perception* – about his experience on Mescaline

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- Which reached back to William Blake for its guiding metaphor + was used by the 60s Psychedelic Movement to slot itself into Blake's intellectual Romantic lineage.
- I want explore tentatively what it reveals about him, what it tells us about his unlikely position in the counterculture, + what bearing that has on the movement and the period.

PLACE IN COUNTERCULTURE (500)

- Huxley made his name in the 1920s, speaking to and for an earlier youth counterculture
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- His 1st 2 novels *Chrome Yellow* and *Antic Hay* (p. in 1921 + 1923 respectively) – social satires on his bohemian intellectual circles – were 'written' he said 'by a member of the war generation for others of his kind'; 'an age which has seen the violent disruption of almost all the standards, conventions and values current in the previous epoch'
- He wrote first about and in sympathy with young English people like himself, shocked into disillusion by the carnage of the First World War + coming to terms with the major social changes that followed it.
- But because he managed that rare thing of capturing Zeitgeists in 2 periods – at the start + middle of the century – his early influence + notoriety tends to be forgotten
- As we know, Huxley's name is synonymous both with his Dystopian predictions in *A Brave New World* and the 60s drug experiments I'm going to talk about.
- He's famous for the impact he had after his move to America in the late 30s; + on the next 'war generation' – one that was coming to terms with the horrors of Auschwitz, the fear of Nuclear apocalypse + the rise of Mass Media.

- As we heard this morning, by the 1950s Huxley was experimenting from California with a host of esoteric and mystical practices:
- From Vedanta Hinduism to hypnotism, + 'parapsychology' (a branch of psychology that brings in the paranormal)
- He discovered Mescaline – a natural psychedelic found in Cactuses – through a member of his esoteric circle on the West Coast: a psychiatrist named Dr Humphrey Osmond.

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- Osmond + his colleague John Smythies were experimenting with drugs like mescaline + psycobilin (found in magic mushrooms) to help understand + potentially remedy psychiatric illness.
- Identifying similarities between the symptoms of schizophrenia + psychedelic drug use, they used these drugs to try and see the world as schizophrenics saw it + thereby work towards
- Huxley was fascinated both by the good he saw in this mission + the potential that mescaline suggested in terms of genuine transcendental visionary experience.
- MODERNIST SKEPTICISM 500
- Now, the wry humor, + the self-awareness that characterize his early literature were always going to distinguish Huxley from the other writers, artists, musicians and philosophers who experimented with the effects of hallucinogens

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- Poets like Allen Ginsberg, struck-off scientists like Timothy Leary, musicians and composers like John Lennon + Yoko Ono
- Incidentally, as well inspiring Jim Morrison, The Doors of Perception earned Huxley a place on the front cover of The Beatles' album, Sergeant Peppers' Lonely Hearts Club Band album

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- Huxley's point was to find out how this stuff affected him, and what benefits it might genuinely have for other people.
- His approach was inquisitive but unromantic. And he was never on a mission to convert.

- This is the vital quality that prevents *The Doors of Perceptions* from descending into the mystical reverence, naivety or arrogant grandstanding that blights a lot of literature in that genre. Leary's *High Priest* for example [NEW SLIDE]

Or the book he wrote with Ralph Metzner + Richard Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*

- It's a self-awareness that's captured well through the character Philip Quarle in Huxley's 1926 novel *Point Counterpoint*
- Quarles – a youngish author who is meant to be Huxley himself – looks back with wry amusement at recent attempts to understand Buddhism + Hindi Meditation.
- What an odd thing, he thinks to have 'tried to persuade himself that reality did not exist'.
- This is 1926, a decade before his move to America, and a time Huxley spent active in London modernist circles
- Circles whose interest in the occult was checked by what Frank Kermode famously called a 'clerkly skepticism'
- That skepticism was of course absolute anathema to the new bohemian spirit of post-WWII America – one in which, as Kermode puts it, that skepticism has fallen away (to potentially dangerous effect)

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- It's postmodern countercultural scene defined, in Leslie Fiedler's words, as "quite another time, apocalyptic, anti-rational, blatantly romantic and sentimental; an age dedicated to misogyny and prophetic irresponsibility; one distrustful of self-protective irony and too-great self-awareness'.
- Huxley's objectivism, his gentlemanly calm + his unruffled attitude to matters of the spirit mark him as part of that pre-war modernist period
- As part of Kermode's conception of the 1st phase rather than 2nd phase of modernism
- In line with that, we have Huxley's despair on his 1st visit to America at what he called 'the revaluation of values' he found there:

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- 'a radical alteration (for the worse) of established standards' *Jesting Pilate* 1936

- As David Bradshaw points out, there's a shift after Huxley's move there in 1938, from fatalism – from the kind of despair that had enabled him speak for his own First World 'war generation', to a mystical quest for deeper meaning/
- For the 'ultimate nature of reality', as he puts it in 'Means and Ends', his book of essays from 1937
- Become, by 1953 when he writes *Doors of Perception* 'the divine source of all existence'
- It's his transition, in Bradshaw's words, from 'highbrow incarnate' to 'transatlantic sage at large'

THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION 500

- We heard this morning about Huxley's ambitions with his experiments in California
- His mission, inspired partly by his friendship with D.H. Lawrence for a more 'integral' way of life: becoming a 'first rate animal' as well as 'thinker', uniting mind, body + spirit in healthy balance
- We heard about his aim through spiritual practices to heal the self, divided and stifled by urban-industrial society.
- These were his interests from youth put into practice in America
- + to their most memorable ends in his experiments with mescaline in 'The Doors of Perception'

His Enlightenment & The Problems with It

- Huxley's description of his experience under mescaline suggests that he is now genuinely, un-ironically convinced that he – he being his ego – does not exist.
- Mescaline permitted transcendence of the mean limits imposed by subjective consciousness.
- It allowed him, he said, to see a larger, truer reality – in which all is one, + all (as Blake had said) is infinite.

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- Like Blake also, he believed he was seeing now through the QUOTE UNQUOTES 'Mind at Large'; a reality that was no longer 'funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system' 11
- What he means is what J.G. Ballard says in his preface to *The Doors of Perception*, that 'our brains have been trained during evolutionary millennia to screen out perceptions that do not directly aid us in our day to day struggle for existence'

- And that mescaline admits you beyond that screen.
- By this, + in line with so many less circumspect, less rigorous experimenters after him, Huxley fell into the trap of designating true and false ways of seeing – of believing he had seen a light that others had not.
- It's an old trap built on the idea that revelation lifts human beings out of their mean self-interest, + is therefore to be trusted implicitly.
- The world lighted as the seer has seen it– on mescaline or in rapture to God – trumps the ordinary world seen by others because it is shaped by something true, not self-motivated.
- Huxley's scheme puts evolution in place of the Christian concept of sin as an impediment to perception.
- His idea that revelation on mescaline by-passes evolution is just another way of putting the Christian belief that divine revelation shows a world beyond the limits of the sinful mind.
- This faith in revelation is, I think, at the bottom of so much that was inadvertently elitist + wrong with the Sixties Counterculture.
- Its an elitism of 'us' and 'them', of 'turned on' or not + it relates to ideas of destiny + authenticity that have their roots in the philosophy of the Beat Generation in the 50s.
- It's was there in Allen Ginsberg + Jack Kerouac's longing for salvation through literature, + in their conviction that they had seen through the ruse everyone else was falling for + that they alone could break that spell.
- In the 60s, with the addition of acid, that same sense of ordination was amped up Ken Kesey's + Timothy Leary's missions to flip a generation's mind.
- Writing 10 years before, and temperamentally from a different era entirely, Huxley explored while also succumbing to the dangers in this kind of thinking:

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- The hints are everywhere in *The Doors of Perception*.
- Having explained his achievement of 'contemplation at its height', he writes of an equivalent 'full and final solution' for all 'can be found only by those who are prepared to implement the right kind of weltanschaaung [or worldview]' 24

- In other words, and with a nod to the totalitarianism Huxley explored throughout his work, enlightenment is limited to a select few or else dependent on a mass conversion to the right kind of thinking.
- Indirectly, Huxley predicts the small + circular nature of the revolution of consciousness his 60s successors would eventually attempt – a small coterie of like-minded, like-educated people
- He was also fully (+ more directly) aware of the practical problems implied by such a revolution: ‘participation in the manifest glory of things’, he writes Gulliver-like ‘left no room ... for the ordinary, the necessary concerns of human existence, above all for concerns involving persons’.
- This is Huxley high, staring at the intricate weaving of his flannel trousers, + trying to avoid eye contact with his wife and friend:

‘Both belonged to the world from which ... mescaline had delivered me – the world of selves, of time, of moral judgments and utilitarian considerations, the world ... of self-assertion, of cocksureness, of over-valued words and idolatrously worshipped notions’

- He worries then, before ‘turning on, tuning in + dropping out’ becomes the fashion, that though it might show people life stripped of its menial veneer, it will stop people being interested not only in society but each other.

- The logical extension of this is left unsaid but implied:

- That regaining the ‘sense of wonder’ sacrificed by evolution in the cause of ‘security and survival’ risks the loss of both.

- That the recovery of a sense of wonder may put both hard fought evolutionary gains at risk.

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- Another facet of Huxley’s self-awareness – another way in which he differs from the counterculture that came after him – is his honesty about feelings of contempt

– Contempt towards the self as much as others.

- As in his fiction, he passes brutal judgment on humanity in

The Doors of Perception, but with full awareness that the judgment applies to him also.

- Human limitations are expounded through attacks on his own limitations.

- If there's what he calls a 'pathetic imbecility' to ordinary human perception he discovers this by closing his eyes + seeing an image of own 'petty' personality:

- There he found, he says, 'A Five and ten cent store' (A bric-a-brac shop)
- This 'suffocating interior', filled with 'gimcrack mobiles of tin and plastic' stand to Huxley both for his 'own personal self' and his 'personal contributions to the universe' 26

- As David Bradshaw has pointed out about Huxley, there's a tension between compassion + contempt in most of what he writes.

- In the first place, Blake-like compassion for all life as one on mescaline is underpinned by not only by disappointment in human pretensions, but
In the second, his contempt here is indiscriminate + as such the source of something more deeply compassionate (a 'salutary' lesson. we call "mere things" and disregard in favor of television' 19)

- CONCLUSION

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION ABOUT HUXLEY + THE 60s COUNTERCULTURE?

- It makes sense that he was celebrated by promoters of psychedelics as a means of living a contemplative, and in fact more moral life.
- His essay is steeped in the core 60s countercultural ideal of a world seeable under the right woken conditions.
- It even draws on Pascal to give moral grounding to Leary's later idea of turning on, tuning in + dropping out – more or less.
- 'The sum of evil', Huxley paraphrases Pascal as saying 'wld be much diminished if men could only learn to sit quietly in their rooms' 25
- But Huxley probed and tested rather than accepting without question the negative virtue of that passive spiritual position.
- To some extent, The Doors of Perception exemplifies a problem with the countercultural moment it helped inspire.
- Its basis in a fundamentally religious + elitist tenet – one that says there are those who can see + those who cannot.
- + that those who cannot are not worth bothering with.
- The Not-Self that H discovers on his mescaline trip
- + the Hell of Other People who are less enlightened
- vs. The Selves who haven't transcended + are still wrapped trapped childlike in their egos.

- If he's complicit in this elitism, he was also rare among countercultural figures in recognizing, exposing and exploring it.
- The dystopia he produces in *A Brave New World* is the obvious logical extension + testament to that.
- In my view, his self-awareness makes him a more astute and enduring guide to the experience, to his literary period + to the kind of thinking that period has left as a legacy.

- He used his exploration of a higher plane to demonstrate the inhuman flipside to expanded vision.
- In his transcendence of perceptual limits, Huxley finds there is no room for conventional love, compassion + earthly compromise.
- It's a position summed up by his non-drug taking contemporary, the novelist Henry Miller. Miller - another figure between high modernism and the counterculture - wrote 'What looks to you like indifference is a new way of seeing... you just can't be made wretched, sorrowful, miserable. You live there for a while, at the apex of clarity, and you see things with the naked eye and everything looks good, *is good*'.¹
- Similarly, on mescaline Huxley finds himself out of kilter with humanity - both in terms of the limited ego he was before + the limited others he loved in his old reality.
- A terrifying prospect when you emerge from the cooling spell of his prose, + when you follow it through - it sheds light on the violence, cultish relations + psychosis the 60s psychedelic project often led to.

- Finally, at a less sensational and broader cultural level, it also reveals a sobering truth in so many post-60s efforts to couch progress in terms of social, psychological and spiritual consciousness and unconsciousness. WOKE + WOKENESS IN TODAY'S LANGUAGE.
- Through people like Huxley - a conservative explorer in that age of inner space travel, and someone who mistrusted his own mind as much as others - we get the elitist counter to a moment that is commonly remembered as progressive.
- We also get an honest admission and warning of the recurring dangers in believing you and your people have woken up from the coma while the rest of the world remains asleep.

¹ Ibid., p. 159.

