



AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

Psychonauts: Drugs and the making of the modern mind

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BOOK REVIEW



The term *psychonaut* has become increasingly common in recent years. Introduced in 1949 by Ernst Jünger, a German author and fellow traveler of Albert Hofmann, the word is used to describe individuals dedicated to the exploration of their mind, often with use of psychedelics. Distinct to those who experiment with psychedelics haphazardly, the title 'psychonaut' suggests an aura of method, commitment, and audacity. Psychedelic history has produced its share of psychonauts over the years. Figures like Alexander Shulgin, John C. Lilly and Terrence McKenna come to mind; intrepid psycho-explorers who ventured to the farthest reaches of the mind and returned bearing metaphysical offerings, sometimes at considerable personal cost.

Psychonauts, Mike Jay's latest essential addition to the psychedelic bookshelf, draws on the figure of the psychonaut and brings it into broader historical context. It tells the story of a motley crew of better and lesser-known 18th, 19th and 20th century mind explorers who experimented with a variety of substances and situates it carefully within the context of the emergence of the modern world: the rise of modern science, the modern self, and consumer society.

Recovering the erratic story of drug experimentation and folly over a period of three centuries and turning it into a balanced, compelling monograph is no small feat. It's hard to think of a more suitable author for the challenge than Jay. His prior contributions *Mescaline: A Global History of the First Psychedelic* (2019) and *High Society: Mind Altering Drugs in History and Culture* (2010) have established his credentials as a savant of drug history, who is, in addition, capable of weaving together many threads and producing gripping histories remarkable for both engrossing detail and broad scope.

The book is divided into four main parts arranged by the different themes, and partly overlapping in terms of historical periods and the substances involved. The first part is dedicated to the use of drugs (mostly cocaine and nitrous oxide) for the purpose of cognitive enhancement. The second looks at the attempt to chart the limits of the mind through the use of intoxicants, focusing on anesthetics (nitrous oxide, chloroform, ether). The third part explores the relationship between drugs and the creative imagination (Hashish), and the fourth part connects these three strands with the present, with view on the psychedelic renaissance.

The cast of characters is impressive as it is diverse. It covers the enthusiastic cocaine self-experimentations of Sigmund Freud next to the orientally inspired Hashish feasts of the Parisian *Club des Hashischins* which included mid-nineteenth-century artists and poets like Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud and Theophile Gautier. The philosophically influential nitrous oxide experiments, which led American psychologist William James to develop his position of radical empiricism, are featured next to drug cocktails that fueled the writing of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Some other prominent names which make their appearance in the volume include the Irish poet William Butler Yeats who travelled to late-19th Paris to experiment with Hashish together with Irish Revolutionary Maud Gonne, the object of his unrequited infatuation; the English occultist Aleister Crowley who shocked 19th century England with his public experiments in sex, drugs and ceremonial magick, but eventually succumbed to cocaine and heroin addiction, which made a mockery of his pretense to a superior will; and French master of the short story Guy De Maupassant, who used ether to soothe his pains and rendered literary

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descriptions of it as a magical liquid facilitating great mental feats, but eventually suffered from hallucinations and psychotic episodes (whether caused by his own overuse of ether, or his degenerative brain disease, we'll never know). Countless other figures make their way in and out of the story as Jay recovers a forgotten world of psychonauts, whose intrepid, sometimes reckless, but always noteworthy forays into the strange worlds of drug intoxication constitute a "remarkable and remarkably under-studied episode in western intellectual history." (p. 9).

The specter of modernity hovers around *Psychonauts* in many forms. Modernity presents itself as a new global reality that brought access to an unprecedented variety of natural and lab-produced psychoactives. It also gave shape and form to the manner in which drugs are perceived, experimented with, experienced, and ultimately mediated into culture. In some instances (particularly cocaine), drugs were perceived as mental accelerators, which will increase human capacity and allow it to adapt to the increasing speed and demands of the modern world. In other cases (as in the case of the *C. des Hasishchins*) they were viewed as a retreat back from the prosaic life of the modern bourgeoisie, and into a world of exotic orientalist fantasies. In yet other instances, they allowed the direct experiential apprehension of novel transformations in the modern psyche that were hinted on by modern art and science. Jay instructs on the ways that the nitrous oxide could be seen as correlative to Hegel's idealist philosophy, and the relativity of mind-altered subjectivity as a way of apprehending Einstein's theory of relativity.

Similar to others before him (Notably David Courtwright's indispensable *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern world* and Toby Seddon's insightful *A History of Drugs: Drugs and Freedom in the Liberal Age*) Jay argues that today's curiously inconsistent body of drug legislation and norms cannot be understood without tracing their origins to the historical, social, and cultural background of modernity. But whereas Courtwright is interested in the social and political forces that shaped modern society's approach to drugs, and Seddon in the relationship between liberalism and the drug war, Jay's interests lie elsewhere, in the intricate tapestry of cultural forces, scientific breakthroughs and personal stories that shaped the culture of self-experimentation and its role in the making of the modern mind. At stake here are two forms of modernity. The first is the modernity of free and often adventurous scientific exploration, consistent with Stuart Mills' liberal individualism. This is the modernity that produces the figure of the daring, fearless, psychonaut scientist experimenting on themselves, and that celebrates the world of multiple mind-states, perspectives, and realities. The second modernity, which rose in the progressive era's backlash to hyper-individuality of the gilded age, produced a collectivist culture with an unfortunate moralistic view of drugs as sins and crimes against society. It is this modernity that give rise to the drug war and brought an end to the vibrant culture of scientific self-experimentation.

The issue of psychoactive self-experimentation in science is key here. Spurned and disdained as a symbol of indulgent,

non-objective, non-professional science, self-experimentation has all but vanished from contemporary psychiatry. Its disappearance from view conceals the fact that, as Jay argues, until the mid-twentieth century self-experimentation was common and even standard practice, widely viewed as the only workable way of attaining in-depth insight into the subjective dimension of psychoactive drug effects. Such knowledge was to be achieved through the use of skilled judgment by trained observers. It was only with the rise of regulation, standardization, and growing legal liabilities, that self-experimentation became anathema to solid scientific investigation.

In view of the dominant contemporary perspective, in which self-experimentation has been all but obliterated from science and its self-image, Jay provides valuable documentation of a time when introspective self-experimentation was believed to sustain exceedingly more profound descriptions of drug effects than those provided by the observation of lab animal behavior. Self-experimentation is described in *Psychonauts* as not just an often-perspicacious strategy for drug research, but also one of greater ethical integrity, where researchers do not impose on others experiences that they have not ventured into themselves. It is a lasting ethos whose lineage leads all the way from Humphry Davy's first Nitrous oxide experiments at the end of the 18th century to modern day psychonauts such as late 20th century maverick underground chemist Alexander Shulgin, who developed an elaborate protocol of self-experimentation and discovered hundreds of novel psychoactive compounds. Crucially, the topic of self-experimentation by scientists has been a recurring topic of debate in the modern history of psychedelics and is currently returning to the fore in light of today's psychedelic resurgence, which makes its appearance in the ultimate chapter of *Psychonauts*.

Beyond the wealth of entertaining and sometimes jarring tales of drug experimentation, and the colorful renditions of varied subcultures and social circles, from the decadent aestheticists of 19th century Paris to Tangier's *kif* smokers, Jay's monograph delivers some still pertinent lessons about psychonautics. Mind-navigating, it appears, is not a business for the wide-eyed and the gullible. Hopes for magic cures are bound to be disappointed and utmost caution is advised. The unfortunate story of Dr. Freud's friend, the morphine addicted Professor Fleischl, whom the good doctor hoped to rehabilitate through the use of cocaine, but quickly deteriorated into insomnia, paranoia and delirium serves as a cautionary tale. On the brighter end of the spectrum stand those who approach the world of psychoactives vigilantly and with care. A mixture of prudent caution and an open inquisitive state of mind can produce true and meaningful insight – as the case of William James's encounters with nitrous oxide demonstrates.

Above all, discipline, restraint, and method count. One of the most striking tales in the volume is that of the British engineer James Lee, author of the forgotten classic *The Underworld of the East*. Lee was a state-educated working man eager to explore the world and expand his horizons. Coming down with malaria in the district of Assam in



north-east India he was treated with morphine. Upon his first encounter with the prospect of opium dependence, Lee (advised by his Assamese doctor) developed a regime of 'scientific' poly-drug use alternating between morphine and cocaine, "tapering one and replacing it with the other in carefully calibrated doses, and developed a detox regime that he spells out in detail grain by grain," (p. 86) a regime to which Lee held for decades avoiding addiction. "The life of a drug taker can be a happy one; far surpassing any other, or it can be one of suffering and misery; it depends on the user's knowledge," he opined (p. 85).

There is no point in denying the dangers of drugs. Nevertheless, the moralistic demonization of drugs and their users is equally pernicious. *Psychonauts* strides both sides of this debate without denying the value that drugs can confer on their users or the dangers which often lurk in their presence. Jay provides a lucid, clear-eyed analysis of the subject when describing Freud's view on the subject in his signature *Civilization and its discontents* (1929). According to Jay's summary of Freud's position:

Drugs give us an edge over our circumstances: 'not merely the immediate yield of pleasure, but also a greatly desired degree of independence from the external world', by offering temporary escape from pain, fatigue, and boredom. Yet they can never actually resolve our conflicts with the external world, and they often end up weakening our ability to manage them. In themselves they are neither disease nor cure; their benefits and dangers are, as James Lee maintained, a function of how we deploy them. (p. 99).

Psychonauts is an impeccably performed piece of writing and highly recommended to drug historians, drug sociologists and anybody interested in drugs, and the history of psychoactive drug use in modernity. The book is not only packed full of vivid, entertaining tales. It is also beautifully written, impressively researched and filled with 32 evocative images and illustrations. Its publication cements Mike Jay's position as a foremost historian of drugs in our time and should provide many hours of delightful, enlightening read to anybody interested in drugs, drug aficionados and their rich, engaging history.

