

Twenty minutes in, like clockwork, the visions begin. They are strong but I was expecting them this time.

Norma, the vegetalista who so astonished me with her care, skill and knowledge during my first ceremony two nights prior, had packed a big bowl with a knot of the local Nicotina Rustica and blown curling, whistling smoke over a plastic litre bottle filled with an opaque orangish liquid I knew to be ayahuasca, the potent brew of tryptamines and MAO inhibitors that has been prepared in the Upper Amazon for perhaps sixteen thousand years. I knew it to be ayahuasca, since I had, after all, helped mix it the day before, pounding a kilo of the soft but woody vine of fresh B. Caapi liana and tossing about fifty green glossy leaves of P. Viridis, a DMT containing relative of coffee, into the black cauldron simmering over a wood fire on the shores of the Yanayacu River, one of the eleven hundred tributaries of the Amazon. Back home this could be a felony. Here, I now understood, it is a medicine.

The smoke whistle is a trope, a refrain that often begins or ends an Icaro, the beautiful songs sung and whistled during the entire four hour shamanic ayahuaca ceremony. The smoke and its whistling inflection act as protocols to open up a spirit portal while keeping unwelcome entities – what I think of as affects – at bay. After my first session, I had also learned that the songs serve to orient the ayahuasca drinker. The songs mime and sample the birdsong of the region, an ecosystem with over five thousand species of birds and polyrhythms of insect chatter. I held on to, and was held by, the Icaros, giving intense thanks for the whistled orientation.

I took the coffee mug and fearfully eyed its contents. My first contact with Ayahuasca had been perhaps the most difficult experience of my life that didn't involve somebody (else) dying. For I had indeed palpably and unmistakably died – the accounts of ego death were not at all greatly exaggerated.

Nonetheless, here I was, two days later, again looking into the flickering, refracted and reversed image of myself I think I spied in the mug lit only by candlelight in the Amazonian night. The liquid was dark and iridescent, but I now knew that tales of its horrid flavor were something like an urban legend from the rain forest. My first gulp of ayahuasca tasted like nothing so much as my first pint of draft stout slurped in Ireland at the age of 17 with my now departed brother.

Still, I was fearful and full of respect for this plant intelligence with which I had seemingly interacted. The mug appeared nearly two thirds full, easily as large a dose as the first, most difficult, night. I had secretly hoped for a tinier tourist dose, but now I really had no choice but to drink down the cup I was offered.

As a result of my extensive research into the ceremony (as well my inquiries into the John Lilly's "science of belief"), I carefully addressed the ayahuasca to orient my journey. Having toyed with the I Ching as a writing tool, I was comfortable posing questions to non-human entities as a rhetorical experiment, a practice of rhetorical invention that seeks interaction with other forms of order and its disruption. Among other things, I asked how I could possibly integrate the knowledge from my first journey into my life back in North America. Then I threw it back like a fat shot of tequila, opening my throat to the entirety of the viscous flow.

Like I said, twenty minutes of mediation later and the visions began, the same as the first night. A pixelated doorway appeared in my closed eye visuals and I went through it. Here goes, I thought to myself – what have I done?

Introduction: Glimpsing the Peacock Angel

If we recognize the plant as an autonomous power which enters in order to put roots and flowers in us, then we distance ourselves by several degrees from the skewed perspective which imagines that spirit (Geist) is the monopoly of human beings and doesn't exist outside of them. A new world-picture has to follow the planetary leveling; that is the task which the next century will take up. Ernst Junger, "The Plant as Autonomous Power", translated by Stephen Slater.



Crawling with transactions, the contemporary Earth whirls and whorls¹, uncannily bereft of human agency. The global ecosystem, undeniably in crisis due to the presence and activities of humans and their fossil fuel familiars, maintains itself far from equilibrium, surfing diverse gradients through raised ocean levels and proliferating vectors of disease: malarial mosquitoes have followed thickening sea

¹ "Big whorls have little whorls that feed on their velocity, and little whorls have smaller whorls and so on to viscosity." Lewis Fry Richardson defined the field of turbulence in meteorology thus.

levels and achieved new highs, more than doubling the altitude at which they can survive and reproduce. Global warming is no longer debated, but instead yields a muted and contentless call for “adaptation” while tens of thousands die of heat stroke alone in “old Europe”², a 2004 Pentagon report identifies sudden climatic change as a plausible “challenge to US security in ways that should be considered immediately”, and an enormous Hurricane provokes what the BBC called the biggest failure of the US Government since the Great Depression. While trillions of dollars are spent in the pursuit of “security”, a ubiquitous superpower – Gaia - launches global defense operations against Homo Sapiens of every demographic. Has yet another security briefing gone unheeded?³

The apparent inability of humans to perceive the densely interconnected nature of their habitat threatens not only said ecosystem but the very self definition of humanity itself as *homo faber*, an organism who actively creates, rather than is simply created by, her environment. Faced with overwhelming evidence of climatic change, one would expect an outburst of human agency, an ordering of the world according to the specifications of Homo Sapiens – the species, who, after, all, knows what it is doing.⁴ And yet humans - or at least, the only ones deserving of the slur – call for a strange acquiescence to the agency of the Earth:

The United States is a world leader in addressing and adapting to a variety of national and global scientific problems that could be exacerbated by climate change, including malaria, hunger, malnourishment, property losses due to extreme weather events, and habitat loss and other threats to biological diversity.(<http://www.gcrio.org/CAR2002/>)

This is a book that is, in part, about rhetoric, so let’s zoom in on the paradox: Watch as the alleged lone superpower “leads” not through “resolve” or “will”, but by speaking to, “addressing”, even “rehearsing” “adaptation.”⁵ Even as the Wolfowitz dreams of a global empire ordered according to the “interests” of the United States, the Bush regime beats a hasty retreat before the very real activities of bioterror their own report suggests could plausibly unfold. Instead of repeating the usual algorithm of empire – “make it so!” – the bloated uber power calls for nothing but an address or a “rehearsal”, a simulacrum of “adaptation”, yet another retraining that teaches humans how to respond to their devastated environment. Here’s a possible public service announcement for you – perhaps we can find time to screen it between reality TV celebrity wedding planning: “UV rays got you wondering if your skin is a tissue culture for cancer?⁶ Grab the sunscreen – it’s right next to the duct tape...”

² In 2003, extreme heat waves caused more than 20,000 deaths in Europe and more than 1500 deaths in India.

³If so, what might "An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and its Implications for National Security" have in common, a priori, with that notorious memo of August 6 2001? While National Security Advisor Condoleza Rice has characterized the DPB document detailing Al Qaeda intentions as "historical" in nature, in fact it was part of a different rhetorical genre altogether: scenario planning. This is a genre whose very medium is uncertainty, and as such must be read less for "information" about the future than "inclinations" toward it. This capacity to evaluate the difference of the future relies on a detachment from the present – what we "know", now – and a connection to the strangeness of the future – what we might become, then.

⁴ Insert note on insect consciousness, growing evidence for mind

⁵ Cited from recommendation number five from a list of seven, under the heading: "Are we prepared for history to repeat itself again?". This author can only respond: Let's hope not!

⁵) Rehearse adaptive responses. Adaptive response teams should be established to address and prepare for inevitable climate driven events such as massive migration, disease and epidemics, and food and water supply shortages "

⁶ Schreber

It is in this rather absurd context that a discussion of plant agency or “power” alluded to by the German writer and botanist Ernst Junger must taken place. Ethnobotany has long devoted itself to the relations between humans and plants, as has the shamanic medicine that has served the vast majority of Homo Sapiens in history and the present. This book will suggest that indeed in responding to global climatic change we must adapt, and that this adaptation begins with a recognition of plants, and the Earth itself, as a power, perhaps a superpower worthy of the name.



Though this phrasing may sound a bit odd to some, this claim is unlikely to remain controversial for long, as the massive effects of climatic change become slowly and unmistakably visible. Part of the adaptation called for by the Bush Administration would entail a submission to a world governing body – the world’s body – whose weaponry is temperature change, rising ocean levels, and emergent and proliferating diseases rather than shock and awe⁷ ...

But if it is easy enough to say we must “recognize the plant as an autonomous power”, even a superpower, we must somehow do the more difficult work necessary to inhabit this space where plants present a paradoxical and uncanny “autonomy” when we are most directly and unmistakably linked to them. The future of Gaian biodiversity and a modicum of global stability appears to depend precisely on a thoroughgoing and practiced re-articulation of human autonomy in the experience of imbrication with global ecosystems, including capital and information flows as well as the carbon cycle. In short, in order to alter what we do, we must “re-engineer” and re-imagine who we are. And across the life and climate sciences, the news is this: You are deeply implicated in the global ecosystem in ways

⁷ Margulis and Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes*, Gaia as natural selector

scientific and technical practices are only beginning to understand. If the breakthroughs in medical and global imaging systems have provided us with revelations, they reveal that our separability from ecosystems is itself an illusion, and that we are membranes inseparable from a global ecology. V.I. Vernadsky wrote about it in 1943:

Man is elementally indivisible from the biosphere. And this inseparability is only now beginning to become precisely clear to us. In reality, no living organism exists in a free state on Earth. All of these organisms are inseparably and continuously connected—first and foremost by feeding and breathing—with their material-energetic environment.

(http://www.larouchepub.com/other/2005/site_packages/vernadsky/3207bios_and_noos.html)

The news of this imbrication can, of course, be communicated in a cognitive fashion, but its persuasiveness – as measured by the emergence of a vision response-able to biodiverse futures – seems to hinge on an *experience* of this interconnection as well as an *understanding* of it. If the Upanishads instruct that “*Tat tvam Asi*”, “You are that”, and they do, “that” is an ecosystem subject to sudden volatility and massive extinctions even as it is increasingly interconnected with an otherwise dynamic, even lively, cosmos. It is therefore a rhetorical challenge to make this perception available to those humans who so violently cling to visions of autonomy even as they are forced to adapt. Rhetoric is the practice of learning and teaching eloquence, persuasion and information architecture by revealing the choices of expression or interpretation open to any given rhetor, viewer, listener or reader. Robert Anton Wilson offers a definition of rhetoric by example when he focuses on the word “reality” in Cosmic Trigger:

I will try again in this new Preface to explain it ONE MORE TIME, perhaps more clearly than before.

"Reality" is a word in the English language which happens to be (a) a noun and (b) singular.

Thinking in the English language (and in cognate Indo-European languages) therefore subliminally programs us to conceptualize "reality" as one block-like entity, sort of like a huge New York skyscraper, in which every part is just another "room" within the same building. This linguistic program is so pervasive that most people cannot "think" outside it at all, and when one tries to offer a different perspective they imagine one is talking gibberish.

It is unavoidably time to imagine the earth as a mesh of systems with which we are entangled. Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi describes a different kind of rhetorical framework and its effects:

It has to do with Gaia. There is a situation where I'm very clear that I'm not acting for myself. And when I realize that, that I am a cell, a living cell of the global organism, ...If I see myself as a living cell of a living planet, that creates a whole different set of ethical norms than the ones that I find when I'm speaking from the Patriot Act.

Can we avoid once again missing the signs of an enormous national security threat before it is too late? What rhetorical choices and means of persuasion do we have to make the perception of the Earth as a political planet palpable?

There are no doubt diverse answers to these questions. Biologist Christopher Uhl's book, Developing Ecological Consciousness maps out and offers an array of practices that help cultivate a relation to the planet superpower, a superpower whose main characteristic is dense interconnection. For Uhl and his attentive reader, becoming sensitive to the night sky, pondering the surface area of Earth's plankton and tracking the spoor of a beetle all are recipes for interconnection, a calm and sometimes oceanic apprehension of the *immanence* proper to biological systems. Immanent systems are

overwhelming and massively interconnected with themselves, neither subject nor predicate but web. For Uhl, the development of ecological consciousness is contingent upon experiencing the interconnection of earth and cosmos. This fact of interconnection appears to be a feature of life as essential as DNA itself, that densely interconnected bundle of nucleic acids.

Lest we think that such immanent visions depend upon the context of nature, recall that the Apollo space program provoked “cosmic consciousness” or the “overview effect” in those astronauts lucky and attentive enough to experience such interconnection while encapsulated in their military hardware. No doubt the practices of immanence are as diverse as the planet itself; fasting, inhaling carbon dioxide and even working with latex have all provoked encounters with immanence, suggesting that in some fashion human perception is indeed “wired” for a periodic recognition of the dense imbrication of organism and environment and is highly tuneable by our practices.

One such practice is thought experiment, as in Uhl’s treatment of the usually optical and now haptic night sky. Uhl reminds us that while gazing “up” at a night sky, one in fact hangs off the planet and near the edge of a galaxy, veritginously suspended over the infinity of space. Uhl quotes cosmologist Brian Swimme:

As you lie there feeling yourself hovering within this gravitational bond while peering down at the billions of stars drifting in the infinite chasm of space, you will have entered an experience of the universe that is not just human and not just biological. You will have entered a relationship from a galactic perspective, becoming for a moment a part of the milky way galaxy experiencing what it is like to be the milky way galaxy. (Uhl, 13)

Looking not at the night sky but at the daylight earth from space, Astronaut Edgar Mitchell of Apollo 14 inhabited a galactic perspective through an involution of perspective into interconnection. Apollo 14’s mission mission was more or less complete, and Mitchell had a brief moment to relax, so he looked out the window:

with Milky Way watermark backdrop, a la promethea

Then looking beyond the earth itself to the magnificence of the larger scene, there was a startling recognition that the nature of the universe was not as I had been taught. My understanding of the separate distinctness and the relative independence of movement of those cosmic bodies was shattered. There was an upwelling of fresh insight coupled with a feeling [of] ubiquitous harmony – a sense of interconnectedness with the celestial bodies surrounding our spacecraft. Particular scientific facts about stellar evolution took on new significance.

(<http://www.edmitchellapollo14.com/bookexcerpt.htm>)

Fundamental to this insight is a perception of dwelling in an evolutionary space. Mitchell's vision – which he hastens to point out was neither “religious” nor “otherworldly” – momentarily but irreversibly rendered the interdependence of the cosmos palpable to him. This “startling recognition” substitutes a sensory and even affective imbrication – “There was an upwelling of fresh insight coupled with a feeling of ubiquitous harmony” – for the everyday perception of the (alienated) distinction between subject and object, earth and its others, human and universe. Mitchell's vision offers a perhaps equally startling irony: it was only by taking on a literally extraterrestrial perspective that the moon walker overcame alienated perception.⁸

This vision was productive of learning and knowledge as well: Mitchell still grapples with his perception of evolutionary interconnection, and has offered a physical theory of consciousness to account for it. Integral to this theory is John Bell's 1964 non locality theorem, the apparent fact of imbrication or “entanglement” essential to matter itself and constitutive of that apparent bubble of experience, subjectivity:

The basis of subjective experience is rooted in the quantum attribute of nature called non-locality. I will use the word “perception” in its most generic sense to denote a basic subjective experience at all levels of complex matter. Thus the non-local quantum correlation between entangled quantum particles is considered the root cause of the phenomenon experienced as perception in more complex matter, but the non-local quantum hologram is the non-local carrier of information for molecular and larger scale matter. *Thus, perception is not an object but rather the label for a nonlinear process involving an object, a percipient and information.*” (emphasis mine, mitchell on Nature's Mind, <http://www.edmitchellapollo14.com/naturearticle.htm>)

The physics of non locality are notoriously difficult to understand, but specific to the core of Mitchell's claim here is that subjectivity – the human feeling of being an observer on a continuous world of duration - is essentially and paradoxically non-local, an evolutionary process distributed over the universe and subject to “nonlinear” transformations – such as his own “startling recognition” that the perception of “separateness” is a label or snapshot of an enormously dynamic system. Even as it appears to confer a sense of interior and exterior to human experience that certainly feels awfully local and “distinct”, the universe does so in a thoroughly informational and non local fashion. Much can be “done” with information, but confining it to a single location is seldom a tractable strategy . Like the mind apprehending it, information “wants to be free” if only because it is essentially “not an object but

⁸This recognition is isomorphic to the recognition of Gaia itself, emerging as it did from James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis's meditation on the earth as seen from space.

rather “the label for a nonlinear process involving an object, a percipient and information.” ***find a glyph for this with figure ground aspect?***

Hence this insight seems to involve not only an act of perception, but an action whose achievement makes legible the nature of perception itself as a non-linear and highly distributed system not “ownable” by a self and navigable only through its practiced but always irreducible dissolution, the sometimes shattering detachment from “distinctness” before which a sense of interior and exterior dissolves in awareness and awe. This awareness of interconnection emerges in what Vernadsky dubbed the “noosphere” - the aware and conscious layer of the earth's ecosystem, and, perhaps, feedbacks back onto our ecosystems as we become conscious of our interconnections with them.

Yet while billions of dollars of hardware and support provided the context for Mitchell’s close encounter of an interconnected kind, millions of humans experience and write incessantly of this sense of non-locality after ingesting compounds derived from plants such as tryptamines and phenethylamines. Consider this recent posting on www.erowid.org, a web site devoted to ethnobotanical information and harm reduction. After ingesting ten inches of a legal mescaline cactus San Pedro, Smokeloc writes:

The basic principal of the experience is ‘EVERYTHING EXISTS WITHIN ITSELF’ MEANING: all of reality is so basic yet so infinite. Think about space, the universe ... the galaxies exist within it and the solar systems exist within that.... planets exist in that.... living animals exist within the earth bacteria and cells live within the animals and atoms exist within that....EVERYTHING EXISTS IN AN ETERNAL PLANE. I could see everything as eternal...So beautiful and so simple. I have never experienced such a strong sense of peace with living and existing. The next day I went outside and noticed things like birds singing and the wind steadily blowing, everything became so beautiful and I had a change of life views and was no longer jealous about what other people had. I lost my anger that was deep inside of me... and it feels GREAT!

(<http://www.erowid.org/experiences/exp.php?ID=5684>)

At a moment when “egoic” consciousness – that form of human experience that insists on the radical distinction between self and cosmos, as the former insists on incessantly consuming and colonizing the latter – seems to have reached a pandemic, a humble cactus enables the news of our fundamentally nested nature. What *are* psychedelics such that they seem to persuade humans of their interconnection with an ecosystem?