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Literary Review: 'Neuropsychedelia' by Nicolas Langlitz

POSTED BY [PSYPRESSUK](#) · JUNE 25, 2013 · [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

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Originally published in 2013 'Neuropsychedelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain' is written by Nicolas Langlitz. Langlitz is an anthropologist and is currently Assistant Research Professor at the New School for Social Research. He has previously authored 'Die Zeit der Psychoanalyse: Lacan und das Problem der Sitzungsdauer'.

The 'Decade of the Brain' was the 1990s when huge advances were made in the neurosciences and a hegemonic identification between mind and brain became the established line. The Human Genome Project mapped what was thus understood as the human blue-print and new technologies, such as neuroimaging, became sophisticated enough to provide the sciences with intriguing data points. And while a new generation of scientists became interested in experimental forms of schizophrenia and mysticism, the ground was re-turfed for an influx of hallucinogen research.

...hallucinogenic drugs have been part and parcel of the emergence of late-modern materialism and its identification of mind and brain as a space of psychopharmacological intervention. In fact, the recent popularization of neurochemical self-conceptions had been anticipated by Timothy Leary's writings from the 1960s that teemed with brain metaphors and *neuro-* prefixes (Langlitz 20)

Langlitz is an anthropologist and his project, from which *Neuropsychedelia* is the result, was concerned with studying the revival of academic researches with hallucinogens since the Decade of the Brain. This meant studying the scientists themselves, their experiences, their reasons for researching, their underlying hopes, as well as putting their research within a cultural context, which takes into account their methodologies and the scientific climate in which their work took place. Primarily, the research was focused on two laboratories, one that studies the effects of hallucinogens on animals in California and one that examines their efficacy in humans, in Switzerland. Langlitz also discusses a variety of others, contemporary and historical, along with a number of organizations like the Heffter Research Institute and the Multidisciplinary Association of Psychedelic Studies (MAPS).

The book, organized into six chapters, begins by examining the historical conditions that made the re-emergence of hallucinogen research viable and gives an ethnographic account of the Swiss LSD symposium in 2006. In chapter 3, Langlitz gives an account of his own experience that he underwent at Franz Vollenweider's laboratory in Zurich with Psilocybin: "I fell through a dark tunnel into a void. The walls of the tunnel were covered with colorful spots and shapes. I felt terrified and absolutely helpless. At first I struggled, then I surrendered" (Langlitz 83). The question that pervaded this chapter was one that has troubled philosophers for eons; the subject-object dichotomy. And, moreover, one of the primary difficulties of psychopharmacological research with hallucinogens—controlling the efficacy of these drugs. If the mind is simply reducible to the brain, then how does one account for such variety? Set and setting perhaps, and Langlitz discusses the possibility of culture controls and fieldwork, as opposed randomized, blind, placebo trials.

When Sandoz first marketed LSD, one of the two primary reasons they gave to the market was its use as a psychotomimetic *i.e.* in an ability to mimic the conditions of a psychosis in people who used it. It fell out of favour as research moved into the 1960s, but its importance never really disappeared, for much of Aldous Huxley's discourse took leave from the psychotomimetic understanding, which his supplier Humphry Osmond had been interested in. Langlitz's fourth chapter deals with this topic specifically and I personally found it the most enlightening and interesting. He deftly covers the reasoning behind its fading in and out of popularity, largely due to prevailing theories concerning neurotransmitters, and how/why the theoretical approach is now being used again. Indeed, this leads Langlitz nicely into ethical and epistemological questions around the use of animal testing, which he treats very objectively and, I believe, fairly (in what is often a very heated debate for animal activists.)

By now, the revival of hallucinogen research is more than twenty years old. The Decade of the Brain has long passed. Even though packaging psychedelic in the fashionable vocabulary of the neurosciences has returned legitimacy to hallucinogen research, it has not made up for Leary's failed neurological revolution (Langlitz 239-240)

There a spiritual-political dimension that has been engrained in hallucinogen research ever since the 1950s. In many respects, this manifested through the LSD evangelist and researcher Timothy Leary's political 'turn on, tune in, drop out' motif from the 1960s, but it didn't simply disappear with research coming to an end in the same period. In the chapter *Mystic Materialism*, and in his concluding remarks about the perennial philosophy, Langlitz remarks on the awareness of material interconnectedness and the mystical apprehension of it. Yet researchers were no evangelists, they were scientists and "[t]he cerebral savages of the strange land of psychedelic science turned out to be travelers themselves" (Langlitz 241). There is a very real sense that Langlitz's research revealed a process that is still very much undergoing; there are yet to be answers, still more questions, but the promise of purpose in integrating the psychedelic experience is still a driving force for some.

...fieldwork in perennial philosophy moves beyond ethnography and begins to provide philosophical tools to remediate some of the spiritual ills of late modern life. In what ways these discourses will be supplemented by pharmacological equipment depends on whether the scientists and activists fueling the psychedelic revival will be able to maintain its momentum (Langlitz 265)

Neuropsychedelica is a very informative book and, in being so, it begins to write a modern history of the psychedelic movement—whether or not those individuals discussed feel themselves to be a part of such a movement or not. What, perhaps, comes as little surprise is that even with the new language of neuroscience giving fresh legitimacy to hallucinogen research, many of the philosophical, and indeed scientific, problems remain from the research heyday. As he says, there has been no great paradigm shift, and although there appears to be a potential for one, it is only with continued research, new technologies and enlightened insights that this might occur. An excellent book.

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About PsypressUK

Rob Dickins is the Editor-in-Chief of the Psychedelic Press UK online magazine and the PsypressUK: Anthology of Pharmacography. In 2012, he received a Masters of Philosophy in English, with the University of Exeter. His thesis examined the proliferation of psychedelic literature between 1954-1964. It primarily dealt with texts on the psychotherapeutic use of LSD and mescaline, and the development of the psychospiritual narrative. Rob's other interests include alternative British histories, festival fun, anarchic approaches and pocket poetry. He has also published a novel called Erin.

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