

# Who Took the Drugs? Displaced Hallucinations in Psychedelic Films

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## SLIDE 1

Although there has been a resurgence of interest in psychedelic art, psychedelia's place in the history of cinema has not been researched thoroughly and, likewise, film's contribution to psychedelia requires a lot more consideration. My paper will move first forward through time towards recent cinema, and then backwards to the 1960s. My focus will be feature-length fiction psychedelic films. Such films are a rich but still fairly neglected area.

## SLIDE 2

The 2005 Tate Liverpool exhibition *Summer of Love* covered psychedelia in almost all media, and considered experimental short films, but gave feature films something of a cold shoulder. This exclusion is fairly endemic.

Certainly, some features like *2001* and *Easy Rider* have undisputed places in the film canon as art-house classics, but a large number of other feature-length excursions into psychedelia tend to be dismissed as, at worst exploitation trash, and at best cult curios. And yet if we peel off these labels, experiment, art-house, exploitation, cult, and so on, similarities are revealed that are worth discussing.

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But first, let's take a step back to the research question. Consider yourselves for the moment not 'breakerers' but instead

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Brain police who are investigating: Who took the drugs?

It's a loaded question. When looking at films which have some kind of relation to psychedelia, we could take the question literally. So, we could ask which, if any, person connected with the film took a psychoactive substance. Do we mean the makers of the film? If so, there will most likely be a lot of people to consider. Most feature films are massive collaborations. So another way of answering the question would be to spot which aspect of the filmmaking process bears traces of intoxication, and therefore which element of the film's style might be psychedelic.

## SLIDE 4

Keeping this sense of collaborative psychedelic cinema in mind, if we take the long view of psychedelic film history, we might look back to animated precursors of psychedelic cinema: *Fantasia*, *Dumbo*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, the three least conventional Disney features made during Walt Disney's life.

## SLIDE 5

If we move on to first wave of psychedelia, salient films would be *The Trip* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But our first inclination if taking these films as psychedelic movies would be to focus on their spectacles, and therefore their special effects.

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pioneered by Robert Beck for *The Trip* and

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by Douglas Trumbull for *2001*.

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Looking for psychedelic traces in recent movies, we might again be drawn initially at least by the spectacle, now produced by digital visual effects artists, in films including *The Doors*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *Blueberry*, *Taking Woodstock*, *Enter the Void* and *A Field in England*, covering the period 1991 onwards.

## **SLIDE 7**

As well as spectacle and technology, though, we could look at character. Therefore we would ask simply which character takes the substance in the film. But detecting the drug in this way can be equally tricky. Films like *2001* and *Yellow Submarine* are unforgettably psychedelic, but show no drug consumption. *2001* suggests that multi-dimensional travel feels like psychedelia. In *Yellow Submarine*, the whole universe is psychedelic.

And then, many other films show characters taking drugs, but don't precisely delimit the representation of the intoxicated mind.

## **SLIDE 8**

One of the more interesting recent psychedelic films is *Enter the Void*, directed by Gaspard Noé and released in 2009. The main character smokes DMT, is shot, dies and enters a void between life and death, present and past. Or, another interpretation that the film actively encourages is that death and void are still DMT hallucinations.

Despite this ambiguity, the question of who took the drugs seems fairly straightforward in this case. In the opening of the film, for a long time we are limited almost entirely to the optical point of view and point of audition of the main character. So we watch with him as he smokes the DMT and share his hallucinations.

Here's a short extract featuring the DMT.

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Writers often judge the extent to which a film is psychedelic by comparing a trip scene with an assumed 'typical' drug experience.

However, cinema does not simply record, it mediates, it represents. And its representation of reality is always determined by codes we as audience members quickly learn to decode. Likewise, representation of subjectivity on screen is necessarily codified: it will never be a straightforward facsimile of a trip. And the codes of representing psychedelic states have changed over time, determined partly by cultural, and partly by technological shifts.

## SLIDE 11

On the other hand, the whole of cinema might be considered psychedelic. Several recent film theorists have connected cinema and altered states of consciousness, But as early as 1973, anthropologist Michael Harner reported that 'Both Jívaro and Conibo-Shipibo Indians who had seen motion pictures told me that the ayahuasca experiences were comparable to the viewing of films, and my own experience was corroboratory.'

If we followed this line of thought, though, would 'psychedelic' still be a useful category to distinguish between one film and another, and if so how?

My answer to this is that what matters most of all is how reflexive the film is. That is, how self-conscious it is about the general psychedelic ontology of cinema that Harner referred to. And then we would still need to ask how it utilises that ontology.

## SLIDE 12

In the sequence from *Enter the Void* you have an example of such reflexivity. Optical point of view is used for so long, it's impossible not to think of it as a device. So, paradoxically, it's immersive and reflexive at once. The pipe is held up. The character is smoking. Following the codes of cinema, we are in the character's head, seeing through his eyes and therefore by implication smoking through his mouth. Who is taking the drugs? He is. But we are also this character smoking DMT.

The audience imagines taking the drug. And imagination is a full part of the film experience. Film is never what we see and hear in any single moment of the movie: to make sense of the film, the audience has to build up a mental image of the film's space and chain of events. Continuity editing wouldn't make sense to us, if our imaginations didn't form an image of the film world from the snippets the actual film gives us. We combine what we perceive with imaginative glue, and that process itself is a bit like tripping. So in a sense we are tripping imagining a trip. Cinema gives us a double dose.

And then again, perhaps the question should be *what* is taking the drugs, for it is surely the camera that is smoking that pipe on screen? The technologies of the DMT pipe and lighter and the camera are brought as close as can be, linked and compared as technologies that can alter consciousness.

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Soon, though, reminders of the character almost completely disappear. Although we are still sharing his optical point of view, we are encouraged by the film to become immersed in the represented hallucinations.

It's a spectacular moment. But even if we neglect in this moment to think about the story about this character who smokes DMT, we are being told another story: the hallucinatory images perform a narrative of choreography, a sort of digital ballet, which at this moment might seem more interesting than the rather quotidian tale of a bloke smoking DMT, even though the one derives from the other.

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As it becomes more spectacular, the sequence seems to walk a fine line between hallucinating and narrating,

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a phenomenon for which I'd suggest the appropriate term is 'halluci-narration'.

This term 'halluci-narration' is at the heart of my paper, so I'll say more about it in due course.

## **SLIDE 15**

But first, let's step back to the 1991 film *The Doors*. It's a much maligned film, but its innovative use of computer generated imagery deserves attention, for the way it is used to represent Jim Morrison's animistic sense of a universe in constant motion.

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So, for instance, we see Val Kilmer as Jim here in the moment where he claims to be the Lizard King who can do anything. His animistic cosmic vision of distorted time and space are conveyed as

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the stars swirl

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and seem to melt into a whirlpool, which conjures up a new space, the desert: the place where he Jim will take on the ritualised myth that he then re-enacts in his Oedipal song 'The End'.

The term used in film narratology to describe this projection of subjectivity onto an environment

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is focalisation. So, thanks to Industrial Light and Magic's digital animation, what we see in this shot is *focalised* by Jim's trippy subjectivity.

But things get more complicated. Have a look at this scene from later in the film, as Morrison performs the song 'Not to Touch the Earth'. See whose subjectivity you think is important here.

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By this point in the film, viewers are used to seeing Jim's visions of Native Americans, so that it would be easy enough to read this scene as a representation of another of Jim's trips, leaving the stage to enter once again the zone of myth and ritual, a hallucination that enables him to return to the song and announce that some outlaws live by the side of the lake, as if the ritual has conjured these outlaws up.

But all this is actually focalised mainly by keyboardist Ray Manzarek, who is

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first emphasised by a tracking shot towards his corner with the organ, just as he stops playing.

We then see the first shots of the hallucinatory Native Americans, and after this

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Ray is presented emphatically in a reaction shot, as if doing a double-take on our behalf as he watches the hallucinatory ritual.

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What makes this sequence interesting is two things:

Firstly its distortion of time, space, and even character, so at one point we see two Jim Morrisons, one off stage, one by the fire. These are qualities we tend to associate with the avant-garde.

Secondly, the sequence is emphatically extra-subjective, featuring a communal trip in which Ray shares Jim's hallucinations, including mythical yet personal versions of Eros (the lady with the breast out) and Thanatos (the bald man who is in most of Jim's visionary experiences).

In a sense, this sequence is typical of what psychedelic feature films can do. They use intoxication as a pretext, as a way of 'smuggling' avant-garde sequences into films produced by conservative studios. And I don't want to offer a specific interpretation of what happens in the scene from *The Doors*: what matters for the purpose of my argument is that it is an example of an opening up of a philosophical, psychedelised space in a mainstream film.

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The combination of mainstream and avant-garde tendencies in psychedelia can be traced back to films like *Easy Rider* (1969), which famously mixed the mainstream codes of road movie and western with avant-garde strategies influenced by experimental film makers like Bruce Conner. But although there is an LSD scene in *Easy Rider*, the disruptive, avant-garde elements are not limited to it, but spread all over the film. Traces of hallucinogens are to be found in the bloodstream of the whole film, not just the trip scene.

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Although psychedelic films often use drugs to motivate the introduction of non-mainstream elements of style, the 'trip scene' rarely marks off these effects. There is a displacement and/or dispersal of psychedelic effects.

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This blurring of the boundaries between mainstream codes and avant-garde codes brings hallucination and narration together to form hallucinarration. Hallucinarration is an emphatically unstable discourse. It neither just immerses us in hallucinatory images, nor simply tells a story. It dabbles in both and blurs the boundaries between them, echoing altered states of consciousness.

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It is widely recognised that *Easy Rider* is a classic that helped to bring European art-house and avant-garde strategies into Hollywood. However, I would argue that we need to revise this history, and consider *Easy Rider* as one of a number of feature-length psychedelic films that used psychedelia as a means and a reason to smuggle in subversive stylistic features. And I'd argue that this applies just as much to

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cult films like *The Trip*, which was a forerunner to *Easy Rider* in various ways,

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exploitation films like *Psych-Out*

and even later films like *The Doors* that return to the 1960s and thereby re-invoke the syncretic subversion of Hollywood's reality codes.

This is to take a retrospective reappraisal, however.

We also need to ask: what mattered at the time of the first psychedelic wave?

## **SLIDE 23**

Let's take a look at Europe, because there is another angle to the story there that we need to consider. In England in 1967, film was essential to the underground. When bands played at the UFO night club, people tripped to light shows that were a kind of live animation. Between sets, members then tripped out to classic films, as diverse as Marilyn Monroe comedies and Kurosawa samurai epics. However, the few comments underground figures make about psychedelic feature films of the era are almost all disparaging.

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The most striking comment I've found is by Horace Ové, who in the mid-1970s would become one of the most important filmmakers in Britain. The film he chose to single out as a successful attempt at psychedelia was

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*Performance*, made by Donald Cammell and Nic Roeg in 1968, and released in 1970. As I'm sure most of you know, the film is about a gangster called Chas played by James Fox, who hides out at the house of Turner, a reclusive ex-pop star, played by Mick Jagger. Chas is fed Fly Agaric mushrooms and his persona is systematically deconstructed in a series of psychedelic games.

Although there are plenty of shots in this film representing psychedelic subjectivity, it's not any of those moments that Ové chose to praise. I'm going to show you the scene he singles out now: in it, Turner is reading the Borges story 'The South', while his lovers Pherber and Lucy listen and prepare mushrooms. Here it is:

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#### **SLIDE 26**

Ové comments on the emphasis of the fly on the soundtrack and image: He says 'That was so fucking psychedelic, that piece of observation. Yet a lot of filmmakers could look at that and not even know what it fucking means, but what it means was that everything was exaggerated under LSD, right into the fly, the spider, the flower.'

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The sequence and film have many other points of interest. But Ové does not even choose one of the shots focalised by Chas's Fly Agaric intoxication. He chooses the close-up of the fly.

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Why?

Yes, it's the kind of detail that a tripper might focus on. It's also the kind of unmotivated detail that a mainstream film would not show. Here the fly is implied to be a displaced element of a trip. The film's psychedelic mushrooms of choice are Fly Agarics, so the word 'fly' creates a homology between the image of the fly and the psychoactive fungus.

The fly is intriguing precisely because it's a displaced trippy detail, rather than a shot from a designated trip scene. At the same time, it's so like a documentary detail, an accidental fly-in-the-eye, with no plot value. The shot even looks like something from a natural history film.

We can call this kind of shot

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a docu-trip close-up.

In contrast to Ové, however, I'd argue that this kind of trippy shot was not unique to *Performance*. Of course, it is the kind of image that appears in psychedelic experimental shorts. But *Performance* was not the only feature film to appropriate this avant-garde element from such shorts. There are a

few European psychedelic films of the 1960s and 1970s that stand apart for their use of docu-trip close-ups. If you recall, an emphasis on spectacle, especially produced by animation or special effects, emerged from my broad overview of the history of psychedelic feature film. It is against this dominant strand that these few European films of the 60s and 70s stand, using docu-trip close-ups rather than special effects technologies.

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A key example is director Barbet Schroeder, who made two films related to psychedelia, *More* in 1969 and *La Vallée* in 1972, both famously scored by Pink Floyd. Both films also use docu-trip close-ups. Let's look at *More*.

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*More* is about Stefan a German graduate travelling, as he puts it, in order to 'burn all the bridges, all the formulas.' He meets Estelle, who acts like a femme fatale, introducing him to cannabis, ibogaine, heroin, LSD and a Nazi drug dealer who she is secretly having sex with. Stefan and Estelle live in Ibiza, where they become heroin addicts and he dies.

There is undeniably a tragic trajectory in the film.

But this is just one element to the film. The film also offers a parallel discourse that suggests a more positive, purely psychedelic philosophy that these unfortunate junkies should have stuck to.

There is one LSD sequence, but the film also features a lot of docu-trip close-ups, like the shot of the fly in *Performance*. Like so many of the most interesting psychedelic films, this trippy imagery is not delimited by a trip scene, but dispersed throughout the movie.

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There are lots of images of the sun, which

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emphasise the lens flare

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by repeated pulling focuses, which have the effect of altering the respective size of the sun and its various halos

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By animating the lens flare, itself a reminder a camera is present, this pulling focus these draws attention to the camera.

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So, we see the reflexive deconstruction of a movie's reality. And this acts as a synecdoche, a symbol in which part stands for whole. In this case, it's a synecdoche for for LSD's deconstruction of reality, so at the micro level cinema's realist codes are deconstructed, and this stands for the wider deconstruction of reality enabled by LSD.

### **SLIDE 31**

The images of the sun have clear emblematic meaning. For Stefan does not burn all the formulas. On the contrary, through drug experiences he uncovers the ritual of myth and re-enacts some old hubristic roles: that of Icarus, implied through the pulling-focus shots that seem to strain for the sun, prefiguring his death

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and that of Don Quixote with the scene in which a tripping Stefan tilts at a windmill.

### **SLIDE 32**

At the same time, though, there are plenty of docu-trip close-ups that have no narrative role: they are given time on screen so the viewer can indulge in their sensuality. They act as freely dispersed envelopes of a psychedelic phenomenology and offer a positive alternative to getting a fix.

Let's now look at the film's single LSD trip scene. In an attempt to cure their addiction to heroin, Stefan and Estelle take LSD and travel to the coast for the duration of the trip.

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It's a powerful sequence, in which the film's seemingly misogynistic representation of Estelle as a femme fatale is overturned. The trip is presented as the film's revelatory moment, and it is Estelle who seems like an innocent. She seems child-like, very similar to Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby*, which was released the previous year. She is horrified by Stefan's evil, which the scene seems to confirm, despite the fact that once they have come down, Estelle once again identifies herself as the evil one, as if re-internalising auto-misogyny.

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At the same time, the sequence is full of docu-trip close-ups. Some of these have obvious symbolic resonance – a phallus, no doubt – but the great majority of them are either highly ambiguous or devoid of interpretative potential and exude a highly sensual, psychedelic phenomenology. The sequence, then, offers that liminal kind of discourse I've referred to as halluci-narration. I should add that there is also a major difference in the sound design in this sequence. Almost all the other scenes only feature diegetic music – that is, heard by the characters, coming out of record and tape players on screen. But in this sequence, the Pink Floyd instrumental is not attached to a source on screen, but heard directly as a non-diegetic score floating over the images, contributing to the heightened sensuality of the discourse.

To conclude, I'm going to suggest how we can contextualise this kind of discourse historically.

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Some of the cultural theory that emerged in the 1960s has much in common with the psychedelic aesthetic I have talked about. Writing amidst the rise of abstract art, Susan Sontag asserted that

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'A great deal of today's art may be understood as motivated by a flight from interpretation.' And the psychedelic fiction film turns partly towards interpretation, but also partly away from it.

In fact, a Janus-faced quality of many psychedelic films has brought disparagement on some of them – indeed, perhaps kitschiness and profundity walk hand-in-hand in even the best of them. But his Janus-faced halluci-narration can be seen more positively. One way of accepting its mixture of profundity with elements that might seem kitsch or absurd is to return to the theories of play that emerged between the 1940s and psychedelia's first wave.

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Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, a key work in ludology, states that

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'in play we may move below the level of the serious, as the child does, but we can also move above it – in the realm of the beautiful and sacred.' I'd say that all the films I've mentioned today move between these levels and that this is part of their richness

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Halluci-narration is at once a form of play and meaning-making. Psychedelic films that deploy it narrate stories, but at the same time create epistemic disruption, introducing imagery and sounds which resist interpretation. This is often achieved by making it hard to isolate all of the traces of hallucinogenic substances in the film's body. Who took the drugs, where and when are questions that are left emphatically open.

### **SLIDE 39**

It might be depressing to reflect that in many psychedelic feature films, a main character dies at the end. It's almost a generic trait. Are these films conservative? No. I'm sure the deaths were partly a convenience to satisfy censors that drugs were not being glamourised. But these deaths also offer a climactic halluci-narration. Is the character dead or just tripping? Is the death a metaphor for ego death? It's this kind of openness that allows such films to smuggle in subversive tendencies, while also provocatively refusing to indicate definitively where the tripping begins and ends. Long may it continue!