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Berard Reviews "High Weirdness"

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<p><u>High Weirdness: Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies</u> Erik Davis MIT Press, 2019 Audiobook narrated by the author</p>
<p>Rating: One Star</p>	

Reading (well, [listening to](#)) this book, appropriately enough given its content and tone, was an experience. Historian of religions Erik Davis landed this book right into two registers that produce very different emotional responses for me. One register is that of chewy, involved, critical intellectual history, a happy place for me, somewhere I feel both welcomed and challenged. The other register is that of mysticism, spirituality, and the particular chip on the shoulder of intellectuals who study esoteric subjects, a much more fraught and murky intellectual/emotional space for me. It is impossible to disentangle these strands in “High Weirdness” and pointless to try. In the end, the challenges involved in taking this book in have helped make it, for me, one of the best books I’ve read this year.

I locate an echo of my ambivalence in the three subjects around whom Davis structured his narrative: hallucinogen evangelist Terence McKenna, journalist and novelist Robert Anton Wilson, and sci-fi master Philip K. Dick. Before listening to this book, my feelings were reverence for Dick, distaste for Wilson, and for the most part a lack of interest in McKenna. In many respects, I took opposite paths between Dick and Wilson. Wilson’s “Illuminatus!” trilogy was passed around by the hippie/nerdy boys (gendered pronoun used advisedly) of my very hippie/nerd-heavy school. I got my hands on it at fourteen, enjoyed the first fifty or a hundred pages of historical references and sex, and then lost it. I picked it up again in my late twenties and was distinctly unimpressed by the history, the sex, the libertarian politics, the prose style, and the general “ain’t I a stinker?!” tone of the work. I read Dick’s “The Man in the High Castle” as an alternate history-obsessed teenager. I liked it but didn’t really “get it” until I got into PKD more generally in college and reread it. As for McKenna, I only

knew about him because a psytrance act I liked (don't at me, they had some groove to them) sampled his lectures.

Did I change my mind about any of these impressions? Not really- maybe I'm a little more sympathetic to Wilson, learning about assorted personal tragedies of his, but that's not enough to make me read more of him. But in many respects, the men themselves are beside the point except as ideal types of "the psychonaut." The word itself takes me back to attic rooms with boys tolerant of, but not always enthused by, my uptight company, shoving Chinese research chemicals from the internet up their noses while I sat by and prattled (knowingly) of tabletop role-playing games and (utterly ignorantly) of girls... boys who are now men, many of them husbands, fathers, homeowners, and I'm very pleased to say some of them are still friends (it probably helps I got a bit less uptight). Anyway! Davis is a historian, methodologist, and champion of "the weird," as both a topic of study and as a way of approaching the world. As I was in those attic rooms, I am ambivalent. Unlike my time in the attics, I am going to make a good faith effort to understand.

This is made difficult by a few things. In many respects, I came to what intellectual maturity I possess through interaction with the special bugbear of countercultural psychonauts — materialist critical analysis. Hippies need squares, and one suspects that goes both ways. Hippies and communists actually just don't get on very well if they take each other's premises even marginally seriously. They are incommensurate. I identify as a democratic socialist more than a communist, and my friends, then and now, interested in psychedelia identify even less with hippie-ness, but you get the idea. In college, I put down my few feelers to what Davis calls "consciousness culture" in no small part by reading *The Baffler*, which took great delight in skewering the conjunction between counterculture and capitalism that loomed so large during the first internet boom. I wasn't a punk, and if anything, I'd rather listen to the 13th Floor Elevators than to Minor Threat any day, but many of my teachers were punk. Be fast, be mean, hit vulnerable spots... among other things, it seemed a better set of principles for someone escaping nerdery (let's throw another subculture in the mix!) in my circumstances than "tune in, turn on, drop out."

And then there's the chip on the shoulder that students of esoterica who get as far as Davis has gotten — well-known journalist, history Ph.D. — in "straight" intellectual life. I get it... kind of. Academia can, indeed, be stultifying. Studying stuff off the beaten path can get you frozen out, especially considering grim economic realities (though esoterica can also be flashy enough to attract grant money and undergrad eyeballs, it's

worth noting). But there is a distinctly passive-aggressive hippie-macho quality to the way psychedelic advocates express the chip on their shoulders, and Davis is no exception. He broadly implies that academics don't engage more with the esoteric, the "weird," and the psychedelic because they are afraid of having their minds blown, that they have to stay within the rules of consensus reality because they're too chicken to venture outside.

Well... lord knows academics are often cowardly enough. But I've also known a lot of people who would do god knows what with their bodies and cerebellums but are terrified of critical thought or honest self-examination. They'll brave the ayahuasca jungle but not the therapist's couch, take aboard criticism from fellow impaired miscreants before listening to an editor. Moreover, speaking as a materialist, what's more comforting- the idea that there is a big magical universe that takes human consciousness as a key element or the idea that there is nothing other than the material, that there's no magic, that when we die we rot, and human consciousness was probably an evolutionary adaptation to make us better hunter-gatherers? I could just as easily say psychonauts, heads, and freaks are the cowards, retreating up their own assholes, refusing the trek into the desert of the real. That's certainly something like what The Baffler would have said back in its glory days, if they could stop laughing at what they saw as countercultural clownishness long enough.

It'd probably be pretty good if I got into what's actually in this book, huh? Because it's good. It's really good. Even the parts where I was ambivalent made me happy because they made me think. Davis dealt not just with three "psychonauts," but their most outre flights of fancy, on their own terms but in a way that made them relevant even to my materialist ass. It would have been easy to focus on "Illuminatus!" and "The Man in the High Castle," and Davis does discuss them, but as a prelude to jumping into the deep ends with his subjects: the McKenna brothers' efforts to build a... psychedelic musical computer/philosopher's stone? in the Colombian jungle, Wilson's entry into (and out of) a paranoid "Chapel Perilous," and Dick's "2-3-74" experience, which dominated the last part of his life and helped produce the Valis series as well as his impenetrable Exegesis. Davis's own exegeses of these are bravura performances of insight, sensitivity, and erudition, borrowing from vast arrays of historical and theoretical literature. This is already a long review so I'm not going into detail, but take it from an only intermittently sympathetic interlocutor, they are quite good.

But there is a certain extent to which these exegeses, for me, were more like (noble, accomplished) work-showing for the larger contextual points Davis makes in "High

Weirdness." As far as the exegeses themselves are concerned, they serve as proof of concept for Davis's takes on how to approach "the weird." Neither confirming nor denying whether his psychonaut's experiences were "real," applying Bruno LaTour's actor-network theory where objects are constituent, active parts in the construction of truth, borrowings from Derrida, there's a lot going on here. Some of it is genuinely innovative- some of it reminds me of that other habit of esoteric academics, using "what do you mean by REAL?!?"-type rhetoric to keep alive the idea (often a childlike hope- not that of the six-year-old desiring magic power, but the twelve-year-old who doesn't want to put his magic kit away) that the supernatural is real... more the former, really, I guess I'm just sensitive to the latter, especially from a guy who likes to take his shots at the intellectual courage of materialists... really, I'd say methodologically, Davis is at his best in incorporating "trash culture" and subculture histories into serious intellectual history, but that could just be reflective of my particular interests.

Historically, Davis makes some provocative claims for his subject. McKenna, Wilson, and Dick were proud freaks, outsiders... but their thoughts and actions weren't so far outside of the mainstream as that might imply, especially not in the seventies. I have some disagreements with Davis, here, though probably more about emphasis (and arguably misprision) than fact. Davis wants to upend the seventies-as-decline narrative, one of the few things both the left and the right can agree on. All three of his subjects were involved, to one degree or another, with the sixties movements, and according to many readings, their retreat from politics and entry into paranoid delusion (if we choose to look at their experiences that way) goes along with the decline-into-individualist-malaise theme of a lot of seventies historiography. I basically agree with this notion but also think it is ripe for some productive disagreement. If nothing else, the psychonauts didn't (always) understand the situation as a decline, especially not the comparatively hearty Terence McKenna and the increasingly smug right-libertarian Robert Anton Wilson... the depressive (and actually brilliant, as opposed to half-smart like Wilson or just sort of questionably relevant like McKenna) Philip Dick had a tougher time. A lot of people thought they were going in the right direction. I might disagree (so might PKD!) but it's worth understanding their perspective.

Davis takes us home towards the end of the book with a discussion of "the network society," a concept that starts taking on valence more in the seventies and which the three subjects prefigured, and especially McKenna participated in. Whatever credulity Davis might display towards the claims and especially the premises of psychedelia, he

is no naïf about the magic of networks, showing how from the beginning, whatever supposedly liberatory, freaky-Deleuzian (to bring in another theorist he name-checks) quality networks might have had, they were also systems of deception, fuckery, and control- and it was impossible to disentangle the two. This he displays in the case of hippie, early network enthusiast, and murderer Ira Einhorn's both digital and social network of futurists and freaks. I know a thing or two about how cold the countercultural imagination can be, from that same school often described as a "hippie" school. When I enrolled in the late nineties, this school openly advertised itself as being the school for the network society, but there wasn't much peace and love there. The founders were libertarians, ruthless Zionists, pigheaded supporters of the Iraq War, and one of them even made the local news for how much money he donated to Trump's reelection campaign. In a gesture at contemporary relevance that I don't think Davis necessarily needed to justify his work, he ties in the alright, "meme magic" etc., in an impassioned call to understand "the weird" before it destroys us.

Well... as it happens, I know a thing or two about fighting fascists and cut my teeth in fighting the "altright" variant. We beat the alright by dragging them away from fora and memes and into the real. We challenged them to come fight on the streets, with the means of politics, violent and otherwise. They tried, and we beat them so hard that no one calls themselves "altright" anymore. There are plenty of Nazis, but that specific strategy is played out, dead, because of us and what we did, in reality, relying on masses, weight, truth. If you ask me, that points to a good way to study the weird- not necessarily with an eye towards beating it (though learning to break anything down is often quite instructive), but by relating what it says about itself to assorted tests of consensus reality. You don't need to be "reductive" to do that. You don't need to grade the weird like so many undergrad essays. Just throw it around and see how it reacts. If these ideas are so interesting and important, they should survive.

Along with "psychonaut," Davis uses an interesting word, mainly for Dick — "hermenaut" (not sure of the spelling because audiobook), navigator of the word and the methods of reading. Maybe it was my odd sensitivities, but it seems like Davis had an odd relationship with Dick. It turns out that Davis knew Terence McKenna "Bob" Wilson — Dick died when Davis was fifteen, and they did not meet. Davis knew of Dick's work and helped edit the Exegesis, and maybe this herculean task introduced a certain frustration with the great man that Davis doesn't have for his old, now dead, friends McKenna or Wilson. It got borderline disrespectful, from where I sat- more emphasis on Dick's romantic failings, the phrase "mendacious imagination" came up... but "hermenaut" is interesting. It's worth noting Dick had given up on psychedelics,

mostly, by the time he had his vision in 1974. He still did plenty of drugs, especially the proletarian uppers needed to keep him writing. All three subjects were voracious readers but Dick had a reading (and writing) habit that put the other two to shame. There's a reason (beyond academic appreciation, which Dick has more than the other two) for the Borges comparisons.

Forgive me for another reference to my youth. At my weird hippie-nerd high school, I was known for my refusal to use drugs, and a boy I knew who was quite enthusiastic for them asked me how I intended to expand my mind. As far as he was concerned, the options were either psychedelic drugs or decades of meditation- I didn't want to do either, so what was I going to do? "I'm going to expand my mind by reading," I told him. I don't relate this story to "own" the boy. I don't actually stand with the Baffler crowd in dismissing other ways of learning and other existential concerns out of hand, though I may not have much time for them myself and utterly refuse to be shamed for that. But I've chosen to explore the noosphere — the realm of human thought, which Davis refers to once or twice but wasn't really part of his or his subjects approach — instead of whatever dimension the psychonaut chooses. Truth be told, I think it's been good for me, and has actually granted some of the benefits, like enhanced connection with others, that more esoteric strains of consciousness promise. Dick's hermenaut imagination helped raise him from his "tomb world" of depression and paranoia (funny how the whole range of "spiritual" thought avoids the realities of clinical depression like it's a damn leper, like it doesn't disprove the idea of a good universal consciousness...). I think that way of doing things has helped me, too. And that's part of why, despite my ambivalence, despite occasionally rolling my eyes, I can only feel gratitude to Erik Davis for producing this work.

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