New edge : technology and spirituality in the San Francisco Bay Area

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Introduction

The Dawn of the Age of the Homo Cyber

Suspended Between Enlightenment and Enchantment

May 2005, I am in the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, where the two-day *Mindstates* conference is organized. In the months of research that will follow I will learn to recognize various of the Mindstates presenters, visitors and organizers as familiar faces of what outside of the US is referred to as the 'U.S. psychedelic scene'[1] and what Mindstates participants and speakers themselves refer to as 'the psychedelic community.'[2] Members of this community generally refer to psychedelic drugs as *entheogens* - a term that expresses the idea that these substances "bring out the divine within" (Blom 2010: 172; Ruck, Bigwood, Staples, Wasson, Ott 1979: 145, 146).

The general thrust of the Mindstates conference, that has been organized on and off since 1997, is that the experience of the 'divine within' is not solely brought about by herbal or chemical entheogens - such as mushrooms, ayahuasca[3], LSD and MDMA[4] - but also by different means. Since the first conference, Mindstates has featured on-stage presentations from Zen meditators, organizers of electronic trance-dance events, Virtual Reality designers, biofeedback practitioners, brain scientists and computer engineers. These presenters discussed practices varying from meditation to trepanation (drilling of holes in the skull), neurolinguistics, neuro-electrical stimulation, ecstatic dance, magnetic stimulation, the use of brain implants and immersion in Virtual Worlds as 'entheogenic

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[1] Interview Markus Berger with Mindstates organizer Jon Hanna, March 2006, published on: http://www.erowid.org/characters/hanna_jon/hanna_jon_interview1.shtml. Retrieved November 12 2010

[2] Julia Onnie-Hay, a participant of Mindstates 2005 who reported on this event, described Mindstates as "the largest psychedelic community gathering in the United States" (Onnie-Hay 2005: 26). Other regular Mindstates presenters and celebrities such as Virtual Worlds developer Mark Pesce and psychedelic guru Terrence McKenna habitually refer to the Mindstates attendees as the 'psychedelic community.' (e.g.Pesce 'Bios and Logos' 2002: McKenna 'Linear Societies & Non-Linear Drugs'1999)

[3] Ayahuasca is a brew, originally used for divinatory purposes by native South-Americans, made of a combination of plants, among which the 'B.caapi vine'. The active component of Ayahuasca, responsible for the psychedelic effects of the brew, is the chemical substance DMT (N, N-Dimethyltriptamine).

[4] MDMA is a synthetic psychedelic substance, chemically referred to as 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine. It is one of the central active components in the drug commonly referred to as XTC ('ecstasy').

techniques.' Whereas this fusion of divine awareness and technoscience had been implicit in all Mindstates conferences, it was the dominant theme of the 2005 conference. The title of this conference was *Technology and Transcendence*. (fig.1)

As formulated by the Mindstates presenter Markus Berger, the purpose of the Mindstates conferences is to work towards the "New Age of Entheogens". [5] In this anticipated new age widespread availability of entheogens will pave the way for a world in which people live in constant awareness of and appreciation for the divine powers that permeate their inner selves and that can be found immanently in nature. Whereas some Mindstates participants work towards this 'New Age' by lobbying for legalization of psychedelic drugs,[6] for others this moment is more likely to come through a permanent fusion of humans with digital technology. In one of the recordings of an earlier Mindstates conference (2001), the computer engineer Lorenzo Hagerty expressed such hope by presenting the image of the 'Homo Cyber.' The Homo Cyber, Hagerty explained, is an evolving new species of the human race. Being "half information, half human", the Homo Cyber differs from the Homo Sapiens in the extend to which it has fused with information technology.[7] It is in this fusion with information technology that a permanent higher awareness is made available to the Homo Cyber. According to Hagerty, the Mindstates participants, both "psychedically aware" and "technologically savvy", are "the prototypes of the Homo Cyber" (Ibid.).

In the course of my fieldwork, I encountered Homo Cyber-like visions in many other types of cultural spaces that I traversed in the geographical region of the San Francisco Bay Area (or simply 'Bay Area' from now on).[8] In general terms I will think of this cultural sphere as the Bay Area 'creative-culture industry', whereby the adjective 'creative' has more self-reflective than objective-analytical value. It is an industrious cultural sphere consisting of people with (overlapping)

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[5] Interview Markus Berger with Mindstates organizer Jon Hanna, March 2006, published on: Erowid.org/characters/hanna_jon/hanna_jon_interview1.shtml. Retrieved November 12 2010

[6] Rick Doblin from the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) presented his plans to have the use of MDMA accepted by the federal government as a legalized means for treatment in certain controlled clinical environments.

[7] *Psychedelic Thinking and the Dawn of Homo Cyber* presented by Lorenzo Hagerty on May 27 2001 at the Mindstates conference:
http://www.matrixmasters.com/speaking/mindstates/mssun01/hc01/hc01.html. Retrieved September 29 2010.

[8] The San Francisco Bay Area is the area surrounding the San Francisco Bay in Northern California, encompassing the sub-regions of the North Bay, San Francisco, the Peninsula, the East Bay, the South Bay and Santa Cruz. The area referred to as the 'South Bay' is also known as 'Santa Clara Valley' which, in turn, is part of the Santa Clara county. However, since the early 1970s, when the orchards that had dominated this largely agricultural area since the arrival of Spanish missionaries had given way to urbanization and the computer industry, this area has more popularly been known as 'Silicon Valley.'

occupations that are all in some degree related to information technology. These people are self-employed or have (sometimes multiple) jobs at Bay Area corporations and institutions as programmers, designers, artists, educators, activists, journalists, futurists, conference hosts, participants of think-tanks, documentarians of Silicon Valley history, consultants or as collectors of computer artifacts. What unites them is their shared, tacit as well as explicit, understanding that by engaging with 'information technology', one finds oneself culturally, economically, technically, artistically and intellectually in a global 'leading edge' position.

Whether imagined as an "Information Society" (e.g. Masuda 1975) as a "Digital Age" (e.g. Negroponte 1995) or as a "knowledge society", (e.g. Leadbeater 1999) the "knowledge workers" (e.g. Drucker 1999) or the "creative workers" (e.g. Florida 2002) of the San Francisco Bay Area find themselves squarely living in a cultural environment in which processes of cultural development, engineering, intellectual education, and biological evolution, are almost exclusively imagined in terms of 'information.' The image of the 'Homo Cyber' then, is only one of many examples of the ways in which this general 'informational ontology' permeates virtually all imaginable realms of social life. In the figure of the Homo Cyber, we see how this can result into a seemingly surprising convergence of cultural interests: a 'religious' pursuit - to get in touch with divine powers - finds its expression here through metaphors and practices derived from the 'secular' realm of technoscientific exploration.

Considering this convergence of 'religious' imagery with information technological interests, one question that the Homo Cyber invites to ask is what the nature is of this peculiar phenomenon. Should we think of the Homo Cyber as a religious icon, or is it a product of modernistic progress-minded thinking? Does the theme of the Homo Cyber signal a return of familiar apocalyptic dreams of salvation, or is it something genuinely new? And, if the Homo Cyber negates such dichotomizing qualifications, how then should we conceptualize it and employ it to understand more about the current cultural moment of one of the most high-technological regions in the world?

Rather than seeking to pin down, a-priori, the nature of the Homo Cyber, this dissertation studies the Homo Cyber as a phenomenon that is inherently multi-dimensional and that invites new ways of thinking about contemporary culture in late-modern societies. By studying the Homo Cyber in all of its multiple dimensions - as an engineering blue-print, a scientific riddle, an object of poetic musings and of artistic inspiration, a humanistic ideal, a social actuality, a gateway to divine awareness and a corporate sales pitch, to name just a few - this dissertation can be understood as an attempt to rethink religion in a contemporary world that, to paraphrase Hent de Vries (2008) is, at least in the west, suspended between the projects of Enlightenment and of re-enchantment (2008: xiii).

This research agenda moves us beyond the still pervasive understanding of the relationship between Enlightenment and enchantment as inherently irreconcilable (Saler 2004: 138). This latter understanding, most commonly thought of as the 'secularization thesis', reflects on the modern western society as having come into being through a process of "progressive enlightenment" (Asad 2001:146) fueled by scientific discovery and technological innovation. Informed by the ideology of science as the dichotomous opposite of religion (Aupers et.al. 2008: 688), and by the 'determinist' understanding of technology as a direct translation of 'science' (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999: 5), the secularization thesis also comprises the belief that all forms of enchantment - such as religion, magic and mysticism - have lost their public cultural significance through the ascent of science and technology.

It is clear that the image of the Homo Cyber confounds such secularization thinking, since it derives from a desire for enchantment and nature-sacralization as well as from scientific rationalism and technological optimism. By taking the image of the Homo Cyber as the starting-point for this study, in the most general sense this dissertation needs to be thought of as an ethnographic study of a "post-secularist" (Meyer 2008: 705) cultural environment, in which the projects of Enlightenment and enchantment are re-negotiated and converging in unexpected ways. In a more narrow sense, this dissertation is a study of 'cybergnosis.'

Cybergnosis

One of the key concepts of this dissertation is 'cybergnosis.' This term resonates with insights arrived at about the convergence of spirituality and high-tech by the Bay Area culture critics Erik Davis in his *TechGnosis* (1998), Mark Dery in his *Escape Velocity* (1996), Douglas Ruskhoff in his *Cyberia* (1994) and by the anarchist poet Hakim Bey in his *T.A.Z.*(2003). In a recent publication *Cybergnosis: Technology, Religion, and the Secular* (2008) the term has been scrutinized for an academic audience by Stef Aupers, Dick Houtman and Peter Pels. In this article, Aupers et.al. use the term 'cybergnosis' to refer to the entwinements of recent forms of spirituality and information technology. Being a contraction of the terms 'cyber' and 'gnosis', the term 'cybergnosis' points to a field of thought and practice where the 'secular' interest in 'cybertechnology' converges with the gnostic quest for immediate experience of ultimate reality.

In a historical sense, gnosticism is a dualistic religion that can be traced back to late antiquity in the Roman empire. Antique gnostics considered the physical world as "a prison and an illusion, created by a false god (the Demiurg) and guarded by evil demons (the Archons)" (Jonas 1958: 44). For gnostics, the ultimate purpose of life was to obtain 'gnosis': knowledge of one's 'true being' and the 'true nature of reality.' Gnosis could be obtained by moving beyond reason and by forgetting what one has learned about the world, while engaging in 'mystical'

states of mind. In this way could one 'unveil' the truth behind the facade of the everyday world and "remember [one's] divine origin" (Ibid.). In the 19th century, Western students of non-Christian religion introduced gnostic themes into the Western esoteric tradition (e.g. Aupers et.al. 2008; Campbell 2007; Anderson 2004; Pels 2000; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Lasch 1992). The British Theosophical society, founded in 1875 by Madame Blavatsky and the American transcendentalist movement of the mid-19th century with the philosopher, poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson as its epic figure, played important roles in disseminating gnosticism further into the Western hemisphere (e.g. Hanegraaff 1996: 457).[9]

In its modern variant, since the late 19th century, gnosis developed as a critical 'third option' alongside the knowledge-claims made by the official institutions of religion and science (Hanegraaff 1996: 519, 520). In its emphasis on 'mystical' states of mind as a road to ultimate truth, gnosis implies a rejection of materialistic and rationalistic science and doctrinal religion as pathways to true knowledge. Moreover, from the perspective of those who see the gnostic epistemology as a valid avenue for the attainment of truth, the official institutions of science and religion are themselves the 'Archons' of the world and responsible for keeping a false image of reality in place (Aupers et. al 2008: 690).

It is in this culture-critical way that the epistemological attitude of the so-called 1960s and 70s 'countercultural movements', particularly in the United States, can ideal-typically be referred to as 'gnostic.' In 1969 the Berkeley professor of history Theodore Roszak used the term 'counterculture' to describe the cultural disaffiliation among students, artists and intellectuals he observed around him in the late 1960s. Since the coinage of the term ‘counterculture’ in this context, this term became the "exclusive signifier for the Sixties version of cultural radicalism" (Braunstein and Doyle, 2002: 7). The Californian counterculture emerged at the intersection of the overlapping networks of Beat poets who settled here in the 1950s, intellectuals and religious leaders operating from the Human Potential Movement (HPM) that was founded in the early 1960s at Esalen, and the so-called 'hippies' and New Left students who, in the late 1960s formed communes in the forested regions surrounding California and elsewhere (e.g. Campbell 2007; Kripal 2007; Turner 2006; Anderson 2004; Braunstein and Doyle 2002).

What united the cultural activities of the Beat-poets, Esalen intellectuals and hippie-'drop outs' was a common rejection of 'cultural brainwashing', a desire for authentic living and immediate experience and a self-conscious understanding

[9] For a detailed account of the similarities and differences between the Theosophical and Transcendentalist movements see Hanegraaff 1996 pp. 443-462.

of continuing the 'gnostic tradition.'[10] As part of their gnostic interest, the varying factions of the counterculture developed practices and techniques that would assist in the double purpose of shedding off preconceived, limiting ideas about reality and of rebuilding new, more flexible and grander notions of the true potential of the self and the nature of reality. Central to these practices was the gnostic epistemology of 'experience.' Only through direct, inner experience could one achieve a higher understanding of the true nature of self and of reality at large. Practices and 'techniques' that were used to trigger gnostic experience varied from the use of psychedelics, to the adoption of Eastern meditation practices, to trance-dance.

In this countercultural context, the celebration of gnostic experience was generally framed by the critique that established scientific and religious prevented access to genuine understanding through their adherence to dogma and doctrine. The British-born self-educated theologian, philosopher and lecturer Alan Watts (1915-1973), who was an inspirational figure at Esalen, postulated the inherent difference between the "grandeur of the cosmos" that can be revealed in "genuine religious experience", and "society"s official version of reality", which he considered "silly" and "inadequate" (Watts in Anderson 2004: 54). The German psychotherapist Carl Gustav Jung, an equally inspirational figure within the Californian counterculture, critiqued the "scientific view of the world" as "hardly (...) anything more than a psychologically biased partial view which misses out all those by no means unimportant aspects that cannot be grasped statistically" (Jung 1960: 422).

According to various scholars of New Age, in the latter half of the 1970s, the 'counterculture' gave way to a 'cultic milieu' that became aware of itself as 'New Age.' About the birth of 'New Age' in the latter half of the 1970s, Wouter Hanegraaff (1996) writes that it is

> (...) marked by the phenomenon that people on a wide scale began to recognize the existence of what Campbell calls the 'cultic milieu.' As a result, they began to refer to this milieu as a “movement”, and began to perceive themselves and others as participating in this movement. This development took place in the period after 1975, and stimulated attempts from within the movement itself to reflect on and define the central concerns of the New Age movement considered as a whole (1996: 17).

Today, when scholars write about New Age, they don't think of it so much as a movement, but as a "discourse (…) that produces its own social practices as much as it penetrates into others" (Pels 1998: 266). One key characteristic of this

[10] The Beat poet Allan Ginsberg, for instance, equated the Beat movement with 'the gnostic tradition, the underground mystical tradition of the West.' This gnostic tradition, according to Ginsberg, was not originated by the Beats, but only 'carried it on a little here in America' (Houedard in Campbell 2007: 191).

discourse, the "great refrain" in the words of New Age scholar Paul Heelas (1996) is the idea of 'self-spirituality' - the notion that we are, by nature, inherently divine:

> The great refrain, running throughout the New Age, is that we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated – or, in the New Age sense of the term, been 'brainwashed' – by mainstream society and culture. The mores of the established order – its materialism, competitiviness, together with the importance it attaches to playing roles – are held to disrupt what it is to be authentically human. To live in terms of such mores, inculcated by parents, the educational system and other institutions, is to remain the victim of unnatural, deterministic and misguided routines; to be enslaved by unfulfillable desires and deep-seated insecurities; to be dominated by anxiety-generating imperatives such as creating a good impression; to be locked into the conflictual demands of the ideal relationship. (...) perfection, it is maintained, cannot be found by tinkering with what we are by virtue of socialization. Neither can it be found by conventional (political, etc.) attempts at social engineering. Perfection can be found only by moving beyond the socialized self – widely known as the 'ego' but also as the 'lower self','intellect' or 'the mind' – thereby encountering a new realm of being. It is what we are by nature (Heelas 1996: 18, 19).

As this characterization shows, the discourse of New Age is thus in large part inspired by the epistemological attitude of gnosis and continues the culture-critical role that gnosis has performed since the 19th century.

Whereas the study of the gnostic epistemological attitude, in the context of New Age, has been given ample academic attention in recent years, the prime purpose of this dissertation is to study what seems to be a recent modification of modern gnosis: *cyber*gnosis. The interest in 'cybergnosis', for Aupers et.al. (2008), came from the realization that a group of public spokesperson in California in the early 1990s were talking about the possibility of achieving gnostic salvation by means of 'cybertechnologies.'[11] Espoused in cyberpunk fiction and in the publications of the cyberculture magazine *Mondo 2000*, one way in which these spokespersons imagined cybergnostic salvation to take place was by leaving the body (dismissed as 'meat') behind in the 'immaterial sphere' of cyberspace. They thereby facilitated a direct, 'immediate' experience of the aggregation of all 'information.'

[11] My use of the term 'cybertechnologies' here indicates the historical connection between the scientific field of cybernetics as it emerged in the 1940s, and the 'information technological culture' that ensued a few decades later. Cybernetics, in short, studies the world as an 'informational feedback-system'; i.e. a system in which bits of information are interacting through feedback-loops (e.g. Boden 2006; Hayles 1999). It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to study the relationship between cybernetics and information technological culture in depth, yet part of the history is discussed in chapter one.

New Edge

With ‘gnosis’ being the key epistemological attitude of New Age, *cyber*gnosis is a central epistemological feature of the discourse and set of practices that I will refer to as *New Edge*.

The term ‘New Edge’ is an invention of the founding editors of the cyberculture magazine *Mondo 2000* that was established in 1989 in Berkeley. The magazine brought together celebrations of new 'edgy' technoscientific concepts, gadgets and future visions with a very 'New Agey' discourse of self-spirituality and spiritual evolution. The magazine was read, so the editor Ken Goffman - a.k.a. R.U.Sirius - told me, by "very New Agey and very nerdy people", hence his use of the neologism ‘New Edge.’[12] Outside the scope of the magazine, the term New Edge was also used as a self-reflective label by organizers of electronic dance events, known as ‘raves.’[13] In an emic sense, the term 'New Edge' thus loosely refers to a discourse and sets of practices that express 'New Age' ideas in a high-technological context.

In his *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996) Wouter Hanegraaff took note of the existence of a "high-tech form of New Age", but placed it outside the scope of his interest. In a footnote Hanegraaff wrote: "recent developments in the direction of a 'high-tech' New Age (sometimes labeled 'New Edge') involve the use of so-called 'smart-drugs', as well as 'brain machines' for the artificial production of psychedelic experiences" (Hanegraaff 1996: 11). Hanegraaff however decided New Edge to be a trend "still too recent to put into clear perspective" (Ibid.). Whereas 1996 seemed too early a moment to place 'New Edge' into clear perspective, a study of New Edge today is timely and necessary if we want to understand how the sacred and the 'ultimately real' may continue to thrive in environments where it is the business of people to create virtual realities, mediated environments and alternative realities. The question that this dissertation seeks to answer is in what ways New Edge produces a way of being, of acting and thinking that transcends the modernist assumption that technoscience and spirituality exclude each other.

When I use the term 'New Edge' in this dissertation, I generally refer to the discourse that treats information technological development as an expression of and as harmonious with gnostic consciousness-growth and that postulates this linkage between gnosis and information technology as part of a critique against 'conventional' institutionalized epistemologies. At times, I will also use the term

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[12] Interview Dorien Zandbergen with Ken Goffman, Mill Valley, California, September 2005.

[13] At a discussion panel that I attended (entitled "Rant & Rave: Dance Culture -- Past, Present and Future") that was organized in the Community Center of Mill Valley in September 2005, Michael Gosney, for instance, referred to the electronic events that he organized in the early 1990s as ‘New Edge.’

'New Edge' to refer to the cultural environment in which this discourse is nurtured, and I will use the term 'New Edger' to refer to a person who recognizes herself to be part of a cultural environment in which the cybergnostic ideal is nurtured in culture-critical fashion.

Studies of Technoreligion and Technospirituality

In what may be regarded as a massive effort to counter the Weberian thesis of secularization and to move beyond modernist thought (Meyer 2004: 94), scholars from wide ranging disciplines have in recent decades shown themselves intrigued by the question how technology and science mediate the sacred.[14] Whether under the rubric of 'technoreligion' or 'technospirituality', the modes and means by which these scholars have addressed this question are very diverse, postulating quite different 'explanations' for the 'affinity' between 'technoscience' and 'the sacred'. This dissertation challenges three common assumptions that inform these studies.

What characterizes most academic studies of 'technoreligion'/ 'technospirituality' is the emphasis that is placed on the immaterial, otherworldly, and transcendental aspects of technology. A pioneering work that is characterized by such an emphasis is the two-part *The Mythos of the Electronic Revolution* (1970) by the American Communication Studies scholars James Carey and John Quirk. In writing this article, the authors were inspired by what the American Studies scholar Leo Marx had traced in 19th century American literature as the rhetoric of the 'Machine in the Garden.' This rhetoric, Carey and Quirk wrote, imagines "a new dimension in social existence through which men might return to an Edenic estate through a harmonious blending of nature and manufactures" (1970: 223). Carey and Quirk traced this theme further and argued how the advent of electricity and electrical technologies by the end of the 19th century gave rise to the "rhetoric of the electrical sublime". This rhetoric is characterized by a "persistent attempt to link it with an extrasensory and worldless world that can be entered in an unmediated way (…)" (1970: 417, 418).

More recently, the works of Marx and Cary and Quirk have inspired studies of cyberreligion/cyberspirituality, which postulate that the computer networks of today constitute a similar extrasensorial and transcendental sphere. Some such works emphasize the possibility granted by information technological networks of reaching salvation through a liberation from the physical body. "Cybergnostics", Aupers et. al. postulate for instance, "often display a profound

[14] e.g. Pärna 2010; Aupers 2010; Aupers et. al. 2008; Barbrook 2007; Krüger 2006; Meyer 2006; Van de Port 2006; Dawson 2005; Stolow 2005; Szerszynski 2005; Höjsgaard 2005; Nelkin 2004; Mosco 2004; Pels 2002; Corn 2001; De Vries and Weber 2001; Lambert 1999; Noble 1999; Wertheim 1999; Helmreich 1997; Kunzru 1996; O'Leary 1996; Stahl 1995; Moore 1994; Verrips 1994; Nye 1994; Gell 1992; Benedikt 1992; Stenger 1992; Alexander 1990

contempt for the archaism of "wetware"- that is, organic substance" (2008: 699). Cybergnostics, so it is suggested, find salvation in the assumed 'disembodied realm' of cyberspace.

Other scholars are *themselves* enthusiastic about the alleged arrival of an immaterial, informational age. For instance, in his collection *Cyberspace. First Steps* (1992) the American professor of architecture Michael Benedikt describes cyberspace as the latest stage in an evolutionary movement from matter to spirit. In this stage, Benedikt hopes, "the ballast of materiality [will be] cast away -–cast away (...) perhaps finally" (1992: 4; see also Stenger 1992; 'O Leary 1994).

A different but related approach to the study of cyberreligion comes from those scholars who embrace a Geertzian[15] approach towards religion and see cyberspace as having the 'religious' function of alleviating social distress. For instance, Margaret Wertheim's study of cyberspace is informed by her sociological understanding:

> (...) we live in a time marked by inequity, corruption, and fragmentation. Ours too seems to be a society past its peak, one no longer sustained by a firm belief in itself and no longer sure of its purpose (1999: 22).

The contemporary infatuation with cyberspace, according to Wertheim, needs to be explained against this background. She interprets the information technological environment as "an idealized realm "above" and "beyond"' the problems of the everyday world". Wertheim compares the contemporary infatuation with cyberspace to the early Christians who were offered an image of the "Heavenly City of the New Jerusalem" as a "final reward" and an "eternal resting place of peace and beauty and harmony, above and beyond the troubled material world" (Wertheim 1999: 18). The study by the sociologist of religion Karin Pärna of the "Internet craze" of the mid-1990s is similarly informed. The Internet craze, Pärna argues, "represented a fleeting moment when an anomic society attempted to find a way out of uncertainty and establish reassuring common points of focus" (2010: 81).

A final category within the larger field of 'technoreligion' that takes the otherworldly aspects of information technology as a focal point, can be identified in those works that emphasize the awe-inspiring capacities of information technology. Oliver Krüger, for instance, studies how 'the Internet' is seen as "the first step of the realisation of a divine entity consisting of the collective human mind" (2006). Richard Barbrook interprets the Silicon Valley efforts to create Artificial Intelligence as an attempt to create a "silicon God Man" (Barbrook

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[15] In his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined religion as (1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (1973: 90).

2007). Richard Stahl studies how the 'newness' of information technology (in the early 1980s) leads people to employ the language of magic; Stef Aupers studies how the incomprehensibility and intangibility of information technology invites an embrace of magic (Aupers 2010) and Jojada Verrips explores how magical thought is the result of the seeming autonomous will of computers (Verrips 1994).

Whether discussed in sociological or ontological terms, these works on technoreligion or technospirituality place a transcendentalist techno-ontology at the center of their analysis: a 'technological sphere' is juxtaposed against a social, cultural and material sphere of existence. These works zoom in on sociologically real and important aspects of some of the popular attractions for technology in general and for information technologies in particular. We will also see this in this dissertation: also the New Edge environment consists of people who recognize cyberspace as divine and who seek to escape the physical body they inhabit. Yet, in this dissertation I take issue with three assumptions that inform many of these works.

In the first place, most of the works cited above are philosophical in nature and/or based on textual analysis of cyberculture magazines and/or cyberpunk literature. Perhaps because of this, each of these works offers one, carefully spelled out interpretation of the 'religious' or 'spiritual' nature of information technology. As such, they don't account for the messy reality of everyday life in which people generally create meaning through ongoing negotiations, in ways that shift and that are often at tension with each other. This ethnographic study of New Edge is rooted in such a messy reality. As a result I won't come up with only one explanation of the spiritual/religious appeal of cyberspace, but show ongoing contestations and negotiations over its meaning. Instead of treating 'religion' as a fixed field of belief and formalized sets of practices, I study it in the manner that more and more scholars come to theorize it: as a practice of *mediation* that changes form with, and that influences in turn, the different technologies of mediation that are socially, politically and historically authorized to perform this mediating function in particular ways (e.g. Meyer 2006, van de Port 2005, Stolow 2005, Pels 2002).

This brings me to the second point of critique. Most works on cyberreligion/ cyberspirituality are uniquely focused on technology. Technology is thereby treated as a factor that can be isolated from other domains of cultural life. It is made to seem as if, for instance, an interest in magic is the result of the incomprehensibility of information technology; or that intrinsic powers of cyberspace itself conjure up divine feelings. In other words, these works assume that it is quite clear what 'technology' is and that it is a force, distinct from social, material aspects of life onto which people can *project* things. This theoretical understanding of technology, however, diverges from the way in which technology can be ethnographically present. The Bay Area 'creative workers' featuring in this dissertation, for instance, don't generally have clear-cut notions in their minds

about where 'technology' begins and where it ends, what is social and what is technical, what is physical and what informational. Instead, we will see, a central characteristic of New Edge is precisely that such distinctions seize to have relevance. For example, New Edge is rooted in a cultural environment where information is considered a sacred, universal force that exists also outside technology. People can sense this informational field through their bodies as well as through their technical devices. In this setting, technology often loses its distinctiveness and a theoretical approach that considers technology as an extra-social and transcendental force seizes to have much explanatory power.

Instead of embracing the dichotomous and deterministic notions that generally inform studies of technoreligion, in this study instead, I seek to bring into view the larger cultural arena in which 'information' is considered a divine source. This allows me also to trace the history of contemporary New Edge to a period prior to the rise of computing and the Internet; and to show how cybergnosis is also rooted in environments that are not necessarily high-tech, such as the desert of the Nevada where the Burning Man festival is organized.

A third understanding that I take issue with in this dissertation is the focus on the immateriality of information technology, which informs most studies of cyberreligion/ cyberspirituality. The understanding that information technology is immaterial in essence, and that this immateriality comprises its religious appeal, resonates well with stereotypical understandings of hackers, 'geeks' or 'nerds' as having contempt for their bodies. This stereotype is carefully cultivated and reproduced in academic critical theorizing, in cyberpunk fiction and in documentaries and is informed by very real and actual 'geek' ways of being. (e.g. Fincher & Spacey 2010; Barbrook 2007; Sobchack 2001; Borsook 2000; Cringely 1992; Levy 1984; Turkle 1984) However, this stereotyped 'geek culture' is only part of the social reality in relation to which New Edge is shaped. Apart from the obvious fact that also seemingly disembodied 'nerds' have bodies and live in specific material conditions, we need to understand New Edge also against the background of a Bay Area cultural environment where bodies and nature have great significance: dance, the celebration of 'hands-on' creation, nature camp-outs and sexual experimentation play significant roles in the constitution of New Edge. Rather than a-priori assuming that cybergnosis comprises a quest for immaterial salvation then, I try to understand how New Edgers themselves negotiate particular ontological notions and ways of being which we may not be able to capture in familiar dichotomous terms.

Bringing the San Francisco Bay Area into View

I have chosen the San Francisco Bay Area as the place to study 'cybergnosis' because it is here that gnostic spirituality and information technologies have, since around the 1960s, simultaneously emerged. The understanding underlying this

choice of region is that 'gnostic spirituality' and 'technological innovation' don't 'happen' in social spheres that are isolated from each other.

In contrast with the 'conventional view' of science and technology as being direct reflections of an underlying natural reality (e.g. Sismondo 2004: 1-11) since at least the 1970s it has become common thought in the social sciences to regard 'technology' as a cultural and social phenomenon (e.g. Latour & Woolgar 1979; Kline & Pinch 1999; Pfaffenberger 1992). Both within academia and in journalistic writing it is also a common understanding that the information technological industries of the San Francisco Bay Area are a significant cultural force that extends well beyond the walls of offices and factories; and that the technologies that are developed in this region - such as the microchip, the Apple computer and SUN Microsystem networking - reflect Northern Californian cultural feats (e.g. Turner 2006; Markoff 2005; English-Lueck 2002; Ceruzzi 2000; Castells 2000; Hiltzik 1999; Cringely 1996; Coupland 1995; Saxenian 1994; Freiberger & Swaine 1984; Larsen & Rogers 1984; Levy 1984). These works on the 'technological culture' of the San Francisco Bay Area resonate with insights won in the context of anthropology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) that 'culture' and 'technology' are intrinsically interwoven, i.e. that 'technologies' often 'embody' tacit cultural and political understandings (e.g.Winner 1999; Pfaffenberger 1992; Bijker 1990) and that the particular cultural environment in which technologies are shaped and marketed decisively influence the form, shape and functions that technical artifacts assume. However, this generally accepted understanding about the entwinement of 'technology' and 'culture' leads entrepreneurs, popular commentators, scholars and journalists to various different starting assumptions about the cultural dynamics and the global significance of the San Francisco Bay Area.

With respect to its global significance, it should not surprise us that Bay Area corporations present their technologies as defining for a global culture. More problematic is it when such assumptions inform academic enquiries and political decision-making processes. In academia, such a perspective has informed, for instance, *Cultures@SiliconValley* (2002), written by the American cultural anthropologist J.A. English-Lueck. In this book, English-Lueck casts the San Francisco Bay Area as the "bellwether sheep" that announces the cultural modality to come for the rest of the world:

> the region experiences forces that will significantly shape the future elsewhere in America, and the world. (...) The things that make Silicon Valley distinctive [are] not merely interesting cultural artifacts in themselves. They are significant because [they] are coming to define the emerging global culture. By studying the nature of the bellwether sheep, we may understand the consequences (...) for the rest of the flock (English-Lueck 2002: 8).

English-Lueck thus adopts typical modernistic thought by assuming that Northern California, by being a pioneering region of high-tech, is also the "staging ground"

for the way in which a "global culture" will take shape. In their article *The Californian Ideology* that appeared in *Wired Magazine* in 1995, the British social scientist Richard Barbrook and the Scottish 'broadcaster' Andy Cameron argue that such an understanding is taken for granted among European elites. The authors observe that politicians, entrepreneurs and futurists in Europe have, in the past few decades, been looking exclusively at California to copy a *Californian Ideology*. This ideology is produced by "a loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists and artists from the West Coast of the USA" as a way of defining for the rest of Europe how information technologies are going to transform culture. The writings of English-Lueck and Barbrook/Cameron differ in their starting assumptions: English-Lueck legitimates her study of 'Bay Area culture' with the understanding that the global future is shaped in this region. Barbrook & Cameron, by contrast, postulate that there are more information technological cultures and futures imaginable besides the Californian version. Both works are similar however in their understanding that there is such a thing as a 'Californian/Bay Area technoculture' that, in its search for expansion and domination has a quite defined set of characteristics that it seeks to impose on 'the rest of the world.'

English-Lueck and Barbrook & Cameron endorse different understandings regarding the question what these particular characteristics are: Barbrook and Cameron focus on the utopian visions of the technological future as offered by transhumanist Californian entrepreneurs, science-fiction writers and engineers. They describe the 'profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies', casting information technology as the leverage for making everyone hip and rich, immortal, freed from the toil of labor and from the limitations of the body. As such, along with other critics of Bay Area technoculture like media scholar Vivian Sobchack (2001) and former Wired journalist Pauline Borsook (2000), they see the Californian Ideology as resulting from a 'libertarian form of politics' that is thoroughly modernistic in celebrating the free-fought autonomous and rationally operating individual, capable of using technology as a 'tool' for the subjugation of matter and of other people.[16]

English-Lueck, by contrast, focuses on a very different correlate of the Californian technoculture. Instead of emphasizing the continued existence of the autonomous, liberal subject she zooms in on the capacity of technology to disrupt and confuse existing identity formations as people find themselves more and more

[16] In this context it is significant to note that 'libertarianism' means something different in an American context compared to a European one. As explained by the sociologist of media Manuel Castells (2000): "In Europe, it refers to a culture or ideology based on the uncompromising defense of individual freedom as the supreme value- often against the government, but sometimes with the help of governments, as in the protection of privacy. In the US context, "libertarian" is a political ideology that primarily means a systematic distrust of government, on the understanding that the market takes care of everything by itself, and that individuals take care of themselves" (Castells 2000: 33).

part of overlapping technosocial networks. Instead of understanding Californian technoculture as one that is driven by modernistic visions of progress and utopianism, she focuses on the way that technology is reshaping "social complexity by combining cultures into new mixes and providing alternative frameworks for reckoning identity" (English-Lueck 2002: 108). English-Lueck thereby does not discuss technology so much as a tool that autonomous individuals use to shape their environments, but as an environment in which increasingly fragmented identities are being shaped. Moreover, this environment is not modern, but postmodern. 'Bay Area culture', Lueck argues, is characterized by its "familiarity and level of comfort with the landscape of diversity (...) Cultural interactions are inherently ambiguous; certainty in the cultural identification of one-self or others is illusory" (2002: 7, 8; 127). Because of this technology-related cultural complexity, English-Lueck typifies the San Francisco Bay Area as an "instance of postmodern life".

Whereas scholars like Barbrook and English-Lueck draw on the general STS-informed tendency to think about 'technology' as a cultural phenomenon, they don't employ the care with which such STS studies are generally conducted. In their cultural explorations of technology, STS scholars and anthropologists generally treat technology as a ‘complex whole’ in which social forces, material particularities and symbolic interpretations combine in complex ways. In their historical and comparative explorations of technological systems STS scholars make clear that each technological ‘innovation’ always brings together many competing understandings among different "relevant social groups" (Bijker 1990) about the use, function, meaning and future trajectory of these artifacts. Scholars of computer technology like Paul Ceruzzi (2000) and Leslie Haddon (1988) have made this particularly clear with respect to the development of the computer. Their works show that the computer is not an artifact over which ‘closure’ regarding its cultural meaning and material form is easily reached. My own historical and ethnographic explorations of information technology indeed suggest that each new ‘innovative concept’ that has emerged in the past few decades – i.e. the microchip, computer graphics, Virtual Reality, networking and biotechnology – ‘breaks open’ yet again the understanding of what computers are and how they are supposed to work.

In many anthropological and STS-informed studies of technology, it is thus an ongoing open question how technology ‘works', i.e. how new cultural repertoires – both in global and in local contexts - are created around ‘innovative technologies', and how the ‘meaning’ of technologies in a global sense is subject to ongoing political and corporate shiftings. From this perspective, it can thus not a-priori be assumed that there is one unilinear way in which 'information technology' 'impacts' or informs a cultural environment, nor that there is one particular way in which the region in which information technology is developed will 'dominate' a

'global culture'. In the cultural environment of the San Francisco Bay Area, entrepreneurs, artists, journalists, documentary makers, activists, and teachers are involved in ongoing debates regarding the significance of information technology and regarding its 'global impact.' Whereas such debates are generally informed by an understanding that a 'Californian culture' will spread globally through its technologies, the understandings that ensue in the context of such debates about what this 'Californian culture' is, differ greatly.

Instead of a-priori defining the nature of Bay Area technoculture, central to my focus will be the ways in which Bay Area inhabitants themselves reflect on their own society, on their sense of self, and on their place in 'the world' and in the cosmological order via their discursive and practical interactions with information technology. In particular I seek to understand how the dominant tenets of the modern-gnostic discourse - the notions of 'self-spirituality', of spiritual evolution and gnostic experiential insight - resonate or are at disharmony with such technological interactions.

The Ideal and Practice of Multi-Sited Ethnography

When doing my ethnographic research, in geographical terms the San Francisco Bay Area appeared to me as roughly consisting of three areas, each with its own particular type of cultural activity.

Corporate activities are concentrated in the region that is colloquially referred to as *Silicon Valley* - the region in between San Francisco (to the north) and San Jose (to the south) where the offices and semi-conductor factories comprising the computer industry are concentrated. In 1968, the corporation Intel was founded in this region, which developed the microchip. The microchip, made of the semiconductor material silicon, became a central component of computers and replaced the transistor as such (Ceruzzi 2000). The popularity of the silicon-based microchip led to the founding of thirty-one silicon-semiconductor firms in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1960s. It is for this reason that the area came to be referred to as 'Silicon Valley.'[17] Within Silicon Valley, Stanford University played a foundational role for the manner in which it coordinated scientific innovation, corporate activity and hobbyist initiatives. Stanford University for instance housed, in the mid-1970s, the personal computer hobbyists of the *Homebrew Computer Club* - a club that is generally considered as having

[17] For an extensive and detailed account of the history of computer development – described as a "cultural, economic and technological phenomenon", (Ceruzzi 2000: 214) see Paul Ceruzzi's *A History of Modern Computing* (2000). For an equally detailed but less extensive account see Leslie Haddon's *The Home Computer. The Making of A Consumer Electronic* (1988). These accounts distinguish themselves from more 'popular histories' of the Silicon Valley computer industry such as Freiberger and Swaine's *Fire in the Valley* (1984) and Steven Levy's *Hackers* (1984). In contrast to these latter works, Ceruzzi and Haddon emphasize the contested nature of technological innovation.

given a major impetus to the personal computer 'revolution.' Founders of Apple Corporation Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, as well as Bill Gates from Microsoft were members of this club.

The cities of San Francisco and Berkeley host many of the political, artistic and intellectual activities in the context of which technology is imagined in non-corporate, non-consumerist terms. In the 1960s Berkeley and San Francisco were the epicenters of the countercultural protests of Beat artists and New Left students. It was in Berkeley in 1989 that the cyberculture magazine *Mondo 2000* was founded, and in San Francisco where in 1993 *Wired Magazine* was established. Both magazines placed themselves in the subversive tradition of the counterculture. So did the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), founded in San Francisco in 1996 as an initiative to keep 'cyberspace' free from government regulations. It was also in Berkeley and San Francisco that, since 1999, the Mindstates conferences have been organized. The *Long Now Foundation* is another important venue of San Francisco, where former countercultural activist Stewart Brand, along with former editor of *Wired* Kevin Kelly, hosts its monthly seminars on the future of technology.

The regions surrounding Silicon Valley to the North and the South consist of breathtaking nature and these areas function as 'camp out' areas and as places where hacker conferences as well as self-ascribed 'neopagan' rituals take place. It is in the Santa Cruz hills, south of Silicon Valley, where my respondents with a very outspoken neopagan/New Age spiritual orientation have settled. For them, the natural spaces surrounding their houses function as important resources for neopagan rituals. Furthermore, both the Santa Cruz hills and the mountainous regions to the North of San Francisco are locations for so-called 'raves', musical events sometimes taking place in the course of several days, in which natural beauty and electronic music and visuals conspire to create hallucinogenic experiences. A non-Californian region that also plays an important role in Bay Area cybergnostic culture is the Nevada Desert to the North-East of North California: here, in the Black Rock Desert, the weeklong Burning Man 'festival' is organized, drawing an international crowd of tens of thousands of artists, engineers and intellectuals, a high percentage of which is from the Bay Area.

This dissertation is an outcome of my explorations in and across all three geographical regions. My study consisted of tracing the entanglement of people, ideas and artifacts that geographically traveled through and within the three regions of the San Francisco Bay Area and that tied together corporate, political-artistic and spiritual practices. The fieldwork that as such informs this dissertation challenges the practice of doing ethnographic research as framed by the "traditional narrative of anthropological study" (Forsythe 2001: 120). It extends the definition of the 'ethnographic field' beyond the categories that define ethnographic studies as traditionally understood.

Such a study was called for because the New Edge discourse cuts across and challenges more traditional understandings of social kinship. It is shaped in relation to processes of globalization, modernistic ideologies, the proliferation of media-technologies and specific forms of rationalization that emerge in such cultural contexts (Kelty 2003). As such, its prime cultural base is not that of the local commune, the work place, or the church. These forms of social organization still matter also for Bay Area elites and there were, fortunately, some places where I could 'sit' and watch the locals go by. However, the larger part of ethnographic research done for this dissertation comprised having to move within, between and beyond classical settings of social affiliation and to discover other, more difficult to classify affiliations of people and institutions. Participants of the Mindstates conference, for example, described themselves as a 'community.' Yet, as I learned, this is not a ‘community’ held together by common residence, daily subsistence networks or a vocally shared ideology. Instead, it comprises local and global affiliations of people and organizations that are united through rationales as diverse as similar understandings of law, a similar pragmatic approach to science and technology, similar interpretations of altered-states-of-mind, or a similar sense of being subversive.

In an attempt to trace the variegated aspects of New Edge, I had to move within and between the different occupational fields and affiliations of people. The type of research conducted by me could thus be characterized as 'multi-sited ethnography', as described by George Marcus (1995). 'Multi-sited ethnographic research' is as much a research method as it is an *ideal* of conducting research. The method is informed by the ideal that the ethnographer can follow people, metaphors and things within and between various overlapping networks. In the context of following metaphors, people and objects, the field emerges as a more or less stable cultural constellation. Whereas the method of 'following metaphors, things and people' emphasizes the ideal of the permeability of the boundaries between various associations of people, there are, however very real in- and exclusion mechanisms some of which are bound to confront the researcher, depending, of course, on her specific subject-position.

In my ethnographic study, I had to establish familiarity with very differently occupied people such as engineers, computer scientists, entrepreneurs, psychedelic hippies, political activists and artists. In order to travel within and between these various social affiliations, I had to confront various different boundary criteria. Examples of these boundary criteria are money, as entrance fees to events can be extremely high; corporate affiliation, as access to corporate events were often restricted due to non-disclosure regulations; geographical location, as many 'cybergnostics' travel the globe and as money and time constrains did not permit me to follow them all the way; gender, as being a woman was sometimes an advantage in the male-dominated world of Silicon Valley but might have excluded

me from certain activities as well; technical expertise, as participation in certain activities are predicated on the ability to participate in engineering activities and rhetoric; and, of course, friendships, which sometimes help soften otherwise sharp boundaries and which can bring a lot of joy to the process of doing fieldwork.

In order to navigate within and between the various networks in Silicon Valley in which the New Edge discourse is nurtured, and in attempts to cross as many boundaries as possible in order to follow this discourse as far as I could, I attempted to shape myself as a, what Lorenzo Hagerty called a "prototype of the species Homo Cyber". A Homo Cyber, understood in this sense, is an image of the ultimate future fulfillment of New Edge ideals - of the merging between humans and machines, of the obtainment of ultimate understanding as such and of the final defeat of socialized conditioning in this way. This dissertation can thus in large part be seen as an account of the cultural capital that is required in order to live the New Edge ideals and to become a Homo Cyber. My affiliation with the Dutch hacker scene, my profession as an anthropologist, my past as a student of biology, my general love for Do It Yourself tinkering, financial support from Fulbright, NWO and the University of Leiden, as well as the helpful friendships I established with other aspirant-members of the Homo Cyber species, helped me in the initiation process. Yet, my transformational aspirations have inevitably been constrained by the specifics of my own subject position in the field. Through discussions with others who could trespass other boundaries, I however, sought to become also aware of yet other possible ways and impossibilities of becoming a Homo Cyber.

Doing Anthropology and Ethnographic Self-Reflexivity

Challenges to fieldwork were not only posed by the complexity of the social setting and the esotericism of the subjects that dominated practice and reflection (or reflexive practices) in these settings, but also by the fact that in these settings classical anthropological boundaries between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ were permeable.

For instance, the link between contemporary New Edgers and ancient gnostics is not one that is only forged by me. The early gnostics provide very real and actual inspiration for contemporary New Edgers, who model their worldview and their self-understanding in the subversive image of these early, ‘consciousness-enlarging rebels’ as they are seen. Virtual Worlds developer and NASA-scientist Bruce Damer, who will be introduced in more detail in the coming chapters, uses the story of the early gnostics alongside other forms of inspiration to tell the world with what people, traditions, and practices he experiences cultural proximity. Damer is in the constant process of expanding and adjusting his vision of a future moment when the universe will wake up after consciousness has suffused digital

technology. On a website to which a network of his friends and colleagues actively contribute[18], Damer presents this vision alongside other stories, such as that of the early Gnostics, that of the 1960s psychedelic explorers the *Merry Pranksters* and of various hero-computer scientists and hobbyists that Silicon Valley has known.

As a technology builder as well as a lay- historian, anthropologist and religion student- now in the process of obtaining his PhD in a subject that combines all these interests- Damer is one of the many self-conscious story tellers of the Silicon Valley cultural elite. He uses his imagination, constant self-reflections, engineering lust and social resources to construct a story about where he, and others he associates with, are heading; what their relevant history is and how they will arrive at a better future. As such, Damer positions himself in relation to me as a co-anthropologist, someone who is, just as much as myself, interested in tracing the contours of New Edge culture.

Damer is but one example of a wide network of Bay Area 'creative workers', who use their privileged position vis-à-vis digital technology development to think up and engineer a natural-cultural 'niche' for themselves 'from scratch.' Members of this network are trained in disciplines as varied as anthropology, biology, paleontology, theater studies or literature and make use pragmatically and in a multi-disciplinary way from whatever insight is useful in charting the contours of this new nature-culture. As a result, I experienced many schizophrenic moments during my fieldwork. As an anthropologist seeking to study my field from a conceptual distance I was regularly challenged in this role by respondents who used theories from, say, Victor Turner and Johan Huizinga in combination with insights from (social) biology, comparative studies of religion, engineering pragmatics, Greek mythology, futuristic awareness of the next development in high-tech and entrepreneurial appetites to cash in on this development. Their rhetoric, thus, is both familiar and alien to me; at times I seemed to be among academic peers, at other times I found myself immersed in an alien tribe.

In experiencing such schizophrenia and disorientation, my research situation is of course, not unique. The American researcher of hackers, Christopher Kelty (2003); the Californian Artificial Intelligence researcher Diana Forsythe (2001) and the American Artificial Life researcher Stefan Helmreich (2001), all of them anthropologists, have reported similar experiences of such fieldwork-schizophrenia and alienation. As Forsythe has put it, such a feeling is intrinsic to a research situation that "brings anthropology home" and that does not follow the "traditional fieldwork narrative" (2001: 120) which describes fieldwork as conducted by an anthropologist from the west in societies "far from home, possibly picturesque, probably small and rural, and very likely inhabited by people who

[18] http://www.damer.com

bear little relation to her home society, class, profession, or employing institution" (Ibid.). In a research situation where the cultural capital of the respondents is similar to that of the researcher, Kelty asserts, one is likely to find oneself in a situation "where we compete with a lot of other people who are also providing explanations for the situation that we find ourselves amid".[19] As also observed by Helmreich (2001), whereas respondents, in his case Artificial Life researchers, might use terminology to study their own life-worlds that is similar to those of the anthropologist, these terms and theories might be used in various different ways, with various different political agenda's and implicit philosophies.

The ambitious task of this dissertation then, is to allow for this proliferation of reflections and to see this as part of the ethnographic field in which I study New Edge. This thus entails studying the ways in which New Edgers discuss the contours of what they perceive to be their cultural environment and to sketch the past and present of these perspectives. In addition, I seek to situate these perspectives in a historical and contemporary cultural context, distilling internal conflicts, ambiguities and other cultural factors that they may not themselves perceive significant to New Edge. Yet, as in any research model, such a distinction between 'first' and 'second-order' observation is ideal-typical and does not always work as a distancing mechanism. For example, also in seeking to adopt a critical perspective, I need to acknowledge some New Edgers as my peers: as will become clear, the New Edge cultural environment is intrinsically 'open-ended' in its cultural manifestations and individualistic in its outlook, thus acknowledging and even cultivating dissent and internal criticism to each other's version of New Edge. In fact, as we will see, it is this ongoing activity of contestation and the acknowledged existence of different perspectives and viewpoints that characterizes the New Edge cultural environment the most. Quite paradoxically, I argue, it is this factor that generates the possibility of holding on to the ideal of ultimate truth even though it seems to defy it.

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[19] *Qualitative Research in the Age of the Algorithm: New Challenges in Cultural Anthropology* unpublished presentation given at the RLG conference, Boston, May 2003, published on: http://worldcat.org/arcviewer/1/OCC/2007/08/08/0000070504/viewer/file1384.html Retrieved October 7, 2010. We may question however if the understanding of 'default anthropology' that informs this remark, holds at all. Anthropologists the world over are always confronted with competing 'local interpretations' of 'the situation.' However, (western) anthropologists doing fieldwork in a place like Silicon Valley are inclined to take these interpretations more seriously - not in the last place because a shared mastery of the English language, and because the fact that researcher and 'informant' are likely to share various global communication platforms, form conditions in which the interpretations of various parties will have to confront each other.

My Fieldwork Practices

In between 2005 and 2008, I spent a total of twelve months in San Francisco from where I conducted the ethnographic research for this dissertation. The first period was from March until May 2005, the second from August 2005 until February 2006 and the third took place in between July and October 2008. In these months I conducted taped semi-structured long interviews with 46 people, six of whom I interviewed twice. In the first period I was a guest-PhD student at the Anthropology Department of Stanford University. In the second period I visited as a Fulbright scholar.

These three visiting periods represent three different stages of study. Operating predominantly from the Monroe hostel in San Francisco and driving in rented cars, trains and on second-hand bikes across the Bay Area, the first period was predominantly exploratory. Aided by my connection with the American anthropologist of hackers Gabrielle Coleman and with Stanford University I built a first sense of the social, institutional and technological networks of the Bay Area and made my first initial contacts. Particularly in the first two months, these contacts were almost exclusively related to the 'geek world': initiated by an interview with Computer History Museum curator and STS scholar Dag Spicer, I spent several weekends and weekday evenings in the Computer History Museum in Mountain View. Here I interviewed the volunteers, took part in guided tours of the hardware exhibition and observed the careful restoration of a 1960s computer (Digital Equipment Corporation's (DEC) 'PDP-1'). I also spent a lot of time in the Stanford University Library where, aided by Henry Lowood, the curator of Special Archives, I looked through hobbyist newsletters from the 1970s and through copies of the 1960s and 70s Whole Earth Catalog. In addition, I met with the hackers at the San Franciscan Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and attended a hacker conference and many of the lectures given at the Long Now Foundation.

Although getting a sense of Bay Area 'geek culture' this way, at the end of two months I felt that I was not at the right place to study New Edge. Despite my ethnographic ideal that I would simply have to 'follow the network' to see where and how 'geek culture' intersects with gnostic spirituality, lack of time led me to decide to force the process somewhat and to use the speed of the technological network of the World Wide Web: I was curious where writers like Erik Davis and Ken Goffman were 'hanging out', and discovered an upcoming conference on 'Technology and Transcendence': Mindstates, to be taking place in May 2005. In addition, I discovered a significant overlap between 'geek culture' and the spiritual scene in the practice of raving, when I met a key-'informant', 'Gary.' In addition, I met 'Homey', another person who proved highly valuable in helping me understand possible overlaps between gnostic spirituality and high-tech. At the end of the first three months, I found a room in a shared apartment in the Mission district in San Francisco, from where I would commence a second phase of research in July 2005.

The Mindstates conference, the Burning Man festival, a 'Dance' rave, the Accelerating Change conference and a Rant and Rave evening, all taking place in the first months of my second period of research, launched me right into the heart of New Edge culture. What was the focus of my ethnographic study in the first phase, now became one of the contexts of study. In addition to the geek cultural environment that I continued to explore - with a trip to the hacker department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston among my activities[20] - a second context came from the Bay Area 'New Age' cultural environment. Thanks to concerts of the reggae/hip hop singer and peace activist Michael Franti in the Golden Gate Park, to the Whole Foods Chains and vegan restaurants across the corner of my house and to my meditating, raw-food eating housemate this New Age context could not be missed. It was also present in the habitual way in which some of my connections used terms like 'goddess' to refer to each other, in the San Franciscan Love Parade, in hippie movie screenings in Santa Cruz and in people speaking of retreating at the Human Potential Movement center Esalen. Framed by these two cultural environments, I borrowed the term that was launched in the context of Mondo 2000 and came to think of my field as 'New Edge', focusing on the ways in which overlaps and connections were drawn between the 'New Age' and 'high-tech' cultural scenes of the Bay Area.

Thanks, in addition, to my Mexican neighbors, to a flight attendant I had befriended, to an anti-Burning Man activist, to a woman called 'Nana Second' who did not have money to go to the New Edge events and to a geek entirely uncomfortable with Burning Man, I also began to see the limits of New Edge culture. In addition, I met several other scholars and journalists who were exploring the same connections as I did: the journalist John Markoff presented his book *What the Dormouse Said. How the Sixties Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry* to an audience of his protagonists in the *City Lights Bookstore* in San Francisco in 2005. The Stanford communication scientist Frederic Turner finalized his book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture. Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* in addition in 2006, presenting it to some of the leading characters in the book at Stanford University. My encounters with such researchers and my observation of the enthusiasm with which their studies were received by the artists, computer engineers and hippies of the Bay Area, made me aware of the enthusiastic emic reflexivity with which Bay Area historical and contemporary culture is charged. I became complicit in this emic reflection, with people following me to events that helped them 'learn about their history' and with others sharing their findings with me.

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[20] This extra trip was made possible because a befriended flight-attendant was so generous as to give me a free plane ticket to New York.

After this second period it was necessary to take some distance and to try and understand how I could create an account of New Edge that was, perhaps, in some sense different from the amounts of reflective work conducted in the Bay Area. A period of writing and reflection started, ending with my return to the Bay Area in July 2008. While staying in Gary's house and lending a car from Homey, while visiting Burning Man a second time and interviewing some of my key-connections once more, in this third period I consolidated and modified some of the insights I had built about New Edge, of which the chapters in this dissertation are a reflection.

The Chapters of this Dissertation

In this dissertation I am concerned with the analysis of the discourse of New Edge. I use the notion of discourse hereby in a Foucauldian sense: by studying the New Edge as a discourse, I seek to understand how New Edge postulates a particular way of knowing the world, and maintains a "network of power relations among those who know" (Lindstrom 2010: 231). A discourse, in other words, has a particular organizational power: it brings together in a particular way ways of thinking about and understanding the world, modes of acting and social constellations. The organizational power of the New Edge discourse resides therein that it proposes ways of thinking and acting and that it forges particular social constellations that seem quite counterintuitive in a variety of ways. For instance, the New Edge discourse quite naturally celebrates the use of psychedelics alongside the use of high-tech. It forges social constellations comprised of CEO's of big corporations and of soul-searching drop-out hippies. It also quite naturally celebrates the transhumanist transformative dream of wanting to merge with digital technology alongside the New Age transformative dream of discovering the 'true self' within. It celebrates virtual complexity and the authenticity of the real. And it endorses an understanding of the world as 'out of control', intrinsically chaotic and ultimately complex while also celebrating the world as a simple computation that we can all learn to see.

The key-characteristic of the New Edge discourse seems to be that it is paradoxical, quite deliberately so in some cases and inadvertently so in others. Considering that this is its key-characteristic, a proper understanding of New Edge can only be advanced if I bring these paradoxes into clear view. Therefore, the organizational structure of this dissertation follows the organizational structure of the New Edge discourse. This means that, instead of dedicating one chapter to the chaos-celebrating aspects of New Edge, and another on its celebration of clarity and transparency, I study both these aspects in the frame of one chapter exactly as the New Edge discourse itself brings these together into the same frame. Each of the chapters in this dissertation centers around one such tension.

In each of the chapters that follow, it may seem as if the main paradox is that 'technology' and 'spirituality' are celebrated in the same frame: in the first chapter I discuss the New Edge simultaneous embrace of 'spiritual' and of technological tools for 'knowing' the world; in chapter two the theme is the simultaneous celebration of transhumanist and New Age transformational acts; in chapter three the focus is on the style of New Edge that brings together the high-tech secularism of the Bay Area with its New Age 'religiosity' and in chapter four attention is placed on the coming-together of hackers, psychedelics-users and spiritually-minded artists in the same 'temporary autonomous zones' of the New Edge.

Although all the chapters of this dissertation show some aspect of the spirituality-technology 'paradox', each of the chapters, however, progressively questions whether this is really the paradox that 'explains' the New Edge discourse sufficiently. What, we will be invited to ask, does it actually mean to distinguish a New Age from a New Edge, gnosis from cybergnosis, 'natural' spirituality and 'technological' spirituality, and what is the nature of the tension when these opposites come together, as they do in the New Edge? This question is brought up in particular because each of the chapters shows also various other kinds of tensions that interfere with the assumed tension between 'spirituality' and 'technology.'

In chapter one we see the epistemological tension between, on the one hand, living in an 'out-of-control', 'chaotic' world that goes too fast, whose technologies are too small and whose procedures are non-transparent; and on the other hand the continuing relevance of the modernist autonomous individual who uses technical and spiritual tools to have agency and to be empowered. In chapter two we see tensions between dreams of salvation that focus on an escape from the body, from 'social conditioning' and from the earth and those that focus on a renewed connection with the body, society and the earth. In chapter three tensions are foregrounded between, on the one hand, the gnostic aspiration to fuse the epistemological attitudes of reason and faith into a third, higher perspective; and on the other hand tendencies in Bay Area society to valorize the masculine gender and the 'rationality' of science over the feminine gender and the 'dogmatism' of religion. The tensions discussed in chapter four are those between the liberalist ideals of creative expression, technological expansion and self-transformation on the one hand; and a corporate, legal and technological reality that limits these aspirations on the other.

By bringing all these different types of tensions into perspective, the overarching understanding of New Edge that I advance in this dissertation is that it is a discourse that is self-consciously paradoxical, permanently liminal, stylistically indeterminate and existent only in spaces that it defines as autonomous. This is how the 'third position' of gnosis, situating itself outside the dichotomous

epistemological perspectives of 'science' and 'religion', is culturally manifested in the contemporary high-tech society of the San Francisco Bay Area.