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

In his book *Escape Velocity*, the Californian culture-critic Mark Dery writes: "Coming to grips with *Mondo 2000* is like wrestling the shape-shifting liquid metal android in *Terminator 2*" (1996: 33). At the conclusion of this dissertation we may take Dery's struggles as characteristic of the challenges that we are confronted with when trying to describe and analyze New Edge in general. The New Edge discourse cannot neatly be mapped onto clear-cut ideological, ontological, material, social, or spatial territories. It is by nature a border-crossing discourse, employed by people who seek to be always in-between and who are unable and unwilling to choose between technology and nature, information and matter, enlightenment ideals and forms of enchantment. Moreover, by attaching itself to spaces that are identified as permanently liminal, ritualized and transformational, i.e. to Temporary Autonomous Zones that seek to escape and transcend the cultural forms and modes of being that define everyday life, the New Edge discourse challenges the validity of such dichotomies altogether.

Cultural anthropologists generally try to build their understandings of cultural phenomena in such a way that they are relevant to the life worlds of those they study. As a cultural anthropologist studying New Edge, the challenge of this dissertation was to understand cultural existence from the perspective of the Reality Hacker and the Homo Cyber and their 'liminal' life-worlds. Simultaneously, the challenge was to transcend the self-ascribed liminality of New Edge and to understand how this discourse has been conditioned by particular social, material and ideological structures. The chapters of this dissertation reflected this double challenge, and we may now formulate some general conclusions in relation to them.

Because of the boundary-transcending aspirations of New Edge, this discourse has offered an outstanding opportunity to study how the longstanding but still prevalent Weberian antithesis between 'religion', or 'spirituality' and 'science' or 'technology' is challenged at an ethnographic level. The findings about New Edge that I presented in this dissertation can be used to challenge three starting assumptions that inform much recent academic research into 'cyberreligion' or 'cyberspirituality.'

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, scholars of 'cyberreligion'/ 'cyberspirituality' postulate quite different explanations for the 'affinity' between technoscience and religion/spirituality. In alignment with the early works of Leo Marx (1964) and Carey and Quirk (1970), and sometimes studied under the rubric of 'implicit religion', most of these scholars emphasize the 'otherworldly' characteristics of information technology. This leads some to focus on the awe-

inspiring capacity of technology itself (e.g. Corn 2001, Mosco 2004; Kruger 2006, Alexander 1990, Nye 1994). Other scholars focus on the way that information technology appeases feelings of social anomy (Pärna 2010; Wertheim 1999) or material discomfort (Aupers et.al. 2008; Barbrook 2007). In what is yet another angle from which the field is approached, some scholars focus on the way that increasingly autonomous technology inspires magical thought (Verrips 1994; Aupers 2004) or translates into fantasies among creators of technology to be god-like (Helmreich 1997) or to create godlike beings (Barbrook 2007). Yet another category of technoreligious interest comprises those studies that show how technologies have always been used to mediate religious sensibilities (Meyer 2006; Van de Port 2006; Stolow 2005). Most scholars study such technoreligious practices as sociological phenomena, yet others endorse techno-transcendental fantasies themselves (Benedikt 1992; Stenger 1992; O Leary 1996).

Whereas by no means exhaustive, these examples illustrate the wide span of approaches taken to the seeming similar objective of arguing the affinity between technoscience and religion/spirituality. Sometimes it is suggested that religious or esoteric expressions are responses to the intrinsic qualities of technology. In other works it is assumed that technology offers answers and solutions to otherwise spiritual everyday life problems. Some discuss technology for its capacity to imbue a sense of safety and understanding, whereas others instead emphasize the 'out-of-controlness' and chaotic tendencies of technology. And sometimes, technology is discussed as mediating understandings of the sacred, whereas others discuss how sacred longings inform particular understandings of technology.

Where these studies of technoreligion typically focus on only one type of affinity between religion and technoscience, my study of New Edge showed that in the San Francisco Bay Area many different types of affinities exist between the technoscientific and the spiritual sphere, some of which may seem to logically exclude each another. Cybergnosis, I argued, is a situational and relational epistemological attitude that prescribes no particular or clear-cut way in which gnosis relates to high-tech. It is, for instance, not uniquely a magical response to complex, incomprehensible technology, or a flight from an otherwise socially complex and materially limiting reality into a perfect transcendental sphere. We may, as I did in chapter one, focus on the epistemological stance of New Edge and recognize technology as a gnostic tool - a tool of 'augmentation' - to discover deep-lying patterns underneath a seeming complex surface reality; or recognize technology as a deconditioning tool - a technology of dissociation - that reminds people of the chaotic reality that lies underneath apparent order. We may also, as I did in chapter two, focus on the transformational ritual of New Edge and recognize technology as an artifact that facilitates new ways of gnostic embodiment, or as an artifact that engenders new forms of life that will attain higher understanding. Or

we may discuss, like I did in chapter three, technological artifacts such as the fractal as a particular stylistic mediation of the gnostic eclecticism of New Edge. Chapter four in addition brought into view the possibility of using technology to create Temporary Autonomous Zones and to either create or disrupt the social trust that is necessary to experience 'pronoia.'

A second, and more significant form of critique vis-à-vis existing studies of cyberreligion offered in this dissertation, is that these various forms of affinity also show that we cannot simply isolate 'religion' and 'technology' and study their 'relationship.' The notion that this can be done is implicit in many studies of 'cyberreligion.' It is for instance implicit in those studies that understand certain forms of spirituality as a 'response' to some assumed intrinsic qualities of the computer and computer networks. It is also implicit in studies that see popular infatuations with information technology as a response to experiences of anomie. This thesis showed that New Edge cannot sufficiently be explained only when looking at 'technology' and 'spirituality.' The boundaries between what is technological and what is sacred become blurred in the context of other sets of tensions. The tensions that I brought into view are those between chaos and control (chapter one), embodiment and disembodiment (chapter two), religion and science (chapter three) and the ideal of autonomous, creative expression and social, technological and corporate structures of control (chapter four).

These tensions show that the assumed relation between 'technoscience' and 'spirituality' may not be the most relevant one at the emic level. In the process of solving the tensions mentioned above, New Edgers show themselves quite eclectic in their embrace of either 'technological' or 'spiritual' tools. Chapter one showed this in the fact that alongside high-tech, New Edgers also use psychedelics as techniques of augmentation or dissociation. In chapter two I argued that physical transformation, both at the level of self and of species, can be wrought through technological means as well as by 'natural' means. Chapter three showed that also the style of New Edge is not necessarily 'high-tech.' Alongside technical artifacts like fractals, we saw the significance of dressing up, theatrical performance and irony as part of the New Edge style. And in chapter four I observed that the New Edge ideal of TAZ is projected onto technological and non-technological spheres alike.

A third critique offered in this dissertation vis-à-vis existing studies of cyberreligion/cyberspirituality is that these studies generally conceptualize technology as 'other-worldly' and disembodied. From this it logically follows that the elective affinity between technology and religion/spirituality is assumed to reside in the technological promise of immaterial salvation. My research showed that this is only one aspect of a much broader affinity between gnosis and information technology as it manifests in the New Edge cultural environment of the San Francisco Bay Area. Gnosis and information technology, I argued,

converge not centrally in the fantasy of disembodiment, but in transformational longings.

The observations made in the chapters of this thesis should also be used to challenge the New Edge projections of its own liminality. 'Liminality' in the context of New Edge means a state of permanent detachment and malleability. Yet, as we saw, the New Edge discourse is shaped in relation to themes and forms of sociality that transcend the self-reflective discourses and practices of New Edge and that show its embeddings in a larger cultural landscape. Throughout the chapters I have shown different guises of this landscape. Chapter one showed how New Edge intersects with modernist and postmodernist ideologies. Chapter two showed the New Edge affinity with apocalyptic thought and emphasized its historical connection with an earlier countercultural environment that was similarly obsessed with spiritual and physical transformation. The third chapter showed how New Edge intersects with and is limited by gender stereotypes and with the ever-prevalent tendency to separate science from non-science. Chapter four showed how the New Edge builds its ideal-home in relation to legal and corporate limitations and is structured as well by the sociological category of trust. These themes make New Edge home in a global landscape where liberal and libertarian political philosophies, complex technology, a paranoid worldview, technoscientific rationality, consumerism and gender stereotypes play hegemonic roles.

Some critical scholars show a profound suspicion towards the New Edge combination of spirituality and high-tech, seeing it as a 'co-opted' version of a once ideologically 'pure' counterculture or as a concealed form of selfishness and consumerism (e.g. Sobchack 2001; Borsook 2000; Barbrook 1995; Pfaffenberger 1988). In contrast to these forms of critique, I argue that New Edge should be understood as a serious gnostic attempt to transcend dichotomies between the spiritual and the technological. More specifically, New Edge is a social, cultural and stylistic manifestation of the antinomian characteristic of gnosis: it manifests the attempt to represent a 'third option', outside the established institutional spheres of religion and science.

If we do take this gnostic attempt seriously, without taking the New Edge self-understanding as permanently liminal at face value, we should see New Edge as a mediating discourse, omnivorously embracing all possible ways of being, endlessly morphing and moving and ultimately rich in potential. It is therein thoroughly positive and optimistic. New Edge allows for instance for a sense of control and understanding amidst social and technological conditions that are extremely complex and difficult to grasp. New Edge also allows for community experience along with individual autonomy and for the creation of social worlds by means of the seeming individualistic embrace of Doing It Yourself. In addition, it

offers a way of experiencing trust in a paranoid society and of experiencing genuine transformation in a consumer society. New Edge postulates furthermore that consumption is possible without becoming passive and it offers a way of using high-tech as an empowering tool while technology envelops people also in a systemic way.