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

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Summary in English

This dissertation is the result of an ethnographic study of the New Edge in the San Francisco Bay Area. New Edge can be seen as an expression of New Age spirituality in an information technological setting. Like New Age, New Edge is a discourse that is manifested in a wide range of practices, places and moments in and around the San Francisco Bay Area. The New Edge discourse is present in all its manifestations in the pages of the magazine *Mondo 2000*, at the yearly Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert, in Virtual Worlds and at 'raves.' With the latter I refer to events focused on dance, self-expression, electronic music and visuals. The predominant characteristic of New Edge is its specific epistemological stance. Just as gnosis is the epistemological key-characteristic of New Age, so is *cybergnosis* key to New *Edge*.

Traditional gnosticism was characterized by a worldview that considered the conventional reality of everyday life as false. Mystical means were employed to discover the true, divine nature underneath this surface reality. Since the late-19th century, gnosis became culture-critical in its rejection of the two epistemological forms that have become dominant in the western world: science and religion. In ideal-typical sense, religion is based on faith and science on reason. By contrast, gnosis offers a third epistemology based on experience. As such, gnosis became a central component of the so-called counterculture of the 1960s. The San Francisco Bay Area became one of the homelands of the gnostic counterculture. This counterculture consisted predominantly of students, artists and intellectuals who resisted the dogmas and doctrines of faith-based, materialistic or rationalistic institutions. In the start of the 1970s, gnosis became a dominant element of a cultic milieu that became aware of itself as New Age.

The primary reason for this study of *cybergnosis* and New *Edge* comes from recent insights among scholars and popular cultural thinkers that an elective affinity exists between gnosis and information technological culture. Since the mid-1980s, former psychedelic hippies and technology developers have embraced the information technological domain for the way it seems to promise a realization of gnostic consciousness. This cybergnostic attitude was embedded in a cultural environment that came to think of itself as New Edge.

New Edge and *cybergnosis* invite us to question the longstanding but still prevalent Weberian antithesis between 'religion', or 'spirituality' and 'science' or 'technology'. Based on twelve months of participant research in the San Francisco Bay Area, in this dissertation I aim to answer the question how the New Edge discourse informs ways of being, acting and thinking that transcend and challenge modernist notions about the relation between technoscience and religion/spirituality. I build thereby forth on existing studies of 'technoreligion' or 'technospirituality.' The majority of studies in this field is philosophical in nature

and predominantly based on textual analysis of writings in the popular cultural domain. By contrast, the ethnographic starting point of the current study makes it possible to study the lived reality of New Edge.

The findings in this dissertation relate to existing studies of technoreligion/technospirituality in the following ways. In the first place, existing studies of this genre generally conceptualize technology as 'other-worldly' and disembodied. From this it logically follows that such studies understand the elective affinity between technology and religion/spirituality to reside in the technological promise of immaterial salvation. Cybergnosis is thereby equated with the desire to be freed from material and physical constraints and to experience full spiritual understanding in cyberspace. My research shows that this is only one aspect of a much broader affinity as it manifests in the New Edge cultural environment of the San Francisco Bay Area.

Another understanding challenged by this dissertation is the determinist notion that spiritual longings are caused by intrinsic qualities of the computer and computer networks. In line with this understanding, contemporary cyberreligion is often considered to be a recent phenomenon. It is also assumed that contemporary hippies who perceive cyberspace as a spiritual realm break thereby with a preceding non-technological 1960s counterculture. By studying New Edge in historical continuity with an equally technological gnostic 1960s counterculture, this dissertation challenges such understandings. Just as the contemporary New Age is generally regarded as a continuation of the 1960s counterculture, so should we understand New Edge in continuation with a technological form of spirituality that also characterized the 1960s counterculture.

A further argument made in this dissertation is that cybergnosis does not consist of one, unequivocal relationship between 'technology' and 'spirituality'/'religion'. Cybergnosis 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. Typically, existing studies on cyberreligion focus on only one such relation. However, this study shows 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.

The purpose of the four chapters of this dissertation is to offer a broad and critical understanding of New Edge. 'Broad' means that each chapter charts the full breath of the technospiritual negotiations conducted in New Edge.

For the first chapter this means that I study how the New Edge discourse harbors different, seemingly conflicting, understandings of society and technology. This chapter aims to clarify in particular what it means that cybergnosis is a subversive epistemological attitude: gnosis is the knowledge one obtains when a 'false' sense of reality is transcended. It follows that it depends on what is

considered as 'false' how a notion of 'true reality' is believed to be obtainable. Whereas this is general for gnosis, cybergnosis is thereby characterized that information technology plays a significant role in such negotiations between 'real' and 'false.' This means in the first place, that alongside 'spiritual' tools such as psychedelics and trance-dance also information technology is embraced as a gnostic technique. Secondly, along with other factors like social brainwashing and physical limitations, also technology is perceived to inhibit true understanding. A significant ambiguity of cybergnosis is thus that technology simultaneously facilitates and obstructs gnostic understanding.

This ambiguity intersects with another one: New Edge negotiates two quite different understandings of the ontological nature of the 'ultimately real.' On the one hand does New Edge postulate 'chaos' and 'complexity' as the true reality that is hidden underneath the surface of socially created and physically mediated order. Techniques of dissociation, such as psychedelics and confusing technological environments like raves serve to discover this real creative nature. On the other hand the New Edge discourse postulates that underneath the apparent chaos and complexity of everyday life, a deeper-lying holistic order and unity can be discovered. Techniques of augmentation like meditation and technological visualization are used to discover these patterns.

The first chapter is thus a broad exploration of the various ways in which technology and spirituality are made to relate to one another in the gnostic search for true understanding. A second manner in which this chapter is broad is in the historical perspective it gives on New Edge. I challenge academic understandings that contemporary Bay Area high-tech spirituality breaks with a preceding anti-technological counterculture. By contrast, I show that in her embrace of spiritual and technological techniques of augmentation and dissociation, the contemporary New Edge discourse continues a technospiritual countercultural legacy. Along with some other scholars, I argue that the 1960s Whole Earth Catalog has historically preceded The New Edge magazine Mondo 2000 and that contemporary raves are technospiritual continuations of the events organized in the 1960s by the Merry Pranksters.

The second chapter challenges current theories that recognize the affinity between information technology and spirituality to reside predominantly in the former's immaterial nature and the gnostic longing for disembodied salvation. Instead of this idea, the second chapter offers a much broader exploration of the affinity between gnosis and information technology. The aspect of gnosis that is here emphasized is its central concern with transformation. Knowledge, from the gnostic perspective is *active* knowledge and has transformational power: by becoming aware of the truth, the truth is created. The argument of this chapter is that gnosis and information technology converge centrally in the notion of transformative knowledge.

The New Edge embrace of transformation is reflected primarily in the fact that Virtual Worlds and raves, including the Burning Man festival, are seen as ritual spaces where one is permanently 'liminal'. Based on my experiences at Burning Man and on my interviews with Virtual Worlds developers, I identify various transformational fantasies and practices. I distinguish two specific 'repertoires' through which transformation occurs. The first repertoire focuses on the liberation from physical limitations and prepares for an apocalyptic collapse of the physical and social system. The second repertoire implies the development of an omniscient and omniscient gnostic body that is in touch with a larger environment through sensory, technological and/or super-sensory means. In the second part of this chapter I identify this gnostic body as a "sensorium", which is a holistic body image that solves the dichotomy between body and mind and that manifests a desire for "total consciousness". This body image has in the recent history of the Bay Area been elaborated in the context of the Bay Area Human Potential Movement. In the technological celebrations of the Merry Pranksters in the sixties and in the context of raves in the eighties and nineties, we see how this idea of the sensorium has become interwoven with sensory technologies.

The first two chapters serve to expose an important feature of New Edge, namely that it does not want to be forced into fixed discursive or material forms. A social manifestation of this is that New Edge representatives identify themselves in contrast with New Age. The latter is thereby defined as dogmatic and religious. In order to distance from New Age and from any appearance of cultural or physical belonging, New Edge representatives employ a particular style. The third chapter is an exploration of this style and of the 'functionality' of this style. I show that this style enables representatives of New Edge to travel in 'spiritual' and 'techno-scientific' social spheres simultaneously without having to adhere to the social or epistemological norms here dominant. Although New Age is as eclectic as New Edge, an important argument of this chapter is that New Edgers manifest this eclecticism through a different style. Irony and a constant change of clothing are part of this style.

This chapter also aims to offer a critical perspective on the supposed flexibility of New Edge. Although New Edge supports an epistemological holism and embraces in its performance different systems of thought as well as genders, this chapter shows that in the social setting of the Bay Area, the scope of New Edge is in fact limited. This is in the first place due to the fact that distinctions between rationality and religion continue to be made, also by New Edge proponents. A second limitation is formed by gender stereotypes that distinguish a non-scientific and non-flexible feminine gender from a scientific and flexible male gender. Because of the interference of these ideological structures with the New

Edge discourse, the New Edge ideals of flexibility and scepticism are easier to implement and more obviously available to men than for women.

The fourth chapter finally addresses the social constellation of New Edge. This chapter critically challenges the New Edge projected understanding of the importance of places like Burning Man and raves. I focus primarily on the New Edge idea that in those places the identities of hackers, artists and psychedelics advocates coincide in the image of the "Reality Hacker". This chapter shows that behind this picture of the Reality Hacker diverse group are hidden that attribute quite different values to "Autonomous Zones" like Burning Man.

I follow in this chapter various hackers, artists and psychedelics advocates and try to understand how a place like Burning Man has a special significance for them. Central to this exploration is the sociological concept of "trust". All three 'dispositions' have different reasons to feel confined in a 'conventional' social setting, and Autonomous Zones offer them a sense of social trust in different ways. Finally, I use my own transformative experience at Burning Man to show how for me this trust was formed in the context of the paradoxical 'Do It Yourself' cooperation.

An important conclusion of this thesis is that cybergnosis, and New Edge as the discourse that embraces cybergnosis, is a situational and relational epistemological stance: there is not one clearly defined manner in which New Edge establishes a link between gnosis and information technology. The New Edge discourse, for instance, links the ideological frameworks and material practices that are typically associated with the social consciousness of the counterculture, with the progress-minded consciousness of Silicon Valley industry leaders. Some critics see this ambiguity as a sign of lack of political commitment and ideological steadfastness. This thesis offers a different interpretation of the ambiguity of New Edge. The New Edge should be seen as a serious effort to put the gnostic 'third way' into practice. Its ambiguity is a manifestation of the gnostic epistemological attitude that authentic reality cannot be captured in clear-cut ideological truths or thoughts.

A second conclusion of this thesis is that New Edge is a mediating discourse that offers a "solution" to several key paradoxes of the high-tech society of the Bay Area. 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.