

Chapter 5: The Idiosyncratic

A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.

Jorge Luis Borges, afterword to “El Hacedor/The Maker”¹

Introduction: Reimagining Psychedelic History

On September 12, 2019, the documentary television program “The Mind Explained” premiered an episode on the revival of psychedelic drug research in the twenty-first century.² Although “The Mind Explained: Psychedelics” provides ample historical context for the psychedelic renaissance, it supports the dubious narrative regarding the hiatus in psychedelic studies. As explored in the preceding chapter, most scholars attribute the “psychedelic winter” to legal injunctions against psychedelics imposed in the United States and Western Europe after the 1960s. A small number, however, have suggested that the intrinsic difficulties of scientizing psychedelic experience also had a chilling effect on the field. This group does not include Michael Pollan and Roland Griffiths, both of whom were consulted for “The Mind Explained: Psychedelics.” Both serve as consummate figureheads of the psychedelic psychiatry movement: Pollan’s 2018 book *How To Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* is, to date, the psychedelic renaissance’s best-known publication.³ Griffiths, a neuroscientist and psychiatrist, directs the Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research at Johns Hopkins University.

In separate interviews for the “The Mind Explained: Psychedelics,” Pollan and Griffiths provide what appear to be complete reports of the rise, fall, and resurgence of psychedelic research after the discovery of LSD. Both identify the confluence of anti-drug moral sentiment and legal mandates in the United States and Western Europe as the field’s primary adversary. Neither considers that features inherent to psychedelic experience also impeded its development. Their testimonies contrast with chapter four’s historiographic review, where I claimed that the more unusual aspects of psychedelic experience have long problematized scientific inquiry. Key to this observation is the fact that psychedelic effects tend to resist generalization, measurement, and replication in controlled settings. Henceforth, two related questions: first, how does one gather information on an experience whose defining characteristics may resist observation?; second, if there is a connection between ineffable experience and the therapeutic efficacy of

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley. (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 293.

² “The Mind, Explained: Psychedelics.” Netflix Official Site, September 12, 2019. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81098586>.

³ Michael Pollan, *How To Change Your Mind: What The New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence*. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2018.

psychedelics, how might psychedelic researchers develop knowledge that is both useful and widely applicable?

Throughout this project, I have argued that the standards of proof of these substances’ therapeutic efficacy should differ from those associated with dominant scientific epistemologies. I have explored the implicit epistemological commitments of psychedelic science with a special focus on psychedelic research processes as a confound to the normative epistemological premises of big data and datafication. In this chapter, I address contemporary studies which speak to the need for a “psychedelic science” as a unique and specific mode of knowledge production and medical practice. These studies clarify the ways in which psychedelic science refutes the epistemology of big data.

It will be useful to review key takeaways from the project thus far. In chapter two, I argued that datafication takes knowledge to be essentially representative; further, it assumes that data are capable of representing all significant aspects of human life. I suggested that this assumption actually functions to the reverse effect. That is, data do not represent all significant aspects of human life so much as their representative capacities and limitations determine what is significant — what has meaning, conceived in the broadest possible sense — and what is insignificant, or what has no meaning. To draw out the normative implications of these assumptions, I envisioned an image of thought (*vis-à-vis* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) which renders any alternative view of knowledge and representation unthinkable — what I called “the digital image of thought.” In chapter three, I invoked Guattari’s notion of the “chaoid” to suggest the existence of a “psychedelic chaoid” that promotes the cognitive function of negation. This mechanism opposes the practical effects of the data episteme on individual sensemaking and knowledge production. The present chapter indicates that the notion of a “psychedelic chaoid” is invoked, howsoever indirectly, in contemporary psychedelic research. I will begin by elaborating on psychedelics as agents of abstraction.

Psychedelics, Abstraction, and the Image of Thought

My treatment of abstraction as a mental function aligns with Matteo Pasquinelli’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. After considering abstraction as it is theorized in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Pasquinelli concludes that “there is no ontological difference between thought and perception, abstraction and negation.”⁴ I wrote in chapter three that although data may perform certain functions associated with thinking or abstraction, they do not permit negation as a mental operation which observes the unknown and unknowable. The digital image of thought does not recognize that which is absolutely foreign, unequivocal, or “other.” It forecloses the possibility of abstract thought.

⁴ Matteo Pasquinelli, “The Power of Abstraction and Its Antagonism: On Some Problems Common to Contemporary Neuroscience and the Theory of Cognitive Capitalism,” in *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism: Part Two*, ed. Warren Neidich. (Berlin, Germany: Archive Books, 2014), 7.

In her book *Contingent Computation: Abstraction, Experience and Indeterminacy in Computational Aesthetics*, M. Beatrice Fazi explores Deleuze’s research on abstraction as it relates to the notion of the image of thought. For Deleuze, she writes,

the separation between an ontological and an epistemological plane must be dissolved in order to leave room for “a new image of the act of thought, its functioning, its genesis in thought itself.” Abstract thought is a type of thinking that does not belong to somebody; it is unbounded, immediate, and indeterminate. This means, against the representational character of Descartes’s *cogito* and Kant’s faculty of reasoning, that Deleuze’s abstract thought is already positioned when one emerges as a subject of that thought, and that this subject cannot be identified as the source of such positioning... Suggestively, Deleuze affirmed that “the theory of thought is like painting: it needs that revolution which took art from representation to abstraction.”⁵

As Fazi makes clear, Deleuze’s “abstract thought” cannot be said to belong to a thinking subject. This is because the subject is always identified with an image, and abstract thought is something other than that which is presupposed as the image of thought. Deleuze’s abstract thought is not only disidentified with a subject, but avoids all forms of identification with recognizable or pre-existing images. Meanwhile, the data episteme operates by representing and/or extending identifiable properties. Data affix to and amplify what is already known (or, per the word’s etymology what is “given”).⁶ Thus the data episteme preempts Deleuze’s would-be “revolution” in the theory of thought. From a Deleuzean perspective, the data episteme is hostile towards the act of thinking.

In his essay “Gilles Deleuze and Psychedelic Thought as Resistance,” philosopher Oli Genn Bash argues that psychedelic experience refutes the image of thought. As he writes, psychedelic experience “escape[s] the presupposition of being supported by an Image which inclines towards the truth,” and thus disaffirms any theory of thought as denotative and/or representative.⁷ From there, Bash argues that psychedelic experience fosters skepticism towards such presuppositions, supporting, instead, a theory of thought as abstraction.

Bash refers only to first-hand encounters with psychedelic substances. He does not draw from anecdotal trip reports, published research, or other second-hand sources of information. This is because, he writes, the image of thought denies the existence of such secondary or transcendent viewpoints. In his words,

⁵ M. Beatrice Fazi, *Contingent Computation: Abstraction, Experience and Indeterminacy in Computational Aesthetics* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 34-35.

⁶ Alexander R. Galloway, “From Data to Information.” September 22, 2015. <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/from-data-to-information>.

⁷ Oli Genn Bash, “Gilles Deleuze and Psychedelic Thought as Resistance” in *Neurotransmissions: Essays on Psychedelics From Breaking Convention*, ed. Dave King. (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2015), 27.

There is a difficulty in analysing the psychedelic experience in general as a “psychedelic experience” might contain many different aspects, or mean various things to different people. In this instance, I do not necessarily see any merit in exploring other subjective viewpoints regarding the psychedelic experience, as there is the very likely possibility of just falling into the trap of a psychedelic image which others have created. This would not really allow for an exploration into psychedelic thought as resistance to the Image of Thought, as we would merely be viewing this resistance in a confined manner which is exactly the opposite of what Deleuze is putting forward.⁸

Despite the author’s intentions, “Gilles Deleuze and Psychedelic Thought as Resistance” does not escape “the trap of a psychedelic image.” In the preceding passage, Bash implies that it may be illegitimate to assay any psychedelic experience for signs of generalizable features.

Nevertheless, he uses a hypothetical scenario to exemplify general features of an acid trip: an individual, high on LSD, encounters a table and becomes engrossed in the activity of exploring patterns in the table’s wood grain.⁹ Bash writes that this person “could be exploring the shape of the table and the patterns for hours before even noticing that it is a ‘table.’”¹⁰ In other words, the individual does not perceive a table as such; instead, they fixate on details which are not determined or informed by “table” as a categorical *a priori*. Insofar as *a priori* categories might be said to imply an image of thought, this imaginary illustrates the LSD experience as a meaningful deviation from the image of thought. I would add that non-categorical thought can take the form of a negative mental operation, or one that proceeds beyond the remit of the already-known or given as an *a priori*. When non-categorical thinking is induced by psychedelic ingestion, it suggests the presence of the psychedelic chaotic.

Despite his promise to exclusively use first-hand knowledge, Bash still presents a second-hand source, or a source whose perspective is not (for all practical purposes) meant to be treated as his own. That it is fabricated does not change this fact any more than synthetic data could be said to be drawn from real-world events. Of course, the scholarly obligation to refer to sources other than one’s own experience applies no less to those who acknowledge that positive representation may delegitimize the effective features of psychedelic experience. In the previous chapter, I documented the long history of this problem, which begins with Humphry Davy’s eighteenth-century research on nitrous oxide. It has become more pronounced in the era of digital and data-intensive research methods.

⁸ Bash, “Gilles Deleuze and Psychedelic Thought as Resistance,” 29-30.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*