

The Devil at Heaven's Gate

Rethinking the Study of Religion in the Age of Cyber-Space

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Since this is the close of the Age, the battle in the Heavens with their servants on Earth will be the means of that closing and the spading under of the plants (including the humans) of this civilization. “Weeds” are now getting rid of weeds—from gang wars to nations involved in ethnic cleansing. This is simply a part of the natural recycling process which precedes a restoration period of the planet in preparation for another civilization’s beginning.

How and When Heaven’s Gate (the Door to the Next Level Above the Human)

May Be Entered (HG I, 11)¹

Messianic hope was based on the *reality* of the Apocalypse. But this latter has no more reality than the original Big Bang... Our Apocalypse is not real, it is *virtual*. And it’s not in the future, it is *here and now*.

Jean Baudrillard, “*Hysteresis of the Millennium*”²

Some eighteen years ago, the respected historian of religions, Jonathan Z. Smith, delivered an influential paper entitled “The Devil in Mr. Jones.” The subject of Smith’s paper was the profoundly disturbing mass suicide of some 914 members of the Peoples Temple, led by the Reverend James Warren Jones, in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978. For his entrée into this troubling and perplexing phenomenon, Smith reminds us that the academic study of religions was born largely during the era of the European Enlightenment. As a product of the Enlightenment quest for rational understanding and

¹ *How and When Heaven’s Gate (the Door to the Next Level Above the Human) May be Entered: An Anthology of our Materials*, a 200-page self-published book (Mill Spring, NC: Wildflower Press, 1997). This was originally available on-line at the now defunct Heaven’s Gate Web-site (<<http://www.heavensgate.com>>), which is now reproduced at several Heaven’s Gate Replica and Mirror Websites, such as: <<http://www.netcentral.co.uk/~steveb/gate/book.html>>; <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/digest/daily/march/27/cultsite/index.html>>; <<http://www.artbell.com/mirror/heavensgate/index.htm>>; and <<http://homepage.netSPACEonline.com/~jonhall/heaven/index.html>>.

Hereafter, this text will be cited as HG. The book is divided into six sections, with the following headings, which I have numbered in the body of this article, followed by the page number (e.g., HG I, 8 refers to section I, page 8). They are:

- Do’s Intro: Our Purpose —The Simple Bottom Line
- I. Exit Statements, 1995–1996
- II. Early Classroom Materials, 1975–1988
- III. ‘88 Update
- IV. Beyond Human—Last Call, 1991–1992
- V. USA Today Ad/ Statement and Misc. Documents, 1993
- VI. Statements/Posters of Public Meetings, 1994
- Appendices

² Jean Baudrillard, “Hysteresis of the Millennium,” in Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 119.

humanistic tolerance, the study of religion has a fundamental duty to try to make some kind of coherent sense of even the most seemingly senseless of religious events:

Simply put, the academic study of religion is a child of the Enlightenment... [R]eligion was domesticated; it was transformed from pathos to ethos... [R]eligion was brought within the realm of common sense... Rediscovering the old tag “nothing human is foreign to me,” the Enlightenment impulse was one ... which refused to leave any human datum including religion beyond the pale of understanding, beyond the realm of reason. As students of religion we have become stubbornly committed to making the attempt ... at achieving intelligibility. We must accept the burden of the long hard road of understanding. To do less is to forfeit our license to practice in the academy.³

Indeed, Smith even suggests that the Jonestown incident really poses the ultimate challenge to the historian of religions: precisely because of its seeming irrationality, incomprehensibility, and shocking enigma, it poses the greatest threat to an academic discipline that claims to make rational sense out of all religious phenomena: “One might claim that Jonestown was the most important single event in the history of religions, for if we continue to leave it un-understandable, we will have surrendered our rights to the academy.”⁴

In the article that follows, I will undertake the study of what seems, at first glance, to be a phenomenon very similar to that of the Jonestown suicides—namely, the now quite infamous case of the mass suicide of the “Heaven’s Gate” community in March of 1997. Not unlike the Jonestown suicides, Heaven’s Gate involved the collective, apparently voluntary deaths of some thirty-nine men and women at the command of a rather enigmatic religious leader, Marshall Applewhite, who claimed to be taking them to the “Next Level” or the kingdom of heaven. And not unlike the Jonestown case, the “religious significance” of these deaths has continued to frustrate, perplex, and tantalize contemporary historians of religions, remaining one of the great enigmas for us “children of the Enlightenment.”⁵

³ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” first delivered as a Woodward Court Lecture at the College of the University of Chicago (1980), reprinted in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 104. Other more recent accounts of Jonestown include the following: Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998); Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1997); Judith Mary Weightman, *Making Sense of the Jonestown Suicides: A Sociological History of Peoples Temple* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983); Laurie Efrein Kahalas, *Snake Dance: Unraveling the Mysteries of Jonestown* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford Publishing, 1998).

⁴ Smith, “The Devil and Mr. Jones,” 104.

⁵ There is to date little scholarship on Heaven’s Gate—though there are a number of more popular accounts and anti-cult tracts; see for example, Tom Brown, *The Heaven’s Gate Suicide: Unlocking the Answer to Why It Happened* (El Paso: Tom Brown Ministries, 1997); Hayden Hewes, ed., *Inside Heaven’s*

While I would by no means belittle the importance of Smith's insights, I will argue that his means of approach and many of his conclusions are perhaps no longer relevant to our own profoundly postmodern situation in late twentieth-century, late capitalist America. It may well be true that the history of religions was originally a "child of the Enlightenment," yet its filial ties to its Enlightenment patrimony appear to have become increasingly tenuous as we enter the final stages of our own distinctly late capitalist era. Indeed, if we are in some sense children of the Enlightenment, then we are also surely *incestuous bedfellows with our shunned half-siblings, technology, postmodernism, and consumer capitalism*.⁶ As Sam Gill has recently argued, the new world of technology is profoundly transforming not only the objects of the history of religions, with the rise of technological, on-line religions such as Heaven's Gate; it is now transforming the very way in which we conduct our scholarship, forcing us more and more to enter the ethereal world of hyperspace in order to conduct our research and to teach our students. Today we plunge headlong into a world increasingly saturated with technologically manufactured simulations and endlessly reproduced and instantly manipulated images, which seem to dissolve our most cherished Enlightenment categories of the real and the imaginary, the original and the copy, rational order and the irrational play of signifiers.⁷

Religious phenomena such as the Heaven's Gate suicides, I will argue, probably cannot be narrowly circumscribed within the traditional Enlightenment concepts of reason and understanding. They may very well turn out to be quite meaningless and seemingly incomprehensible when scrutinized with the all-seeing eye of Enlightenment rationality. Instead, I would suggest that we need to employ certain distinctly posten-

Gate: The UFO Cult Leaders Tell Their Story in Their Own Words (New York: Signet, 1997); William Henry, *The Keepers of Heaven's Gate: The Millennial Madness, the Religion Behind the Rancho Santa Fe Suicides* (Anchorage: Earthpulse Press, 1997); Rodney Perkins, *Cosmic Suicide: The Tragedy and Transcendence of Heaven's Gate* (Dallas: Pentaradial Press, 1997).

⁶ On the concept of "late capitalism" or post-industrial society, see Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Fredric Jameson, "Post-modernism and Consumer Society," in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. H. Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985); and *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); S. Lash and J. Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987); W. Halal, *The New Capitalism* (New York: Wiley, 1986); Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978).

⁷ See Gill's two on-line articles on "TheStrip" Website, "Burnt Offerings" (<<http://www.colorado.edu/ReligiousStudies/TheStrip/Grill/burntofferings2.html>>), and "Chips from a Cyborg Workshop" (<<http://www.colorado.edu/ReligiousStudies/TheStrip/Features/chips/induction.html>>). See also Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semioext[e], 1990).

As Mike Featherstone summarizes, "[I]n late capitalist society, sign and commodity have come together to produce the commodity sign. The autonomy of the signifier, through ... the manipulation of signs in the media and advertising, means that signs are able to float free from objects and are available for use in a multiplicity of associative relations... The overproduction of signs and reproduction of images and simulations leads to a loss of stable meaning and an aestheticization of reality in which the masses become fascinated by the endless flow of bizarre juxtapositions which takes the viewer beyond stable sense" (Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* [Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991], 15).

lightenment hermeneutic tools, particularly those dealing with the rapidly expanding new realms of computer technology, global communications, and hypermedia.

Using some insights drawn from Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and other critics of late capitalist “simulational culture,”⁸ I will argue that Do and his followers in Heaven’s Gate reflect the intense ambivalence and alienation shared by many individuals lost in late twentieth-century capitalist society. In a world in which the boundary between the real and the imaginary, the original and the simulation, or the human body and the computer screen, is growing increasingly blurred, the search for ultimate meaning, or even a coherent personal identity, often becomes more complex, even seemingly futile. Very much a technologically based religion, whose members actually worked firsthand in the cyber realm as Web-page designers, Heaven’s Gate seems to have offered a loving, human community and an alternative source of personal identity amidst the seemingly cold and sterile world of hyperspace.

In many respects, Heaven’s Gate would appear to be the ultimate postmodern pastiche and the ideal spirituality for the age of hypertext: it is in a sense a religion perfectly suited to the age of “simulation,” in Baudrillard’s sense of a technologically reproduced sign which comes to appear “hyperreal,” or more real than the “real” object it represents. As a remarkable fusion of simulated images and sound bytes borrowed from an enormous range of sources, from the Book of Revelation to “Star Trek,” the on-line religion of Heaven’s Gate became for its members more real, more meaningful, and more true than the “real” world itself. Not only were the members Web-site designers themselves, but the very theological language they employed was saturated with the discourse of computer technology: human beings are “vehicles” equipped with mental hardware and implanted with computer chips that must be properly “reprogrammed” through religious training. Finally, with its ideal of mastering the bodily “vehicle,” transcending sexual desire, and ascending into a supra-material cyberspace world, Heaven’s Gate was a religion that seemed ideally suited to the “processed life” of the late twentiethcentury cyborg/human.⁹

Yet at the same time, if Applewhite and his followers in Heaven’s Gate were very much products of the technological age, they were also profoundly ambivalent, even hostile in their attitude toward contemporary American society, government, and big business. Indeed, they were deeply suspicious of what Baudrillard calls “*la société de la consommation*”—a late capitalist world in which consumption is allimportant, in which images of wealth, power, youth, and sex are bound together in a seductive, endless circle of media advertisements and artificial desires. Viewing contemporary American society as utterly corrupt and ruled by the Luciferian forces of capitalism and greed, the members of Heaven’s Gate saw no hope beyond a millennial destruction.

⁸ See especially Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* (Sydney: Power Institute, 1987); *America* (London: Verso, 1988); Jameson, *Postmodernism*; and Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Picador, 1987).

⁹ Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert, *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1997), 4–5.

Not unlike Baudrillard in his early, most pessimistic work such as *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Applewhite and his followers saw only one real way out of the vicious circle of the late capitalist consumer code: the most extreme act of mass suicide, the most shocking act of death which puts a brutal stop to the otherwise endless circle of seduction and consumption.¹⁰

In short, Heaven's Gate provides us with a striking insight into some of the deepest contradictions of religion in the age of cyberspace. On the one hand, the new technologies open up new possibilities to create alternative spiritual communities, seemingly egalitarian social groups with the promise of a new selfhood freed from the hierarchies of race, class, and gender in mainstream society. On the other hand, however, the group reveals the threat of losing one's identity, even losing a sense of the "real" itself amidst the bewildering play of endlessly reproduced simulations. It is in precisely this sense that they pose the greatest challenge to the historian of religions—not as yet another datum to be comprehended within the scope of Enlightenment rationality, but rather as a striking example of the impact of technology upon religious belief, upon spiritual communities, and upon the very concept of human identity.

Ecstasy on-line: Religion, the New Age, and Hyperspace

[D]igitalization is its metaphysical principle (the God of Leibnitz) and DNA its prophet.

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*¹¹

Since at least the time of Max Weber, a great many scholars have lamented the destructive potential of modern Western technology for traditional religious belief. In an increasingly bureaucratized, industrialized, and now computerized world, a world dominated more by the media and the marketplace than by the pulpit, there would seem to be little room left for real piety or spiritual fervor. As more pessimistic scholars like Daniel Bell argue, the coming of post-industrial society, or capitalism in its advanced stage, has ushered in an era of generalized "secularization of culture, namely by the death of God, the loss of a sense of hell and the collapse of traditional systems of salvation":

The real problem of modernity is the problem of belief. Secular systems of meaning have proved illusory solutions to the spiritual crisis once the anchorage of society in religion has been severed ... [There is] a void in belief

¹⁰ See Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1990); *Fatal Strategies* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1990).

¹¹ Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 109.

... which the aesthetic justification of life with its emphasis on hedonism and self-expression is incapable of filling.¹²

Such fears have become all the more intense as we enter the era of global communications and the new media technologies, which seem to dissolve all traditional institutional hierarchies and absorb even the most remote and undeveloped villages across the planet into the everexpanding network of global capitalism. As Bryan S. Turner puts it, “The corruption of pristine faith is going to be brought about by Tina Turner and Coca Cola and not by rational arguments.”¹³

And yet, as more optimistic scholars such as Mike Featherstone have persuasively argued, the spread of Western consumer capitalism throughout the globe does not necessarily sound the death knell of religion. On the contrary, a growing number of new and alternative religions, as well as new spins on old traditions, have found some remarkably innovative ways to “capitalize,” as it were, on the new technologies and marketing strategies of modern big business, to adapt and in fact to flourish within the volatile world of late capitalism. The sacred continues to survive and reappear in various ways throughout consumer culture, often by “sacralizing” the most secular aspects of the late capitalist world itself, including consumer commodities, business structures, and new media technologies:

Modernity, with its processes of rationalization, commodification, secularization and disenchantment does not lead to the eclipse of religious sentiments, for while formal religions may decline, symbolic classifications and ritual practices ... live on at the heart of the secular social processes. As Durkheim pointed out, anything can become sacred, so why not the “profane” goods of capitalism? ... [C]ommodities ... can become de-commodified and receive a symbolic charge (over and above that intended by advertisers) which makes them sacred to their users.¹⁴

¹² Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 117; see Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 28, 156; cf. Bryan S. Turner, *Orientalism, Postmodernism, and Globalism* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹³ “The threat to religious faith is the commodification of everyday life. People adopt or reject belief systems not simply on the rationalistic grounds that they are not intellectually coherent. Beliefs are adopted ... because they are relevant or not to everyday needs and concerns. What makes religious faith ... problematic in a globalized postmodern society is that everyday life has become part of a global system of exchange of commodities which are not easily influenced by ... religious leaders” (Turner, *Orientalism, Postmodernism, and Globalism*, 10).

¹⁴ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 121. On this point see also Jeff Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology is Changing our Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: HarperEdge, 1997), and Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (New York: Harmony Books, 1998): “Technology is neither a devil nor an angel. But neither is it simply a tool, a neutral extension of ... human nature. Technology is a trickster, and it has been so since the first culture hero taught the human tribe how to spin wool before he pulled it over our eyes” (p. 9).

Indeed, one might even argue that there is a strange kind of “fit” between many of the new religious movements (NRMs) and late capitalist, hyper-technological society—a fit not unlike that of Weber’s Protestant ethic and early modern capitalism. More and more we seem to be witnessing the rise of alternative spiritual forms—from Christian televangelism to Scientology to self-help gurus like Deepak Chopra and his cohorts—that seem not only compatible with, but ideally suited to the ever-changing and endlessly transformable world of mass communications and high technology.¹⁵ For, as Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert point out, all forms of technology are capable of being “appropriated differently than their original design intended and creatively extended or subverted by particular users under particular historical and political circumstances.”¹⁶ Hence, even the most seemingly secular and irreligious of technological media, even the most material hardware of late capitalist society, have the potential to be appropriated and transformed into technologies of the sacred.

Nowhere is this adaptation to technology more apparent than in the realm of the World Wide Web—a medium which has increasingly become the forum of choice for many burgeoning young NRMs. The role of technology in general, and of the World Wide Web in particular, is still one of the least explored areas of the New Age; indeed, many NRMs appear to have capitalized upon and exploited the possibilities of the Internet in ways that have left the rest of us decades behind. First and most obviously, the Web provides a new and extremely effective means of spreading the word, of marketing a new religious message to a vast global audience, all relatively inexpensively. Anyone with server access, Adobe Photoshop, and a small amount of computer savvy can now advertise his or her spiritual wares alongside major corporations such as AT&T and Coca Cola.

Second and perhaps more profound, however, are the implications of the Internet for personal identity, status and social roles. As a great many advocates of the Web have argued, the anonymity of the Internet offers the user the potential to experience a new identity, to engage in personal exploration and social interaction relatively free of normal hierarchies and social prejudices. Offering the ability to log on without any indication of one’s gender, race, or physical appearance, the Internet presents remarkable new possibilities for the imagining and re-imagining of the self: “the possibility of browsing information anonymously with no login nickname,” as Nina Wakeford com-

¹⁵ See my article, “Zorba the Buddha: Capitalism, Charisma and the Cult of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh,” *Religion* 26 (1996): 161–82; Brian Wilson, “The New Religions: Some Preliminary Considerations,” in *New Religious Movements: A Perspective for Understanding Society*, ed. E. Barker (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 23; cf. James Beckford, *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change* (London: Sage, 1986), 395.

¹⁶ Terry and Calvert, *Processed Lives*, 4. As Davis argues, “Regardless of how secular this ultra-modern condition appears, the velocity and mutability of the times invokes a supernatural quality that must be seen ... through the lenses of religious thought and the storehouse of the archetypal imagination” (*Techgnosis*, 1; cf. Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace*, 1–26).

ments, “means that a basic feature of identity (re)creation which elsewhere structures the negotiations of risk and trust ... is absent for most Web users.”¹⁷

Indeed, the Internet has been hailed by some as the potential locus, not only for a new individual identity, but for participation in an alternative social space—one freed from the hierarchies of class, wealth, and gender that structure mainstream social spaces. With its ability to unite individuals from all points of the globe, irrespective of geographic boundaries, age, sex, or race, the World Wide Web, according to its more optimistic advocates, also holds the potential to create new “virtual communities.” Indeed, some have even created their own alternative religious communities and virtual ritual spaces, in which individuals vastly separated in physical space can enter virtual temples and other sacred spaces to participate in on-line ceremonial gatherings.¹⁸ According to its most celebratory proponents like George Landow, the new hyper-technologies offer a radical “engine of personal and political transformation”—a radically democratizing, anti-totalitarian force which, in keeping with the larger intellectual trends of deconstruction and post-structuralism, knocks down hierarchies of wealth, race, and gender, ultimately empowering those who are typically disempowered in mainstream society.¹⁹ As another optimistic web-enthusiast puts it,

Life in cyberspace ... is more egalitarian than elitist, more de-centered than hierarchical... Life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the practice of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity and community.²⁰

¹⁷ Nina Wakeford, “Networking Women and Grrrls with Information/communicationTechnology,” in *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, eds. J. Terry and M. Calvert (London: Routledge, 1997), 53–54. See also James Brook and Iain A. Boal, eds., *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995); Dale Spender, *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1995); W. Chernaik and M. Deegen, eds., *Beyond the Book: Theory, Text and the Politics of Cyberspace* (Oxford: Office for Humanities Communication, 1996); John Law, ed., *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination* (London: Routledge, 1991); G. Bender and T. Druckrey, eds., *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1994); C. Penley and A. Ross, eds., *Technoculture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

¹⁸ See Gregory Price Grieve, “Imagining a Virtual Religious Community: Neo-Pagans and the Internet,” *Chicago Anthropology Exchange* 21 (1995). There are now a number of online Temples and virtual sacred spaces, such as the Kali Mandir (<<http://www.kalimandir.org/pujashop/index.html>>), Temples of Tantra (<<http://www.tantraworks.com/Shakti.html>>), Temple of Jvalamukhi (<<http://www.dakinitantra.com/jvalamukhi.html>>), The Ultimate Temple (<<http://www.grapho.net/temple/>>), Ancient Egyptian Virtual Temple (<<http://www.netins.net/showcase/ankh/>>), etc.

¹⁹ See George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 10, 169. The term “hypertext” comes originally from Theodor Holm Nelson, *Literary Machines* (Swarthmore, PA: Theodor H. Nelson, 1987), preface, 2. See also George P. Landow, ed., *Hyper/Text/Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 1.

²⁰ Mitch Kapor, “Where is the Digital Highway Really Heading?” *Wired*, July–Aug. (1993): 53.

Of course, there have also been far more skeptical, cynical, and pessimistic critics of the new technology, who find these utopian pretensions of hypertext theory self-deluded and perhaps even dangerous. As a variety of recent observers have commented, the Internet—like computer technology in general—opens up vast new potential for both oppression and liberation, both capitalist exploitation and personal empowerment. “Digital reality contains alternative possibilities towards emancipation and domination,” as Arthur and Marilouise Kroker put it.²¹ If it can be used for more democratic and egalitarian ends, there is also no doubt that it can and increasingly is being used as yet another extension of consumer capitalism to all points of the globe and all aspects of human consciousness. Indeed, the more pessimistic critics have even forewarned that the Internet signals the end of communication and even of human bodily experience as we know it, with the dissolution of all reality into the hyperreal world of computer simulations and simulacra.

The virtual communities formed on the Internet allow people to be whomever they want, freed of the physical constraints of corporeality, geographical confinement and socially inscribed identities... However, this anonymity and fluidity also have a price—the possibility of losing true identity.²²

As we will see in what follows, the Heaven’s Gate suicides throw many of these issues surrounding the new technology and religion, the New Age and the World Wide Web, into stunning, often frightening, bold relief.

A “Twisted Theology” or a Religion for Late Twentieth-century America?: The History and Beliefs of Heaven’s Gate

We watch a lot of Star Trek , a lot of Star Wars; it’s just ... like going on a holodeck ... now it’s time to stop. The game’s over. It’s time to put into practice what we’ve learned. We take off the virtual reality helmet ... go back out of the holodeck to be with ... the other members of the craft in the heavens.

Thomas Nichols, brother of Michelle Nichols, who played Lieutenant Uhura on “Star Trek”²³

²¹ Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, *Hacking the Future: Stories for the Flesh Eating 90s* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 78; cf. Cliff McKnight, Andrew Dillon, and John Richardson, eds., *Hypertext in Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²² Andrea Slane, “Romancing the System: Women, Narrative Film and the Sexuality of Computers,” in *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, eds. J. Terry and M. Calvert (London: Routledge, 1997), 77.

²³ Quoted in *Time* (7 April 1997), 33.

Since the world drives to a delirious state of things, we must drive to a delirious point of view.

Jean Baudrillard, *La Transparence du Mal*²⁴

Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of the Heaven's Gate phenomenon is simply its enigmatic history and its remarkable belief system. An elaborate combination of Christian theology (largely drawn from the Book of Revelation), various New Age teachings, UFO speculations, conspiracy theories, and popular television programs such as "Star Trek" and the "X-Files," Heaven's Gate has typically been characterized by the media in fairly derogatory and dismissive terms: as a "twisted theology,"²⁵ as an "X-Files" meets Revelation stew" and "a dense and jumbled universe of UFOs and extraterrestrials careening smack into unusual astronomical happenings, apocalyptic Christian heresies and end-is-nigh paranoia,"²⁶ as a "bizarre cybercult" comprised of "cultural fluff," spawned "out where religion and junk culture meet,"²⁷ and as "a world view on the furthest fringes of millennialism, with disconnected elements of Christianity interpreted through a thick lens of science fiction."²⁸

The founder and now quite infamous leader of Heaven's Gate—whom most Americans know from the wild-eyed, rather alarming images of him taken from his farewell video and reprinted throughout major newspapers—was Marshall Herff Applewhite, alias "Bo" or "Do." The son of a Presbyterian minister in Texas, Applewhite has been described by some as a kind of "Mr. Rogers" character. Good-looking, with a powerful singing voice, he taught as a music professor at the University of Alabama in the 1960s, living as a conventional family man with a wife and two kids. His marriage, however, would eventually break up, and he would be forced to leave Alabama because of the scandalous rumors of his homosexual tendencies.²⁹ In the late 1960s, he taught music at the University of St. Thomas, a Roman Catholic school in Houston—a job which he was also forced to leave in 1970 because of his apparent emotional problems and depression. Eventually, he would have himself hospitalized in the hope of being cured of his homosexual desires.

Applewhite's life changed dramatically, however, when he met a young nurse and dabbler in astrology named Bonnie Lu Trusdale Nettles. Both deeply interested in alternative spiritualities, and finding in one another eternal soul mates, Nettles and Applewhite began to believe that they had been infused with heavenly spirits and were

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *La Transparence du Mal: Essai sur les Phénomènes Extrêmes* [*The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*] (Paris: Galilee, 1990), 9.

²⁵ Kenneth L. Woodward, "Christ and Comets," *Newsweek* (7 April 1997), 40.

²⁶ *Time* (7 April 1997), 31, 34.

²⁷ *The New York Post* (28 March 1997).

²⁸ Gustav Niebuhr, "On the Furthest Fringes of Millennialism," *New York Times* (28 March 1997), A1.

²⁹ On Applewhite's homosexuality, see the article by his old friend, David Daniel, "The Beginning of the Journey," *Newsweek* (14 April 1997), 36.

now the vehicles for some much higher divine purpose on this earth. As a sign of their transformation, they adopted new names for each other like Tiddly and Wink, Guinea and Pig, Nincom and Poop, and later, Do and Ti. Ultimately, however, they came to regard themselves simply as “the Two”—a reference to the two witnesses mentioned in the Book of Revelation who were prophesied to appear at the end of the world in order to prepare the way for the Kingdom of Heaven.

In 1975, the couple (then calling themselves Bo and Peep) formed a religious group in Los Angeles whose primary goal was to leave the mortal world on a spaceship and journey to the “‘Father’s kingdom’ in outer space.” Members had to overcome earthly attachments to friends, family, jobs, and material possessions. By following the guidelines set down by Bo and Peep, these early followers hoped to become “immortal, androgynous beings complete with physical bodies that would be free of all human limitations.” During this period, the group was infiltrated and studied from within by Montana sociologist Robert Balch, who traveled with members through California and Arizona. The followers, Balch reports, lived a nomadic existence journeying from one secluded campsite to another. Idle socializing within the group was discouraged, as was contact with the other campers. The main communication these followers had with the outside world was when they approached ministers and local merchants for handouts, and during public presentations of their message.³⁰

The movement faltered when Ti died of cancer in 1985—an event which seems to have driven Applewhite into a deep depression and further amplified his urgent sense of the coming apocalypse. Applewhite and his followers disappeared from public sight for the next eight years, spending part of that time at an isolated compound built of old tires and lumber (their “Earth Ship”) in the New Mexico desert.³¹ But they suddenly resurfaced again in 1993 bearing the new title of “Heaven’s Gate,” advertising the movement in highly visible national magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *USA Today*, and offering a “last chance to advance beyond the human.” By 1994, the community had rented itself a \$7000a-month estate owned by an Iranian businessman in Rancho Santa Fe, San Diego County.³² Although their new home was equipped with such luxuries as

³⁰ *Time* (7 April 1997), 35; Robert W. Balch, “‘When the Light Goes Out, Darkness Comes’: A Study of Defection from a Totalistic Cult,” in *Religious Movements: Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers*, ed. Rodney Stark (New York: Paragon House, 1985), 14–16. See also Robert W. Balch, “Waiting for the Ships: Disillusionment and the Revitalization of Faith in Bo and Peep’s Cult,” in *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 137–66.

³¹ Carey Goldberg, “Heaven’s Gate Fits in with New Mexico’s Offbeat Lifestyle,” *The New York Times* (31 March 1997), A8. According to Goldberg, there were many New Age prophetic characters and centers in that part of New Mexico at the time, including Mike Dew, a preacher of the prophetic group “Voices in the Wilderness,” a Hindu retreat, a center for Russian mysticism, at least one survivalist enclave, and various other “New Age encampments for burned out people.”

³² In this respect, Heaven’s Gate and their neighbors appear to have been an example of late twentieth-century “American” religion, in Baudrillard’s sense—a religion of the *desert*, of the vast expanses of flat, empty wasteland, without depth, history, or tradition, yet surrounded by the glitter and glitz of Las Vegas; see Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1988), 63; Barry Smart, “Europe/America:

an elevator, a jacuzzi, and a putting green, the Heaven's Gate members appear to have led a very spartan life in their home, living in bunk beds, plastic chairs, and cheap furniture, and subsisting on bulk food and simple meals of pasta, lemonade, and diet coke. With the house as their base, they established their own lucrative small business as Website designers, offering cheap rates and efficient service under the name "Higher Source." Indeed, the members seem to have felt more at home in cyberspace than in the physical world and made impressive profits by designing sites for a variety of employers such as the San Diego Polo Club and "Keep the Faith," a Christian music Web site.

The membership of Heaven's Gate really seems to defy any reduction to stereotyped images of dysfunctional social outcasts lured into a brainwashing cult. Ranging in age from 26 to 72, the members came from backgrounds as diverse as former army paratroopers (Michael Barr Sandoe, 26), rock musicians (Darwin Lee Johnson, 42, of the band "Dharma Combat"), massage therapists (Jeffrey Howard Lewis, 41), computer trainers (Cheryl Butcher, 42), oyster men (Alan Bowers, 45), farm girls (Margaret Bull, 54), nurses (Julie la Montague, 45), bus drivers (Alphonso Foster, 44), artists (Robert Arancio, 45), and even car salesmen (Lindley Ayerhart Pease, 41). Indeed, the occupational, sexual, and racial profile of these thirty-nine individuals does not appear that much different from a sample cross-section of the American population as a whole.

Moreover, while it is true that some of the members—most notably Applewhite himself and the infamous survivor and narrator, Rio DiAngelo—came from troubled families and suffered various social dysfunctions, this does not appear to be true for the group as a whole. Many members were described as extremely normal, well-adjusted, and quite functional individuals leading ordinary, productive lives prior to their involvement with Heaven's Gate. For example, Cheryl Butcher is described as a shy, bright, self-taught computer expert, a perfect daughter, and a good student; likewise, Ladonna Brugato, a forty-yearold computer consultant, is said to have been a "girl next door simply trying to get by as single mom."³³

By 1997, however, the movement seems to have taken a darker turn. After composing their own 223-page movie script describing their beliefs and calling others to join the move toward Heaven's Gate, the members failed repeatedly to sell the script in Hollywood (despite the fact that one Phoenix producer, Alex Papas, assured the members that their script would be a box office smash).³⁴ In response, they appear to have fallen into an increasingly suspicious, depressed, and paranoid state. Fearing another Waco and growing increasingly worried about FBI surveillance of their activities, they began to collect weapons, including five handguns, three rifles, and ammunition later

Baudrillard's Fatal Comparison," in *Forget Baudrillard?*, eds. C. Rojek and B. Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), 55. 32 For a good description of the Rancho Santa Fe community, see Joseph Wambaugh, "Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch..." *Time* (7 April 1997).

³³ *People* (14 April 1997), 42, 46.

³⁴ B. Drummond Ayres, Jr., "Cult Members Wrote a Script to Put Their Life and Times on the Big Screen," *New York Times* (1 April 1997), A13.

found by the police in a warehouse near the mansion.³⁵ They began to speak more openly about the “weeds of Lucifer” or the “space aliens” who had overrun mankind, corrupting our government and religious institutions; and they also began to plead more urgently that it was now time to depart from this world of sin, to ascend to the higher plane of the Next Level. The approach of the Hale Bopp comet—widely noted in New Age circles as an event of spiritual and cosmic proportions and one that happened to coincide roughly with Holy Week in the Christian calendar—suddenly appeared to offer the Heaven’s Gate members the divine opportunity they had been awaiting: an astronomical omen signaling that it was now time to leave this world. They saw the comet as a herald of a coming spaceship from the heavenly Kingdom, sent to take them personally to the Next Level.

The Ecstasy of the Decline: The Last Spree of Consumption

The farewell tape looks like a garden party of the apocalypse, with the California sunshine and the trees in the mansion’s backyard blowing in the breeze.

Elizabeth Gleick, “*The Marker We’ve Been Waiting For*”³⁶

The last several weeks before the Heaven’s Gate suicides appear to have been a remarkable last fling or final spending spree before the community’s ascent to the Next Level. This previously very ascetic and prudish group suddenly went on a kind of joyride of consumption, burning up virtually all of their substantial savings on a variety of seemingly frivolous trips and entertainments—movies, gambling, tourist trips, big meals, and nice hotels.

Indeed, one is more than a little reminded here of Baudrillard’s phrase, “the Ecstasy of the decline” by which he means the “terminal stages of fading culture” or the giddy, morbid glee of a consumer society consuming itself and spinning ever faster into self-destructive oblivion.

Traveling to Las Vegas, the Heaven’s Gate members stayed at the Stratosphere Hotel, where they spent much of their time playing the slot machines. Several members then took a bus trip to Santa Rosa and Sacramento, then onward to Oregon, running up some two thousand dollars in hotel bills. Their excursions included an outing to a wild animal park, where they spent eighty dollars on ice cream, and trips to Sea World and to the movies (to see *Star Wars*, one of their all-time favorites). On their last days, March 20 and 21, the formerly ascetic group went out to a steak house, where

³⁵ <<http://www.cnn.com/...ide/index.html#waco>> (7 April 1997).

³⁶ *Time* (7 April 1997), 32.

they spent \$549, and then out to lunch, spending an additional \$351. The last, rather cryptic entry in their account book was the finding of two cents on the street.

This wild spree appears to have culminated in the final act of “expenditure”: the collective suicides of thirty-nine Heaven’s Gate members. So it was that on March 23, 1997, the first group of fifteen swallowed a fatal mixture of applesauce or pudding with pheno-barbital, washed down with vodka and helped along by the asphyxiating effect of a plastic bag over the head. The next day, March 24, a second group of fifteen died in the same manner. And on the third day, March 25, the remaining nine killed themselves, the first six in the same way as the others, and the last three—the ultimate angels of death—wearing only plastic bags over their heads. The suicides were remarkably well orchestrated and uniform: each body was dressed in a standard black shirt, black pants, brand new black Nikes, with their faces covered by purple shrouds. Those who wore glasses had laid them neatly folded by their side. Still more striking, however, is the rich trail of video and Internet information that the victims left behind including a detailed farewell video recorded by Applewhite and a colorful Web site urging its viewers to “leave the earth” now, before it is “recycled” and destroyed.

Rather ironically, it appears that the members of Heaven’s Gate did have the foresight to purchase an insurance policy covering the possibility of alien abduction: for \$1000, Goodfellow Rebecca Ingrams Pearson (GRIP) offered them a policy covering up to fifty members and providing \$1 million per person for abduction, impregnation, or death caused by aliens (the same firm, it turns out, also insures virgins against immaculate conception, prostitutes from loss of earnings from headache and backache, conversion to werewolf or vampire, death or injury through paranormal activity, and unfaithful husbands against “Bobbitting”).³⁷

“X-files” Meets Revelation Stew? The Spiritual Pastiche of Heaven’s Gate

Now reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning—the signified—is problematized. We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural productions, in some new ... bricolage: metabooks which cannibalize other books.

Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*³⁸

A fairly ingenious and imaginative mixture of traditional Christian theology with the space-age exploits of *Star Wars*, “Star Trek,” and other elements of popular culture,

³⁷ <<http://www/cnn.com/...rance.ap/index.html>> (2 April 1997).

³⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 96.

the world of Heaven's Gate stands out as a superb example of the art of pastiche or *bricolage*. It is in this sense that I would suggest Heaven's Gate be regarded as a specially late capitalist or postmodern religion—a religion not simply containing elements of syncretism or religious borrowing, but one essentially founded on the art of pastiche and the free-wheeling appropriation of a remarkably wide diversity of religious and cultural artifacts. It is very much, in Jameson's terms, comprised of the "fragments of preexistent texts, the building blocks of older cultural productions, in some new bricolage." As one author summarizes this rather remarkable fusion of traditional Christian faith and popular cultural mythology,

Do's vision ... was an odd mixture of Biblical apocalyptic, New Age mysticism and science fiction... There were elements of Eastern religions, Islam, Mormonism, and scientology ... Do's gospel evolved from a 1970's style UFO cult into a full blown sacred narrative... But for all that, Do was very much in the American grain: a would-be prophet melding bits of this tradition and that into a desperate faith aimed at saving a tiny marginalized cult from impending world disaster.³⁹

At the heart of the Heaven's Gate theology was the belief in a Kingdom of Heaven—a peaceful, transcendent other world, inhabited by the gods and situated at some unspecified location in outer space. The inhabitants of the Kingdom, it seems, had spread throughout the universe, planting the "gardens" of various civilizations with the "seeds" of human souls. When these seeds have grown and ripened, they then send a messenger or divine incarnation to "harvest" the good seeds from among their human crop. Two thousand years ago, the Kingdom had sent down the being now known as Jesus Christ in order to harvest the good seeds from among the human plants on this earth. Jesus, according to this rather eclectic theology, can also be described with the ("Star Trek" influenced) image of the "Captain," who was sent to this world with his "Away Team" to beam humankind up to the Next Level. Unfortunately, the Captain was killed, and his teachings were misunderstood, abused, and perverted by his later followers, who turned them into a kind of wealthy elitist "Country Club religion":

Two thousand years ago, the Kingdom Level Above Human appointed an Older Member to send a Representative (His "Son") ... to incarnate on this garden... While on Earth as an "away team" with their "Captain," they were to work on their overcoming of humanness and tell the civilization how the true Kingdom of God can be entered. The ... humans under control of the adversarial space races killed the Captain ... and turned the teachings of the Captain ... into watered-down Country Club religion (HG VI, 4).

The original message brought by the Captain or Christ was thus perverted by the evil race of "space aliens"—a group of demonic beings known in Christian mythology

³⁹ Kenneth L. Woodward, "Christ and Comets," *Newsweek* (7 April 1997), 40.

as the fallen angels led by Lucifer. Having slain the first Captain and corrupted his teachings, they have subsequently insinuated themselves into virtually all of modern government, big business, and even religious institutions. Today, they control the entire world through a hidden network or “club” whose tentacles stretch throughout the globe, secretly running modern political, economic, and religious organizations, and assuming a quasi-divine status:

Where the space aliens have a major stronghold in playing “God” is through those humans with the most power. The power is the strongest among the very rich and the very righteous (their self-styled religion) who accept that it is their (“God-given”) responsibility to maintain the world’s stability... These powerful individuals have a loose-knit world-wide “club” that for the most part dictates who their primary “monopoly” players are—those leaders in the strong societies (HG I, 10).

With their twisted teachings purveyed under the name of politics and religion, the space aliens have brainwashed virtually all ignorant inhabitants of earth into being docile servants in their corrupt order. Only those who blindly obey the norms of society—marriage, children, economic productivity—are allowed to survive in this regime, while those who challenge it are labeled deviant subversive “cults” (like the Heaven’s Gate “cult” itself):⁴⁰

(These space aliens) don’t want themselves “found out”... They want you to be a perfect servant to society ... to the “acceptable establishment,” and to false religious concepts. Part of that “stay blinded” formula goes like this: “Above all, be married, a good parent, a reasonable church goer, buy a house ... have a good line of credit, be socially committed, and graciously accept death with the hope that ‘through His shed blood,’ or some other worthless religious precept, you will go to Heaven after your death.”

Any little group that isn’t naively, totally submissive to their social rules, or begins to see through this “control mechanism,” or questions its rightness, is seen as subversive, radical, anti-social, a cult, treasonous—or “terrorists” (HG I, 10).

In order to save humankind from this oppressive, demonically programmed regime of the space aliens, the Kingdom of Heaven therefore sent a second away team in

⁴⁰ Here Heaven’s Gate explicitly allies itself with other persecuted radical cults, such as the Branch Davidians and the Solar Temple; see the message sent from the Heaven’s Gate Website, 20 September 1996, under the title “ARMAGEDDON—WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON? (From: rep@heavensgate.com to Newsgroups: alt.conspiracy): “Examples of how this misplaced judgment is forced upon religious zealots are seen in how the authorities treated the Weavers at Ruby Ridge, David Koresh and the Branch Davidians at Waco, and the actions presently being taken against Saddam Hussein and Iraq.”

the final days of this century, to help harvest those few human souls who remained uncorrupted. This second away team became incarnate in the bodies of “the Two,” Do and Ti, in order to lead the Heaven’s Gate followers back to the next Level.

Again an “away team” from the Level Above Human incarnated in the 1970s in the mature (adult) bodies that had been picked and prepped for this current mission. This time the “Admiral” (the Older Member, or “Father,” incarnate in a female vehicle) came with the “Captain” and his crew (HG I, 7; cf. Intro, iii, vii).

As bizarre and perhaps silly as much of the Heaven’s Gate theology might sound to most contemporary Americans, it was in many ways a teaching rather strangely well adapted to our own hugely pluralistic and eclectic late capitalist consumer culture. As Gustav Niebuhr suggests, their rejection of mainstream society and governmental institutions, and their turn to a more austere, puritanical lifestyle was highly appealing to the generation of the 1970s, who lived through the chaos of Vietnam, the Nixon administration, and the growing suspicion toward American government as a whole:

The message that Mr. Applewhite and Ms. Nettles preached was well suited to a nation traumatized by the loss of the war in Vietnam, the resignation of President Nixon and years of social upheaval and violence. They were both antiestablishment and puritanical, calling for total separation from society, simple living with shared resources and adherence to a moral code that eschewed drink, drugs and sex.⁴¹

Going further, however, we might say that Heaven’s Gate was even more uniquely suited to the generation of the 1990s—the era of global communications, hypertext, and the World Wide Web. This is very much a religion for the technological age, one whose members seemed to have felt more at home in the cool digital space of the cyber realm than in the messy ambiguities of the physical human body.

The Ascent Into Hyperspace: Heaven’s Gate as a Religion for the Technological Age

The Web is the new frontier. If there is going to be a new heaven on Earth it’s going to be there... Cyberspace is open to all with the minimal equipment required to access it. It’s God’s new New Kingdom where billions of dollars are at stake and millennium fever has taken hold.

William Henry, *The Keepers of Heaven’s Gate*⁴²

⁴¹ Niebuhr, “On the Furthest Fringes,” A18.

⁴² Henry, *The Keepers of Heaven’s Gate*, 88–9.

It is man with his planet Earth, with his territory, his body, who is now the satellite. Once transcendent, he has become exorbitant.

Jean Baudrillard, *La Transparence du Mal*⁴³

Perhaps the most striking fact about the Heaven's Gate phenomenon is that it was a distinctly technological religion, a spiritual teaching conceived in, by, and for the age of global communication technology. Whereas most religious sects today have learned how to make some use of the new computer technology, establishing web pages and using online communications, Heaven's Gate was one of the first to emerge as a true religion of and for the computer age.

First and most simply, the Net is an ideal means of mass proselytization and rapid conversion—a missionary device which operates instantly, globally, and anonymously. Second, and more interesting, is the fact that the Internet, more than perhaps any other conventional medium, fosters the process of religious syncretism and the blending of many different traditions drawn from radically different and seemingly contradictory sources. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Heaven's Gate's theology, with its remarkable fusion of Christian faith, antigovernment paranoia, UFO mythology, and popular television series. As one Internet critic rather cynically describes the Heaven's Gate technospirituality:

The young people of the Higher Source group spent their days crouching in front of computer screens, on the addictive ether of the Internet. The wording of their web site ... gave a clue to their antiseptic, orderly world, with its whiff of plastic wires and the hypnotic tapping of computer keyboards. "Higher Source is very much 'in tune' with the future direction of technology," was the group's metallic message to newcomers.⁴⁴

Not only did its members employ themselves as web page designers, and not only did they use the Internet as one of their primary means of proselytization, teaching, and converting new members; but more strikingly, they also *incorporated the discourse of computer technology into their religious system*. Their aim was nothing less than to "re-program" human selves that had been falsely programmed by modern society and government, to rewrite the software of the soul, and, ultimately, to ascend to an immaterial level of hyperspace beyond the mundane physical plane altogether. It is in this sense that Heaven's Gate is an ideal spirituality for the age of the simulation—a religion for an era in which the technologically produced world of the computer image has come to appear more real than reality itself.

⁴³ Baudrillard, *La Transparence du Mal*, 30.

⁴⁴ "Pick n' Mix Spirituality," posted on the Web site <<http://net1.netcentral.co.uk/steveb/cults/index.html>>.

Deprogramming and Reprogramming the Soul

The soul has its own “brain” or “hard drive” that accumulates only information of the Next Level.

“How and When Heaven’s Gate (the Door to the Next Level Above the Human) May be Entered” (HG I, 8)

The central metaphor that appears throughout the Heaven’s Gate teachings is a fundamentally technological one—that of “programming,” “computer chips,” and the “software” which has been implanted into each one of our human body “vehicles.” The divine beings inhabiting the Next Level, the Heaven’s Gate text tells us, periodically descend into human civilization in order to implant their special chips—that is, souls—into the “plants” or “biological vehicles” of human bodies. These chips or souls contain the possibilities for growth and spiritual development for each bodily vehicle (HG I, 8). However, the human body vehicles and their deposited chips are in turn subject to an ongoing process of programming by the social, political, and religious world around them. As the HG text puts it, “your ‘programming’... determines the limit of your acceptance or understanding” (HG I, 5–6); that is to say, the way that we have been programmed or conditioned by society, government, and religious institutions conditions the way we see the world, and also determines how open we will be to liberating new teachings like those of Heaven’s Gate.

However, when the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Heaven decide that it is time to send down a new “Harvester” to lead human beings back to the Next Level, they implant a special new chip into the bodies that will serve as the Harvesters’ physical vehicles. Two thousand years ago, they implanted such a chip in the body of Jesus Christ, and so too, in this generation, they have implanted chips into the bodily vehicles of Do and Ti:

Other crews from the Level Above Human preceded our arrival and “tagged”—placed a deposit “chip”—in each of the vehicles that we would incarnate into, when that instruction would be given. These “chips” set aside those bodies for us (HG I, 7).

The physical brain in each human vehicle thus serves as a kind of “hard drive” for the soul. This hard drive can be programmed either with the false and destructive software of the space aliens or with the pure and true software of the Next Level.⁴⁵ When this latter, true spiritual software is programmed into the brain through authentic religious

⁴⁵ “Just as the biological body is the container for the soul, the soul is the container for Mind (“Spirit”). Mind translates into the brain as information. Information is available to humans from only two sources—the mind of the adversarial space races—or the Mind of the Kingdom... The mind of the adversarial space races yields misinformation (promoting the behavior of this corrupt world). The Mind from the true Kingdom of God yields true information” (HG VI, 4).

teachings like those of Heaven's Gate, it tends to grow and expand, like a tiny "cyber-fetus." Ultimately, when it grows large enough it will displace and take over the normal human mind altogether—indeed, the normal human mind must then be "aborted" and "discarded" like a "deflated balloon" that has been popped and pushed aside by this new cyber fetus.

The soul has its own "brain" or "hard drive" that accumulates only information of the Next Level... The soul also becomes part of the new physical body of the new creature... Therefore, when a soul is a part of a new deposit, it has very little information and is as a very small Next Level "fetus." As it develops or grows in size, it necessitates the abortion of the human mind, which is in a container beside it... As the Next Level mind increases the human-mind container ... decreases until, if the Next Level mind makes it to "term," the human deflated balloon is discarded and the ... Next Level mind is all that fills the container... That soul with its Next Level mind has by then become a physical body in a new species (the Level Above Human) (HG I, 8).

In short, the process of entering, converting to, and progressing within the Heaven's Gate movement is very clearly described in terms of a deprogramming and reprogramming of the brain, a literal rewriting of the brain's software which ultimately results in the death of the old socialized self and the creation of a new spiritual self in its place. This demands that all ordinary "human" ways of thinking, acting, desiring, and feeling must be deconstructed, to render the soul pure and open to the influence of the Next Level. "Leaving behind this world includes: family, sensuality, selfish desires, your human mind, and even your human body if it be required of you—all mammalian ways, thinking, and behavior" (HG Intro, iii). Members of the group were forced to follow rather elaborate and strict rules regulating their every pattern of thought, aiming to eradicate all negative ways of thinking and to inculcate the true thought patterns of the Next Level. The "Major Offenses" thus included deceit, sensuality (permitting arousal in thought or action), and breaking any instruction; while the "Lesser Offenses" consisted of taking any action without a check partner, trusting one's own judgment or using one's own mind, responding defensively to classmates or teachers, criticizing, jumping ahead of teachers, picking or choosing certain tasks, having likes or dislikes, permitting lack of control over emotions or having inappropriate curiosity.⁴⁶ As Rio

⁴⁶ A list of the "17 Steps," the "3 Major Offenses," and the "31 Lesser Offenses" is given in HG II, 8–9. As Applewhite and Trusdale explained in an interview, "You overcome the need for receiving affection, giving affection, needing people... Your mind ... cannot really be open until all the fluids in your body contribute to the opening of your mind instead of being spent in sex or socializing or whatever your addictions are" (Steiger, *Inside Heaven's Gate*, 114). At least in some cases, this process of deprogramming the brain involved the actual taping of tuning forks onto the heads of the members, in an apparent effort to dispel all human thoughts. (Steven S. Simmons, "Who They Were," *People* [14 April 1997], 42).

DiAngelo put it in his interview with *Newsweek*, “You can’t be thinking like a human, you can’t be thinking are you going to have sex or you’ve got to shave or you have angry thoughts... You’ve got to be ready.”⁴⁷

Beyond the Human: Mastering and Transcending the Physical Vehicle

The student must complete this change to the point of abhorring human behavior before his soul can become a “match” with a biological body of the true Kingdom of God—for that new, genderless body is designed to function at a far more refined level.

“How and When Heaven’s Gate (the Door to the Next Level Above the Human) May be Entered” (HG VI, 4)

As soon as behavior is focused on certain operations, screens or terminals, the rest appears as some vast, useless body which has been abandoned and condemned. The real itself appears as a large futile body.

Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of the Decline*⁴⁸

The final stage in this process of deprogramming and reprogramming the self, it would seem, lies in a complete mastery, transcendence, and even radical transformation of the physical body itself. The journey to the Next Level cannot be accomplished in the ordinary physical vehicle, but rather, only by “separating and disconnecting” the soul-fetus from the material hardware of the body altogether:

The final act of metamorphosis or separation from the human kingdom is the “disconnect” or separation from the human physical container or body in order to be released from the human environment and enter ... the Next Level (HG I, 9).

This is not necessarily a painful or terrifying experience, however; indeed, leaving behind the body is merely “similar to putting it in a closet, like a suit of clothes that doesn’t need to be worn for a while” (HG Intro, iii). As former member Nick Cooke put it, “the word was given to depart from this world back to the mother ship. To move into bodies that had been prepared for them—bodies of a finer nature—androgynous and sexless. It’s an evolutionary step.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Rio DiAngelo, cited in *Newsweek* (14 April 1997), 34.

⁴⁸ Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of the Decline*, 18.

⁴⁹ Nick Cooke, quoted in Steiger, *Inside Heaven’s Gate*, xxxii. “They have overcome their human way. They are no longer having babies, getting old and dying. They’ve taken their birth into a body that can transport them into an atmosphere that has no decay” (Applewhite and Trusdale, interviewed in Steiger, *Inside Heaven’s Gate*, 128).

They will have nothing to fear, nor will they know DEATH—even if they lose their human body. That belief will one day find them a member in the Level Above Human in a physical body belonging to ... the Evolutionary Level Above Human—leaving behind this perishable world for one that is everlasting and non-corruptible (HG VI, 4).

The most difficult impediment in this struggle to master and transcend the body, however, is the sexual impulse. It is our sexual desires above all which, for Applewhite, bind us to this physical vehicle of the body and keep us under the deluded control of the space aliens. Sensuality “is the strongest addiction there is. It doesn’t matter if it’s male-female, female-female, male to male, female to dog. You think about it and it changes your vibration.”⁵⁰ It was precisely in order to conquer the addictive power of sexuality (and perhaps his own homosexual impulses) once and for all that Do had himself castrated; some of his male disciples would also follow suit, going down to Mexico to have the operation done. As DiAngelo commented on the movement’s preoccupation with castration, “You have to work against [sexual urges], and the thing that’s doing that is the equipment you’re given.”⁵¹

In this sense, the Heaven’s Gate movement represents a particularly acute example of a much larger cultural phenomenon of the late capitalist, hyper-technological cyber era: namely, the conflict between technology and the physical body, the struggle between the ideal of a pure, immutable, incorruptible digital world and the hard reality of the mortal, corruptible human body in this material world. As Arthur Kroker suggests, this is much of the drive behind our generation’s increasing desire to ascend into hyperspace, to leave the suffering, mortal body behind and enter a purely virtual realm. It is the digital generation’s version of the age-old struggle between the material and the immaterial, between the corruptible flesh and the desire to transcend the body in an incorruptible other-world:

Not something new, digital reality continues anew a very ancient story: the struggle between two irreconcilable elements in the human drama—the unwanted reality of the decay of the flesh and the long-dreamed promised land of escape from body organic of the pre technological body. Between the necessity of bodily corruption and existing human flesh, that’s the utopia and futility of digital reality.⁵²

Thus we dream of a new virtual identity for ourselves—“a World Wide Web self” with a new “hardware body electronically equipped for fast travel across the World

⁵⁰ Rio DiAngelo, quoted in *Newsweek* (14 April 1997), 32.

⁵¹ *Newsweek* (14 April 1997), 30.

⁵² Kroker, *Hacking the Future*, 33. This is what Baudrillard calls the search for “a beyond of castration which is consummated ... in a perfectly closed system. It is this which includes a fascination like that for a perfectly smooth body, without orifices, doubled and redoubled by a mirror” (Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* [St. Louis: Telos, 1981], 96).

Wide Web: neuroskin URL exoskeleton, with HTML beacons coded into its processing sensor.”⁵³ The ironic truth, however, is that the more we expand our technological capability and the more we immerse ourselves in these digital worlds, the closer we come to the danger of losing the body amidst the bewildering proliferation of technological bodies. As Sam Gill recently warned, “The border separating animals (humans) and machines (computers) has been transgressed... We are the cyborg as a creature in a postgender world.” And we are perhaps ever more in danger of losing the “org” side of our “cyborg” selves.⁵⁴ Other authors, expanding upon the darkest fears raised by Baudrillard’s work, state the problem in even more starkly pessimistic terms: “the body has become a mere extension of network television.”⁵⁵ As Chris Rojek suggests, we must now confront the prospect of the body being left behind by the telecommunications revolution:

Telecommunications have clearly surpassed the natural senses of the body. Telecommunications are more efficient in zooming in on data, magnifying objects and revealing what lies beneath surface appearance. The body has already become a terminal in the communication networks which make contemporary sociability possible.⁵⁶

The world of the Internet, above all, seems to offer a kind of vehicle “beyond the Human,” a means of transcending the mundane mortal world and the limitations of the fragile physical body. Surfing the Net, we can instantly travel across the planet, to visit Web sites, gather data, view images, interact with individuals from every point of the globe, leaving behind our limited bodily selves and the narrow confines of the material world. In cyberspace, the very conceptual boundaries of physical time and space dissolve as we travel at light speed through millennia of history and culture at the click of a mouse:

The screen becomes a hyperreal vehicle for traveling across a simulated world... The computer ... functions as the last vehicle, one which threatens to resolve all topographical concerns. Motion, speed and travel lose their real meanings, while gaining power as technological simulations.

The technology that aims at containing distance creates a virtual world which destroys the possibility of distance. In this vertiginous moment of

⁵³ Kroker, *Hacking the Future*, 41.

⁵⁴ Gill, “Chips from a Cyborg Workshop” (<<http://www.colorado.edu/ReligiousStudies/TheStrip/Features/chips/induction.html>>); see Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁵⁵ Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner, eds., *Forget Baudrillard?* (London: Routledge, 1993), xiv.

⁵⁶ Rojek, “Baudrillard and Politics,” in *Forget Baudrillard?*, eds. Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), 113.

physical stasis and virtual travel, the Voyeur-Voyager experiences an immediacy which dissolves space and time.⁵⁷

In Heaven's Gate, I would argue, the ancient conflict between the spirit and the flesh, the transcendent otherworld and the harsh realities of the corruptible physical world, is combined with the central conflict of our own technological generation. The spiritual combat between soul and flesh has now melded with the postmodern combat between the immutable, superhuman, hyperreal world of technology and the frail, fallible world of the body.

Spirituality for the Age of Simulation

Reality itself founders in hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real ... through another reproductive medium... The real is volatilized, becoming an allegory of death.

Jean Baudrillard⁵⁸

It is in precisely this sense that Heaven's Gate appears to be an ideal religion for the age of the "simulation." According to Baudrillard's postMarxist narrative, we have now entered a radical new stage of technology and the power of reproduction: the stage of the simulation. In the earlier eras of the simple copy or the mechanical reproduction, the distinction between original and copy, the real and the imaginary, still held true. In our own generation of digital simulation, however, this distinction begins to falter and finally collapses altogether, as we are now capable of producing infinite simulated reproductions that are not only indistinguishable from the now long lost original, but are in many cases more intense, more perfect, digitally enhanced supra-real re-creations. We thus enter a new world of the hyperreal. Real and imaginary, original and reproduction, collapse into one another, and the entire system implodes into a vast circulation of signs—simulated images without any referent in a real, external world, but simply referring endlessly to one another in a vast play of seductive yet meaningless significations: "The hyperreal ... manages to efface even this contradiction between the real and the Imaginary. Unreality no longer resides in the dream or fantasy ... but in the *real's hallucinatory resemblance to itself* reality itself is hyperrealistic... We already live out the aesthetic hallucination of reality."⁵⁹ As K. H. Chen summarizes,

⁵⁷ Mark Nunes, "Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality and Postmodernity," *Style* 29 (1995): 314–27. As Arthur Kroker comments, "A fatal metastasis ... in which the world is irradiated by a viral positivity—a hyper-realism of simulation for fractal subjects—that can achieve such a frenzied point of acceleration that it finally reaches escape velocity, leaving the modernist world of material culture behind as pure epiphenomenal implosion in the violent semiurgy of the rationalist eschatology" (Arthur Kroker, *The Possessed Individual: Technology and the French Postmodern* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 57).

⁵⁸ Mark Poster, ed., *Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 145.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 145–46.

Our senses of the world, of the real, have largely been redefined by the explosion of mass media proportion; media practices have rearranged our senses of space and time. What is real is no longer our direct contact with the world but what we are given on the TV screen: TV is the world... [W]e enter into a new age of simulation.⁶⁰

A remarkable fusion of “Star Trek” and *Star Wars*, UFO mythology and Christian fundamentalism, Heaven’s Gate is a striking example of simulational culture in its most extreme form. Comprised of a bewildering pastiche of media images and fragments of popular culture, the Heaven’s Gate world was essentially made up of simulations in Baudrillard’s sense—technologically produced images that appear hyperreal, more real, more meaningful, more true than the objective world itself. As one member put it, the present world is comparable to the “Star Trek” holodeck or the technologically generated, virtual reality simulation preparing them to enter the real world of the spaceship taking them to the Next Level.⁶¹

Fatal Strategies: Digital Dreams for the End of the World⁶²

Many say they live only for the “Harvest Time”—the “Last Days”—the “Second Coming.” These have all arrived!

“How and When Heaven’s Gate (the Door to the Next Level Above the Human)”

May be Entered” (HG VI, 4)

If the world is fatal, let us be more fatal than it. If it is indifferent. Let us be more indifferent. We must conquer the world ... through an indifference that is at least equal to the world.

Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*⁶³

If Heaven’s Gate could, in one sense, be described as an ideal religion for the age of simulation and technology in postmodern America, it is also a movement that reflects

⁶⁰ K. H. Chen, “Baudrillard’s Implosive Postmodernism,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 3 (1987), 71–88.

⁶¹ Thomas Nichols, quoted in *Time* (7 April 1997), 33. As another member, Dennis Johnson put it, “we’ve been training on a holodeck for roughly thirty minutes and now it’s time to stop... It’s time to put into practice what we’ve learned. So we take off the virtual reality helmet... We go back out of the holodeck, to reality, to be with the other members on the craft” (in Davis, *Techgnosis*, 247).

⁶² Kroker, *The Possessed Individual*, 62.

⁶³ Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* (Sydney: Power Institute, 1987), 101.

a profound ambivalence, even deep hostility toward late twentieth-century American society. Like many NRMs, as Peter Sacks comments, Heaven's Gate reflects the broader postmodern suspicion of all conventional structures of authority and a rejection of modern rationality itself. "The increasingly widespread tendency to view institutions such as central government in conspiratorial terms is a logical step along [the] spectrum of responses to the postmodern crisis of knowledge and authority"; and it has, as such, been a major factor in the rise of various antirational, anti-institutional NRMs, which utterly reject modern forms of authority and legitimation.⁶⁴ For Applewhite and his followers, not only this mortal physical body, but the entire material world, contemporary society, and the entire cycle of human history are rapidly approaching their ultimate end. Perverted and controlled by the space aliens or fallen angels, all contemporary social, economic, political, and even religious institutions are utterly corrupt, now spreading their demonic influence to every human mind born and reared within their pre-programmed social order:

The space aliens have very successfully, through their religions, confused the humans' concept of "God" or "Deity"... The Next Level abhors religions, for they bind humans to the human kingdom, using strong misinformation mixed with cosmic or universal consciousness of Creation, about which, in truth, they know nothing (HG I, 10–11).

Today's leaders in the "industrialized world," though claiming to be democratic, self-righteously dictate to the rest of the world their own ideas of what are acceptable practices and behavior—Money RULES! The monetary systems, through indebtedness, ownership, and insurance ... bind man to servitude. The powers behind the money have discovered man's most tempting addictions, and through advertisement, movies, television, and publications, feed these addictions with the excitement of sex, drugs ... and all manner of violence, to ensure their continued monetary power. Under the guise of "the social norm," this world also imposes its distorted religious values (HG VI, 4).

According to an e-mailing sent from *heavensgate.com* on September 20, 1996, Heaven's Gate is part of a widespread movement of those freethinking souls who are brave enough to go against the modern world, who reject the corrupt authority of government and religious institutions, and who are willing to kill and die in opposition to the "system." They are thus of one spirit with the Branch Davidians, the Unabomber, the Solar Temple, and even with the most extreme para-military groups and Muslim fundamentalist terrorists:

These who have CONNECTED MENTALLY are driven ... to go against the world—the systems, the socially and politically accepted "norms"—and are determined ... to go to "God" ... and to die in opposition to this world... [E]xamples ... cover a broad spectrum—from the Weavers at Ruby

⁶⁴ Peter Sacks, *Generation X Goes to College* (Open Court: Chicago, 1996), 124.

Ridge, the Branch Davidians at Waco, the Unabomber, the Order of the Solar Temple, Aum Shinri Kyo of Japan, the Freemen of Montana, to UFO believers, and others. Many ... take the form of the patriot/militia movements, Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, the many other Islamic movements, and countless groups that are simply rebelling from the system, the “norm,” and WANT TO GO TO GOD, OR LEAVE THIS CORRUPT WORLD, at any price.⁶⁵

When we read the highly pessimistic, even paranoid teachings of Heaven’s Gate, we cannot help but be reminded of the more pessimistic recent postmodern critics, such as Jameson, Baudrillard, and Umberto Eco. As postmodernism’s “high priest” and arch-cynic, Baudrillard in particular often sounds reminiscent of Applewhite in his searing critique of contemporary culture. The late capitalist system is, for Baudrillard, a culture thoroughly dominated by the seductive logic of the market and utterly saturated by an “empire of images,” a relentless flurry of advertisements churning in an endless, self-referential circle of consumption: “We have reached the point where consumption has grasped the whole of life.”⁶⁶

The modern consumer society is a system in which ... consumption is all important... Thanks to the 20th century revolutionization of consciousness—through mass communications, hi-tech media, the advertising industry, the empire of images throughout the global village—human beings now inhabit an artificial, hermetically sealed pleasure dome. Nothing is constant. Everything reflects everything else in a theater of dazzling simulations dominated by the proliferation of signs... Desire itself is manufactured and nothing any longer possesses any intrinsic value. Meaning is produced by endless symbolic exchanges within a dominant code, whose rhetoric is entirely self-referential; a sexy woman is used to sell a car; a car sells cigarettes, cigarettes sell machismo, machismo is used to sell jeans... Sex, youth, health, speed, style, power, money—all interpenetrate in the mesmerizing dream world of floating signifiers that typifies the ephemeral, destabilized vortex of late capitalism.⁶⁷

Contemporary Western society is now thoroughly dominated by what Baudrillard rather cryptically calls the logic of “the code”—the logic of digital media and the endless reproduction of information, which saturates the consumer with an infinite barrage of electronically generated images, signifiers without any signified object in the external world.

⁶⁵ “ARMAGEDDON—WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?” From: <rep@heavensgate.com>toNewsgroups: alt.conspiracy (20 September 1996).

⁶⁶ Poster, *Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, 33.

⁶⁷ Roy Porter, “Baudrillard: History, Hysteria and Consumption,” in *Forget Baudrillard?*, 1–2.

The strange world of the Internet would seem to represent one of the most striking realizations of Baudrillard's world of simulations and the logic of the digital code. As Mark Nunes suggests, the Internet embodies many of Baudrillard's darkest fears about the dissolution between reality and imagination, as the hyperreal images of cyberspace appear to us ever more seductive and persuasive than reality itself:

This figuration of Internet as a kind of cybernetic terrain works to undermine the symbolic distance between the metaphoric and the real. It abandons the real for the hyperreal by representing an increasingly real simulation of a comprehensive world. This heading points the way toward ... hypertelia, that fated catastrophe when the sophistication of a model outdoes the reality it attempts to comprehend.⁶⁸

Amidst this ever-expanding, ever more bewildering maelstrom of images and technological reproductions, many critics fear that we are in danger of losing our very selves—of reducing the human self to yet another technologically generated simulation, fed by advertisements, conceived merely to participate in the endless, self-referential, and meaningless game of consumption. As Baudrillard describes it, this dissolution also has a terrifying aspect, the schizophrenic paranoia of a self that has collapsed into a disjointed flurry of disconnected signs: “Not hysteria any longer with its theatrical staging of the autonomous subject and certainly not paranoia ... but schizophrenia and terror.”⁶⁹

Ultimately, as some of the more dramatic of recent techno-critics warn, we may have already entered not only the terminal stages of the human subject, but even a kind of technological apocalypse of the known world itself. As Arthur Kroker argues, taking some of Baudrillard's insights to the furthest extreme, we are so thoroughly dominated by the “empire of technology” that we face a complete implosion of reality itself amidst the relentless logic of simulations. The real world itself has already been dissolved in a technological Armageddon in which computer generated simulations and televised media images have already replaced the now long lost “solid world of external objects.”

What results is an eschatology of technological culture... The simulacrum takes the place of virtual reality... In the simulacrum, reality itself disappears ... and what takes its place is a mediascape infected by the logic of hyperreality. A society of the hyper-spectacle with such intensity that the commodity form finally breaks free of its grounding in materiality, becoming a sign-form in a circulating machinery of immaterial desires. Cold

⁶⁸ Nunes, “Baudrillard in Cyberspace,” 314–27.

⁶⁹ Kroker, *The Possessed Individual*, 71; cf. Andrea Slane, “Romancing the System: Women, Narrative Film and the Sexuality of Computers” in *Processed Lives*, 77.

seduction ... for a hallucinatory culture of special effects personalities moving at warp speed to nowhere.⁷⁰

It is much this same kind of paranoia, pessimism, and apocalyptic terror, I would argue, that was at work within Heaven's Gate. Not unlike Baudrillard, Kroker, and the more nihilistic of the postmodern prophets, Applewhite and his disciples saw modern society as a dark empire dominated by a hidden, insidious code, ruled by the inexorable forces of consumer capitalism, and headed at light speed toward its own selfconsuming apocalypse.

Symbolic Exchange and Death

There's nothing left for us here. We couldn't be happier.

Marshall Herff Applewhite on his video-recorded farewell message

In societies reduced to blur and glut, terror is the only meaningful act. There's too much of everything, more things and messages and meanings than we can use in ten thousand lifetimes. Inertia-hysteria. Is history possible? ... Who do we take seriously? Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. Everything else is absorbed. The artist is absorbed, the madman is absorbed and processed... Give him a dollar, put him in a TV commercial. Only the terrorist stands outside. The culture hasn't figured out how to assimilate him.

Don DeLillo, *Mao II*⁷¹

If Applewhite and Baudrillard share similarly pessimistic visions of contemporary Western consumer culture, it would seem that they also offered equally bleak and fatalistic solutions to the problem. For Heaven's Gate, modern society, with all its social, political, and even religious institutions, is now thoroughly controlled by the Luciferian forces of the space aliens: our minds have now been entirely programmed by a materialist, selfish, consumer logic, in which money rules and the rich and powerful exploit the weak and helpless. It is therefore now time to leave this world and ascend to the pure, pristine, incorruptible Next Level; and this ascent can only take place through the act of death—by abandoning this fragile vehicle of the physical body, leaving behind the corrupt material world altogether (see HG I and VI).

⁷⁰ Kroker, *The Possessed Individual*, 64–5. "An empire of technology ... which can glimmer so brilliantly because like a massive star at the moment of its death, it begins to expel enormous amounts of matter as a prelude to its demise. A violent expulsion of the imagereservoir, a fantastic acceleration of signs of consumption, a frenzied drive towards the technical perfectibility of sound, images, movement ... a violent implosion of society that has already taken place" (p. 72).

⁷¹ DeLillo, *Mao II* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 157.

Here the Heaven's Gate rhetoric sounds eerily like that of some of postmodernism's most fatalistic of prophets—perhaps the most famous of which is Baudrillard in his early, most nihilistic writings such as *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and *Fatal Strategies*. For the early Baudrillard, contemporary mass culture is so thoroughly dominated by the logic of the code—through the media, through computer technology, through the publicity industry and the world of TV politics—that no political or social revolution is possible. Any attempt at revolution would simply feed back into the circle of simulations, becoming yet another televised image or media sound bite, yet another sign to be consumed by its viewing audience. In a televised world in which image and style are everything, in which both image and style are instantly manufactured and manipulated through media technology, political action begins to appear at best futile, at worst self-defeating or absurd: “individuals are no longer citizens ... nor proletarians anticipating the onset of communism. They are consumers, and hence the prey of objects as defined by the code.”⁷²

The individual has been sucked into the negative electrical mass of the media age... Baudrillard has ruled out opposition to the system, at least at the level of public debate and formal politics.⁷³

Given this seemingly bleak and hopeless situation, Baudrillard can suggest only the most radical, violent, and shocking of solutions. In his early work, he offers us only the solution of death itself as a way out of the circle of simulations. In his search for some “escape from an allabsorbing system with no fixed determinations, where anything can be anything else, a society ... dominated by the digital logic of the code,” Baudrillard gives us the rather terrifying answer that “only death escapes the code, only death is an act without equivalent return.”⁷⁴

You can't fight the code with political economy or revolution. All these outdated weapons (including those we find in ... the ethics and metaphysics of man and nature ...) are neutralized by a high order general system... Perhaps death and death alone ... belongs to a higher order than the code... Death must be played against death: a radical tautology that makes the

⁷² Poster, *Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, 7.

⁷³ Turner, “Baudrillard for Sociologists,” in *Forget Baudrillard?*, eds. C. Rojek and B. S. Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), 83. As Chris Rojek comments, “The greater sophistication and saturation of the global electronic media ... [mean that] it is no longer a question of the masses being prone to fascist manipulation... Rather the space for political collective political action had disappeared” (“Baudrillard and Politics,” in the same volume, 113). See also Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 5.

⁷⁴ Poster, *Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, 5. On Baudrillard's “nihilism” and terrorism, see his essay “On Nihilism”: “If being a nihilist is to take, to the unendurable limit of the hegemonic system, this radical act of violence, this challenge which the system is summoned to respond to by its own death, then I am a terrorist and a nihilist... Theoretical violence, not truth, is the sole expedient remaining to us” (“On Nihilism,” *On the Beach* 6 [1984]: 39).

system's own logic the ultimate weapon. The only strategy against the hyperrealist system is some sort of pataphysics, a science of imaginary solutions; that is, a science fiction of the system's reversal against itself at the extreme limit of simulation, a reversible simulation in a hyperlogic of death and destruction... *Ex-terminate* every term, abolish value in the term's revolution against itself: that is the only symbolic violence triumphant over the violence of the code.⁷⁵

Such is Baudrillard's solution: an act of violence, terrorism, and selfdestruction so profound that it would bring about an equal and reciprocal self-destruction in the system itself: "to defy the system with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death... The system turns on itself, as a scorpion does when encircled by the challenge of death... The system must itself commit suicide in response to the multiplied challenge of death and suicide."⁷⁶

Much the same kind of fatal strategy was at work in the Heaven's Gate suicides. Facing a society they saw as thoroughly controlled by an insidious hidden code, dominated by the logic of consumer capitalism and ruled by a seemingly alien political system, they saw their only response to be one of self-destruction—a suicide that would, perhaps, counteract the self-destructive, suicidal impulse of late millennial Western culture, and so lead them beyond this world altogether, to the freedom and transcendence of the Next Level.

Conclusions: Religion Beyond Meaning and Readability—The Challenge of Religious Studies in the Age of Cyberspace

This is the reason for the journey into hyperreality, in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between the game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of "fullness" of *horror vacui*.

Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 3–5. "We will not destroy the system by a direct, dialectical revolution of the economic or political infrastructure. Everything produced by contradiction ... will only feed back into the machine and give it impetus, following a circular distortion similar to a Moebius strip. We will never defeat it by following its own logic of energy, calculation, reason and revolution... We must therefore displace everything into the sphere of the symbolic, where challenge, reversal and overbidding are the law, so that we can respond to death only by an equal and superior death" (p. 36).

⁷⁶ Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 37.

⁷⁷ Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 8.

Despite its seemingly bizarre, incomprehensible, in many ways even morbidly silly character, the Heaven's Gate phenomenon poses several profound challenges to the contemporary historian of religions. First and most basic is the challenge of the *irrational* in religion—the threat of a religious event so strange and shocking that it appears to shatter our cherished Enlightenment paradigms of rationality and intelligibility. Quite in contrast to Jonathan Z. Smith's neo-Enlightenment commitment to intelligibility, the contemporary historian of religions has to confront a post-industrial, late capitalist era of hyperreality, a proliferation of simulations, technologically manufactured images, and media signs seemingly without referent in the real world. Rather than a world of coherent belief systems, which can always be rendered intelligible through the aid of disciplined reason, we now face a world of “cultural disorder, the overwhelming flood of signs and images which is pushing us beyond the social,” a world not of rational unities but rather of “pastiche, eclectic mixing of codes, bizarre juxtapositions and unchained signifiers which defy meaning and readability.”⁷⁸

Against Smith's highly intellectual and utilitarian view of human nature, I would argue that such a rationalist Enlightenment approach to religion is not only inadequate but in many cases quite clearly damaging and destructive. As Wendy Doniger has recently pointed out, Smith's highly rationalistic and utilitarian Enlightenment model could well be accused of a kind of neo-colonialism or intellectual imperialism, perhaps even repeating many of the same errors of the European Enlightenment and the imperialist colonization of the world. For it bears the danger of an eradication of all otherness, a reduction of all cultures, all foreign cultural traditions to our own (post-Enlightenment Western) level of secularism, rationalism, and empiricism—to “what we see in Europe everyday,” as Smith puts it.⁷⁹ As Michel Foucault and others have shown, the European Enlightenment may well have brought with it the general triumph of reason and the creation of a body of human sciences aimed at the rational understanding of mankind: yet it also brought with it the exclusion, or more accurately, the “confinement” and institutionalization of all that was dubbed the irrational, the mad, all that could not be comprehended in the orderly categories of Enlightenment Humanism.⁸⁰ So too, I would argue, phenomena such as Heaven's Gate can never be adequately understood as long as we cling to the Enlightenment ideals of rationality and intelligibility.

Second and more profoundly, however, Heaven's Gate poses a central challenge to all of us in contemporary late capitalist society as we are immersed more and more in

⁷⁸ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, 20.

⁷⁹ “The social sciences, of which history is one, were utilized as a defense against the powerful civilizations colonizing peoples emerging into Western consciousness. To insist on historical context is to deny difference, namely to remain unmoved and in control” (Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1998], 52).

⁸⁰ See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Random House, 1965); *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970); and Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 166ff.

the bewildering new world of hyperspace, global communications, and the expanding network of technological simulations. How do we find meaning, value, or simply a reason to continue living in a world that seems utterly dominated by the logic of the marketplace, the commodity, and the simulated desires of media advertising? Is the only way out of the endless circle of consumption this most extreme act of death—be it mass suicide (as in Heaven’s Gate) or Baudrillard’s acts of terrorism? As Mark Poster and others have argued, Baudrillard’s early solution of death as the only way out of the vicious circle of media simulations in the postmodern world is, to say the least, rather pathetic and hopelessly pessimistic.⁸¹ Indeed, if we take Baudrillard’s critique of late capitalist culture seriously, if we accept his pronouncement regarding the domination of the code of technology, media, and consumerism, it would seem to render any kind of political action self-defeating and absurdly redundant.

Thus, perhaps the most important reason to take seriously and to grapple with a group as disturbing as Heaven’s Gate is precisely to seek alternative strategies for dealing with this seeming “empire of technology.” If we are to find other, more productive ways out of the circle of consumption, other means of fighting the code of the late capitalist world order, we must first grapple with these more extreme reactions such as Heaven’s Gate. In contrast to Baudrillard’s morbid fatalism, I would suggest we follow the lead of authors such as Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert, who point to the subversive and dissident potential inherent in all technology: for the new cyber technologies open both new possibilities for exploitation and new potentials for freedom and resistance. However, the sheer quantitative mass of information and the staggering barrage of imagery with which we are bombarded today demands even more acute critical skills in the scrutinization, analysis, and questioning of this information—what Eco calls a “*guerrilla strategy*,”⁸² placing us squarely in front of each TV screen and each computer terminal, asking the critical questions: Where does this information come from? Who is conveying it? Of what are they trying to persuade me? What are they trying to sell me? To what are they attempting to convert me?

It is in precisely this sense—as the greatest challenge to our skills as critical thinkers and educators in the art of critical thinking within the academy—that these hi-tech religions on the furthest fringes of cyberspace demand the most serious attention from contemporary historians of religions.

⁸¹ Poster, *Baudrillard: Selected writings*, 7. On this point see also Mike Gane, *Baudrillard: Fatal and Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1995), 207. As Douglas Kellner comments, “the implosion of meaning in the media; the implosion of the social in the mass; the implosion of the mass in a black hole of nihilism and meaninglessness—such is Baudrillard’s postmodern vision... Baudrillard’s nihilism is without joy, without energy, without hope for a better future” (“Introduction: Jean Baudrillard in the fin-de Millennium,” in *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Douglas Kellner [Oxford: Blackwell, 1994], 12).

⁸² Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 8ff.

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