

University of Wisconsin, Madison
English 559: Topics in Cultural Theory

Psychedelic Imaginaries

Professor **Ramzi Fawaz**
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Course Meeting Time:
M 2:30-5:00 PM
Animal Science 209

Office Hours:
M 10 AM-Noon
on Zoom:

[https://
uwmadison.zoom.us
/j/97693108205](https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/97693108205)



Course Description: Today’s media landscape explodes with infinitely branching multiverses, stunning animated dreamscapes, hyper-saturated hallucinations, and mind-bending fantasy worlds. Superheroes jump between multiple dimensions while switching costumes, identities, and powers. Scientists enter alien environments and transform into trees. Laundromat owners meet countless versions of themselves across time and space. And space travelers ingest hallucinogenic substances to navigate the cosmos. How do we make sense of these dazzling, surreal, and sometimes terrifying images of life turned inside out? And how do we explain our popular craving for such psychedelic flights of the imagination?

This advanced seminar will explore recent US-American popular culture that grapples with psychedelic experience. Psychedelics, like LSD (or “acid”) and psilocybin (or “magic mushrooms”), are a class of drugs, which create mind-altering and consciousness-expanding effects. The signal feature of psychedelics is their ability to stimulate a radical tuning up of the senses, which is experienced as a hallucinogenic state but lived differently by each person. In the 1960s, US-American countercultural youth turned on to psychedelics as a way to access a broader range of human perceptual capabilities. Many also claimed that psychedelic experience expanded their understanding of categories like race, gender, sexuality and other forms of human difference by giving them a cosmic sense of interconnection with planetary life. Today, medical researchers are studying psychedelics as an effective treatment for a numerous mental health crises like depression, anxiety, addiction, and trauma, thereby inaugurating what many consider a new psychedelic renaissance. In this class, we will ask what role art and culture can play in harnessing the best aspects of psychedelic experience in aesthetic or creative form. This includes studying how hallucinatory, kaleidoscopic, and viscerally intense literature, film, television and visual culture can shake us out of habituated ways of thinking, broaden how we grasp human diversity, and provide ways of better responding to the large-scale catastrophes of our time.

In addition to reading about the history, aesthetics, and cultural politics of psychedelics in the US context, we will watch the following films: *Barbarella* (Vadim, 1968), *Sun Ra: Space is the Place* (Coney, 1974), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015), *Spider-Man: Into and Across The Spider-Verse* (Persichetti et. al., 2018, 2023), *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* (Daniels, 2022) and *Dune: Part 2* (Villeneuve, 2024); view episodes of the streaming television series *Undone* (2019), *Lovecraft Country* (2020), *Midnight Gospel* (2020) and *Scavenger’s Reign* (2023); and read the following literature: Jenny Slate’s *Little Weirds* (2019) and books 1 and 3 of Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy: Area X*.

What are we learning?

This advanced seminar offers students from any discipline or educational background an in-depth look at a specific aspect of the US culture, the impact of psychedelic experience on late twentieth century American art, literature, popular culture and politics. By the end of this term, students will have gained:

- 1) a strong understanding of the historical significance of psychedelic drugs to the social, political, and artistic life of US-Americans since the 1960s.
- 2) a better grasp on how psychedelics have been used as a means to reinvent, disorganize, or altogether dissolve seemingly fixed categories of racial, gender, and sexual difference and identity. At the same time, an honest assessment of the ways that contemporary

psychedelic drug use by white US-Americans has often erased, negated, or appropriated the experiences of Mexican, Native American, and South American indigenous cultures, which have used these substances for spiritual practices dating back centuries.

- 3) significant knowledge about how the neurochemical effects of psychedelic drugs, including their ability to increase connections across various parts of the brain, can influence or transform how we think about the study of culture.
- 4) a highly refined capacity to register, articulate, and analyze one's own visceral or affective experiences of art, literature and culture. This includes developing a wider vocabulary to talk about how one is impacted or transformed by encounters with aesthetic or creative life.
- 5) and an expanded imagination about how the study of literature and culture can have a meaningful relationship to other dimensions of human lived experience. This includes the ability to hone our perceptual awareness, cultivate ethical values, enrich our spiritual life, improve our mental wellbeing, and help us conceive of other perspectives on the world.

Disclaimer: This class does not in any way encourage, support, or condone the actual taking of psychedelic drugs, which remain illegal substances outside of therapeutic settings.

Rather, we are considering how psychedelic experience, as an intensified sensory phenomenon, can provide a potent framework for understanding the lived, material influence that art and culture can have on our relationship to the world. At the same time, however, we will honor the fact that the taking of psychedelic drugs in countless historical time periods, geographical contexts, and interpersonal settings throughout human history have had meaningful, life-transformative effects on people from all walks of life.

What are we reading?

The text below is required. It is available for purchase at Mystery to Me Bookstore (1863 Monroe Street) or online. I recommend Bookshop.org, BetterWorldBooks, Powell's Bookstore or other independent online retailers that support local booksellers. All other readings will be available in a course packet to be purchased at the university copy center. You must bring copies of readings to class each session. Most of our course films will be streamed online through Canvas; however, a number of our viewing assignments are only available on various streaming services like Netflix, Max, and Amazon Prime Video. Due to restrictive streaming rights, many of these programs are not available through the university but must be accessed through your existing subscriptions or individually purchased for viewing. I have listed the costs for either purchasing these programs to view or getting a short-term subscription to these streaming services below.

- Jeff VanderMeer, *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014)

Course media

- *The Midnight Gospel* Episode 10, "The Mouse of Silver": Available with Netflix subscription (starting at 6.99 a month) or on Daily Motion: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8iza2y> (but this format has many advertisements in it, which reduces the quality of the viewing experience).

- *Lovecraft Country* Episode 9, “I Am”: Available with Max subscription (starting at 9.99 a month).
- *Undone*: Available with Amazon Prime Video subscription (starting at 8.99 a month)
- *Scavenger’s Reign*: Available with Netflix Subscription
- *My Octopus Teacher*: Available with Netflix subscription

This is a reading and viewing intensive, advanced cultural studies seminar. This means you will need to manage your time well, plan ahead for each week of reading and viewing, and commit significant time to prepare for our discussions. I have intentionally reduced the amount of writing we will complete in the class to focus on reading comprehension and interactive group activities to help you integrate what we are learning. Officially speaking: the credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit), which include regularly scheduled meeting times, reading, writing, and other student work as described in the syllabus. **That is roughly ten hours of work a week.** If you are putting in this kind of time and still struggling to keep up with the course readings, we will thoughtfully trim readings as we go along. At all times, the syllabus may be subject to change at my discretion as an instructor.

What do we have to do?

In addition to our weekly readings and screenings, this course has four major assignments, including a short reflection paper, a weekly integration practice, a mid-term exam, and a creative final. The last three assignments will be completed with a group. While many people tend to dislike group work, it is extremely rewarding and beneficial to your mental health to develop a long-term intellectual dialogue with fellow students, receive mutual support, and build new friendships. At the beginning of the term, I will place you into randomized groups of 3-4 members. You will work with this team for the entire semester, gaining knowledge of each other’s strengths, negotiating collective weekly meetings, and providing one another feedback. I will also have policies in place to ensure all members of a group are pulling their weight.

- 1) **Short reflection paper—10%:** in the first two weeks of class, I will ask you to engage in a high-intensity activity for a minimum of thirty minutes, and write a short 3-page reflection paper about your experience. This might include take a long run or bike-ride, engaging in a competitive sport, listening to a techno music mix while wearing an eye-mask, sitting in a sensory deprivation tank, doing indoor rock climbing etc. Whatever activity you choose must be safe for your body, but should mobilize or stimulate your senses in a heightened way. The reflection paper will ask you to describe this experience in depth and analyze some of its effects on how you view or interpret sensory data.
- 2) **Weekly Emotional Regulation and Integration Practice:** at the start of the semester, I will assign people to groups of 3-4 members. You will meet with this group every week to participate in an emotional regulation practice and integrate the lessons you’re learning from that week’s readings. In the process you will form a small intellectual community that will help keep you motivated throughout the term. Psychedelic experiences tends to induce high-intensity explosions of emotion and sensation in the body, which must be fully integrated in one’s consciousness after the experience in order for it to have long-term mental health benefits. Similarly, the readings and viewings we engage will activate

your senses and emotionally impact you in exciting but unpredictable ways. The point of having weekly meetings with your groups is to acknowledge, respond to and fully assimilate or absorb your reactions, ideas, feelings, and thoughts about course materials in a safe and encouraging setting. I will offer a number of concrete instructions on different kinds of emotional regulation practices at the start of the semester, but these might include: taking a long walk near the lake; taking a yoga class; meditating for 15-20 minutes together; taking a swim; going on a run or playing a sport; listening to peaceful music or nature sounds together quietly; drawing in your notebooks; or engaging in deep breathing exercises. I will encourage you to try different regulation and integration practices throughout the semester and you will be asked to document your weekly meetings in a group journal.

- 3) **Mid-term Integration—20%:** halfway through the term, I will distribute a mid-term exam, which is intended to help you recall and deploy the central ideas of our course materials so far. You will have a week to look over this exam with your group, but rather than “take” the exam like a traditional test, we will all answer the questions together in a group dialogue during our week 9 session. In this way, the midterm will actually end up functioning as a symbolic practice of collective psychedelic integration. At the end of the discussion, I will show a clip from a movie and we will all analyze it together using the ideas we’ve learned from the seminar so far.
- 4) **Final Integration Practice—20%:** at the end of the semester, you will be asked to invent an additional week of course content and conceive a unique psychedelic integration practice based on your group’s semester-long weekly meetings.

The remaining 40% of your grade rests on your dedicated engagement in our class discussion. This is, without a doubt, where most of the magic happens in a seminar. The heft of this percentage is intended to stress how important it is for you to bring your A-game every week.

Attendance Policy: Attendance and participation at every class session is mandatory. That means not only showing up, but being awake, attentive, and actively engaged in our meetings. Most importantly, this includes coming to class having completed that day’s reading (and viewing) assignments, taken careful notes on all these items, and prepared to engage in dialogue about them. Throughout our class, I will offer substantive advice on best reading practices, how to manage your time appropriately to complete all the assignments, and how to enjoy the process. I will grant each student one excused absence for any reason; all other unexcused absences will incur the 5% participation grade deduction listed above.

Statement on AI and ChatGPT: The use of AI for any aspect of this course is prohibited. Psychedelic experience is fundamentally grounded in a sustained engagement with one’s own consciousness, delving deep into our thoughts, feelings, and worldviews to illuminate new and surprising aspects of ourselves to the world. While AI can be a useful technology for a vast range of logistical tasks, it is ultimately about asking computers to do our thinking for us. This does serious damage to our successful intellectual growth and emotional maturity, both of which are fundamentally based on sustained experiential learning. The central work of humanities education is to become the most refined, independent thinkers we possibly can be in order to

make informed decisions about how we wish to engage with the world around us. AI can never be a meaningful substitute for this crucial intellectual and imaginative labor. In other words— (and I say this with love): *grow up and think for yourselves* ☺

Covid-19 and other ailments: I am acutely aware that the conditions of the Covid pandemic, and general exposure to any number of cold and flu viruses throughout the year, might create obstacles to a consistent attendance record. Please do everything in your power to stay healthy, including washing your hands, getting a flu vaccine, getting a good night’s sleep, and resting when you feel under the weather. Always inform me of all unforeseeable absences, such as those caused by severe illness or a personal emergency, as soon as possible. I will do everything in my power to accommodate unexpected changes in anyone’s personal circumstances. Your health and wellbeing is paramount. If you feel serious symptoms of illness you should not attend class but rest and recover. If you are coughing or experiencing mild symptoms of illness but still want to attend class, wear a mask to protect your classmates from getting sick. With this in mind, however, remember that anytime you miss a class session, you lose the opportunity to participate in a completely original intellectual event that can never be reproduced or adequately conveyed after the fact. This loss is no small thing. Moreover, during a period of intense stress and isolation under the disorganizing conditions of the pandemic, our class sessions can provide an uplifting weekly anchor in the storm, connecting you to a larger intellectual and social community. You should make every effort to attend as consistently as possible. General tiredness, irritability or feeling “stressed out” are not legitimate excuses to miss class. Finally, while the university no longer requires the use of masks, I support anyone’s choice to use them for their personal health.

Email etiquette: Whenever you write an email to a professor, you should always begin with a formal salutation (such as Dear Professor or Dr. Fawaz) and sign off with an appropriate ending followed by your name (Sincerely, All Best, Have a wonderful day etc.). You should read all emails from your professors carefully to ensure you receive appropriate instructions and details about course assignments and schedules. **Finally, I cannot stress enough that you must reply to any email individually directed to you by a professor, and provide a specific explanation for any absences.** I will underscore again: a general statement that you are exhausted or overwhelmed will not suffice as an excuse for an absence.

Disability Support Services: At all times, this seminar will be open and accessible to students with disabilities. If you are a student enrolled with the McBurney Disability Resource Center or have a disability but have not used the MDRC, I encourage you to speak with me regarding your rights to accommodation. Please come see me about any questions you have regarding additional support for your success in this class. For more information, contact MDRC, 702 W. Johnson Street, at 608-263-2741. Or refer to <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>.

How do we talk to on another?

At its core, psychedelic experience is *intense*. It amplifies all of our sensory capabilities to an extreme degree; it expands our cognitive ability to make meaning out of the world’s countless objects, landscapes, textures, and relationships; and it stimulates the entire gamut of our emotions. This is also often what art does as it enters our awareness and affects, or impacts, us in unpredictable ways. Since we will not be taking any actual psychedelic substances in this class,

we will attempt to use art and culture to activate a similarly intense perceptual experience in each of us. The intensification of all aspects of life can be lived as something exceptionally joyful, uplifting, and transformative, but also terrifying, unsettling, and confusing. In the various cultural texts we read and view, you will encounter numerous types of intensified existence. This will include: a woman traveling at light speed through multiple dimensions encountering different versions of herself; a man watching his mother grow old, die, and be reborn over and over until the end of the universe; a daughter bending the laws of space and time to discover who murdered her long lost father; a diver becoming best friends with an ingenious octopus in the freezing depths of the Atlantic ocean; a warrior mother leading an army of feminist rebels against a monstrous death cult; and a Black messiah from another planet spreading the gospel of an “altered destiny” where white supremacy no longer exists. In the face of these extraordinary, enchanting, strange, scary, and moving stories, our job is to remain open to the spectrum of affects, emotions, and sensations that comprise the human experience, and to thoughtfully grapple with our complex, sometimes painful, but most often transformative responses to them.

With this in mind, I want you to be positively influenced by the conversations we have. This might mean being open to changing your mind, defending your position with substantial arguments, or simply listening and thinking through what others are saying about the works of art and literature we discuss. Sometimes it will just involve sitting with your discomfort. Under no circumstance, however, should anyone ever be personally attacked. We are all flawed and will make mistakes, including saying things that might seem off-base, accidentally mischaracterizing other people’s ideas or identities, or simply stating incorrect information. When this happens, others should generously chime in and offer thoughtful corrections, or an alternative perspective. The point is not to punish anyone or moralize at them but to collectively uplift our consciousness. In other words, we should practice being intellectual friends to one another. At the same time, I want to encourage you to take risks, get involved, and debate one another with care, even when it might feel easier to bow out of a controversial conversation. I guarantee the rewards of participating will be extraordinary. Below are best practices for class discussion:

1. All students must speak at least once in every class session.
2. Regardless of what we discuss, we will treat one another with respect, knowing that we may not always agree on other peoples’ conclusions, interpretations, or claims.
3. Anything you bring up in class is up for discussion and others are free to agree, disagree, or respond to what you have said in a respectful way.
4. **You must always begin by responding to what other students have said before you or inform the class that you intend to move the dialogue in a new direction.**
5. Practice making arguments, not stating opinions. This requires you to always have your reading materials with you in class and to be able to point to specific moments or features of a text to support your ideas.

(All reading for Week 1 should be completed before our first class session)

Week 1—Flinging Open the “Doors of Perception”

Monday, September 9

Michael Pollan, selections from *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Tells Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (2019)

Keith Williams, Osiris Sinuhé Gonzáles Romero, Michael Braunstein, and Suzanne Brant, “Indigenous Philosophies and the ‘Psychedelic Renaissance,’” *Anthropology of Consciousness*, July 30, 2022.

Nese Devenot, “Psychedelic Drugs,” in the MacMillan Interdisciplinary Handbook, *Gender: Nature* (2016)

Week 2—The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience Part I

Monday, September 16

Screening: **The Midnight Gospel**, Episode 8: “The Mouse of Silver” (Netflix)

Aldous Huxley, selections from *The Doors of Perception* (1954)

Jean Houston and Robert Masters, “Some Varieties of Psychedelic Experience,” and “Experiencing the Body and Body Image,” in *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience: The Classic Guide to the Effects of LSD on the Human Psyche* (1966)

Ido Hartogsohn, “Introduction” in *American Trip: Set, Setting, and the Psychedelic Experience in the Twentieth Century* (2020)

Robin Wall Kimmerer, selections from *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013)

Benny Shanon, “Moments of Insight, Healing, and Transformation: A Cognitive Phenomenological Analysis,” in *The Therapeutic Uses of Ayahuasca*, eds. Beatriz Labate and Clancy Cavnar (2014).

Week 3—The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience Part II

Monday, September 23

Screening: **Dune: Part II** (Villeneuve, 2024)

Ernesto Londaño, *Trippy: The Perils and Promises of Medicinal Psychedelics*, Preface, Chapter 4, 8, and 9.

Rachel Nuwer, selections from *I Feel Love: MDMA and the Quest for Connection in a Fractured World* (2023).

Arun Saldanha, “Ethnography as Thought” and “Psychedelic Whiteness,” in *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race* (2007)

Nese Devenot and Brian Pace, “Right-Wing Psychedelia: Case Studies in Cultural Plasticity and Political Pluripotency,” *Frontiers in Psychology* (December 2021)

Week 4—Acid Drag, or Remaking Self and Society in the Psychedelic 60s
Monday, September 30

Screening: **The Cockettes** (Weber and Weissman, 2002)

Ido Hartogsohn, “Chapter 8: American Trip,” and “Chapter 9: LSD and the 1960s,” in *American Trip: Set, Setting, and the Psychedelic Experience in the Twentieth Century* (2020)

Malik Gaines, “The Cockettes, Sylvester, and Performance as Life,” in *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible* (2017)

Chris Elcock, “Building Utopia: Nina Graboi, the East Village, and the Psychedelic Counterculture,” in *Psychedelic New York: A History of LSD in the City* (2023)

Week 5—The Radical Experimentation of Black Psychedelia
Monday, October 7

Screening: **Sun-Ra: Space is the Place** (Coney, 1974)

Screening: **Lovecraft Country, Episode 7: “I am.”** (HBO)

Emily Lordi, “The Radical Experimentation of Black Psychedelia,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2022

Darieck Scott, “Introduction: Fantastic Bullets,” in *Keeping it Unreal: Black Queer Fantasy and Superhero Comics* (2022)

Daniel Kreiss, “Appropriating the Master’s Tools: Sun Ra, The Black Panthers, and Black Consciousness, 1952-1973,” *Black Music Research Journal* 21.1 (2008)

Week 6—Sex in Space
Monday, October 14

Screening: **Barbarella** (Vadim, 1968)

Lana Cook, “Empathetic Reform and the Psychedelic Aesthetic: Women’s Accounts of LSD Therapy,” *Configurations* 22.1 (2014)

Alex Dymock, “Acid feminism: Gender, Psychonautics and the Politics of Consciousness,” *The Sociological Review*: 817-838 (2023).

Damon Young, “Autonomous Pleasures: Bardot, *Barbarella*, and the Liberal Sexual Subject,” in *Making Sex Public, and Other Cinematic Fantasies* (2018)

Week 7—The Re-enchantment of the World Part I

Monday, October 21

Screening: **Marcel the Shell with Shoes On** (Fleisher-Camp, 2022)

Jane Bennett, “The Wonder of Minor Experiences,” in *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (2001)

Jean Houston and Robert Master, “The World of the Non-Human,” in *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience The Classic Guide to the Effects of LSD on the Human Psyche* (1966)

Selections from Jenny Slate, *Little Weirds* (2019).

Week 8—The Re-enchantment of the World Part II

Monday, October 28

Screening: selections from **Undone, Season 1** (2019) [Available on Amazon Prime]

Gloria Anzaldúa, selections from *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987)

Ben Feinberg, “Undiscovering the Pueblo Mágico: Lessons from Huautla for the Psychedelic Renaissance,” in *Plant Medicines, Healing, and Psychedelic Science*, eds. Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar (2018).

Sylvie Boulette, “Moved by Another Life: Altered Sentience and Historical Poiesis in the Peyote Craze,” *American Literature* 95.3 (2023)

Week 9—Psychedelic Integration (In class group midterm)

Monday, November 4

Week 10—Thinking Like a Multiverse Part I

Monday, November 11

Screening: **Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse** (Ramsey, Persichetti, Rothman, 2018) and **Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse** (2023)

Carhart-Harris, Robin and K.J. Friston, “REBUS and the Anarchic Brain: Toward a Unified Model of the Brain Action of Psychedelics,” *Pharmacological Reviews* 71.3 (Summer 2019).

Ramzi Fawaz, “Webbed Attachments: Psychedelic Lessons from the Multiverse,” *Theory & Event* 28.2 (forthcoming April 2025).

Week 11—Thinking Like a Multiverse Part II

Monday, November 17

Screening: **Everything, Everywhere, All At Once** (The Daniels, 2022)

Lisa Lowe, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences,” *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991).

Anne Anlin Cheng, “‘Everything Everywhere All at Once’ is a deeply Asian American film,” *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2022:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/05/04/everything-everywhere-asian-american-pessimism/>

Chris Letheby, “Unbinding the Self,” in *Philosophy of Psychedelics* (2021).

Week 12—The Future Belongs to the Mad

Monday, November 18

Screening: **Mad Max: Fury Road** (Miller, 2015)

Selections from *The Invisible Committee*, *NOW* (2017) (read pages 5-53)

Mark Fisher, “Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)” (2016)

Week 13—The Surprise of Otherness

Monday, November 25

Screening: **Scavenger’s Reign** (Bennett and Heuttner, 2023) [Available on Netflix or HBO] & **My Octopus Teacher** (Reed and Ehrlich, 2020)

Sarah Ensor, “The Eco-Poetics of Contact: Touching, Cruising, Gleaning,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 25.1 (2018)

Selections from Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (2003)

Merlin Sheldrake, “What is it Like to be a Fungus?” and “Living Labyrinths,” in *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change our Minds and Shape Our Future* (2020)

David M. Peña-Guzmán, “The Value of Animal Consciousness,” *When Animals Dream: The Hidden World of Animal Consciousness* (2022)

Week 14—On Learning to Surrender Part I
Monday, December 2

Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (2014)

Week 13—On Learning to Surrender Part II
Tuesday, December 9

Jeff VanderMeer, *Acceptance* (2014)