

Peter C. Reynolds, "Abandoned Bodies," *The Month*, November, 1997, pp. 421-426.

In late March 1997, during the week of the Easter vigil, thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate committed suicide in order to rendezvous with a space ship that they believed was approaching earth in the shadow of a newly discovered comet. The last week of March was an astronomically active time in California.¹ For several weeks, the comet Hale-Bopp hung in the northwest sky after sunset, bright as the brightest stars, with a forked white veil trailing dramatically behind it. March 23rd, Palm Sunday, was the first night of the first full moon after the vernal equinox—the date that defines Easter Sunday in the Western liturgical calendar. Almost all of California was clear that night, with no fog in San Francisco and the ocean calm beyond the Golden Gate, but no sooner did the full moon appear over the purple crest of the mountains than it was swallowed up in the shadow of the earth, a lunar eclipse that peaked at 8:39 p.m PST with 92 per cent of the moon darkened. The planet Mars, especially prominent, appeared as a bright orange star in proximity to the copper moon. The day before, San Francisco newspapers predicted for astronomy buffs a "celestial triple-header."² To the Heaven's Gate faithful gathered in their mansion at Rancho Santa Fe ("holy faith" in Spanish), the signs were clearly pointing to a cosmic and historical conjunction.

The members of Heaven's Gate are polite, educated, and well-groomed people who would not look out of place in a rich, white enclave such as Rancho Santa Fe, and by all accounts they were model suburbanites. One neighbor said the residents of the compound were "always polite and never noisy,"³ and their house was kept impeccably neat. The last person alive apparently cleaned up after the others, putting the debris in the trash can.⁴ Heaven's Gaters are recognizably "one of us" — earnest technocrats and hard-working, computer-literate, sci-fi fans with their own page on the World Wide Web. They are also economically mainstream. The ritual life of technocracy involves, for the technological players, the climb up the corporate ladder, and for the fans, the ritual consumption of its products, both literally and vicariously; and in this respect as well, the members of Heaven's Gate are normal citizens with normal aspirations. They were not mere consumers of high-tech products but producers of them as well.⁵ The recently deceased were skilled in the art and science of Web page design, ran a profitable computer consulting business, and lived, albeit collectively in rented quarters, on a three-acre estate not far from the beach, where they watched Star Trek on big-screen TV.

In the few months before the Heaven's Gate suicides, the American news media were full of references to the impending millennium, with the implication that changes of cosmic proportions would soon be taking place. Computer consultants were also aware of what came to be called the "millennium problem"—the fact that many old computer programs use only two characters to encode the year, so that "00" would be interpreted by the computer as 1900 instead of 2000, creating havoc in the accounts departments of many large organizations. A search on the word "millennium" in San Francisco's two major daily newspapers turned up 69 articles for the first quarter of 1997 alone. A few of these instances reflect inflation of the human time frame, with executives planning for the "next millennium" where they once were content with months or years, and some refer to the television show "Millennium," but most refer to the actual calendrical event, such as planned celebrations or soul-searching about what the future might bring. Moreover, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported in a front-page story the pronouncement

by astrologers that the Age of Aquarius, “which has kept some people giddy with anticipation ever since the song of the same name appeared in the 1967 musical ‘Hair,’” was to officially begin at 12:56 p.m. on February 23, 1997, noting that the event is to be celebrated worldwide in a dozen or more countries, including a “nondenominational meditation” at St. John’s Episcopal Church in San Francisco. Certainly, it is not their millenarian awareness that distinguishes Heaven’s Gate from the mainstream community.

Heaven’s Gate is more disturbing to the average American than the far more deadly mass suicide at Jonestown almost two decades earlier. The members of Jonestown were primarily dark-skinned people, whose ideology was more conventionally religious, and they had the good taste to die in a distant jungle. But the setting chosen by Heaven’s Gate for its fatal rendezvous, Rancho Santa Fe, is not at the bottom of the cultural pyramid but at the top: “A community of large estates in the county’s rolling back country, Rancho Santa Fe features some of San Diego County’s most expensive homes,”⁶ as a real estate notice describes it. It is not so much a town as a Hollywood set rebuilt larger than life among the chaparral, with the false facades extended to encompass all four walls. A building code permits only “Spanish Mediterranean” villas and California “ranch style” architecture. White pillars simulating ante-bellum mansions and quaint green shutters reminiscent of Cape Cods are grafted onto beige stucco palaces, “naturally” landscaped with palm trees and bougainvillea trucked in from nurseries. Some of the wealthiest people in the United States own homes there, including the owners of major corporations, prominent members of the Republican Party, and the heiress to the MacDonald’s hamburger fortune.⁷ According to the editor of a local newspaper, “The Rancho Santa Fe area is the second most expensive by zip code after Beverly Hills, with homes typically selling for one million dollars or more.”⁸ It would be misleading to call these architectural edifices ‘houses,’ for that implies continuity with human communities as known historically, and suggests that they are built by carpenters and masons, whereas these buildings appear to have been lifted as images directly from the celluloid and extruded in three dimensions by some digital rendering engine. Rancho Santa Fe, built de novo on an arid mesa above the ocean, is itself a fantasy of the insularity money can buy.

Like many people, I first became aware of Heaven’s Gate via the Internet, on the Wednesday before Easter, when a news headline rolled across the screen of my email account proclaiming “mass suicide by religious cultists.” Imagine the dismay among the public when the suicidal zealots turned out to be not fundamentalists but technocrats, computer programmers and Web page designers, whose sources of spiritual inspiration included “Star Trek” and the “X Files”? The official distancing of us from them began within hours of the first news reports on Wednesday afternoon. On the World Wide Web, a site parodying the Heaven’s Gate home page was launched that night, with a lead graphic depicting a man with shaved head and monk’s robe, like a Hari Krishna devotee, quite different from the black-garbed, unisex look that Heaven’s Gate members share with fashionable denizens of cyberspace culture.⁹ Television news bureaus, in economic competition with the Internet, saw an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone and positioned Heaven’s Gate as an example of the dangers of the World Wide Web and paired it with stories on cult abductions. On Maundy Thursday morning the *San Francisco Chronicle* had a long article by the religion editor that reviewed the excesses that have occurred historically when comets became visible from earth, and he warned about the potential threat from the David Koreshes of the world as the millennium approaches. The news media also featured interviews

with psychologists about the dangers of cults and mind control, as if the members of Heaven's Gate were vulnerable children running away from home; when in fact almost all the suicides were people in their forties and fifties, old enough to be granted responsibility for their own lives whether psychologists approve of them or not.¹⁰

Yet even in this concerted effort to distance Heaven's Gate from the mainstream, the congruency of their ideology with that of the culture's received wisdom continually breaks through. A columnist in the *San Francisco Examiner*, for example, alerts us to the dangers of religious fanaticism by employing computational metaphors for the human mind and body not very different from what one can read on the home page of Heaven's Gate: "Something is badly wired in the hardware of the human brain, and thousands of years of upgrades in cultural software have not fixed it.... Now we have a madman touched by visions, one Marshall Herff Applewhite, aka Bo. Like [William] Blake, he showed that religion and madness are not far apart in the brain's wiring."¹¹

The doctrines of Heaven's Gate are not the ravings of a religious lunatic but a logical consequence of a technocratic ideology that is very widespread in contemporary culture, and which is implicitly endorsed by some of the most educated, technically skilled, and scientifically trained members of the populace, even though most of its adherents lack the single-minded commitment of Applewhite and his followers. Only a week earlier, a movie critic for the *San Francisco Examiner*, for example, reviewed the new release of the *Star Wars* trilogy and found it spiritually uplifting. "Perhaps unintentionally, producer Lucas relocates the Christian promise of salvation in a futuristic, high-tech setting: If a man such as [Darth] Vader can be convinced to renounce the evil he has done, there are truly hopeful possibilities in the 'Star Wars' universe. This represents a slight theological shift within the overall narrative because the process of The Force is clearly an aesthetic or pantheistic idea, but the duality of The Force — its vital tension between good and evil — is based on a Judeo-Christian principles."¹² In actuality, *Star Wars* is about as far from Christian principles as a movie can be: it is a relentless visualization of technological warfare, rationalized as Cold-War combat between the forces of freedom and tyranny, yet so disembodied that scarcely a drop of blood sullies the screen. It is the cultural prologue to the Persian Gulf War.

Clearly, it is not the propensity to confound high technology with spiritual values that sets Heaven's Gate apart from the mainstream. The community is unusual in both their collective suicide and propensity for voluntary castration, but a system of belief that blends conventional science with science fiction, millenarian computations, and New Age spirituality does not appear as strange to an anthropologist as it does to members of the press. More than five years ago, I published *Stealing Fire*, an ethnographic account of technocratic culture based on many years of participant observation in the computer industry in California. In that book I argued that modern high technology is primarily a symbolic process based on the premise that the biological body is inherently flawed, and that "progress" consists of cutting away the "primitive" body parts and replacing them with more "advanced" prosthetic devices constructed by science to simulate celestial light. I illustrated this system of belief by the evolutionary trajectory shown in Figure 1, in which the sexual organs are cut away first because they are contaminated through natural child birth, followed by the excision of other "terrestrial" organs until only the head is left, the incubator of disembodied intellect; in the final stage of progress, even the head is left behind

when “pure thought,” conceptualized as radiant energy, leaves the planet earth to achieve final union with starlight.

The idea that “modern technology,” the putatively most rational endeavor ever conceived by human beings, could be based on a system of symbolic transformations not very different from systems of savage superstition chronicled by anthropologists does not sit well with 20th-century Americans. Nonetheless, this ethnographic model has predictive power about technocracy in its ritual aspect, and the only points on the trajectory of Figure 1 not exemplified by the Heaven’s Gate suicides and the contents of their Web page is their failure to decapitate the bodies. Significantly, ritual decapitation does occur in technocratic religion, not in Heaven’s Gate but among practitioners of cryogenics, who contract to have their heads severed from their bodies after death and frozen in liquid nitrogen in the expectation that science will eventually discover a way to resurrect them.¹³ Even more disturbing, if high technology is primarily the process of symbolically transforming “terrestrial bodies” into starlight, then the ethnographic model implies that many technological development programs in government-funded laboratories and Fortune 500 companies are based on premises identical with those ridiculed in the mainstream press, even though they are less conscious and overtly expressed. Far from being deviant, Heaven’s Gate perfectly embodies the values of one of the most powerful sectors of contemporary society.

Of all the news media, only *Wired* magazine did not try to distance itself from the Heaven’s Gate events. *Wired* is a house organ of digital technology that has done more than any other institution to create a cultural identity for the World Wide Web. After the Heaven’s Gate site was pulled by its Internet service provider, *Wired* hosted it on its own computers, and columnist Jon Katz wrote one of the few sympathetic and reflective pieces by a journalist. “Wherever these people really went when they died,” he wrote, “they left us with the first Web tragedy. For the first time, the dead are very definitely us, not them. Their lives, work, beliefs, and passing are woven into the machinery of the digital culture, already part of our archives and history. This wasn’t some remote cult hidden away in some faraway jungle, to kill and die in private. Their messages, fingerprints, voices, and handiwork are ineluctably available on the World Wide Web, easily and instantly accessible, a couple of clicks away on any browser.”¹⁴

It is their spiritual craving, not their ideology, that sets Heaven’s Gate apart from mainstream technocrats. To the latter, it is human science and technology that provides the path to salvation, not superior aliens, for the social utility of this system of belief is keep power firmly in the hands of those who control the earthly status quo. In Heaven’s Gate, however, advanced knowledge is conveyed to humans by adepts who are really alien life forms in disguise, and the human body is essentially a passive vehicle for implanted chips with coded instructions as to how to achieve union with the absolute.¹⁵ Whereas technocrats apparently experience the development of prosthetic devices and the consumption of technical products and images as intrinsically rewarding and fulfilling, the members of Heaven’s Gate are, paradoxically, on some level, too spiritual—and too alive—to find salvation in technology.

In attempting to reconcile evolutionary physical-chemical transformation of the body with a conventional theology of resurrection, Heaven’s Gate even alienated fellow practitioners of technocratic religion, for whom UFOs are substitutes for spirits, not vehicles of spiritual transcendence. According to the *San Jose Mercury News*, “when members of the Heaven’s Gate

cult tried to join discussions at the annual Ozark UFO Conference three years ago,” a convention dedicated to factual presentations on alien abductions, time travel, and celestial explanations for mutilated cows, “they were permitted only to drop off literature.” “I remember them showing up, talking about Jesus and UFOs,” one participant complained. In the words of another; “The difference is that they integrated UFOs into a set belief system. We’re all individuals here with individual minds.”¹⁶

Yet to someone schooled in a spiritual tradition, the most disturbing fact about the members of Heaven’s Gate is not the totalitarian cast of their beliefs or their monomaniacal devotion to a self-destructive agenda—in this too they are indistinguishable from much of the mainstream ideology of the twentieth century—but that their spirituality is so spiritually debased that it can scarcely be called a religion at all. Spiritual consciousness emerges from a metaphorical encounter with the divine, but in the theology of Heaven’s Gate every word in the religious lexicon is filtered and re-filtered through a pervasive physical-chemical reductionism until only the most literal interpretation remains. “Higher” means above one’s head, “spiritual vehicle” a space ship, “inner voice” an implanted chip, and “salvation” a new biological morphology. The poet Kathleen Norris has re-emphasized the age-old link between poetic and religious thinking, and she sees the literal-mindedness imposed by the machine as one the major barriers between modern, educated people and the rediscovery of spiritual understanding. “As a Benedictine liturgist said to me,” she writes, “the loss of the ability to think metaphorically is one of the greatest problems in liturgy today.”¹⁷ Although the members of Heaven’s Gate were apparently people of serious spiritual aspirations, they could never break through the strictures of scientific materialism into the realm of poetry, dance, and metaphor.

Although Heaven’s Gate shares with technocratic culture the belief that salvation of the human race requires us to transcend the biological body, its implicit rejection of human science and engineering as the *deus ex machina* leads to a very different program for realizing its spiritual goals. In mainstream technocratic culture, the literal cutting away of the flawed, “terrestrial” organs, as illustrated in Figure 1, is a minor theme, subordinate to the creation of prosthetic devices by science. Although physical mutilations such as mastectomies, Caesarean sections, and episiotomies are consistent with this ethnographic model, the culturally dominant theme in modern technology is the symbolic, not physical, neutering of the body through a panoply of prosthetic devices that makes its functions, cares, and constraints increasingly irrelevant. Mainstream technocracy follows the dictates of what I call the Galilean circuit, shown in Figure 2, in which each bodily organ is replaced by a man-made prosthesis: the eyes are transformed into optics, the hands become robots, the brain a computer. Where industrial technology emphasized the extension of somatic action by means of machines such as bulldozers and cars, postwar technocratic culture is increasingly engaged in a biological quest for the fountain of youth by replacing the body itself with prostheses, through gene therapy, organ transplants, hormone treatments, and bioengineering. Even sexuality is divorced from procreation, with the latter recast as an industrial process implemented by lawyers and fertility experts.¹⁸

In this emerging social context, the evolutionary transformations and paranoid machinations postulated by Heaven’s Gate are a prophetic vision of an all-too-plausible future in which the human body is reduced to an empty shell controlled by computerized implants and synthetic genes experienced as forces alien to oneself. No wonder they wanted to leave. As their home

page expresses it: “If you study the material on this website you will hopefully understand our joy and what our purpose here on Earth has been. You may even find your ‘boarding pass’ to leave with us during this brief ‘window.’ We are so very thankful that we have been recipients of this opportunity to prepare for membership in Their Kingdom, and to experience Their boundless Caring and Nurturing.”¹⁹ Fully cognizant of the technocratic vision of the body and the soul, who can blame the prophets of Heaven’s Gate for abandoning their empty husks and seeking something better in the stars?

¹¹ “Peak Period For Viewing Hale-Bopp: Comet’s brilliance set off by dark skies, eclipse,” David Perlman, Chronicle Science Editor, San Francisco Chronicle, Saturday, March 22, 1997, Page A15.

“Hale-Bopp, Eclipse, Mars Put In Concert: Celestial trio dazzles crowds on busy night,” Henry K. Lee, Chronicle Staff Writer, San Francisco Chronicle Monday, March 24, 1997, Page A17

² “Night skies promise triple treat Sunday: Lunar eclipse, a bright Mars and Hale-Bopp on tap,” Keay Davidson, EXAMINER SCIENCE WRITER, San Francisco Examiner, Saturday, March 22, 1997, Page A1.

³ “Deaths a shocker to neighbors,” San Francisco Examiner, Thursday, March 27, 1997.

⁴ “House of Horror”, San Francisco Chronicle, Friday, March 28, 1997, Page A1.

⁵ Their professional We site is unexceptional: <http://www.higher-source.com>

⁶ San Diego *Source*, 4-9-97, “Community Profiles”,

⁷ “Swank enclave known for privacy, posh estates,” Bernie Wilson, Associated Press Writer, Live Wire, www.sfgate.com

⁸ Interviewed on KCBS-TV; quoted by Bernie Wilson, Associated Press

⁹ See

¹⁰ “Most of the Dead were Middle-Aged: Disciplined, celibate cult often fasted for days”, Alex Barnum, Marshall Wilson, John Wildermuth, Chronicle Staff Writers, San Francisco Chronicle, Friday, March 28, 1997 Page A1.

¹¹ “Earth to earthlings: No next level,” Rob Morse, San Francisco Examiner, Sunday, March 30, 1997, Page A2.

¹² Bob Stephens of the Examiner staff, San Francisco Examiner, Friday, March 14, 1997, Page C1. See also: “Star wars returns: The Force is still with George Lucas in 20th anniversary edition, with enhanced special effects, remastered soundtrack,” By Bob Stephens of the examiner staff, San Francisco Examiner, Jan. 31, 1997, Page C 1

¹³ Cryogenic sources

- 14 Jon Katz, The Netizen, Hot Wired, March 31, 1997 <http://www.wired.com>
- 15 Heaven's Gate website, <http://www.wired.com/hg.html>
- 16 "Suicide cult freaked out UFO buffs," by Paisley Dodds, *San Jose Mercury News*, April 13, 1997, p. 11A.
- 17 Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*, Riverhead Books 1996, p. 64.
- 18 Sources on surrogacy
- 19 <Http://www.wired.com/heavens-gate/html>