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Heaven's Gate: the End, a religious belief

Ibrahim Mohamed
Njala University Freetown Western Area Sierra Leone

ABSTRACT

In San Diego on March 26, 1997, the bodies were found of 39 similarly dressed men and women who took their own lives in a mass suicide. Led by Marshall Applewhite, the Heaven's Gate cult believed that a flying saucer was traveling behind the Hale-Bopp comet. They chose to leave their physical bodies behind to find redemption in an extraterrestrial “Kingdom of Heaven.” The sect also left behind apocalyptic messages in their Rancho Santa Fe mansion and on home pages on the World Wide Web. This paper looks at online material produced by the cult and the media coverage of their tragic end, it explores the background of the cult and the science fiction and millennial influences on their beliefs, and it considers the group's connection with cyberculture and some of the questions raised by their mass suicide, which perhaps, as David Potz said in Slate, “promises to be the first great Internet mystery”
Keywords: Heaven's Gate, religious belief,cult.

INTRODUCTION

It was late Thursday evening, March 27, 1997, when the first headlines crossed my desk at the Raleigh News and Observer [1, 2, 3]. I had come to expect a certain decorum at the N&O, but with the Heaven's Gate suicides, the difference in tone was striking: “Cult members were deeply into cyberspace,”“Cult leader believed in space aliens and apocalypse,”“Tapes left by cult suggest comet was the sign to die” [4]. At last, I thought, the press has found the bad-news story with an Internet angle that it has been waiting for.Since the first Internet covers of Time and Newsweek in 1992–93 that legitimized and sensationalized the Internet, followed by the mainstream popularity of the World Wide Web, the Net has been vilified as often as it's been hailed as a panacea to the world's ills, a late twentieth-century electronic Eldorado [5]. In practice, of course, the Net is in itself neither a utopian nor a dystopian place, but rather is made up of people who for the most part are sitting in front of monitors and keyboards exchanging commonplace information a bit more conveniently, if often with a sense of “virtual community” [6] within “cyberspace” [7]. Nevertheless like William Gibson who coined the term, the press seems deeply ambivalent about cyberspace and its populace. As Joshua Quittner wrote in “Life and Death on the Web” in Time, “Every time this country extrudes any significant bit of evil at its fringes my editors dispatch me to the Internet to look for its source” [9]. The Heaven's Gate techno-deaths delivered the sensationalist goods. [10], “Here was obsession, delusion and mass suicide played out in multimedia and hypertext – a horror, finally, best observed online.” Yet most of the early reports spent disappointingly little time looking at Heaven's Gate online. There was abundant coverage of the curiosities – the castrations, the purple shrouds, the comet, The X-Files– but little about the individual cult members as celebrated Webmasters. It seemed to be enough that the group had a Web presence business and used the online medium among other media to disseminate messages to declare the Net guilty by association. The virtual community reacted with outrage [5]. The suicides and the media's blinkered condemnation came fresh on the heels of the Communications Decency Act (CDA), which had been argued with mixed success before the Supreme Court on March 19 (but which was overturned on

June 26 [9]. A groan passed across the Net as members of the community wondered whether the actions of the cultists might influence public policy at a particularly vulnerable time, when free speech and openness, and the Net's importance as an electronic town hall, was a matter of public debate [10], the Electronic Frontier Foundation's Blue Ribbon Campaign, the Citizens Internet Empowerment Coalition, and 24 Hours of Democracy]). In “Deaths in the Family” on HotWired, Jon Katz said.The killings gave our fearful guardians in politics and mainstream media yet another new Net phobia to warn America about. Cultists momentarily pushed aside pornographers as the demonic and threatening offspring of new technology. The Internet, just last week an interstate highway for perverts, was transformed for a few days into a natural breeding ground for fanatics and zealots [11]. Rather than informing the public and setting the record straight, the singular Heaven's Gate incident was exploited by the traditional media to fan the flames of suspicion much as pornography had been used all along. The Net of dangerous pictures became the Net of dangerous ideas. The media, which over the past year or so had been colonizing and commercializing the Web, and therefore didn't even seem to be acting in its own best interest, let us down. Again [12]. As one of the best known parodies of the cult that quickly sprouted on the Net, put it: The media spin on the suicide of religious cult members is, in a word, inexcusable. Television, radio and print media sources have reported this as if the cult did all their recruiting online and killed themselves by ingesting poison computer parts. The cult was around for 22 years, LONG before the web. They only recently began making some money making VERY bad web pages [13].

A vocal segment of the online community seemed to hold the group in disdain because they did less than stellar Web work in terms of graphic and programming sophistication. While the term “Webmaster” often has little practical meaning, the fact that these apparently minor-league talents represented the majority of people putting up Web pages was felt to be insulting, although the democratization of publishing wrought by the Web does mean precisely this: that anyone with some pages written in HTML can claim Web expertise. Morgan Davis, operations director of one of San Diego's largest Internet providers, typified this attitude when he said, “They're rather mediocre.... Their art work is kind of amateurish. The layout and typesetting is not cutting-edge. It really looks like anything anyone could have done in their spare time” [14]. Still the scornful Webmasters were hardly alone. With the notable exception of the millenarians, nobody wanted to be associated with Heaven's Gate, not Nike, not the gay community, not San Diegans, Californians, astronomers, the UFO community, or Trekkies [15]. Even other cultists were backpedaling [16]. Heaven's Gate's strange amalgam of beliefs made them the fringe of the fringe. In remarks that were widely quoted, the ultimate head of CNN himself, Ted Turner said: “It's a good way to get rid of a few nuts, you know, you gotta look at it that way. Well, they did it peacefully. At least they didn't go in like those S.O.B.s who go to McDonald's or post offices and shoot a lot of innocent people and then shoot themselves. At least they just went out and did it to themselves” [7]. Gallows humor seemed to be the main statement made by their deaths.Heaven's Gate quickly became a cyberculture in-joke. [5], By the time I was invited to speak on the topic ten days later [5], friends were feeding me one-liners. It took all the restraint I could muster not to use the presentation as an opportunity to get my start as a stand-up comic with puns playing on Unix and eunuchs and

references in questionable taste to keeping up with the "Joneses" [8]. But the incongruity between these shallow jokes and sensationalist press coverage and the brutal reality of 39 people choosing to kill themselves upon a sign from the heavens was startling. Here was a group that scorned mortality, who considered their bodies to be nothing more than disposable shells, for whom the most profound issues of life and death and faith must've been part of their daily existence. Yet they seem ridiculous to many of us, whether we consider ourselves to be members of a Net community or not. The gap between us and them in itself struck me as interesting in both the Freudian, cathartic sense [7] and in the way that [5] uses Kenneth Burke's conception of the tragic and comic frames to simultaneously embrace the open and closed aspects of the apocalypse. Yes, laughter provides a safety valve for the aggression we feel toward the members of the sect for their apparently complete lack of basic common sense, but it also helps us accept the enormity of the end-times that await us all. Heaven's Gate didn't shrink from this reality; they embraced The End. The headline of their suicidal home page in bold print announced [italics added]: "Red Alert – Hale-Bopp brings closure to Heaven's Gate ...."What is it about these people, their chosen end, and what they believed and practiced that touched a common chord? Why were we so eager to dismiss them out of hand? To what can we attribute their thorough alienation, I wondered. After all, while many of us thought that Hale-Bopp was memorably spectacular, few were inclined to read the comet as an omen – or did we? And do we today view Applegate's followers less as flesh-and-blood people with whom we might feel a sympathetic human connection than as representatives of dangerous cults, as signs of the coming millennium, and not least of all, as a case-in-point of what's wrong with cyberculture or, conversely, how the media typifies cyberculture?

Who Were Heaven's Gate?

The facts are well known. The group lived together in a large immaculate house in Rancho Santa Fe, a wealthy community in San Diego. On March 26, 1997, the bodies of 21 women and 18 men, ranging in age from 26–72, were discovered in various stages of decomposition. Several days before, they had ingested applesauce or pudding laced with barbiturates and a shot of vodka, and they had submitted to suffocation from plastic bags placed over their heads [15]. They were identically dressed in unisex black shirts, pants, and Nikes, and had purple shrouds placed across their faces. Many of the men had been castrated. Nevertheless still frustrated with their bodies, they chose to leave their "earthly containers" behind in San Diego to join aliens who would take them to the Next Level with a newly embodied life. The extraterrestrials were believed to reside in a starship traveling behind the Hale-Bopp comet.Much more than a Net cult, Heaven's Gate was a UFO cult. Marshall Herff Applewhite, known as "Do" (formerly "Bo"), and Bonnie Lu Nettles, known as "Ti" (formerly "Peep"), met in Texas and formed Heaven's Gate in the early 1970s.[7] The group settled in the Southwest where they lived in seclusion, eventually attracting as many as 1000 followers [12]. Do and Ti preached that they were Christ-like extraterrestrials who had taken human form. As early as 1975, Applewhite and Nettles (who passed on from natural causes in 1985) told of a spaceship that would spirit true believers away toward a

higher level of existence [9]. The Two as they called themselves, after the “Two Lampstands” prophesied in the Bible, always drew as much on science fiction as on Biblical prophecy. Heaven's Gate flourished in the Southwest, where UFO sightings have been common since the postwar boom in aviation and the government's use of the region for nuclear testing. UFO mythology resonates strongly in contemporary popular culture. Concerns over the atomic bomb as well as hopes and fears that we aren't alone in the universe have spurred countless Hollywood films and television shows in which beings from outer space warn the people of earth of impending disaster. H.G. Wells in his late phase, notably the apocalyptic The Shape of Things to Come [9], is a major literary influence. Another well-acknowledged influence is the 1947 UFO sighting and rumored cover-up that took place near the airforce base in Roswell, New Mexico, where some believe two alien starships collided. Located northwest of Las Vegas, the inspiration for last summer's Men in Black is Area 51, thought to be the government's top-secret installation for investigating flying saucers.[8] The members of Heaven's Gate took such science fact and fiction seriously; indeed, they watched The X-Files and Star Trek religiously.[9] The group recruited with pamphlets and other print publications for two decades before moving to California and actively using the Internet to transmit messages in the mid-1990s. Members of the cult opened a Web consulting business, Higher Source (a name that can be assumed to be intended to evoke both bodily liberation and HTML source codes). Despite what the Net community thought of their work in retrospect, in Southern California they had a reputation strong enough to attract a client list that included the San Diego Polo Club and Kushner-Locke, a Hollywood production company. Their work shows some programming expertise in that they used Java, VRML, audio and video clips, and advanced HTML that many mom-and-pop Web businesses did not provide in late 1996-early 1997. Similarly, Higher Source was ahead of the curve with using meta tags in inventive ways, in their case for evangelical purposes. Members of the cult believed they were leaving their bodies behind in a chrysalis that would take them to The Evolutionary Level Above Human (TELAH). According to Balch, these beliefs date back to the early period: Ultimately the Two held out the promise of eternal life at the “Level Above Human.” There … their followers would become … complete with androgynous bodies forever free of disease, decay, and death. Eventually they also might be able to help with a harvest in some distant part of the universe, or even, like Jesus and the Two, “do the Christ trip” on another garden [11]. From the beginning, then, the group made plans to leave this planet and their bodies, which they called “shells” and “vehicles,” for new life in a more evolved corner of the universe. The sign they were waiting for came with Hale-Bopp and its ghostly companion vehicle. On Nov. 14, 1996, Houston-based amateur astronomer Chuck Shramek phoned Art Bell's “Coast to Coast” to say that he had taken a photograph of a mysterious object traveling behind Hale-Bopp. [10] Art Bell's popular radio program discusses matters of interest to the UFO community. The next night a guest on Bell's show, Courtney Brown, director of the Farsight Institute in Atlanta, asserted that three professional psychics associated with his organization had detected the companion vehicle and found it to be inhabited by extraterrestrials. Although there are

conflicting reports as to whether Shramek's call was intended as a hoax or was simply a mistake, the sighting of Hale-Mary, as the companion spaceship came to be known, has been widely attributed to have been enough to break Heaven's Gate's holding pattern and to have perhaps triggered the 39 cult members' exit from their mortal containers. O'Leary is among those who point out that the "suicide of the Heaven's Gate sect was timed to coincide with the nearest approach to Earth of the comet Hale-Bopp – a celestial event that, like many comets throughout history, has been greeted in apocalyptic circles as a harbinger of cosmic change" [12]. There is no question that when first reporting the Rancho Santa Fe suicides, the press acted irresponsibly by hastily pointing the finger at the Net although many factors influenced the decision of Applewhite and his followers to end their lives. And the follow-up coverage was never given the prominence of the first few days in which the Net was implicated by the association with UFOs and cult mania. The general public probably still associates Heaven's Gate with the Net and thinks that the Rancho Santa Fe suicides somehow happened because the cult members spent too much time in spooky cyberspace. The mass media based broad assumptions about the group on the "fact" that they were part of the online community and therefore were taken to be representative of cyberculture. Whether we accept that premise or consider the Heaven's Gate cult members' connection with the Internet to be tenuous at best – as just another medium they used for proselytizing if also for commerce – there is nothing to be lost by examining the online evidence, even if it's not difficult to see that the blame, if any, for their deaths should be shared. In addition to bringing out the significance of celestial influences, O'Leary notes, "Heaven's Gate gives a new and terrifying significance to previously innocuous media products which had long enjoyed what are commonly, and unthinkingly, referred to as 'cult followings': the 'X-Files,''Star Trek,' and 'Star Wars'" [11]. Perhaps the Net encourages pop idolatry. Perhaps the Net encourages addictive behavior. Perhaps any number of assumptions, which is all they can be without examining the evidence first-hand. In the hope that it might be illuminating to explore the ways in which the members of the sect were typical or atypical of the Net and its virtual community, a consideration of the Heaven's Gate Website is in order.The recruitment ad lays out the four basic tenets of Applewhite's teachings: That the physical body can be left behind for TELAH in which the inviolate spirit will live on at a higher evolutionary level. That traditional religion is untrustworthy,That escape is forthcoming through alien abduction, andThat this is the final warning. The latter was a common theme following the death of Nettles. The ending of her life from cancer instead of from alien abduction proved difficult to explain to the faithful. Wojcik notes that after Nettles' death Heaven's Gate disappeared for nearly a decade until May 27, 1993, when they "placed an ad in USA Today entitled 'UFO Cult Resurfaces with Final Offer,' which declared that societal institutions and mainstream religions are controlled by a conspiracy involving Satan" [5]. When they re-emerged, it was in crisis mode. Heaven's Gate was a doomsday cult with a predilection for conspiracy theory, views they vigorously disseminated. The Heaven's Gate group's cross-posting did not endear them to the Net community. Indeed, the cult can be

considered guilty of deviating from at least the first five of what [13] have defined as the seven "Standards of Conduct on Usenet." However, it seems as though Heaven's Gate never felt an obligation to observe the tacit rules of the Net; rather, it was the Net community that was supposed to come around. There is nothing in their literature and the interviews with surviving cult members to support the idea that they felt part of cyberculture or that the Internet was anything more than a digital bulletin board on which to affix their messages. The communal joy of connecting, sharing, flaming, ranting that many people associate with what it means to be online apparently was not part of the cult members' experience or interests. In other words, there was no interactivity. Heaven's Gate's messages are one-way, authoritarian. Applewhite, presumably, talks at the world, preaching, proselytizing. Submission is the expected response, not dialogue. In "'Un-Homey' Potential in the Public Discourse of Heaven's Gate," Robert Glenn Howard notes: The Heaven's Gate group's newsgroup "recruitment" communications display a static and deterministic rhetoric. Railing against the bodily manifestations of human beings, they developed a belief set that allowed them to view suicide as a positive experience. This attitude failed to effect large groups of individuals on the Internet because, for the most part, their rhetoric failed to attempt any sort of persuasion. In their e-mail posts, they made no real attempt to persuade anyone of anything. They simply dogmatically asserted their version of the truth [14].

Abduction Mythology and Reification of Alienation

The entire first section is about being rescued by extraterrestrials who are envisioned as New Age angels come to set true believers free in the second coming before the end times. This apocalyptic vision is reinforced by other Heaven's Gate writings posted on the Net. While most of us view alien abduction with a mixture of skepticism and abhorrence, to Heaven's Gate such escape was felt to be affirmative. Life on this planet is fallen and redemption can only come with the next cycle. The words in the second section reinforce this idea: e.g., "life after death,""past lives,""resurrection,""star people." Since [(Jung, 1964)], flying saucers have often been considered to be manifestations of modern mythology, the archetype of cosmic intelligence we call God, not unlike Zeus appearing before Danaë as a shower of gold or the experience of Moses at the burning bush. Like many UFO cults, Heaven's Gate fervently pointed to passages in the Bible that could be interpreted as proof of extraterrestrial visitation. In this sense, the group happily anticipated their release and demise through alien abduction, even to the extent of taking out abduction life insurance in the amount of $1 million per cult member [10]. To see their taped suicide messages and to read their exit statements is to witness unshakable belief expressed as smug certainty: they really thought they were going to a level above the rest of us lowly earthlings and were about to embark on the ride of their lives. They don't show any remorse or concern for the people they left behind.

Apocalypse 2000

While the assortment of marginalized beliefs Heaven's Gate brought together was strange, the cult didn't emerge from a vacuum. They saw themselves as martyrs, as part of the tradition of Masada, Christian saints, self-flagellating monks, and other true believers who put faith and a sense of mission before self-

preservation and self-interest (Our Position Against Suicide), however much these values are out of step with the reigning ethos of the 1990s. There have long been (arguably false) prophets who preached about the coming of The End and End Times, particularly around major ingresses such as a new century or millennium. The group's desire to leave their bodies also draws on the Western metaphysicaltradition.

Cyborgs

The Heaven's Gate cyborgs may have lost the ability to differentiate reality from virtuality from hyperreality [11]. Toggling between mundane and celestial causes and events, biology and science fiction, the self before joining the cult and the androgynous selves they became afterwards, the members of Heaven's Gate seem to have lacked a coherent sense of self. Like Turkle's users, they conceived of their daily existence as cycling or channel-surfing between programs. Life could be turned on and off like a television or computer, the mechanisms of media technology becoming an extension of their I/O identity. But in an extraordinary identification with popular culture, the cult members seem to have taken fandom to the extreme of seeking to merge with their favorite shows by beaming up to join the pop icons they were dying to meet. Life after death doesn't appear to have been any less certain or significant than flipping the remote to tune in to another show or surf to another Web page. As with a particularly immersive VR entertainment ride, the Heaven's Gate cult member cited above seems to have envisioned death as the ultimate Trekkie trip to the final frontier. It doesn't appear that the Star Trek allusion was meant metaphorically, e.g., committing suicide is like leaving the holodeck. It seems that the cult member literally meant that exiting the planet is a means for entering the "craft in the heavens." Other than in the unlikely event that their alien abduction was successful, it seems that they desired to enact what [8] originally defined as telepresence, an illusion of synchronous transportation to a real location through telecommunication devices, except that the location of their illusion was unreal, or its reality was death (which may or may not have been what they wished for), and equally unreal was the mode of telecommunication device, the holodeck [2].It's tempting, quite tempting, to do some second- and third-hand armchair psychoanalysis on the deceased Heaven's Gate cult members and to view them as borderline personalities, indicative of the kind of postmodern slippage that Turkle describes. Significantly, Turkle too is uncertain as to whether her subjects are dysfunctional, meaning that they may suffer from Internet addiction (which may be analogous to cultism), schizophrenia, wish fulfillment, or a host of other social maladjustments, or whether the phenomena that she's observed over the past decade is developing into a new technormalcy [8]. But there is an enormous difference between Turkle's subjects and the cult members. Where Turkle's users speak of an abundance of personality and perhaps splintered selves, multifaceted realities, it's not clear that the Heaven's gate cult members had a firm grasp on any identity, singular or plural, real or fantastic. Under Applewhite's ministry, they sought the annihilation of their individuality, then the annihilation of their sexuality, and finally the annihilation of themselves.

Fellow millenarian Hillel Schwartz might concur. Senior Fellow at the Millennium Institute, Schwartz has reviewed the historical evidence and developed a

theoretical framework within which Heaven's Gate might be placed. The great ingresses, Schwartz argues, are not arbitrarily the products of calendars nor are they wholly attributable to cosmic influences. Whatever the cause, many of us seem to feel large-scale numerical changes. The change to the year 2000 is deeply meaningful in human terms, soul data or neo-biology writ large. In "Generational Change, Historical Age, Calendar Page," Schwartz delineates seven "Tendencies at Centuries' Ends," paraphrased below; Compulsively Counting Down: Reckoning in terms of numbers and seeing patterns. "The numbers that count down to century's end add up, literally, to one's identity." Trying to Keep Up with the Times: The feeling that things are speeding up, trying to avert disaster. Feeling Distraught and Depleted:"Centuries' ends are taken to heart as ends of the line.... Suicide is viewed with enormous seriousness, for the ending of one's own life is ... resonant of larger ends: toxic pollution, mass extinctions, a dead planet."Getting Confused about Conclusions:"Centuries' ends seem interminable; the end has been held in sight for so long that it seems to take forever for anything decisive to happen." The desire to bring closure leads people to take hasty action. Searching for Signs and Synchronicity:"[No] coincidence can be free of hidden meaning. People are obsessed with conjunctions (astrological or economic), correlations (poetic or politic), convergences (historic or harmonic)."Going for Broke:"At centuries' ends people believe that events and inventions are spinning out of control.... Our world is broken; we must fix it, now or never.... People fantasize new sources of energy which can keep humanity humming."Thinking Globally:"We look for 'universal' languages or technologies to unite the world. We are inclined toward short-term prophecies of – and speedy therapies for – personal, familial, social, and ultimately global transformation" [9]. Schwartz's prescient thoughts provide a useful way to contextualize Heaven's Gate. We can view the group less as an anomaly than as a millennial case-study. Indeed, the cult members' "Earth Exit Statements" suggest that they may well have been acting under the influence of Schwartz's seven tendencies or symptoms (counting down, getting confused, searching for signs, etc.). Moreover, we may feel such foreboding ourselves, even if we might not carry through to the extent of Heaven's Gate. Just a week and a half after the Rancho Santa Fe suicides, the countdown of the 1000 days until the dawn of 2000 was widely celebrated by calendar-watchers and other millennial enthusiasts. These cosmic markers have deep personal meaning, which in turn become cultural touchstones like where you were when you heard about JFK or when the Challenger exploded. The poignant ache of expectation associated with New Year's Eve and birthdays will be felt that much more keenly, we can assume, with the change to the year 2000 and perhaps more so with 2001, the true cusp of the third millennium. Other well-wishers recently celebrated HAL's "birthday."[2].

Another strange coincidence? Another sign?

Still Heaven's Gate eludes us. Millennialism is an attractive answer, but like blaming the Net or cyberculture, it may be a bit too convenient, incomplete. As with most handy case-studies, its subjects exceed their explanations just as the group wasn't completely successful with determining the meaning they so ardently desired that their mass suicide would bring, that they went to such

lengths to broadcast on the Net and through other media. They are dead, yes, which is as final an end to life as there can be on this planet, as offline as offline can be, but still their story is being inscribed. Hale-Bopp did not bring closure to Heaven's Gate. Former members have set up new Websites, sometimes in conflict with each other (and over, it can be assumed, interpretations of what will become the Heaven's Gate gospel). At least one former member ended his life and there have been copycat suicides. The sect's former Rancho Santa Fe mansion is on the market. ABC is filming a docudrama of the Heaven's Gate story. Right to Know carries on Heaven's Gate's evangelical work and Higher Source still provides Web services for clients. The access counters on their sites offer evidence that the Heaven's Gate Websites continue to receive a hefty number of visitors, months after the initial prurient interest has passed [2]. The group will continue to be a mass media – not specifically a Net – phenomenon for years to come. Their ideas, dangerous or silly depending on your point of view, may well continue to spread, which is, of course, partially what they hoped to accomplish through their online/offline deaths. In 1997, the Net became an extension of the mass media. If Heaven's Gate was the Internet's first great mystery [3], then their suicides may also serve in retrospect as signifying the beginning of the Net's demystification process. The maverick status of the Net has become cumbersome, a backward-looking reminder of the good old days of the Silicon Valley gold rush. The cyberfrontier is fading as quickly as did the mythic American West of the previous century. And surely for many, a tamed, suburbanized, sanitized Net is not altogether unattractive. We want a Net that is safe for families, even if the CDA overshot the mark. One of the promises of Vice President Gore's Information Highway, which is roaring through the cyberfrontier like the locomotive and telegraph that preceded it, is law and order, necessary for colonization and economic development.[2],Fringe groups such as Heaven's Gate no longer are completely acceptable to either long-time members of the virtual community or its newbie settlers. The taint of association isn't welcomed by the former, and the latter are afraid of contact with their children. As discussed throughout, the practices of the Heaven's Gate group were more atypical than typical of Net standards and behavior. They were alienated from and alienated other Net users. Applewhite's followers belong to the traditions of which they were knowingly a part, e.g., religious martyrdom, UFOlogy, messianic cults, millennialism. The Net is almost incidental. But if we want to go ahead and blame the Net and cyberculture, we need the right supporting evidence. Yes, there are some ideas central to cyberculture that, no matter how tangential to Heaven's Gate, may be relevant. And it's true that if we want to make a case, perhaps there is something inherently dangerous about cyborgs, bodily liberation, and multiple online identities for some people who lack a secure sense of self. Perhaps the Heaven's Gate cult members would've been better off if they hadn't been exposed to the Net and those of us on the Net would've been better off if we hadn't been exposed to their memes. But it's equally true that the comet may have come at the wrong time. That the dawn of the year 2000 may account for their lunacy. That exposure to Southwestern UFOlogy unduly influenced them at a vulnerable time. That they may have seen

too many episodes of The X-Files. Their credulity and the syncretist nature of their beliefs accommodates a wide range of explanations. Most of us, perhaps instinctively, view human and machine as antipodal. We partially gauge our humanity by contrast with machines, which may lack immortal souls but are oblivious to the indignities of mortal aging. Who doesn't want to become just a wee bit more cyborg-like if it means improving on our humanity in the here-and-now? To want a nip here, a tuck there is perfectly understandable, particularly if the promise of "being digital" is taken to mean eternal perfection [9]. Most of us rely on some form of mechanical slave to take care of repetitive tasks. We appreciate the dependability of our home and office machines and take pride in our ability to outsmart their limitations. We clean them with a soft cloth and dutifully maintain their physical condition. We probably even feel some affection for our computers, household appliances, and motor vehicles. But they're inanimate. Manmade. We don't want to become them.

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