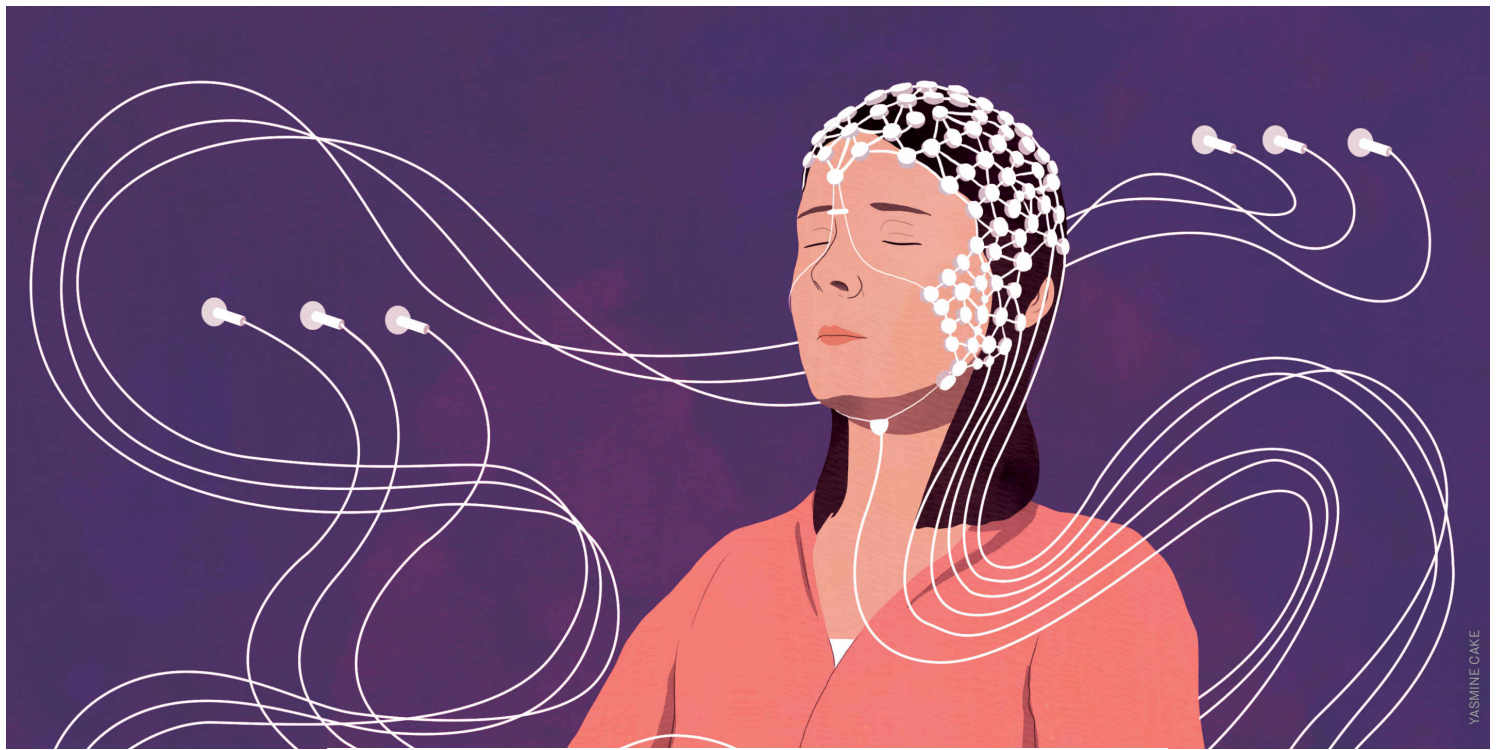




COMPANY • HEALTH

The strange powers of trance on the brain studied at university

By Annick Cojean

Published on November 18, 2021 at 5:45 a.m., modified on November 25, 2021 at 10:53 a.m.

Reading 20 min.

Article reserved for subscribers

Offer the item

INVESTIGATION | The University of Paris-VIII is offering, from November 22, introductory courses on “trances and modified states of consciousness” intended for health professionals. This world premiere owes much to the work of a French woman, Corine Sombrun, initiated among the shamans of Mongolia.

This is a scene that no one should witness unless they are part of the group or initiated. An intimate scene where each individual moves, expresses himself, dances, laughs, cries, crawls, moved by a force which escapes his intellect and which he accepts, for a moment, not to control. Powered by electronic sounds coming out of big speakers. Free to be stone, wind, tree, animal... A woman has the sensation of being on horseback, galloping through limitless steppes; another, immersed in the ocean, hears the cries of a whale; a man, sitting with his back against a wall, laughs very loudly while holding his sides; a girl, with a tense face, glimpses the face of her dead father and grandfather. A guy swings his arms like a gorilla in the heart of a lush forest. A woman does tai chi movements while uttering samurai cries. Another, intrigued, sees eyes on the trunks of giant

sequoias. Another, with a smile on her face, zigzags flexibly between her comrades. She will tell, as an imperial eagle, of having flown over the mountains and feeling the wind on the feathers of her outstretched wings...

The trance. Little-known discipline, long limited to the ethnology or esotericism departments of libraries, until now dissociated from science. And yet... Now, at the University of Paris-VIII, introductory courses on trances and modified states of consciousness are opening, and this is a world first. This course, which begins Monday, November 22, is aimed only at professionals in the medical and paramedical worlds. Paris-VIII is thus overtaking American universities – notably Berkeley –, although they are keen on innovation and have long been interested in research into trance, particularly when it is induced by psychotropic drugs, so widespread in California.

The “symptom of a major societal change”

Point of chemical substances involved in the trance taught at the French university. Nor, of course, any rituals. It will be a self-induced trance, in the service of medicine, and taught only to therapists, because it is potentially capable of correcting health problems. In short, something new. And eyes are fixed on this pioneering program which demonstrates enthusiasm for the discipline. “*A groundswell*”, summarizes Antoine Bioy, professor of clinical psychology and psychopathology, responsible for these diplomas (university diploma and university graduate diploma).

LA SUITE APRÈS CETTE PUBLICITÉ



As soon as registrations opened, dozens of applications poured in from everywhere, including other countries in Europe and America: general practitioners, neurologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, researchers... Professor Bioy sees this as “*proof of a new opening to “complementary” medicine and the symptom of a major change in society. For decades, he continues, it was considered that medicine was defined by a contribution external to the individual. Today, we finally admit that the person has within them resources allowing them to regulate processes by themselves. And that it is also the role of medicine to reveal these buried capacities to the individual.*”

“10,000 CHU patients underwent surgery without general anesthesia! It is time to shake up the medieval structure of our universities! »

Which ones? This is the subject of a proliferation of studies currently underway, announces François Féron, neuroscience researcher in Marseille and president of the TranceScience research institute: “*A dynamic is underway. Five to ten years ago, none of this would have been possible. The development of an*

Steven Laureys, director of GIGA-Consciousness

ecological conscience, the desire to rethink the link between the individual and their environment have opened minds. » Trance, he

assures, is no longer taboo. She still makes you smile, dressed in her shamanic traditions. *“But my scientific and neurobiologist colleagues, who have had the time, over the last thirty years, to see the contribution of meditation and hypnosis, no longer close any doors. They are now ready to train themselves, within an ethical and medical framework, and that is good news. »*

Professor Steven Laureys, director at Liège University Hospital (Belgium) of GIGA-Consciousness, a cutting-edge laboratory for the study of altered states of consciousness, shares this enthusiasm. *“Trance is an illustration of the power of the mind. And, therefore, that of the patient on his own well-being. What a challenge for us scientists! And what an opportunity to learn more about how the brain works, for those of us who never stop wondering about consciousness, thought and emotions! »* Studies on trance are still in their infancy, recognizes this world-renowned coma specialist. *“We need to map a brain in trance and analyze it with the same scientific rigor as we did for hypnosis and meditation. These practices did not feature in my medical studies, and yet 10,000 patients at Liège University Hospital have already undergone surgery without general anesthesia! So, it’s time to shake up the medieval structure of our universities! »*

Corine Sombrun, “outstanding transeuse”

The trigger for this very recent interest in a discipline practiced in almost all traditional societies since the dawn of time? *“An unparalleled “transeuse”, respond our interlocutors, using a noun still unknown in dictionaries. But still ? “A determined transeuse who put her expertise and her brain at the disposal of our teams,”* comments Professor Laureys. *It is his tenacity, his rectitude and his ethics which have enabled the scientific world to now consider trance as a promising subject of study. »*

Read also (in 2016): [Unconventional medicines are coming to hospitals](#)

The “transeuse” in question is called Corine Sombrun. She just turned 60. She is lively, direct, luminous, and her laugh and her appearance have something surprisingly youthful about them. However, its history connects it to millennia-old cultures, and its knowledge, intuitions, experiences could be those of an old soul...

Online courses, evening classes, workshops: develop your skills

Discover

She brushes off the expression with a shrug. *“Old soul? »* No, she would never say that. Corine Sombrun has no desire to shroud herself in mystery or play a character. On the contrary, it wants to be transparent, describes itself as *“Cartesian”* and *“hyper-rational”, “with its feet firmly anchored on the ground”*. His way of telling the truly extraordinary story that happened to him twenty years ago demonstrates a simplicity mixed with self-deprecation. A few tens of thousands of readers have discovered her this way, through several of her books. Others knew her through [the very beautiful film by Fabienne Berthaud, Un monde plus grand \(2019\)](#), which recounts her adventure that began in the

summer of 2001 on the borders of Mongolia, and in which Cécile de France, initiated herself even in a trance, interpreted his role.

“The Shamanic Spark”

So let's summarize the story. Very marked in 1999 by the loss of a great love, and obsessed by this impossible mourning, Corine Sombrun, composer and director of a music school in Cannes, decided to move to London and began working for the BBC as an ethnomusician. Attracted by Mongolia, she flew to produce a series of programs on Mongolian mysteries and record a shamanic ceremony. A challenge in the year 2001: the shamans, persecuted during the communist era, remained suspicious, and it took him several days to convince one of them to accept him under the yurt for this very private ritual. But nothing goes as planned. At the sound of the big drum that the shaman begins to wield, the young woman begins to tremble. His body moves, moved by an irrepressible force. She jumps, screams, feels a muzzle growing in place of her nose and claws at the end of her hands which have become paws. She becomes a wolf, howls like a wolf, sniffs like a wolf, even attacking the shaman to snatch the drum. When the trance ends, she oscillates between shame, dismay and perplexity.

Read also | [Corine Sombrun, from shamanic trance to science](#)

What happened ? How could the drum have such an effect on his body? Why this loss of control when she has neither drunk nor smoked anything? She is neither crazy, nor a believer, nor a mystic. Her trouble only increases when the shaman, finally disarmed by her sincerity, believes that she has what is called *the “shamanic spark”*, in other words that she is the bearer of a gift, chosen by the “shamanic spark”. *spirits* to serve and heal others. She widens her eyes. “*You have no choice,*” warns the shaman. *You will have to learn, be initiated here into the rites of the shamans. Otherwise...*” Otherwise what? “*The suffering you have already experienced is nothing compared to the hell that your life will become.* »

Eight years of initiation

Corine Sombrun leaves Mongolia, both troubled and furious. Why this blackmail? Who are these charlatans? But curiosity ends up winning out, as do some more intimate questions about the abilities of these characters, “*intercessors between humans and spirits*”, to access the beyond, perhaps to disappeared beings... In short, for eight years, the young musician will spend long stays in the Tsaatan community, on the Siberian border, and will be trained in trance and all its rituals by the shaman Enkhetuya, a reindeer herder. She accepts the tests, expectations, servitudes and jokes of this mischievous woman who soon gives her the affectionate nickname of “*Tchichik kochkonok*” (“little asshole”). It supports collective life under the teepee, without water or electricity. Upset in her certainties, she discovers above all the infinite richness of the trance state: visions, exacerbation of the senses, capture of information imperceptible in an ordinary state, apprehension of dissonances, intense connection with the environment, in particular the living (trees, plants, animals, etc.).

“It is possible that having gone through certain trials, illness, coma, near-death

“It’s simple,” she said, in a trance, “the world is bigger. » One night, “I had the sensation of merging with the entire universe, of being filled with the cosmos. Boundaries between visible and invisible were collapsing. My

experience – like what happened to me – makes access to trance easier. »
Corine Sombrun, trance expert

body was dissolving. There was no longer an “I”, melted into the whole, but the new sensation of being indestructible.” Her mastery of trance is gradually refined, the range of her potential captivates her. So she asks herself: “Why didn’t my culture, the society in which I grew up, warn me

of this possibility? And why does she persist in mocking this phenomenon without taking the trouble to study it seriously? »

Corine Sombrun does not accept the mystery, she wants to understand. She doesn't care about having obtained the title of shaman, she is convinced that anyone initiated into trance would have the same abilities. It is objected that shamans constitute a tiny minority in Mongolia, around thirty for three million inhabitants. That's because the stimulus of drumming may not be effective for everyone, she suggests, convinced that there must be other ways to ignite the potential buried within everyone. But how can we advance in knowledge? She turns to science, *“the only language that Westerners are capable of hearing”*, the only discipline capable of verifying, if not explaining, cerebral activity and its tangible effects on the body and mind. Two worlds which were hardly intended to cross will thus become acquainted through him: ancestral trance and hard science. Thus the adventure begins.

Subjected to a battery of tests

She still laughs at the first doctor who, upon mentioning her experiences of distancing, recommended a psychiatrist. *“Do you regularly think of yourself as a wolf? A grasshopper, sometimes? All right ! I have an address for you. »* Fortunately, researchers are more open. One of them, Pierre Etevenon, honorary research director at the National Institute of Health and Medical Research (Inserm), received it in 2006, with great interest. Since the 1970s, he has studied altered states of consciousness in great meditators, convinced that the brain can provide answers to numerous pathologies. He sent him to Edmonton, Canada, to meet Pierre Flor-Henry, professor of clinical psychiatry and director of the research center at Alberta's main hospital. Doctors subject her to a battery of tests and questionnaires, then perform electroencephalograms (EEG) before, during and after a trance session. Harnessed on an armchair, her head wearing a cap equipped with electrodes connected to a screen, Corine Sombrun is not leading much. Here she is, a guinea pig.

This is the first time in the world that the brain of a shaman in trance has been studied in this way. But, to do this, she had to learn something that she did not imagine possible: to induce trance without the help of the drum and Mongolian rituals, by her will alone. A feat which definitively disconnected trance from its cultural aspect. The experiment is conclusive and proves two things: the brain of the “guinea pig” is perfectly healthy and its trance state does indeed modify cerebral activity; it is therefore not just a theatricalization, as anthropologists have long thought. By refining the study, we also observe a change in the predominance of the two hemispheres of the brain. In a normal state, it is the left hemisphere (that of analytical intelligence) which dominates. In a state of trance, a sort of shift occurs: the right hemisphere takes over, with the expression of a perceptive, intuitive intelligence. Basically, more animal?

“The brain is a lazy person! »

While waiting for the results to be published in a scientific journal – this will take ten years, but will be a turning point in the scientific world – the transeuse is thinking about how to make everyone experience trances. Because for studies to progress, it must not be the only subject, cohorts of guinea pigs are needed. How to do ? Would some be more talented? No, she assures. *“But it is possible that having gone through certain trials, illness, coma, near-death experience – which happened to me at the age of 11 months – makes access to trance easier.”* For what ? *“Because the brain is lazy!”* He will not develop abilities he does not need. On the other hand, hyper-demanded in an emergency situation, he knows how to find survival strategies that open up extraordinary capacities that are usually dormant.

»



YASMINE CAKE

Corine Sombrun returns to the drum which has such an effect on her. What rhythm? What vibration? What range? Her job as a musician helps her identify sequences in drum recordings deemed effective, and thus construct a first sound loop. Listening to him, his friends just yawn. Disappointed, she reworks, gets help from Elie Le Quemener, researcher and member of the TranceScience scientific committee, records drum sounds in the studio, in a trance, which will be modeled. A digital loop emerges, immediately tested with students of the Beaux-Arts of Nantes. Sixteen out of twenty enter a trance. That's it ! She then continues to refine her loop, then tested it with all kinds of volunteers. 90% of them go into

a trance. It teaches them to become independent and induce trance on their own, without the aid of sounds.

More and more psychiatrists, neurologists, psychologists, biologists and artists want to try it in their turn. *"It was fascinating,"* remembers Marik Cassard, a general practitioner whose office in Paris often hosted the experiments of Corine Sombrun, to the great dismay of her neighbors (because the trance, when one becomes a wolf, bear, gorilla, is sometimes noisy). *I felt like what she was offering was the culmination of all my research for a holistic approach to health. It revealed in us an extraordinary resource capable of activating our body's healing system. What a sudden opening to the world, even if it can be harsh! Ideas arise, intuitions are expressed. Trance allows both repair and transformation to be fully oneself.* »

“What I saw blew up my scientific credentials. It was... crazy! How can we not see it as a tool to improve the well-being of our patients? »
Audrey Vanhauzenhuyse, neuropsychologist

It was at Dr. Cassard's house that researcher Francis Taulelle, research director at the CNRS, experienced a first trance, which amazed them all. He then suffered from partial paralysis of the pelvis, moved forward with a cane and lay down very carefully... And, after eight minutes of listening to the loop, his breathing suddenly accelerated, his body became agitated. of disorderly movements, then his pelvis rose

several times, as if a rope on the ceiling was pulling him. He himself came away taken aback. He didn't feel any pain. And his strength was increased tenfold... Corine Sombrun taught him how to self-induce a trance. He quickly walked again without a cane, and became, until his death in 2020, one of the young woman's most fervent supporters, founding with her, and mobilizing an international team of researchers, from the TranceScience institute, to Paris.

Read also | [“It is urgent to structure complementary and alternative medicine”](#)

It is at the Liège University Hospital that we meet doctors Audrey Vanhauzenhuyse and Olivia Gosseries, both neuropsychologists and researchers at the hospital and university. Specialists in coma states under Professor Laureys, they decided to launch several studies on self-induced cognitive trance after a conference in which Corine Sombrun participated in the company of artists trained in trance. *“What I saw on stage that evening blew up my scientific standards,”* says Audrey Vanhauzenhuyse. *It was... crazy! How can we not want to understand what is happening in the brain and see it as a potential tool to improve the well-being of our patients? I told myself we had to work with this girl!* »

Pain reduction

La « fille » s'est pliée une fois de plus à tous les examens possibles : EEG, stimulation magnétique transcrânienne, IRM... comme l'avait précédemment fait le moine bouddhiste Matthieu Ricard pour étudier les états de méditation. Mais il fallait d'autres sujets pour étayer l'étude. Vingt-sept transeurs formés par Corine Sombrun se sont donc volontairement prêtés aux mêmes tests. Les résultats sont en cours d'écriture, mais les chercheuses sont convaincues de disposer là d'un outil puissant. « *Je l'ai moi-même intégrée à ma vie et en ressens tant de bienfaits,* confie M^{me} Vanhauzenhuyse. *La transe permet de se réaligner, de se reconnecter à un soi très profond. Mais attention, souris-elle, ce n'est pas qu'un cadeau ! Cela peut*

provoquer un tumulte dans notre vie personnelle en nous rendant intolérants aux moindres faux-semblants. »

Lire aussi | [Des neuroscientifiques lyonnais auscultent la méditation](#)

Plusieurs protocoles de recherches sont donc en cours, notamment sur l'impact de la transe sur la douleur (elle semble la réduire considérablement) et sur la force (elle paraît la décupler). Une première étude clinique mondiale, en oncologie, mesure aussi l'impact de cette pratique sur la qualité de vie de patients (fatigue, sommeil, douleur, détresse émotionnelle).

Séverine N., 44 ans, subit un cancer des poumons agressif et suit un traitement de chimiothérapie très ciblé. Elle s'est portée volontaire pour une première formation à la transe en juin. Elle était alors en colère, « *psychologiquement dévastée* ». Mais elle raconte que, dès la première transe, « [elle a] *ressenti quelque chose recirculer en [elle] et [a] éprouvé de la joie. [Elle] n'avai[t] plus ri depuis dix mois* ». Le soir même, elle téléphonait à ses parents : « *Mais tu as retrouvé ta voix !* », se sont-ils exclamés, sans rien savoir. Le deuxième jour, elle a réussi l'auto-induction, peu de visions, mais un ressenti d'énergie qui lui a fait faire des mouvements de main et vocaliser : chants et « protolangage », cette suite d'onomatopées qui ne correspondent à aucune langue mais que les transeurs utilisent spontanément pour exprimer ce qu'ils éprouvent et parfois communiquer avec les autres... qui les comprennent. Depuis, Séverine continue. « *Cela donne une nouvelle perspective dans ma vie. Sachant que j'ai cette ressource en moi, je peux faire face !* »

Le sentiment d'une « transformation »

Lyna, 51 ans, qui a eu un cancer du sein – en rémission –, témoigne d'une expérience similaire. « *Je n'aurais jamais participé à un tel projet s'il n'y avait eu cette éthique et cet environnement scientifique* », précise-t-elle. Si la première « boucle sonore » n'a eu aucun effet, la deuxième a déclenché des torrents de larmes. Pas de tristesse, dit-elle. Mais le sentiment d'une « *transformation* ». Et puis, elle a fait des choses qu'elle n'aurait jamais faites sans la transe. Chanter très fort, par exemple. « *Je suis de culture chinoise, corps et émotions doivent rester sous contrôle. Or, là, tous les freins ont été débloqués.* » Les soucis du travail glissent désormais sur elle sans l'atteindre. « *Je suis libérée de mes peurs.* »

Le professeur de neurosciences François Féron, lui aussi, se souvient de la légèreté et de la joie ressenties à l'issue de son premier week-end de formation. « *J'étais délié de partout, comme si je sortais d'une séance de kiné.* » Mais tant de questions continuent d'interpeller celui qui a pris la présidence de TranceScience. Tant de sujets mériteraient, selon lui, des recherches : l'effet de la transe sur le métabolisme du corps, et pas seulement le cerveau ; son influence sur le bien-être, la cognition sociale, l'empathie, l'altruisme ; son effet sur la santé (plusieurs études, certaines spectaculaires, sont en cours sur les douleurs chroniques, les maladies auto-immunes, les crises non épileptiques psychogènes, la régulation de l'anxiété...). Sans oublier le rôle de la transe dans la créativité (Corine Sombrun a travaillé avec le danseur Simon Mayer et l'artiste performeur Abraham Poincheval), et aussi dans la performance : quid de son apport dans le sport de haut niveau ? Et pour les spationautes en état d'apesanteur ?

Médecin en soins palliatifs à Vannes, la docteure Kirsten Keesman s'avoue incapable de trouver les mots pour expliquer comment sa pratique de la

« Je ressens une connexion intense avec le mourant au moment de son départ, cela permet de mieux l'accompagner. » Kirsten Keesman, médecin en soins palliatifs

transe a enrichi sa relation avec les patients en fin de vie. *« Je n'interprète pas. Je ressens simplement une connexion intense avec le mourant au moment de son départ et cela permet de trouver les gestes, les mots, les propositions, bref, d'être exactement avec lui pour mieux l'accompagner. Il se joue tant de choses dans ce moment ultime, et ce n'est bien sûr*

pas qu'une question de souffrance physique... » La docteure Keesman en est convaincue : si l'on considère que la médecine n'est qu'un diagnostic et des médicaments, *« alors on sera vite remplacés par des robots. Mais si on considère que c'est aussi un art et qu'un patient doit être envisagé dans sa globalité de corps et d'esprit, alors la transe, patrimoine de l'humanité, est d'un apport majeur ».*

A la clinique Belmont de Genève, une vingtaine de soignants formés par Corine Sombrun et son équipe se réunissent chaque jeudi pour « transer » et partager leurs expériences. *« L'alliance entre patients et thérapeutes en est tellement renforcée ! »*, estime la psychiatre Valérie Picard, qui conduit actuellement une étude de cas avec une patiente souffrant de crises non épileptiques psychogènes. Même chose à l'hôpital La Timone, à Marseille, dans le service du professeur Fabrice Bartolomei, où la neurologue Agnès Trébuchon – qui confie *« faire parfois des microtrances pour se ressourcer entre deux patients »* – lance aussi une analyse pour comprendre les mécanismes neurologiques à l'œuvre pendant l'écoute des boucles de sons. En Côte-d'Or, enfin, une formation à la transe va être organisée pour une cohorte de pompiers et de médecins urgentistes à l'initiative du colonel Régis Deza, dans le but d'en mesurer les bénéfices dans la gestion de l'urgence et du stress post-traumatique. *« J'ai renoncé à comprendre, dit ce militaire habitué aux situations extrêmes. Je sais juste que la transe m'a donné accès à une ressource inouïe. »*

Tous se perçoivent comme des pionniers, convaincus d'être à l'aube d'une grande aventure, et qu'après avoir rêvé d'être plus savants il est urgent de former des êtres plus « conscients ». *« On n'en est qu'à la petite enfance de la transe, affirme François Féron, de l'institut TranceScience. Et sans doute traversera-t-elle les trois étapes par lesquelles est déjà passée l'hypnose et qui sont celles de la vérité, selon Schopenhauer : d'abord ridiculisée, puis violemment combattue, enfin acceptée comme une évidence. »*



The world

“Le Fil Good” newsletter: because we need it more and more, every Monday, find our selection of comforting news.

Your email

Subscribe

[Privacy Policy](#)



Annick Cojean