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Altered States of Consciousness and Creative Expression

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Hypnagogia, a state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep, provides a palette where conscious awareness intertwines with dream images. This state is compared with synesthesia, the imaginal realm, and Jung's active imagination process as inspiration for artistic creation.

Keywords: *imaginal realm, mundus imaginalis, hypnagogia, active imagination, synesthesia, altered states, creative expression, art*

As an artist and graduate student researching creativity and consciousness, delving into the unconscious realms of the mind has become an integral component of my daily practice and creative expression. In particular, hypnagogia, synesthesia, and active imagination as a means to access the unconscious through altered states, have been of vital importance. I have been observing how my artworks often depict the unconscious content of my psyche in symbolic form, and hold meaning long before my rational mind can make sense of it.

I was drawn to the field of transpersonal psychology because it includes studies into experiences that are beyond ego, including altered states of consciousness (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013). An *altered state of consciousness* is a change in overall pattern of conscious experience, or a profound shift (not always consciously recognized) in the subjective feeling about reality (Revonsuo, Kallio, & Sikka, 2009). Ordinary consciousness, according to Tart (1986), is based on habitual processes—patterned, automated, and systematic functioning—of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and acting. In contrast to ordinary consciousness, an altered state of consciousness occurs when there are, often radical and large in magnitude, simultaneous changes to subjective reality, which interfere with the ordinary pattern (Tart, 1986).

Hypnagogia

In my own experiential engagements with altered states of consciousness, *hypnagogic states* and the method of *active imagination* have led me to a deeper self-understanding by assisting with individuation and an ongoing process of self-actualization. Hypnagogia (Mavromatis, 1987) is the unique state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep. In my personal experience when paying attention to the immediate concreteness of ordinary consciousness as it gives way to a vivid imaginal experience or inner

dialogue during this state, an absorptive transformation of consciousness that can be termed “altered” occurs. This experience is difficult to articulate (any verbal description falls short of capturing my experience). Whereas my creative expression tends to be a result of divergent thought processes and serve as means to bring fragments of these non-linear and even irrational ideas into a tangible plane of existence, reflecting, writing, and revising is a convergent process in which my thoughts are brought together in a logical fashion meant to convey a specific idea.

Hypnagogia, a digital painting (Figure 1), is an expression of my experience while in a hypnagogic state, which I can only maintain for a few minutes at a time, as elements of conscious awareness intertwine with dreamlike imagery. During this time, somatic experiences dissipate while other ways of knowing are illuminated until I am absorbed into the imagery. Momentarily, this absorption entails a loss of ego, transformation of perception, and alterations to time and space that feel like entering into a stream of sensations being perceived at once. When my hypnagogic experience is accompanied by music, notes and frequencies take on color and form, becoming an epiphenomenon of complex imagery with fantastical scenarios.

When I am professionally engaged in producing an illustration for a commercial purpose, I rarely take myself into an altered state—an experience I hold personal and for the purpose of spiritual insight. However, after a stream of vivid colors and unbounded forms that accompany the hypnagogic state, I must consciously reassemble the shapes, patterns, and symbolic imagery I encountered. This requires an analytic transformation of my recollection and a skillful interpretation into a work of art—skills similar to those I employ in commercial work. Utilizing color and form in a manner that provokes an instant and intuitive emotional response, I continue to render emotions until matter emerges and dances to

Figure 1. Hypnagogia: Digital Painting (2012)

its own rhythm. This occasionally results in a cacophony of sensations that evoke the original experience, but have, overtime, evolved to a much more refined, aesthetic form.

Synesthesia and the Imaginal Realm

William James (1982), described consciousness as a stream of unending parade of thoughts, feelings, images, ideas, sensations, conceptions and emotions that are brought into conscious awareness before dissipating. This typically requires interaction with an environment that provides input from senses such as sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste. By observing the subtle alterations of sensory perception when focusing my attention inwardly, I have experienced a phenomenon I equate with *synesthesia*.

Synesthesia, which means joined sensation (Cytowic, 2002), is something I think of as multiple sensory inputs integrating into a unified process. Henry Corbin (1976) wrote of the spiritual imagination as an altered state of active imagination; instead of individuated processes, the senses are synthesized into oneness that is recognized by the soul.

In active imagination, the imaginative perception ceases to be scattered across the various thresholds of the physical body's five senses, and because it is no longer required for the care of the physical body, which is exposed to the vicissitudes of the external world, imaginative perception can finally display its true superiority over sense perception. ... The imaginative function makes it possible for all the universes to symbolize with each other and, by way of experiment, it enables us to imagine that each substantial reality assumes forms that correspond to each respective universe. (Corbin, 1976, pp. 7, 14)

I recently painted an image (Figure 2), which might be conceived of as a rendition of the imaginal realm (*mundus imaginalis*). It is a world of "subtle bodies that is both intermediary and intermediate and requires its own faculty of perception, namely, imaginative power, a faculty with a cognitive function, a *noetic* value which is as real as that of sense perception or intellectual intuition" (Corbin, 1976, p. 8). I think of the imaginal realm not as fantasy, but as a visionary state containing permutations or potential possibilities of reality that are realized through an inner knowing revealed by suprasensory perceptions. James' (1902/1982) and Corbin's (1976) discussions of the imagination's noetic value in revelation, illumination, and deep knowing continue to inform the

open-minded exploration of consciousness I attempt to convey in my own artistic endeavors. For example, when painting, I try to retain the qualia of an experience from an altered state of consciousness by focusing on reassembling eidetic forms and formless emotions into visual representations without consciously judging aesthetic values. While this blend of unconscious and conscious processes often results in artistic expressions that provoke reflection relating to aspects of my own life, I find that leaving my work somewhat enigmatic, and thus open to the subjective interpretation of the viewer, allows for additional insights to develop, perhaps including those derived from the collective unconscious.

Active Imagination

Entering the imaginal realm is a positive experience according to Jungian psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz (1980), who wrote the following: "A beneficial effect arises from attempting to objectivize (carefully observe) contents of the unconscious in the awake state and relate with them consciously" (p. 146). Jung's application of *active imagination* as a cognitive method of psycho-spiritual development suggested a conscious turning of attention toward the unconscious for the purpose of healing and individuation by engaging in dialogue with the images and moods that arise from fantasies and dreams (Jung & Chodorow, 1997). In this way, active imagination aptly identifies the practice that brings me to the threshold between ordinary consciousness and the imaginal realm of the dream world. By maintaining a degree of alertness and openness to this altered state of consciousness, I both observe and engage with what I feel are deeply spiritual images, feelings, and insights that emerge during this practice.

As there are no specific traditions or dogmatic principles attached to this practice, James Hillman's writing on active imagination as an imaginal practice suggested that it might not be considered a spiritual practice in the traditional sense. "It is not a discipline because there are no prescribed images that one must follow. One works with the images that arise, not special ones chosen by a master or a code" (Hillman, 1990, p. 57). Nonetheless, as a method of self-knowing or coming into a deeper understanding of one's own psyche, I feel that practicing active imagination and engaging in hypnagogic practices have been beneficial in my process of psycho-spiritual development. As such, bringing forth subject matter from the imaginal realm or unconscious dimensions of the mind into creative expressions is one

Figure 2. Mundus Imaginalis: Acrylic on Canvas 24 x 20 in. (2014)

of my primary interests in both the creation of art and research into consciousness. In this way altered states of consciousness have served as a catalyst in my journey of self-discovery as seen through a transpersonal lens and expressed in my artwork.

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About the Artist

Micah Linton, MA, has received a Masters in transpersonal psychology, with a specialization in Creative Expression, from Sofia University. He is interested in imagery that comes from the more extreme levels of mystical experiences and the way they manifest into symbolic representations or archetypal elements. Linton is also

a creative expression facilitator with UCLA's Creative Minds Project for S.P.Y. (Safe Place for Youths) in Venice, CA where he is developing a computers arts and training program utilizing 3D modeling and printing. A graduate of Savannah College of Art of Design, Linton received his BFA in 1995 and spent almost two decades creating art and writing stories for video games, children's books, and graphic novels. Recently, Linton founded a virtual reality company called Vection Labs that is focused on creating positive experiences that promote well-being. Additional examples of his artistic endeavors can be found on his website <http://micahlinton.com>

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