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Sciencing the mystical: the trickery of the psychedelic trip report

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ABSTRACT

Science has caught wind of mysticism once again. Operationalising metrics from the writings of perennial philosophers, psychopharmacologists are using psychedelics in a laboratory context to reliably induce ‘mystical experiences’. These experiences are scored along such dimensions as unity, noesis, transcendence of space–time and ineffability. How are we to read this moment? I draw on data from an ethnography of psychedelic science and take cue from Walter Benjamin’s treatment of the threshold in *Convolute O* of *The Arcades Project*, to identify apophatic narratives of trickery that contrast with the positive knowledge prominent in the sciencing of the mystical experience. Read as apophatic labour, psychedelic trip reports reveal how the significance of the mystical encounter lies not in its point-like efficacy in transforming the subject, but in precisely the doubts, contradictions and aporias involved in the writing out of their experiences.

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Convolute O: prostitution, gambling

Our election cry must be: Reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but through the analysis of mystical consciousness that is unclear to itself ... Then people will see that the world has long possessed the dream of a thing-and that it only needs to possess the consciousness of this thing in order really to possess it. (Marx, cited in Benjamin 2002, N5a,1)

We have grown very poor in threshold experiences. Falling asleep is perhaps the only such experience that remains to us. (But together with this, there is also waking up). (Benjamin 2002, O2a,1)

Pharmacological science has renewed its curiosity in the ‘mystical experience’, skilfully occasioned through administration of psychedelic drugs, purportedly establishing permanent changes in self.

In participants who had mystical experiences during their psilocybin session, Openness remained significantly higher than baseline more than one year after the session. The findings suggest a specific role for psilocybin and mystical-type experiences in adult personality change. (MacLean, Johnson, and Griffiths 2011, 1453)

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The idea that a single discrete experience can result in lasting beneficial effects in an individual's attitudes or behavior is highly unusual if not unprecedented within the modern biomedical paradigm. (Garcia-Romeu, Griffiths, and Johnson 2015, 163)

Once you drink you see, and once you see you cannot unsee. (Narby, cited in Richards 2015, 33)

Piercing phantasmagorias; becoming woke. The 1960s call for the transformation of global consciousness stirs.

And yet.

The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary. A *Schwelle* <threshold> is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *schwellen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses. (Benjamin 2002, O2a,1)

Threshold experiences: swollen zones; swollen in the zone.

Eight dimensions of the Hood Mysticism Scale:

EGO QUALITY (E): The experience of a loss of sense of self while consciousness is nevertheless maintained

UNIFYING QUALITY (U): The experience of the multiplicity of objects of perception as nevertheless united

INNER SUBJECTIVE QUALITY (Is): The perception of an inner subjectivity to all things

TEMPORAL/SPATIAL QUALITY (T): Both space and time are modified, with the extreme being one of an experience that is both 'timeless' and 'spaceless'

NOETIC QUALITY (N): The experience as a source of valid knowledge

INEFFABILITY (I): The impossibility of expressing the experience in conventional language

POSITIVE AFFECT (P): Typically the experience is of joy or blissful happiness

RELIGIOUS QUALITY (R): The intrinsic sacredness of the experience

(Adapted from Hood 1975, 31–32)

Clinical researchers ask participants to write out their experiences in the days following psychedelic sessions. Elsewhere, online repositories of tens of thousands of psychedelic 'trip reports' peppered with scientific precision characterise more attempts to speak the ineffable.

Definition of trip reports (I): 'Detailed first-hand descriptions of drug experiences' (Bluelight)

This presence was a feeling, not something I saw or heard. I only felt it, but it felt more real than any reality I have experienced. And it was a familiar place too. One I had felt before. It was when I surrendered to this, that I felt like I let go ... I was in the void. This void had a strange and indescribable quality to it in that there was nothing to it but this feeling of unconditional and undying Love. It felt like my soul was basking in the feeling of this space. I have no idea how long this lasted. Time and space did not exist there. (Volunteer, cited in Barrett and Griffiths 2018, 397).

[The First Principle of Apophatic Language:] The Aporia of Transcendence

(a) X transcends all names and referential delimitation.

(b) If the major premise is true, it must also be false or incomplete, because if X is ineffable in this rigorous sense, it cannot be called X.

(c) This dilemma leads neither to silence nor to a distinction between two kinds of names (*deus* in itself, *deus* in our minds; God in himself, God in creatures; God and 'God'; or God and god).

(d) The aporia yields an open-ended process by which the original assertion of transcendence continually turns back critically upon itself.

(Sells 1994, 207)

I believe Mother Ayahuasca wanted me to write this book to help bring her medicine to the world.

(Author and psychotherapist)

I learned photography in order to capture what I saw in my session.

(Trial participant I)

After Salvia blew the hinges off my reality the study ended. I needed to build new containers to keep processing what I saw.

(Trial participant II)

I live now in the knowledge that the mystical plane is the real one. It watches this one.

(Psychedelic Society audience member)

Definition of trip reports (II): Documented waves of non-sensuous correspondences evoking, provoking and metamorphosing the power of drug experiences.

... the point to consider here is whether the anthropologist [studying shamanism] was himself part of a larger and more complex staging in which exposure of tricks is the name of the game and that what we are witness to via the text is an imaginative, albeit unintended and serendipitous, rendition of the skilled revelation of the skilled concealment necessary to the mix of faith and skepticism necessary to magic. (Taussig 2006, 150)

Go again. Consider here whether the psychedelic clinical trial researchers oversee experimental systems that skilfully produce objective, replicable knowledge without the scientists' subjective interference (except a little subjective influencing here and there), admiring of the skilled separation of subjectivity and objectivity reported by others (while keen to expose a little subjective influencing here and there).

Futurity tricks: summoning the gratification of imagined successful medicalisation to curtail critique in the present course of action.

Commodity tricks: trading the pursuit of widely useful knowledge of whole plants for narrowly patentable knowledge of synthetic extracts.

Continuity tricks: interpolating smooth transitions between measurement points to reveal how discrete interventions result in unidirectional transformations.

Placebo tricks: reading for figure-ground reversals that seek the magic not in the drug but in everything-but-the-drug.

Each a skilled revelation relying on the experiment; magical formulae as formulae for magic.

The dominant image of the mystical experience in psychedelic science is a mountain with many paths leading to a single, eternal mountaintop. This is the universalist domain of perennialism. But read as apophatic labour, trip reports reveal the power of the mystical encounter to lie in a series of mis/translations across thresholds – the doubts, contradictions, ambivalences and aporias involved in the writing out of experiences. Psychedelic science is setting before us new tasks of dream interpretation.

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