

# QUASI-MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES INDUCED BY PSYCHEDELIC SUBSTANCES

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## Abstract

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The goal of this paper is to show that the psychedelic experience offers a unique condition in studying spiritual imagination. The spiritual aspect is frequently present in the psychedelic experience. Psychedelic visions are not psychotic hallucinations, users often find them enjoyable, uplifting, fulfilling and inspiring experiences in spite of their frequently and shockingly transformative aspects. Furthermore, the experience is frequently accompanied by intellectual ruminations and realizations. One of the most important features of the psychedelic altered state of consciousness is its hyper-associative capacity. The flood of associations might easily lead to visions representing the world in a poetic, mythic way, quasi-mystical visions.

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**Keywords:** spiritual imagination ▪ psychedelic experience ▪ intellectual ruminations  
▪ hyper-associative capacity of the mind

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## INTRODUCTION

„[P]sychedelics – for good or ill – have played a surprisingly large role in shaping the landscape of modern spirituality.”, writes John Horgan in his *Rational Mysticism*.<sup>1</sup> Since William James’s self-experiments with nitrous oxide, which contributed in an essential way to write his classic work of the psychology of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the strong relation between hallucinogen substances and spiritual fantasies is well known (James 2009/1902). After about a quarter of a century’s worth of a forced hiatus, research into psychedelics could continue in many different fields, around the ‘90s. The classic experiments of the ‘60s (eg. Phanke, 1963) are being repeated, such as inducing quasi-mystical experiences under laboratory conditions (Griffiths et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2008). Anthropologists and psychopharmacologists delve into the ritual consumption of ayahuasca and its impact on one’s mental operations (Trichter, 2010; Frecska, 2011; Frecska et al., 2013). Psychedelic visions are analyzed from a phenomenological perspective, too (Horváth et al., 2017;

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<sup>1</sup> John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism. Spirituality Meets Science in the Search for Enlightenment*, Boston, Mariner Books, 2001. (Kindle Edition), loc. 226.

Horváth, 2012a,b; Horváth and Szabó, 2012; Horváth, 2016; Shanon, 2001, 2002, 2003; Lundborg, 2012; Szabó et al. 2014; Horváth et al., 2017; Szummer et al., 2017). In this paper, we would like to address the religious-spiritual aspects of the psychedelic experience from a phenomenological point of view.<sup>2</sup> Our goal is to show that psychedelic substances offer a favourable condition for spiritual imagination.

### *The psychedelic experience*

Psychedelic substances are able to help the mind to transcend its habituated schemes of perception, thinking and feeling. The chemically-induced radical change of the neural connections results in altered state of consciousness. Millions or even hundreds of millions of neurons get synchronized in unexpected ways and discharge in an unusual rhythm, which then produces synoptic connections we have never encountered before. From a phenomenological standpoint this means that the subject experiences an unstoppable surge of memories and phantasies creating completely new metaphors, analogies, symbols and references. According to Grinspoon and Bakalar's classic description (1983, 13-14),

At deeper levels, drug users may regress to childhood as they relive their memories, or they may project themselves into the series of dreamlike images before their closed eyelids and become the protagonists of symbolic dramas enacted for the mind's eye. Actions, persons, and images in this dream-world or even in the external world may become so intensely significant and metaphorically representative that they take on the character of symbols, myths, and allegories. Loss of self may be experienced as an actual death and rebirth, undergone with anguish and joy of overwhelming intensity.

During a psychedelic experience, cognitive and emotional patterns of the mind might be completely rearranged. This provides possibilities for different types of psychedelic therapies. (see Frecska, 2011; Gasser et al., 2014; Mithoefer, 2011; Oehen et al., 2013; Sessa, 2012; Vollenweider, 2001). A new mode of existence may open up to the *psychonaut* in which one is capable of shedding one's habituated way of being, and thus able to perceive the world as a place that is more meaningful, richer and is full of possibilities.

It is of great importance whether the subject goes through the experience with open eyes or blindfolded. When the user experiences a trip with *eyes open*, the effect usually consists of distortion of forms and colors, spatial and temporal

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<sup>2</sup> We restrict our efforts on the phenomenological approach. We do not analyse the significance of individual factors (traits of the person and the actual mindset of the subject) and environmental factors (setting of psychedelic experience. About the importance of these factors see Studerus et al., 2011; Leary et al., 1963; Janke, 1983; Preller and Vollenweider, 2016.

disorientation, and, at the same time, enrichment of perception. This experience can be characterized by heightened aesthetic appreciation and flood of associations, sometimes even synesthetic transfiguration of perception. On the other hand, if the psychonaut goes through the experience *blindfolded* then the trip usually consists of visions. As we shall see, psychedelic visions are not psychotic hallucinations, users often find them enjoyable, uplifting, fulfilling and inspiring experiences in spite of their frequently and shockingly transformative aspects. Ideally, the subjects are often happier and find themselves in a better physical shape after the sessions (Shanon 2003, p. 165). Characteristic features of the visions are the intense affectivity and extraordinarily vivid imagination. Furthermore, the experience is frequently accompanied by intellectual ruminations and realizations. Although the spiritual aspect is frequently present in the psychedelic experience, the contents of the visions are monstrously heterogeneous. The range of the accounts expands from playful and frivolous fantasies (e.g. users see cartoonish figures or characteristic images of *pop art*) to mythical, numinous or unsettling topics of other worldly journeys (Shanon 2003, p. 96). Everyday objects may be saturated with deep significance and with mystical connotations. Psychedelic visions represent not a volatile, obscure, chaotic experience, rather an intensified multimodal experience. Mostly clear and organized patterns form, which can easily be recalled after the initial experience. At the same time, as Benny Shanon, the Israel psychologist, psychonaut of several hundred ayahuasca trips observes, the narrative structure of the visions are not as complex as those of dream narratives.<sup>3</sup> Shanon proposes that in considering the nature of psychedelic visions, a conspicuous paradox appears, i.e. visions compel a *perceptual belief* (and strong illusions of acquiring knowledge) to the subjects. Shanon accepts the notion that visions are hallucinations, however, he emphasizes that they are *special kinds* of hallucinations which are not only able to concur with perceptual objects but the experience feels hyper-real, that is “more real than real” for the users.<sup>4</sup> This special variety of altered states of consciousness possesses and integrates the variability of the imagination of normal waking consciousness and some of the vividness and sharpness of the normal perception (see Shanon, 2003). It is enormously difficult to find the right place of the visionary experience amongst the multifarious system of intentional acts. Seeing from this perspective, this kind of “hybrid experience” is a special conundrum. These psychological and philosophical

<sup>3</sup> “By and large, it seems to me that structurally they are less complex than the narratives of dreams. /.../ Only a relatively small number of the visions in my corpus of data define multi-unit, complex narrative structures.” (Shanon 2003, p. 110)

<sup>4</sup> Referring to Merleau-Ponty (1962), Shanon says that in normal life we do not doubt our perceptual contents; when stimuli reaches the eyes – and generally our bodily presence – then we promptly immersed into the world. “Normal human beings do not doubt that what they perceive is real. In a fashion, the act (or rather, the existential state) of perception forces itself upon us and the moment we open our sensory faculties we are immersed in the world of our perception without any choice or room for doubt, like fish in water.” (Shanon 2003, p. 165).

potentials of the phenomenological research into psychedelic experience are suggested to be rooted in this very hybrid nature. Due to this duality, psychedelic fantasies – compared to regularly occurring ones – are relatively stable and less likely to slip away as well as are easier to recall. This latter characteristic is crucial for a phenomenological project since, in the psychedelic state, like in any other altered states of consciousness, it is impossible to keep the intentional structures and functions of reflexive consciousness. At the same time the phenomenological analysis obviously demands the operation of the reflexive consciousness of the subject.

There is a returning dilemma that psychonauts and psychedelic researchers are encountering; whether the psychedelic experience a distortion, debilitation and dissociation of the normal waking consciousness, i.e. a chemically induced temporary hallucination is or straight the opposite, a richer and deeper way of perceiving reality? The answer depends on from what perspective reality and perception are viewed. If the world is seen from a naturalistic point of view, as the sum of positive facts and things and perception is a kind of a mirror-like reflection of the facts of the world, the psychedelic experience will be considered nothing more than an artificially induced hallucination. At the same time, creativity and the fantasy activity of the mind are enormously enhanced by psychedelic substances, and they can increase creativity as well.<sup>5</sup> The hyper-associative, creative dynamism of the psychedelic mind may have an important role in survival. It is a limitless reservoir of creative solutions, which is vital if the environment changes and the tribe or the individual has to adapt to the demands of new environmental circumstances. So, this kind of divergent capacity of the mind can play a central role in an unstable social and physical environment. This integrative mode of consciousness is described by Michael Winkelman as a superefficient problem-solving activity in which the affective states of the shaman are attuned with the tribe (Winkelman, 2011b, p. 35). Winkelman (2011b) explains visionary states as deriving from the integration of the activity of the low level-system of cognition under the language-based high level-system with that of the neocortical areas. He refers to Vollenweider and Geyer (2001, p. 23) who state that psychedelics "reduce the sensory gating systems of the lower brain structures, leading to a flood of information into higher levels of the brain" resulting in an enhanced integration of information from the evolutionary ancient structures of the brain into the frontal area. Referring to transcultural anthropological studies, visions ("*presentational symbolism*" in Winkelman) are regarded as common factors in shamanic trance states and psychedelic experiences (Winkelman 2011a, p. 166). Winkelman proposes that the visionary experience is the result of a psychointegrative function of consciousness. It is

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<sup>5</sup> „/A// participants performed better on creativity tests in a setting where the expectation was reinforced that the drug would actually enhance creativity". (Preller, K. H., & Vollenweider, F. X. (2016). Phenomenology, structure, and dynamic of psychedelic states.)

considered to be the fourth mode of consciousness after wakefulness, REM-sleep, and dreamless sleep. The function of psychointegration is a peculiar problem-solving in which the affective states of the shaman are attuned with the needs of tribe; thus, visions are often the symbolic-imaginative representations of social conflicts and emotions (Winkelman 2011b, p. 35). (As opposed to Winkelman, Shanon (2003) does not consider the symbolic aspects of psychedelic visions. In case of visions, argues Shanon, there is no need to decipher hidden meaning; visions have intrinsic meaning and sense for the subject.).

In 1948, the strongest psychedelic substance of all time, LSD, was begun to manufacture for psychopharmacologists and psychiatrists for research purposes by the Swiss pharmaceutical company, Sandoz. The dilemma mentioned above, appeared here, as well. At first, psychopharmacologists thought that a reversible, quasi-psychotic hallucination, or, in other words, a “model psychosis” was induced by LSD. But psychiatrists quickly came to realize that a psychedelic vision is not a psychosis-like hallucination, i.e. the psychedelic experience is not a sphere of existence dominated by chaos. The pattern of a psychedelic vision is totally different from that of a psychotic hallucination, since (i) if the appropriate mindset and setting (environment) is generated, it usually turns out to be pleasurable and is not filled with anxiety; (ii) modality is usually visual and not exclusively auditory; (iii) a psychedelic vision brings an extra layer of meaning, context and associations flowing to the user; here an almost shocking multimodal flood of meaning occurs; (iv) the experience does not induce memory loss; (v) the time frame of the experience can be defined (e.g. in cases of mescaline, psilocybin or ayahuasca, a trip generally takes 3-5 hours, double as much for LSD, 20-30 minutes for DMT, etc.); (vi) psychedelic visions have an integrative potential for the individual as opposed to psychotic hallucinations<sup>6</sup> which dissociate the personality of the psychotic individual (Winkelman, 2011b; Carhart-Harris et al., 2014; Tagliacuzzi et al., 2014; Mishara & Schwartz, 2011);<sup>7</sup> (vii) sometimes, a vision is as intense as perception would be, e.g. something usual, like a flower or a pebble, the realness of which we would never be questioned (See Shanon, 2003); lastly (viii) it generates a rich aesthetic experience.

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<sup>6</sup> In South-American indigenous tribes that use ayahuasca, psychoactive plants act as a moral compass for the members of the tribe.

<sup>7</sup> Neurological data also suggest a significant difference between psychotic hallucination and psychedelic vision. We know from psychopharmacological research evidences that psychedelic experiences stem from the increased levels of neurotransmitters, specifically serotonin and dopamine which last a couple of hours. According to recent neurological research (Carhart-Harris et al., 2014, Tagliacuzzi et al., 2014, Mishara & Schwartz, 2011), psychedelic substances kick start certain neurosynchronizational and pharmacological mechanisms that actually do not deteriorate information processing, on the contrary, they make the individual able to process information that is normally subliminal and, thus, lost.

## THE HYPER-ASSOCIATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCE

One of the most eminent characteristics of the psychedelic altered state of mind is its augmented associative capacity. Significant parallels can be found between the hyper-associative psychedelic mind and the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's late ontology. The style of Merleau-Ponty's last texts, compiled in the book titled *The Visible and the Invisible*, is imbued with a mystic flavor. In his approach, Being is inexhaustibly rich and perception, exploiting the over-flowing richness of Being, is an inherently creative activity.<sup>8, 9</sup> Instead of the cold, geometrical Cartesian-Euclidean concept of being, Merleau-Ponty brings forth the polymorphic and amorphous structure of Being, i.e. its "exalted promiscuity". "Say that the things are structures, frameworks, the stars of our life: not before us, laid out as perspective spectacles, but gravitating about us. Such things do not presuppose man, who is made of their flesh. But yet their eminent being can be understood only by him who enters into perception, and with it keeps in distant-contact with them /.../" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 220).

The individual events of perception are differentiations of our belonging to the massive medium of Being itself. This all-embracing medium is the "flesh" (*le chair*), or "the flesh of the world". The "flesh" is defined as a common, intertwining structure (*chiasm*) of the world and the perceiving body of the subject (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 270).<sup>10</sup> As David Abram puts it, the flesh is "the mysterious tissue [...] that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its spontaneous activity [...]" (Abram, 1996, p. 66). The psychedelic experience can be approached as a manifestation of the polymorphic-amorphous structure of Being in the Merleau-Pontian sense, as the revealing of *wild being*. During the use of psychedelic substances, the psychonaut's boundaries of the self become porous, self-affection more intense, the phenomenological body (*Leib*) merges with the environment of the subject

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty among others, applies the concept of the Freudian interpretation, Freud's novel idea of the past wedging in and organizing the present, as well as Husserl's "ray of world" or "ray of the past". Consciousness has to be understood as "rays of the past and rays of the world at the end of which, through many »memory screens« dotted with lacunae and with the imaginary, pulsate some almost sensible structures, some individual memories." (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 268). While in the Cartesian ontology, consciousness is a phenomenon made out of a sequence of discrete, individual *Erlebnissen*, in Merleau-Ponty's mind "we are a field of Being" meaning that in every single act of perception the whole Being reveals itself in us and by us (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 240).

<sup>9</sup> "The interior monologue — the 'consciousness' itself - to be understood not as a series of individual (sensible or non sensible) 'I think that's' but as openness upon general configurations or constellations, rays of the past and rays of the world at the end of which, through many 'memory screens' dotted with lacunae and with the imaginary, pulsate some almost sensible structures, some individual memories. It is the Cartesian idealization applied to the mind as to the things (Husserl) that has persuaded us that we were a flux of individual *Erlebnisse*, whereas we are a field of Being. Even in the present, the landscape is a configuration." (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 240.)

<sup>10</sup> Perceptions are „differentiations of one sole and massive adhesion to Being which is the flesh (eventually as 'lace-works')" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 270.)

and the phenomenological field becomes the background for the ever-forming new forms (*Gestalts*) of perception.<sup>11</sup> One of the best known reports of the psychedelic experience is Aldous Huxley's essay, *The Doors of Perception* (1954), which had a huge role in preparing the psychedelic revolution of the '60s. Laurie Spurling states that Huxley's essay "reveals many parallels between perception under mescaline and Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of pre-objective experience at its primordial level" which refers to the experience of the *wild being*. (Spurling, 2014, p. 19).<sup>12</sup> In Huxley's essay, a naïve phenomenological approach is demonstrated; "[...] we must preserve and, if necessary, intensify our ability to look at the world directly and not through that half opaque medium of concepts, which distorts every given fact into the all too familiar likeness of some generic label or explanatory abstraction" (Huxley, 1954, p. 22). In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty sets the same aim, i.e. to return from the "perception fashioned by culture to the »brute« or »wild« perception" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 212). Mescaline, so to say, catapulted Huxley into an everlasting explosion of primordial experience<sup>13</sup>, into the prolific, over-flowingly rich world of the *wild being* (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 220). The title of Huxley's essay came from one of William Blake's prose poems, called *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The great English visionary says:

"But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid. [...] If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. [...] For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." (Blake, 1994, p. 14).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Huxley's description is a good example: „A moment later a clump of Red Hot Pokers, in full bloom, had exploded into my field of vision. So passionately alive that they seemed to be standing on the very brink of utterance, the flowers strained upwards into the blue. [...] I looked down at the leaves and discovered a cavernous intricacy of the most delicate green lights and shadows, pulsing with undecipherable mystery." (Huxley 1954, p. 34)

<sup>12</sup> Spurling quotes Huxley's description of his own sensation of space under the effect of mescaline: "At ordinary times the eye concerns itself with such problems as where? – how far? – how situated in relation to what? In the mescaline experience [...] the mind does its experiencing in terms of intensity of experience, profundity of significance, relations within a pattern [...]" (Huxley 1954, p. 5 - quot. Spurling 2014, p. 19) Then Spurling states: "Here we find an illustration of the distinction Merleau-Ponty makes between perception in the natural attitude which we understand as occurring in objective space (where? how far? etc.), and pre-objective perception, occurring in phenomenal space, and where we witness the birth of perceptual meaning and organization (relations in a pattern)." (Spurling 2014, p. 19)

<sup>13</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty, the wild world "to be described as a space of transcendence, a space of impossibilities, of explosion, of dehiscence, and not as objective-immanent space." (1968, p. 216).

<sup>14</sup> Blake 1994. Plate 14.

Blake describes the infinite potentiality of perception with the help of poetic metaphors as if would address Huxley's mescaline experience. The use of "corrosives" is to free perception to such an extent that Huxley could see things in their full richness, not just "thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." The "corrosive" of mescaline frees Huxley's perception from the rigid categorization of everyday consciousness, and emancipates its mechanical ways of functioning. It is a state of mind in which routines are removed from perception, thus "the doors of perception will be cleansed" and the overflowing richness of perception and Being sheds into light.<sup>15 16</sup>

### THE RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF THE PSYCHEDELIC VISIONS

The foundation of each religion is set by mythical-spiritual fantasies. From a historical perspective, the role of the mythical-spiritual visions is of utmost importance. These visions are crystallized and articulated in canonical texts, rituals, and visual work of arts might provide the basic patterns of consensual reality of a given culture. The spiritual atmosphere of psychedelics, on the one hand, and skyrocket fantasy, on the other, is an eminent characteristic of the psychedelic visions. Shanon claims that "o/verall, what make ayahuasca visions impressive is their magnificence, grandeur, super-naturalness, and the psychological and spiritual impact they have on their viewers." (Shanon 2003, p. 110). Shanon's statement is underpinned by both classical and contemporary empirical studies (Phanke, 1963; Downing and Wygant, 1964; Masters and Houston, 1966; Clark, 1974; Grof 1975; Griffiths et al., 2008; MacLean et al., 2011). One of the most characteristic features of psychedelic visions is how easily they can take on themselves a religious-spiritual form. According to psychonauts' reports about their experiences, their emotions and ideas are often described to make these sessions quasi-mystical. Psychedelic visions "are often characterised as providing understanding, enlightenment, a sense of unity, oneness with the universe, connection with others, and personal integration." (Winkelman, 2011b, p. 5). This exalted state is a vital factor motivating the use of psychedelic substances.<sup>17</sup> "In some cases the culmination is a mystical ecstasy in which for an eternal moment all contradictions seem reconciled, all questions answered, all wants irrelevant or satisfied, all existence encompassed by an

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<sup>15</sup> To put it in Merleau-Ponty's words: "Say that the things are structures, frameworks, the stars of our life: not before us, laid out as perspective spectacles, but gravitating about us. Such things do not presuppose man, who is made of their flesh. But yet their eminent being can be understood only by him who enters into perception, and with it keeps in distant-contact with them." (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 220).

<sup>16</sup> As it was recently demonstrated by the MRI-records of Robin Carhart-Harris et al. (2014), the activity of the brain is increased enormously for a couple of hours. Millions of neurons are synchronized in novel ways, building up new and unusual patterns, discharging in different rhythms.

<sup>17</sup> See Moro et al., 2011



experience that is felt to define the ultimate reality, boundless, timeless, and ineffable.” (Grinspoon, Bakalar 1983, 13-14). In *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley was enlightened while admiring certain flowers that seemed to be eternal and transient at the same time with „their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged.” Huxley dawned on that what the flowers „so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were a - transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being” (Huxley 1954, pp.17-18). The hyper-associative performance of the psychedelic mind might be one of the main factors providing spiritual character to the psychonaut’s visions. The flood of associations might easily lead to visions representing the world in a poetic, mythic way, quasi-mystical visions about the universe and human existence. Subjects often report about an “oceanic feeling”, a deeply felt connection with the world’s inner nature, an *unio mystica*, which is described by the different religious traditions of the world regardless of their use of psychedelics for mystical journeys. Psychonauts regularly report an illusion of omnipotence and omniscience, a sense of harmony, a feeling of solemnity of Being. They feel in sync with nature and all of mankind. Newfound ideas seem one of a kind, cosmic in nature and their significance is heightened to the level of the whole mankind. This can lead to a kind of megalomania, often appearing in leaders of different religious cults.

Tom Wolfe, concerning the religious sensibility of the hippie movement of the ‘60s to the use of LSD and other psychedelic substances, observed:

”[...] every major modern religion, as well as countless long-gone minor ones, has originated not with a theology or a set of values or a social goal or even a vague hope of a life hereafter. They have all originated, instead, with a small circle of people who have shared some over-whelming ecstasy or seizure, a »vision«, a »trance«, a hallucination—an actual neurological event, in fact, a dramatic change in metabolism, something that has seemed to light up the entire central nervous system.”<sup>18</sup>

Although hippies and the youth culture of the sixties connected messianic expectations to LSD, “/m/any recreational users have probably never experienced the more profound and extraordinary effects, which are usually produced by larger doses, closed eyes, and deep introspection. At any dose, a great deal depends on the time, the place, and the persons involved.” writes Grinspoon and Bakalar (1983, p. 14). This is a one-sided view or it can be even called irresponsible to forget that not everyone (and not always) has a quasi-mystical *unio mystica* or even positive effects while using psychedelics. The hippies’ expectations were unreasonable because of at least three reasons; first of all,

<sup>18</sup> Wolfe, Tom: The Me-Decade and the Third Great Awakening. In: *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine*. Bantam, New York, 1977. p. 135.

the mind of the person undertaking the psychedelic trip, its religious sensibility and spiritual creativity are essential although neglected elements of the spiritual change of the subject.<sup>19</sup> Second, hippies ignored or at least, understated the phenomenon of ‘bad trips’. Bad trips are such psychedelic experiences that are characterized by negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, horror, paranoia or less intense but equally negative feelings, such as sadness, depression, disappointment and bitterness. Psychedelic substances have the ability to induce nightmarish episodes, mostly when they are not taken in a physically, emotionally and socially safe environment (setting) or in the proper emotional set of the psychonaut. “[...] what happened sometimes was not heavenly, but infernal. Instead of primordial illumination, some experienced the horror of deep alienation and paranoia, not self-other transcendence, but the most extreme forms of self-other deviation or alienation.”, says Arthur Verluise in his *American Gurus* (2014), a monograph about the contemporary American religious movements. William James described the experience induced by psychoactive substances as emotionally dichotomous. Aside from uplifting transcendent experiences, he portrays a state of “diabolical mysticism” when “instead of solace we find despair [...], meanings become horrifying and the powers that manifest seem evil in nature and against life.” In psychedelic visions, we not only face Heaven but also Hell. Of course, this happens in religious visions in general, too, regardless the use of substances. As far as Huxley is concerned, *The Doors of Perception* is a living proof of how much he was fascinated by the mescaline experience. At the same time, this essay also describes how there is space left for the dark side of a psychedelic experience. Two years later, in his second essay, *Heaven and Hell*, he goes a bit further into the subject and comes to the conclusion that “Dante’s *Hell* is a psychologically adequate definition for the case. The horrors portrayed in here are quite similar to what a schizophrenic patient or someone who took mescaline or LSD in the wrong circumstances could experience.”<sup>20</sup> In spite of James’ and Huxley’s warnings, on the whole, we can say that looking through the literature of bad trips, it is a neglected field of the psychedelic research, judging by the sheer volume of information on the subject. At last we take into consideration, that not only the agonies of the bad trips make psychedelic visions to be dubious from a spiritual point of view. Psychedelic experiences are not easy to integrate since they are the product of the abrupt and radical change of the state of the consciousness. Writers, like Robert Lowell, William Burroughs, Arthur Koestler, and spiritual authors, like Zaehner or Meher who were skeptical related to the spiritual value of psychedelic trips, emphasized their ephemeral nature.<sup>21</sup> Without integration, the psychedelic

<sup>19</sup> See Studerus, E., Gamma, A., Kometer, M., & Vollenweider, F. X. (2012). Prediction of psilocybin response in healthy volunteers. *PLoS One*, 7(2), e30800.

<sup>20</sup> Huxley (1956, 122)

<sup>21</sup> See Zaehner 1957, 1972; Meher 1966; About the writers see Lee, Shlain 2007

trip cannot be really understood and transformed into an event having a permanent spiritual value by absorbing into the user's life and behavior. It's true, however, if the integration is successful, the artificially induced quasi-mystical experience might result in a real, authentic spiritual enrichment of the personality. Ram Dass (Richard Alpert), Houston Smith, Huxley and many other authors' reports and their life certify the previous statement.

## CONCLUSION

One of the most important features of the psychedelic altered state of consciousness is its hyper-associative capacity. We suggested that spiritual contents and emotions of the psychedelic visions are facilitated due to this surged associative function. Do psychedelic visionary states represent real mysticism or only "Ersatz", surrogate, as Arthur Koestler calls it?<sup>22</sup> The answer depends on the success of the integration of the experience into the everyday life of the psychonaut. The main reason why many people reject the spiritual value of the psychedelic experience is its transient nature. Although the primary source of spiritual imagination is the individual psyche, most people need religious institutions and the practice of a particular religion to succeed this integrative process of spiritual visions. As Huston Smith, the American historian of religious studies writes about psychedelics: "If you do not institutionalize your spirituality, it gets no traction on history. So if Jesus had not been followed by Sain Paul, who established a church, the Sermon on the Mount would have evaporated within a generation. So I think if we are serious about the spiritual life, we have to undertake the burdens of institutionalization – and they are heavy." (Horgan, 2004, pp. 19-20.). In most of the cases, sharing psychedelic visions is a condition sine qua non of the preservation of the spiritual effect of the psychedelic trip. The collective, ritual consumption of entheogens is a fairly safe and efficient way of the integration of mystical aspects of the psychedelic experience. This kind of religious practice can be observed in e.g. the Indian churches of the União do Vegetal, the Santo Daime, the Barquinha in South America, or the Native American Church in North America.

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<sup>22</sup> See Lee, Shlain 2007, p. 81

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