

# Mind Altering Cinematography: Psychedelic Re-Orientations of Film Theory

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**Abstract:** In this time of the so-called psychedelic renaissance, it is “mind-revealing” to rediscover the body of work on LSD therapy by Stanislav Grof. As researcher of the transformative potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness, his observations from over fifty years of LSD research offer a holistic and deeply philosophical approach towards the realms of the human unconscious. Reading his work, one cannot help but make connections to (certain genres in) cinema. While in the mid-twentieth century film theory developed from and in relation to psychoanalytic conceptions of the unconscious, this article proposes to look at the lessons from research in psychedelics, to propose a psychedelic re-orientation of the cinematographic unconsciousness. Rather than a conscious or unconscious and ideological representation of the world, this article argues that our media culture itself belongs to the vast realm of the unconscious where we have strange encounters that lead to profound questions about what it means to be human in a transforming world in crisis.

Don't be scared. There must be  
beautiful things in this chaos.

—*The Beast*<sup>1</sup>

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1. *The Beast*, directed by Bertrand Bonello (Les Films du Bélier, 2023).

## THE PSYCHEDELIC REVIVAL, FILM THEORY, AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

We are in the midst of a renewed interest in psychedelics in science and culture. Usually, psychedelics (such as magic mushrooms and LSD) are associated with the American counterculture of the hippies, the summer of love, pop music, and rebellious youth culture, and maybe also with the protests against the Vietnam war, civil rights movements, and other emancipatory movements. And we may think of hippie exploitation films such as *The Trip* (Roger Corman, 1967) and *Psych-Out* (Richard Rush, 1968); or the rebellious freedom seeking adventurers in *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1970). After President Nixon declared ‘the War on Drugs’ in 1972, scientific research into psychedelics, which was thriving in the 1950s and 1960s, drastically dropped, psychedelics got a bad reputation and became a taboo topic for research; and hippie culture was slowly but surely replaced by new wave and punk.

Since the early 2000s, psychedelics have reappeared in a new wave of research into the properties of psychedelics to treat mental health issues such as PTS, anorexia, alcohol addiction, severe depression, and end of life anxiety. The psychedelic revival focuses on trying to understand the brain under psychedelics from a neuroscientific perspective, and on the therapeutic uses and contexts of these mind-altering substances and their healing potentials.<sup>2</sup> The 2000s also saw a revival of cultural and popular interests in psychedelics, evidenced in the popularity of nonfiction books such as Michael Pollan’s *How to Change your Mind*, Tao Lin’s *Trip*, and Merlin Sheldrake’s *Entangled Life*<sup>3</sup>—as well as in series, films, and artworks that address psychedelics openly as a remedy for different kinds of mental problems,

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2. Nicolas Langlitz, *Neuropsychodelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research since the Decade of the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Wouter Hanegraaff discusses how psychedelics resonate with esoteric traditions in *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Beatriz Labate and Clancy Cavnar’s collection *Psychedelic Justice: Towards a Diverse and Equitable Psychedelic Culture* (Santa Fe: Synergetic Press, 2021) observe the necessity of decolonial perspectives on this Indigenous wisdom and heritage also as an explicit concern in the psychedelic revival. In this article I focus on the “Western” ancestors related to LSD research and the psychedelic wave of the 1960s.

3. Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (London: Penguin Press, 2018); Tao Lin, *Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation and Change* (New York: Vintage, 2018); Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make our Worlds, Change our Minds, and Shape Our Futures* (New York: Vintage, 2021).

such as Netflix's *Magic Medicine* (2018), or *Nine Perfect Strangers* (2021) on Amazon Prime. Some medical professionals may consider the hallucinatory and other non-ordinary effects of psychedelics in treatment as "side effects" of the substances, but in fact psychedelics cannot be easily disentangled from the deep or strange experiences they provoke. As one patient in a trial exploring the effects of ketamine in combatting depression declared: "the trip is the most important thing [. . .]. My idea is that during the trip you unconsciously solve things in your head, that you come to certain insights [. . .] which helps you being aware of it."<sup>4</sup> The question is of course, what does "unconsciously" mean? Is the psychoanalytic unconscious as theorized by Freud and Lacan still a good model? Or is there something that we could call a "psychedelic unconscious" that points to other realms of the unconscious? This is a relevant question for cinema studies, as so much of film theory has been conceived in relation to the psychoanalytic unconscious. Before moving to the extended LSD research that psychiatrist Stanislav Grof conducted in the 1950s to the 1970s, and examining its relevance for today's film culture, let me briefly recall the unconscious in film theory.

Film has often been theorized in relation to the unconscious, ranging from colloquial comparisons of Hollywood cinema as a dream factory, to the development of modern film theory where cinema was considered as an ideological apparatus, tightly related to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Christian Metz, for instance, presented cinema as an "imaginary signifier" where the film screen is theorized as a Lacanian mirror-image, and where spectators are invited to identify with both the camera and with the characters on screen;<sup>5</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Cinematographic Apparatus" theorized how the spectator accepts the dominant ideological structures (of capitalism, of societal norms) embedded in cinema's imaginary worlds;<sup>6</sup> and Laura Mulvey's feminist critique of these ideological positions remains seminal, as she demonstrated that in the unconscious mirror-image or dream worlds of narrative cinema, men are presented as "ideal egos" that can look and act, while women are re-

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4. Joost Brecksema, "Exploring Inner Depths: A Qualitative Investigation of Patient's Lived Experiences with Psychedelic Treatment of Depression" (PhD diss., University of Groningen, 2024), 155.

5. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982).

6. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1974-5): 39-47.

duced to being the passive, “to-be-looked at” objects of desire.<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek has updated this approach of cinema as a seduction machine that operates through perverse pleasures and desires, bound up with ideology and politics. His bold Lacanian view on the cinematographic unconscious is brilliantly captured in Sophie Fiennes’ film *The Perverts Guide to Cinema* (2006). Of course, there are many important updates within a Freudian/Lacanian perspective on cinema, for instance in relation to specific genres such as horror, or from racial point of views, queer perspectives, and transgender approaches.<sup>8</sup> However, my aim here is not to evaluate this influential branch of film theory. I simply want to indicate how cinema and film theory have been (and continue to be) developed in important ways within a psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious.

Psychedelics, however, seem to present a conception of the unconscious that goes beyond the psychoanalytic framework of the individual psyche bound to drives and repressions. It is remarkable that the renewed interest in psychedelics emerges in a time when humanity faces multiple crisis that go beyond the individual psyche. Climate change and the environmental crisis, the dazzling implications of technology, most notably AI, increasing polarisation between groups of people (especially left and right sides of the political spectrum). The current state of cinema equally has gone beyond the classical narrative, and equally seems to ask: what kinds of “altered states of knowledge” and altered conceptions of intelligence (as conscious/unconscious constellations) do we need to navigate these crises? I suggest it might be worthwhile revisiting the vast research on LSD treatment to find some principles that can be instructive for the cinematographic unconscious and the search for what it means to be human in the current age. The rational oppositions between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, man and machine, “right” and “left” no longer hold: everything seems warped and weird, transforming into hallucinatory doppelgangers, imposing a dazzling “trip into the mirror world,” as Naomi Klein describes our Post-COVID so-

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7. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

8. See for instance, Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question,” *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 18–36; Calvin Thomas, *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory: Essays on Abjection in Literature, Mass Culture and Film* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (London: Duke University Press, 2019).

ciety<sup>9</sup>—something perhaps best captured on screen in Sean Price William’s weird and warped retake of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* in the delirious contemporary US of *The Sweet East* (2024). So let’s step through the looking glass, into the rabbit hole of psychedelics as a heuristic tool for the unconscious, and for the current state of cinema.

### STANISLAV GROF’S LSD RESEARCH AND THE HOLOTROPIC UNCONSCIOUS

Stanislav Grof started LSD treatments for psychiatric patients in the mid-1950s in Prague, in the former Czechoslovakia. At the time, LSD was legally manufactured, sponsored by the government and listed as an official therapeutic drug, as Grof explains in the foreword of his book *Realms of the Human Unconscious*.<sup>10</sup> From his observations from LSD psychotherapy, which encompass thousands of hours of therapy sessions, he concluded that a good framework to understand the unconscious that psychedelics seem to summon, is missing:

The phenomena observed in psychedelic sessions are manifestations of deep areas of the unconscious unknown to and unacknowledged by contemporary science. The application of existing theoretical concepts and practical procedures to the problems related to psychedelic-drug use has been, therefore, inappropriate, inadequate, and ineffective.<sup>11</sup>

He starts out by addressing the LSD controversy, which at the time was divided between, on the one hand, enormous hopes to solve any kind of problem, ranging from depression to the ecological crisis and ending the Vietnam war (Good Trip), and on the other hand, panic about LSD causing serious brain impairment, mental and physical harm, and a true menace to society (Bad Trip). Grof indicates his intention to go beyond this hysteria on both sides and offers serious research and a mapping of unknown territories of the mind. The controversy, however, does demonstrate that there is something fundamental embodied in the “LSD phenomenon that offers a deeper understanding of the mind, the nature of man, and human society.”<sup>12</sup>

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9. Naomi Klein, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World* (London: Penguin Books, 2023).

10. Stanislav Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research* (London: Independent Voices, 1975), viii.

11. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, x.

12. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 6.

The hallucinatory and mind-altering properties of LSD were first discovered by accident by Albert Hofmann in 1943, in the lab of the Swiss chemical company Sandoz. The original intention of the synthesis (based on an ergot fungus that is found in rye) was to obtain a respiratory and circulatory stimulant, but when Hofmann ingested some of the substance by accident, he discovered its psychoactive properties. This has famously become known as Bicycle Day, as he tried to cycle home from the lab in a total state of intoxication. After that discovery, he believed it would have strong psychiatric and therapeutic potential, and Sandoz started to manufacture LSD and distributed it widely to psychiatrists in Europe and the US. In the 1950s, the CIA and military became interested in LSD for mind control and as weapon on the battlefield.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the general public discovered LSD, together with other psychedelic substances such as psilocybin and mescaline (magic mushrooms and peyote). LSD gained further support from famous people during this period: Cary Grant, who allegedly introduced Timothy Leary to the drug, was a fervent advocate of its profound potentiality. LSD soon became associated with the generational search for freedom and rebellion. In 1956 Grof himself had his first LSD experience during a Sandoz medication trial for doctors; it was a powerful cosmic experience that changed his perception of the unconscious, which he has investigated ever since. As he explains in an online interview for the Omega institute:

I was particularly interested in these non-ordinary states that are healing, that are transformative, that are potentially evolutionary and they also have what we call heuristic value which is that they can bring absolutely new information about the psyche, about human nature, about the nature of reality.<sup>14</sup>

In the same interview he further explains that those are comparable to the ones that the “shamans experience as part of the initiatory crisis, or states that native cultures experience in rites of passage or some other powerful ritual; the kind of states that the initiates experience in ancient mysteries

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13. See Martin Lee and Bruce Schlain, *Acid Dreams—The Complete Social History of LSD: the CIA, the Sixties and Beyond* (New York: Grove Press, 1992); and Ido Harzogsohn, *American Trip: Set, Setting and the Psychedelic Experience in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

14. Stanislav Grof, “Stanislav Grof: Holotropic States of Consciousness,” posted August 21, 2007, by Omega Institute for Holotropic Studies, YouTube, 03:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA1hDI5liQ&list=PPSV>.

of death and rebirth in Egypt and in Greece and other places.”<sup>15</sup> And also experiences that are related to meditation, Sufi dance and other spiritual or mystical tradition in various religions. At the time, he was amazed that these kinds of altered states were often pathologized, at least in Western contexts, where these non-ordinary states would be diagnosed as a sign of mental illness and in need of treatment. To avoid pathologizing, Grof proposed the term “holotropic” for such extraordinary states of consciousness.<sup>16</sup> Holotropic literally means “moving towards wholeness,” comparable to heliotropic flowers and plants moving toward the sun. With this term, he indicates the vastness of the different realms of the collective unconscious that seem to open up in LSD experiences, as in shamanic or other mystical experiences alike. To have access to such a wide variation of holotropic states and experiences of the collective unconscious that can be experienced in transpersonal ways, crossing time, space and cultures, Grof argues, is a new phenomenon that he explicitly parallels with globalization and technological mediation (of spiritual traditions) that has solved boundaries of all kinds:

We have now translated all the spiritual texts; we have recordings of spiritual music from different traditions, from different cultures. The Tibetans are all over the world now teaching and Sufis and other teachers coming and doing workshops and establishing ashrams and so on. We can travel by jet [plane], we can go to different countries, there's intermarriage, there's shortwave radio stations going everywhere, enormous amount of television stations, movies being exchanged and so on. And of course, the internet that's sort of interconnecting everything [. . .]. So there is unification sort of happening on the surface of the Earth and the parallel sort of opening somehow of the collective unconscious in these non-ordinary states.<sup>17</sup>

So Grof is making a connection between the surface of our globalized techno-media culture, and the extension of the collective unconscious, perhaps comparable to Marshal McLuhan's famous remark that the interest in psy-

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15. Grof, “Stanislav Grof: Holotropic States.”

16. After LSD became also illegal in Europe in the 1970s, Grof developed the technique of “holotropic breathwork,” a breathing technique that also opens up the realms of the unconscious, without any substances other than breathing. See Stanislav Grof and Christina Grof, *Holotropic Breathwork: A New Approach to Self-Exploration and Therapy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010).

17. Stanislav Grof, “The Opening of the Collective Unconscious,” posted August 21, 2007, by Omega Institute for Holotropic Studies, YouTube, 02:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWJC8ZizIOI&t=24s>.

chedelic drugs was related to a desire to become intimate with our electronic environment that was changing the world into a “global village.”<sup>18</sup> Obviously, this does not mean that everything becomes universally the same, but there is a greater potentiality for exchange and insights.

It also involves a different conception of the unconscious. As Ralph Metzner, another pioneer of psychedelic research in the 1960s, explains, the metaphoric language of the “trip,” or of “being high,” used in different traditions points to a difference in the conception of the unconscious in Freudian or in Jungian traditions: “For Freud, the unconscious was a deep and dangerous unknown, like the ocean; and psychoanalysis—making the unconscious conscious—was like reclaiming land from the sea.”<sup>19</sup> Symbols in the unconscious, in dreams, or in slips of the tongue, for instance, conceal the hidden impulses, conflicts and forbidden desires. Metzner compares this to Jung’s view where “the unconscious, both personal and collective, is like the night sky, an unknown infinity studded with myriads of tiny sparks of light that can become sources of illumination, insight, and creativity.”<sup>20</sup> Symbols point to a (divine) meaning that is not fully grasped, that is perhaps perplexing for consciousness, but that have revelatory and transformative potential. They may be closer to “prehensions” of past or future events and feelings that are hard to pinpoint and can only be grasped as a perception, an energy, an emotion, a memory.<sup>21</sup> Many psychotherapists that work with psychedelics are Jungian, and Jung’s conception of the human psyche as connected to, and influenced by, a transpersonal collective unconscious seems to be closer to the unbounding of the psyche in a psychedelic experience. However, this still does not explain the explicit techno-mediations and the expanding conceptions of the unconscious that Grof points out. So before returning to Grof’s levels of the unconscious and how I see these connected to the current state of cinema, let me address

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18. Marshall McLuhan, “Marshall McLuhan: The Playboy Interview,” *Playboy*, March 1969, [http://www.nomads.usp.br/leuphana/mcluhan\\_the\\_playboy\\_interview.pdf](http://www.nomads.usp.br/leuphana/mcluhan_the_playboy_interview.pdf).

19. Ralph Metzner, *The Unfolding Self: Varieties of Transformative Experience* (London: Synergetic Press, 2022), 6.

20. Metzner, *The Unfolding Self*, 6.

21. John Buchanan, “Grof and Whitehead: Visions of a Postmodern Cosmology,” in *Psyche Unbound: Essays in Honor of Stanislav Grof*, eds. Richard Tarnas and Sean Kelly (Santa Cruz: Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, 2022), 265–286. Buchanan makes very interesting observations between Grof and Whitehead that will be elaborated in the larger project on the cinematographic unconscious and psychedelics, but that are beyond the scope of this paper.



another alternative conception of the unconscious that was also developed in the 1960s and 1970s that seems to only become more and more relevant today: the unconscious as conceived by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

### THE MACHINIC UNCONSCIOUS OF DELEUZE AND GUATTARI

In *Deleuze and the Unconscious*, Christian Kerslake traces the different genealogies of Deleuze's conception of the unconscious, beyond the dominant one proposed by Freud, and also beyond Jung. He demonstrates how Deleuze has always looked for obscure places to find ways to describe the unconscious, ranging from Bergson's theories of instinct and memory to esotericism and madness, drug experimentation, and sorcery. In Deleuze's "gallery of the unconscious" we can find "werewolves, sorcerers, drug-addicts, artists, hermaphrodites, vampires, centaurs, perhaps even salamanders and sylphs (not to mention that peculiar class of people known as 'schizophrenics')." <sup>22</sup> So, like Jung, Deleuze explores the unconscious as a source of alternative knowledge, not as repressed knowledge or hidden desire. Unlike Jung, he explicitly refers to the relation between the unconscious and drugs. In "Two Questions on Drugs," Deleuze says that no one knows what to do with drugs and that no one knows how to talk about them seriously either. He pleads for an investigation into what he calls a "drug-set" that shows how unconscious desire invests in certain aspects of our behaviour. He acknowledges that psychoanalysis traces a specific causality between neuroses of all kinds, and psychosocial formations of memories and affects, but cannot handle the mind in an altered state of expanded consciousness. This is, Deleuze argues, because psychedelics, or more generally drugs, do something different:

The failure of psychoanalysis in the face of drug phenomena is enough to show that drugs have an entirely different causality [. . .]. My question is: Can we conceive of a specific causality of drugs and in what sense? [. . .] "with drugs there is something very unique, where *desire invests the system of perception*."<sup>23</sup>

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22. Christian Kerslake, *Deleuze and the Unconscious* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 1.

23. Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, ed. David Lapuojade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext[e], 2007), 152.

So this direct investment of perception, where “perception becomes molecular at the same time as the imperceptible is perceived,”<sup>24</sup> appears to be directly related to drugs, the ingestion of a substance that opens the unconscious pharmacodynamically. And while this state can also be achieved in other ways, and while psychedelics may be controversial, Kerslake indicates that this should not be taken as something irrelevant either. Even if it may strike many as dubious:

it would be a mistake to treat this as a marginal, or slightly grubby, aspect of the modern theory of the unconscious. Deleuze and Guattari state that drugs give us immanent access to the unconscious, we would be looking at a complete upheaval of our established ways of understanding the unconscious.<sup>25</sup>

A complete upheaval of our established ways of understanding the unconscious seems like a radical project, which might be necessary to get in touch with our technologically transforming world, as well as with other dimensions hidden in the realms of the unconscious that go beyond normal or normative human perception. In his search for an alternative way of conceiving the unconscious, Deleuze found in Guattari the best “partner in crime.” Guattari, in his own way, was also looking for alternatives to psychoanalysis, or at least to transform psychoanalysis. Trained by Lacan, Guattari wanted to free the unconscious from a strict individual personal psychology and introduce (or rather, re-introduce, given these are not completely new ideas but rather ones that have become obscure in Western modern times) a transhuman, transsexual, and transcosmic perspective, and bring out its “magical” dimensions, both acknowledging the capitalist sorcery of capturing everything, and as “a route to regaining a resistant magic.”<sup>26</sup> As Gary Genosko explains, magic and animism for Guattari, has nothing to do with the psychoanalytic conception of the uncanny, but with an “opening to alterity,” not the alterity of the symbolic Other, but “of an assemblage in which the ontological distinction between subject and object is called into question in favour of the heterogenic machinic production of subjectivity.”<sup>27</sup> It is called “machinic” because the unconscious is not only formed around human subjectivity but includes many different fluxes, energies, and elements from the entangled ecologies of mental perception, socio-political

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24. Kerslake, *Deleuze and the Unconscious*, 181.

25. Kerslake, *Deleuze and the Unconscious*, 185.

26. Gary Genosko, “Schizoanalysis and Magic,” *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 16, no. 4 (2022): 535.

27. Genosko, “Schizoanalysis and Magic,” 536.

relations, and material-environmental concerns.<sup>28</sup> It is a wild multi-semiotic system that always changes in relation to the changing environments that constantly co-construct the unconscious.

It also allows us to see the unconscious emerging in what Guattari calls the aesthetic paradigm of writers, visual artists, musicians, filmmakers, and performers.<sup>29</sup> While this would include (capitalist) media manipulations as “bad sorcery,” in any case it opens up the unconscious to a much wider realm, beyond the intrapsychic dimensions of Freud, and also beyond the archetypal aspects of Jung’s collective unconscious. Guattari postulates that “the questions raised by the unconscious no longer fall squarely within the realm of psychology. They involve the most fundamental choices for both society and desire [. . .] in a world which is criss-crossed by a myriad of machinic systems.”<sup>30</sup> Neither Deleuze nor Guattari say that Freud and Jung were wrong, just that their conception is insufficient to account for the contemporary modern unconscious. And this is where a more nuanced discussion of the psychedelic experience, combined with a discussion of its aesthetics, such as what we find in cinema, might come in. So let us return to Grof’s LSD research and bring in some cinematographic examples.

#### FOUR MAJOR LEVELS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS ON LSD AND IN (CURRENT) CINEMA

Grof distinguishes between four levels of experiences in LSD sessions, each of which open up different realms of the unconscious: abstract aesthetics experiences, psychodynamic experiences, perinatal experiences, and transpersonal experiences. I will briefly discuss these levels below. But a first look at these levels raises a parallel with certain topics and tropes from the history of cinema, which allows me to suggest a psychedelic re-orientation of the cinematic ecology of the unconscious, especially in relation to the genres and types of cinema that operate at the limits of what is commonly understood, and the limits of perception: horror, science fiction, and experimental cinema. Here again, it is important to recall Deleuze’s remark that drugs invest perception directly, and Guattari’s emphasis on the aesthetical

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28. Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Continuum, 1989).

29. Genosko, “Schizoanalysis and Magic,” 542.

30. Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy: Texts and Interviews 1972–1977*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. David L. Sweet, Jarred Becker, and Taylor Adkins (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2009), 197–198.

paradigm and the machinic nature of the unconscious. I will return to this in my discussion of the different levels.

### 1. Abstract and Aesthetic Experiences

The first level that Grof addresses is the aesthetic level, the first level where perception itself changes and opens up alternative worlds, intensifying fields of the unconscious that are normally hidden. In LSD sessions this is often the first level, an entrance point into deeper levels, but these abstract and aesthetic experiences can also be meaningful in themselves. The most common experiences include visual distortions, time-lapses, strobe-light vision, afterimages, cubist vision, grotesque transformations, micro-perceptions, geometric figures, optical illusions, hypersensitivity to sound, and synesthetic experiences of music, colors and touch: “orgies of vision” and transformed acoustics.<sup>31</sup> In *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze discusses how the camera is a technology that allows the human eye to go beyond its normal human perceptions, diving into the most hidden subjective poles of perception (as in the dreamy and surreal liquid perception of the French school, with Jean Vigo’s 1934 film *L’Atalante* as prime example), or expanding into the nonhuman realm of the objective pole of perception, where the camera gives us access to impossible birds-eye views and gaseous micro-perceptions of worlds that are not accessible to the human eye alone.<sup>32</sup>

Deleuze discusses the American avant-garde cinema from the 1960s, most famously analyzed and identified in the 1970s by Gene Youngblood as “expanded cinema,”<sup>33</sup> paralleling and resonating with expanded forms of consciousness (or opened realms of the unconscious made visible). A good example would be the abstract cosmic cinema of Jordan Belson, who traces “coloured forms and movements back to molecular or atomic forces.”<sup>34</sup> Or the flicker film, which through hyper-rapid montage, extracts “a particle of matter” which, according to Deleuze, follows Bergson’s formula whereby a photo is “snapped and taken in the interior of things and for all the points of space.”<sup>35</sup> Deleuze argues that these experimental films act together and form “cinema as machine assemblage of matter-images.”<sup>36</sup> Deleuze here ex-

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31. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 41.

32. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), 73–88.

33. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

34. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 87.

35. Bergson quoted in Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 87.

36. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 87.

plicitly refers to drugs, but only because the “perceptive experimentation which they induce”<sup>37</sup> can be brought about by different means as well, to reach another perception through a camera-consciousness that reaches the genetic elements of perception at the limits of (normal/human) perception.

Contemporary cinema is increasingly infused with these kinds of liquid and gaseous perceptions, either integrated in narrative films, such as Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019), where flowers breathe and visual distortion indicate the onset of a bad trip; or Ben Wheatley’s *In the Earth* (2021), which infuses a post-COVID horror story with psychedelic stroboscopic episodes. Ben Russel’s experimental TRYPPS series (2005–2010)<sup>38</sup> is an interesting example of a psychedelic experimentation of perception and trance experiences through extreme perceptual experiences. TRYPPS 1 to 4 are black and white investigations of the grains and reverse qualities of the image, and of flickering montage and trance ecstasy in dance. In TRYPPS 7, a static image of a girl under the influence of LSD (filmed with an automatic camera captured by a mirror held by the director), gives way to formal abstractions of the badlands of the desert in which the film is shot. Russel calls his experiments a form of psychedelic ethnography intended to “understand the self through an objective record that is not the self,” and where the trip is both end and means “to call all stable identity—of the subject, the author or the audience—into question in a productive, generative way not to dismiss but to expand on them.”<sup>39</sup> In a purely cinematographic way, Russel’s investigations of the limits of perception in their liquid and gaseous states are explicitly linked to psychedelics as an investigation of the genesis of new perceptions.

## 2. Psychodynamic Experiences

The second level of the LSD session that Grof describes, is the level of psychodynamic experiences, which is closest to the traditional psychoanalytic approach in trauma theory. Grof distinguishes what he calls systems of Condensed Experiences or COEX systems that repeat, with differences and variations, a core traumatic event. While these systems can be both positive and negative, its mainly the negative ones that prevail (at least in the therapeutic context in which Grof conducted his LSD sessions). These negative

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37. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 86.

38. See Ben Russel, “TRYPPS #1–7,” *Dimeshow*, accessed December 2, 2024, <https://www.dimeshow.com/TRYPPS-1-7>.

39. Ben Russell, “Ben Russell—Psychedelic Ethnography,” lecture at Sonic Acts Festival Amsterdam, February 25, 2017, posted June 14, 2017, by Sonic Acts, 45:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smurBqTyA-Q>.

COEX systems influence the individual's encounters with situations that are "endangering survival, health and integrity of the body."<sup>40</sup> And, in spite of far-reaching differences in content, Grof argues, various COEX systems share formal dynamic psychological structures: "In each individual case, similar traumatic events from various life periods seem to be recorded in the memory banks in close connection with the oldest experience of such a series, which thus constitutes the primary trauma."<sup>41</sup> Grof discusses several cases and drawings that translate the visions that patients saw in their LSD sessions. Very often the trauma goes back to an early childhood event of neglect or sexual abuse that transforms the psyche and influences patterns of behavior. Usually they relate to family patterns, and in that sense are close to a psychoanalytic definition of the unconscious. Sometimes an early childhood memory appears that is traumatic beyond the family framework. Grof discusses, for instance, how in one session a man experienced himself again as a nine-month-old baby in the grass: when he is suddenly approached by a cow in enormous close-up that licks his face. He feels the saliva, the fear, and also the relief when he is picked up by one of the adults nearby. The COEX experiences usually concern the individual psyche, even if some patients, in later sessions, explore deeper levels of perinatal or transpersonal experiences.

In cinema, and in film theory, arguably, the COEX system has been analyzed as the normal Oedipal trajectory of the hero. Think of Raymond Bellour's classic analysis of Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) where the Cary Grant character (probably before he took LSD) has to symbolically kill all the father figures on his road trip from New York to the West coast, while leaving his mother and finally finding her replacement in a younger form, embodied by Eva Marie Saint.<sup>42</sup> More traumatic (and closer to what Grof describes in this psychodynamic level of the psychedelic experiences as therapy) are psychodramatic horror and thriller films that function like an LSD trip, where we return, layer by layer, to the core traumatic event. Thomas Alfredson's *Let the Right One In* (2008) and Marina de Van's *Dark Touch* (2013) could be considered "COEX dramas," contemporary horror movies that are revealed to be incest and child abuse dramas.<sup>43</sup> Todd Philips'

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40. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 47.

41. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 51.

42. Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film*, ed. Constance Penley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

43. Patricia Pisters, *New Blood in Contemporary Cinema: Women Directors and the Poetics of Horror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

*Joker* (2019) would be another case in point, and may even be the most explicit example of COEX patterns that lead to disastrous consequences without therapy or subduing medication or a mitigating (loving) environment.

### 3. Perinatal Experiences

The perinatal experiences in LSD sessions are intrauterine experiences that occurred before birth which need to be read symbolically, biologically, and spiritually. The perinatal realm of the unconscious is beyond the reach of classical psychoanalysis, although some elements, such as the erogenic zones, form part of the Freudian framework of the unconscious.<sup>44</sup> Examples of birth and rebirthing rites are often found in sacred contexts, rites of passages, or ecstatic religious practices. Grof indicates that perinatal experiences are situated at the crossroad between individual and transpersonal psychology because they often surpass the individual body and acknowledge history, race, ancestral lineage, transgenerational and trans-sexual encounters and mixtures. These transpersonal dimensions will be developed further in the following section. Here I will focus on the four Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPM). These BPMs do not necessarily all appear, nor do they take place in the chronological order of stages in the birth process. Each stage of biological birth is connected to a spiritual counterpart.

In the first matrix of undisturbed intrauterine existence is the experience of cosmic unity, oceanic ecstasy, and universal engulfment. Besides elements of individual psychodynamic experiences (“good and bad womb,” comparable to the “good and bad breast” in psychoanalysis), there are archetypes of the Great Mother or the Terrible Mother. In the second matrix, the onset of delivery, the contractions in a closed uterine system correspond to the feeling of “no exit,” of being locked up in hell. Here there is an antagonism with the mother. The third BPM is marked by the driving forth through the birth canal and has a spiritual analogue in the titanic death-rebirth struggle, marked by an experiential limit of volcanic ecstasy, sexual excitement, bodily excess like slime and blood, purging, war and revolution. The fourth perinatal matrix is determined by the end of the delivery and has its equivalence in the experience of ego-death and re-birth after annihilation and the reconnection to cosmic unity.<sup>45</sup>

While these different perinatal stages may sound quite abstract or even far-fetched, in the actual descriptions of experiences during LSD sessions,

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44. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 98, 104.

45. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 101–104.

there are many images that are not unfamiliar in the cinematographic imagination. The cosmic unity of the first matrix of intrauterine bliss, for instance, can relate to the feeling of floating in a galaxy full of stars, visions of various deities, and Jungian archetypes.<sup>46</sup> Think for example, of Darren Aronofsky's esoteric science fiction film *The Fountain* (2004), where a future cosmonaut (perhaps a psychonaut) is floating through the star filled galaxy and meets the Great Mother/Nature in the form of his great love, dressed as the Tree of Life. Intrauterine distress is equally possible, when more unpleasant demons are met. Combined with the hellish experience and titanic struggles of the second and third BPM, Lars von Trier's hospital series *The Kingdom* (1994–2022), described as “a mixture of *Grey's Anatomy* and *The Office* on mushrooms,”<sup>47</sup> is another very interesting cinematographic trip report. Ari Aster's *Beau is Afraid* (2023) could have been a story told in an LSD session in Grof's office and offers another prime example of these perinatal experiences. We can also see the volcanic ecstatic moments in the perinatal matrix translated in disaster films, where natural elements break loose in the form of volcanic eruptions, fires, floods, tornados, and earthquakes.

Some of the experiences described by Grof's patients are what Deleuze and Guattari would call Bodies without Organs, where the normal function of the organs no longer holds. As one patient declares, “I had a powerful sense that I was in touch with one of the most basic cosmic processes, but there was some strange problem about my being a man—who could never give biological birth, that somehow I was breaking the circle.”<sup>48</sup> And also: “I felt my teeth becoming dangerous, poisonous fangs, and I knew I was turning into a vampire.”<sup>49</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's toolbox of concepts are useful to describe psychedelic experiences, matching their search for an alternative conception of the unconscious, as described earlier. A fuller exploration of these concepts is beyond the scope of this article, but the two scenes just described can also be seen as experiences of becoming-woman or becoming-animal, so often explored in the horror genre in popular cine-

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46. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 107–108.

47. See Patrick Sambiasi, “Lars von Trier's *The Kingdom* is *The Office* on Mushrooms! (Feat. Exodus) | Torn Apart,” posted December 8, 2022, by Patrick Sambiasi presents Torn Apart, YouTube, 38:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BP79GN-7Gogc>.

48. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 136.

49. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 137.



ma.<sup>50</sup> This is even more pronounced at the level of transpersonal, extended experiences.

#### 4. Transpersonal Experiences

Finally, on the level of transpersonal experiences that are reported in LSD sessions, Grof distinguishes a whole range of experiences that are sometimes entangled with the other three levels. He lists a wide range of experiential extensions, both within and beyond the framework of objective reality. Experiential extension within the framework of objective reality includes phylogenetic embryonal experiences (some people even go as far back as to their animal DNA lineages), ancestral experiences, past-incarnation experiences, collective and racial experiences, evolutionary experiences, ego transcendence, identification with other persons or species, and organ or cellular consciousness. Experiential extensions beyond the framework of objective reality that Grof lists include encounters with or experiences of spirits, mediumistic trance, archetypes, various deities, extra-terrestrial universes, chakras, consciousness of the universal mind, and the supracosmic void.<sup>51</sup> On this level it is clear that not everything can be related back to a psychoanalytic framework of psychodynamics that symbolically disguise childhood experiences.

Grof further points out that “collective and racial experiences can be related to any country, historical period and cultural tradition, although there seems to be a preference for ancient cultures and countries with highly developed religious, philosophical, and artistic traditions.”<sup>52</sup> One subject experienced himself as an embalmer in ancient Egypt and was able to describe the size and quality of the mummy bandages, materials used in fixing mummy cloth, and the shape and symbolisms of the four jars in which the organs of the deceased were placed. The experience can be quite independent from one’s own ethnic background, which can lead to “new sensitivity and awareness of racial problems.”<sup>53</sup> Also other religious practices and artistic traditions can be understood better through such transpersonal experiences. Again, a sidestep to Deleuze and Guattari can be made when they argue that the unconscious concerns the whole social field, including

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50. This article is part of a book project on the cinematographic unconscious, psychedelics, and philosophy. For an initial exploration, see Patricia Pisters, ed., *Deleuze and Guattari and the Psychedelic Revival*, Special Issue of *Deleuze and Guattari Studies Journal* 17, no. 4 (2023).

51. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 156–157.

52. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 169.

53. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 169.

race, history and civilizations.<sup>54</sup> We also encounter other instances of becoming-animal in evolutionary memories that have been reported under LSD experiences, where subjects have experienced “what it feels like when a snake is hungry, when a turtle is sexually excited, when a hummingbird is feeding its young, or when a shark breathes through its gills.”<sup>55</sup> All these weird and wild experiences often contain deep insights and have transformative potential.

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As I have been suggesting here, our current cinematographic (and larger audio-visual media landscape, a mediatic noosphere) functions as the delirious “psychedelic” unconscious that gives expression to our deep anxieties and transpersonal experiences to grapple with the profound transformations humanity seems to be going through, to find a discourse to talk about these (potentially terrifying changes), especially in genres that are at the limits of perception: experimental films, horror, and science fiction. There are countless examples available that testify to the “psychedelic nature” of contemporary cinema, and that presents us an extended conception of the unconscious. Gaspar Noé’s *Enter the Void* (2009) is a case in point that immediately comes to mind. But let me end by briefly raising two more current examples.

*Talk to Me* (Danny and Michael Pilippou, 2022) has been described as a social media horror for Gen Z: “The kids at the centre of the movie engage in an occult ritual largely for the experience of being filmed doing it.”<sup>56</sup> The occult ritual they engage in involves getting in touch with the spirit world by holding an embalmed hand for ninety seconds. The seances put the participants in a state of trance-like possession, and the connections between media addiction and drug addiction are made clear in a sequence where they all go through multiple rounds of “getting high on the hand,” entering a state of hallucinatory delirium in a rush, while being filmed by their peers. The transpersonal experiences from the vast realms of the unconscious is clear when one of the participants suddenly sings in another language, a French song in a Josephine Baker-like voice, probably picked

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54. Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953–1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2004), 273.

55. Grof, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, 172.

56. Darren Mooney, “Talk to Me is a Social Media Horror for Gen Z,” *The Escapist*, August 2, 2023, <https://www.escapistmagazine.com/talk-to-me-is-a-social-media-horror-for-gen-z/>.

up somewhere on a social media channel, coming through. In Deleuzian terms, it is as if they all tap directly and uncontrollably into the vast realms of the virtual (everything that has been and will be). The events turn darker when one of the boys speaks in the transpersonal voice of the main character's deceased mother. Here *Talk to Me* touches the traumatic kernel of the film's protagonist, her unprocessed mourning of her mother's suicide. And we can see how elements of the psychodynamic and perinatal levels of the unconscious intermingle with the transpersonal realms. In the end, the film appears to be a hellish story of birth and re-birth, albeit a rebirth in the guise of a ghost who can only return to the world of her peers for ninety seconds via an embalmed hand . . .

Another example of a film that translates the transpersonal realms of the unconscious, and that deserves a fuller analysis from this perspective than the one I can provide here, is Bertrand Bonello's *The Beast* (2023). Moving between layers of time, the film demonstrates how a cinematographic recollection of the past, a media consciousness of the present, and speculative ideas concerning artificial intelligence in the future (that are also indebted to cinema's past), can coalesce in an entangled delirium about the crisis of humanness in contemporary media society. The protagonist Gabrielle (Lea Sedoux) experiences several incarnations of herself in different periods of time. We see her being treated with some kind of psychotropic substance or brain procedure in the year 2044, when artificial intelligence is in control and where emotions are seen as a superfluous and dangerous. The voice of an AI agent tells her that the procedure is a therapy that will allow her to rid herself of all the traumas that she underwent throughout the ages; as the AI tells her in voiceover, she will have to choose between affect or work, the two don't go together. The substance allows her to revisit the Paris of 1910 where she is a piano player and married to a puppet factory owner, as well as to experience a version of herself in the Los Angeles of 2014 where she housesits the luxurious apartment of an absent owner while trying to find work as a model in Hollywood.

In each of the co-existing layers of time, the protagonist meets versions of the same man, Louis (George MacKay), who is the impossible love of her life/lives. In the Paris of 1910, societal conventions make it inappropriate to act on their mutual feelings, though all the love in the world seems to be embodied in the touching of their hands. Filmed in close-up and lasting over a minute, this touch is perhaps one of the most sensual and moving love scenes of current cinema, that becomes all the more profound when

connected to Franco Berardi's ode to touch in a post-COVID world.<sup>57</sup> In the Great Flood of Paris of that year, they lose their own lives and each other. In contemporary Los Angeles, Louis has transmuted into a lonely, frustrated misogynist, who constantly films himself and puts his disturbing thoughts online. This version of the male protagonist is modelled on Elliot Roger, the "incel hero" who killed several women in 2014 near the campus of Santa Barbara University. As with the historical event of the Parisian flood, reality and fiction again become entangled in the world on screen. In this layer of time, our protagonists meet after an earthquake, she invites him over to her house, but he refuses out of fear. When sometime later he does appear in the house, Gabrielle invites him to come closer and not to be scared: "There must be beautiful things in this chaos," she says while she touches his head. The love scene that follows is almost like a social relief, perhaps he will get rid of his fear and dangerous mistrust of toxic incel masculinity. But now dream and reality have intermingled within the world of the film, and again it will not end well. In the future, they finally seem to find each other, until she realizes that he has accepted and completed the treatment, and it worked. When Gabrielle realizes she has lost him again, this time to artificial intelligence, her scream is chilling to the bone.

There are relations to media, mediums, and mediated doubles everywhere in *The Beast*. The puppets in the 1910s factory recall the surrealist obsession with puppets and doubles in the work of Hans Belmer, and the conversations of past encounters are reminiscent of Alain Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961). In the contemporary world everything is mediated, Gabrielle is performing for a green screen and in test runs for commercials and films, Louis is constantly filming himself for social media, the television screen in the lavish empty house is always on, the computer screen is the contact point with an oracle, a medium that also predicted the encounter with a (mythical, archetypical) beast. And the future world is somehow an updated double of Jean Luc Godard's dystopian science fiction *Alphaville* (1966), which exposes a similar fear of the cold and inhumane logic of artificial intelligence. The ending also recalls Phillip Kaufman's *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978) which explicitly deals with the theme of eerie doublegangers.

So *The Beast* resonates in with all that vast cultural technomediated noosphere in important ways, hinting at many semiotic layers of the machinic unconscious (all our mediated disasters, madness, loneliness, fears, hopes),

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57. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Third Unconscious: The Psycho-Sphere in the Viral Age* (London and New York: Verso, 2021).

and translates past-incarnation experiences as transpersonal time-traveling, in a way that suggests an unconscious realm is opened and expanded by a psychedelic culture that seems to be asking how we can both cope with and transform into a posthuman future without losing all “the beauty there must be” in the chaos of the current world.